A superb
Cloudstreet
THEATRE
Cloudstreet
By Nick Enright and Justin Monjo
WAAPA Third-Year Acting.
Subiaco Arts Centre
Review: Ali Taulbut

As a relative newcomer to Perth — and a Pom to boot — I have not yet had the pleasure of reading Tim Winton's much-lauded Cloudstreet.

For anyone in a similarly embarrassing position, Cloudstreet is the epic story of two WA families, the Lambs and the Pickles, sharing a ramshackle house in Perth's western suburbs. The Lambs are God-fearing and hard-working — symbolising the puritan element of Australia. The Pickles are dissolute and unrestrained, representing that more free-spirited side of Australia. There are ghosts, real and metaphorical, to contend with as each family tackles the trials of life in post-war Perth.

The original 1998 production ran for more than five hours and it is testament to the quality of the material and of that production that it was a huge popular and critical success both here in Australia and around the world. In this version, abridged by WAAPA's Chris Edmund and directed by Black Swan's new artistic director Kate Cherry, the spirit of the original would seem to have been retained.

Cherry directed the young cast with a light touch; Matt McVeigh's set was similarly un-showy, a simple open stage with minimal dressings and props. The piano, so significant to the troubled history of the house, sat side stage — a spectral, haunting presence. Three ghostly figures were also ever-present; oozing and sinuous as they embodied the pain and sadness of the house.

The specific local details have ensured that this story and its characters resonate powerfully with a Perth audience but its themes — identity, guilt, ambition, love, death, redemption — are firmly universal. The talented young cast worked seamlessly together and showed no sign of nerves at the presence of Winton himself in the audience on opening night.

T. J. Power was absolutely assured in his portrayal of the brain-damaged Fish Lamb, effectively embodying the innocent, mystical and magical Fish. Thomas Stokes was equally confident as sensitive Quick Lamb, who "picks up sadness like he has a radar for it".

Elizabeth Blackmore gave a deeply affecting performance as Rose Pickles, who takes on responsibility beyond her years in the face of her gambling father and slutish mother.

This is a superb production of an outstanding piece of fiction and an absolute must-see for anyone not familiar with the work.

Cloudstreet runs until Saturday.

Innocence: Brent Hill and T.J. Power in Cloudstreet. Picture: Jon Green