



**Mysterious Skin** by Prince Gomolvilas

Produced by [Vertigo](#) , Performed at [Three Minute Theatre](#)

Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) May 2013

What a pleasure to return to Manchester's **Three Minute Theatre**, with its welcoming and intimate atmosphere, and generally quite experimental theatrical productions.

**Mysterious Skin**

written as a stage adaptation by

**Prince Gomolvilas**

(2003), from the novel by

**Scott Heim**

(1995), and produced here by

**Vertigo**

was one such production, tests the sensibilities of the audience with a real,

**in your face**

emotional drama drawing you in and inviting you to be a part of the journey. It was also

decidedly unnerving and uncomfortable viewing, so I'll try and unpick it as an experience.

The off beat story is based around two young men from dysfunctional families in small town America with wildly different degrees of comfort around their own **sexuality**. One is a rather nerdy young lad who *isn't comfortable with sexual advances from a wannabe girlfriend*, and the other an occasional male prostitute, seemingly very relaxed about sexual activity albeit *not with women*.

The nerdy lad **Brian**, played with great attention to detail by **David Lock**, is encouraged by the geeky though relatively grounded

**Avalyn**

(

**Ciara Tansey**

) who he initially seeks out to discuss alien abduction with, to

***remember the facts***

of his alien abduction for a 5 hour period of his childhood where he can't remember what happened. Although the alien metaphor is a really clunky device for an adult audience to help tease out the child abuse later on, rather like the dolls used with children, it is initially at least a funny technique that Avalyn uses to get Brian to open up, leading to her attempts to seduce him, which rather freak him out. Considering this is David's onstage debut, all credit to his professionalism and characterful performance - one to watch in the near future. This is my second viewing of Ciara who presents as a very accomplished actress whom I rate from both performances.

It becomes increasingly clear though that Brian as a free will actually has been abducted, not by

aliens though, but by the author who's shoe-horning a story around him **Recovering his Memory** - pitch perfect

for the dangerous fad of the 80's and 90's that saw hundreds of kids taken into care because social workers in

**Cleveland**

, followed by

**Rochdale**

and

**Orkney**

were convinced of widespread child abuse from what they 'uncovered'. Now between you, me, and artistic license, the idea of someone, even a nerd, going to an alien abduction acolyte to have their memory recovered is surreal and worthy of a skit to put the lucrative couch work of West Coast quacks in their place. Alas, despite it's relatively light-hearted start with a send up of an alien abduction specialist advertising on TV, this was no send up comedy, but an all too serious attempt at promoting the cause of

**Recovered Memories**

and reliving past experiences to move on.

I've met some nerdy characters in my time, but being able to isolate 5 hours of your childhood as a period of time you can't remember really does take the biscuit - I'm pushed to remember a total of 5 hours of my childhood with any clarity, let alone focus on 5 mysteriously missing hours. I'm convinced my childhood was a happy experience, and I've no reason to doubt it, but given the story in this script I'm surely in denial of some pretty big proportion, though I go with my wife's assessment that I probably just had a childhood like one of the happy daft kids on her street. Happy daft I may be, but that is one seriously awkward construct to promote the Recovered Memory Movement through - and to promote it through such a trivial and bizarre situation indicates to me the lack of seriousness for clinical rigour it requires.

Just when you thought the relatively relaxed and buoyant character of **Neil**, palyed by **Richard Allen**

who excels in his role as a confident young man able to overcome adversity, is maybe going to do well for himself despite the cards he was dealt in childhood as a country bumpkin,

**wham bam**

, you're going nowhere until you

### ***submit to the force***

and go back to your childhood. The choice Neil makes to pimp himself out to older men, that led to him being brutally raped was clearly not a real choice of his but the actions of someone suppressing the memory of being abused when a child. Only by facing up to his memory will he be able to move on from selling his body and putting himself in such risky sexually charged situations. And in case that doesn't convince you dear audience of the need for him to relive his childhood he has to do it to help Brian complete the recovery of his memory so he can move on. There is no other option but recovering that memory.

Although Prince Gomolvilas' script provides rather one-dimensional characters, except maybe for the more incidental yet fuller character of **Wendy** (delightfully and compellingly played by **Steph Reynolds**

), on a proscriptive journey to revisit their childhood experiences, the passion and commitment of all the actors was exhilarating and the production was professionally delivered as per the production of M. And as with M, all credit to the set designers working in a relatively compact stage, yet still providing a believable setting for each scene. Equally, the music was a perfect match for setting the right backdrop.

Whilst there is some attempt to explore the impact of disturbing events on vulnerable minds, this script has a profoundly voyeuristic and exploitative feel about it, where the characters are straight jacketed into the therapeutic framework, which was profoundly unsettling given the heart-wrenching way the cast make up for the train track of a story line and narrow personality scope of their characters. I would have loved a discussion about the issues involved with the cast and producer afterwards, but as **Director Craig Hepworth** said, the cast put so much into their performance that "on a show like this as the cast and audience need to relax after the show as it's a tough show". I personally trust the audience would benefit from discussing some of the issues raised, but given the emotional input by the cast I appreciate their desire to take a break.

In the programme both **Directors Craig Hepworth** and **Adele Stanhope** wrote:

Throughout this development one word has hung over the show... 'Truth' a word that has moved the play to where we believe it is today, every performance, every directing decision, every light cue comes from a place of a truth. And tonight at times that truth will be painful to hear, you may cry, you may get angry, you may be disturbed and you may even feel uncomfortable, but if you feel anything then we have done our job properly, after all this is a play designed to make you feel, but does not tell you how to feel.

I'm quite an independent thinking kind of guy and being told I'm going to have **the truth** delivered to me from the stage, from a

**fictional story**

constructed by the author and having only one optional outcome for the way to deal with childhood experiences was always going to be a big ask. It not only comes across as lecturing or evangelising to the audience, but treats them as an object that will have things done to them to make them have certain experiences - and only at the level of feelings rather than any attempt to move them intellectually to

**think**

beyond their immediate experiences and instinctive feelings. What I felt was that I'd just had a message delivered to me, though I didn't

**think**

it was the

**truth**

, and so it

**felt**

like propaganda. I've come across production companies that make this approach their raison d'etre, and attract some lucrative state funding from it, but I'm not a fan of it myself, and I know from other work by Vertigo that they're unlikely to make it their mainstay, but theatre today does seem to be more moralising and lecturing than I remember it being, so a trend I think Vertigo would do well to steer clear of in future.

After seeing the play I did have a dream of a rape scene that was gross and disturbing, especially as characters from my past were in it. Now I don't often dream of such things, in fact can't remember having ever done so before, so presumably that can be counted as a success. But I'm sure I didn't learn anything from dreaming about old friends raping people though.

The stage play at least, though I expect the novel has much greater depth and nuance, speaks to contemporary and widespread interest in the notion that adulthood is determined by childhood experiences, perhaps somewhat ahead of its time in that sense, though not in a good way as it's quite a **conservative viewpoint**. The script left me wanting in the future focussed parts of my brain, as its shoe-horned story fitted around the idea that our future is destined by our past experiences, and using a highly charged emotional subject focus seemed very heavy handed. That any demons we may have can't be exorcised without focussing on the past isn't tolerated as an idea, and that comes across as proscriptive and hectoring which really did leave me cold, despite the heartfelt and brilliantly uplifting attempts by the cast to go beyond the narrow characters they were handed.

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**Editor's Note:** Given how widespread the notion that adult behaviours are so strongly determined by childhood experiences, the Manchester Salon have organised a discussion around the legacy of **Freud's Unconscious** and how it has been so abused by a whole industry of therapeutic interventions - click on [Is childhood beginning to dominate adulthood?](#)