Powerful aftershocks...

THE DARK ROOM
By Angela Betzien
Hotbed Ensemble
PICA

There is something about theatre involving raw young talent that rarely fails to excite the senses, as demonstrated by two current productions examining some ugly truths about lost children.

At PICA, Black Swan State Theatre's youth arm The Hotbed Ensemble presented a new work it commissioned from award-winning Queensland playwright Angela Betzien.

The Dark Room has been collaboratively workshopped into a radial, non-linear narrative. The action has already happened in a remote desert town, which Betzien's program notes infer is in the Northern Territory during the Federal intervention.

On a grey motel set, all soulless homogeneity but beautifully lit by Trent Suidgeest, we see aftershocks from earlier events through three separate scenarios. Emma and Stephen, are a couple on the verge of a break-up. Local cop Craig is absorbed in contemplation of his recent, controversial shooting of a young child. Social worker Anni has the feral teenager Grace in her care for protection.

Like some thrilling, ghostly farce, the players weave in and out of each other's emotionally charged moments. The effect is tense and unsettling. The awesome soundscape from Ben Collins adds to the suspense. Wonderfully evocative, eternally present, distant deep rumblings are just out of reach from identification.

Truly deserving of the moniker "ensemble", the cast was excellent throughout. Adam Mitchell continues to demonstrate his talent as a director — he always seems able to get his money's worth from an actor. (And thanks to an RAC partnership, this superb emerging artist initiative is finally able to pay its creatives.)

The Dark Room is still a work in progress, Mitchell admits. Small structural alterations were made at the last moment and more tweaks are anticipated, but this is the nature of the brief for Hotbed. Perth theatre is lucky to have this platform.

Acting accolades go to Arielle Gray as the vacillating, defiant and confrontational 14-year-old Grace. Apparently the victim of domestic abuse/neglect, her story unfolds gradually. Gray combines beautifully her histrionic rage and heartbreaking vulnerability.

The counterpoint to her youthful excess is Jacinta John's nuanced performance as Anni, the epitome of selfless, nurturing care but seemingly on the edge of nervous collapse herself. In a telling moment, Grace steals a bottle of pills from her bag and on returning them asks, "how long have you been sad?"

TOP GIRLS
By Caryl Churchill
Third Year Acting
WAAPA

Also at the weekend, WAAPA's students gamely tackled regional English accents and shoulder pads in their rendition of Caryl Churchill's seminal 80s work set in Thatcherite Britain.

In an opening scene, widely acknowledged to be Top Girls' greatest strength, five great women of history and literature, including Pope Joan and Isabella Bird, gather for a fantasy dinner party hosted by Marlene, an ambitious modern Conservative. Although each woman accomplished astonishing career feats, most had their children either voluntarily or forcibly removed. Adele Querol was a captivating Lady Nijo, the Japanese courtesan and Buddhist nun; her use of gesture and vocal inflection was spot on.

As is often the case with Churchill, uncomfortable questions are posed and answers rarely offered. Top Girls leaves an untidy and disquieting feeling of self-righteous horror at Marlene's lack of solidarity with her fellow women and guilty shame as memories of the heady pursuit of self-interest are awakened.

Aside from the magical mystery tour of accents, director Andrea Moor leads the young cast well. A very solid central performance from Jennifer White as Marlene peaked in her climactic scene with Hannah Greenwood as the stay-at-home sister. It was a heart-wrenching emotional slug-fest.

The Dark Room runs until May 17.
Top Girls runs until Thursday.