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>> theatre

Moth

Where: Malthouse Theatre and Arena Theatre Company at the Malthouse, Southbank until May 30.

Reviewer: Chris Boyd
★★★★½

THE best theatre for young people — the stuff teen audiences find valuable, appealing and encouraging — is exactly the kind of art that parents and teachers might choose to protect them from.

So if Arena's latest show for Malthouse Theatre is shocking, it's shocking in a valuable way. It's like the shock of electro-convulsive therapy . . . it might actually brighten the lives of a few of the downtrodden and depressed. It might shock a few adults into action too. Or at least shock them out of ignorance. Shock them into looking.

Though Declan Greene's play is billed as a piece about mental illness, it's at least as much about the bullying and brutalisation of the vulnerable and the isolated, of the weak and the different.

Sebastian (Dylan Young) is the weak

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and Claryssa (Sarah Ogden) is the different. They're both about 15. He's sickly (coughing up blood) and is what we once might have called soft in the head — giggly and annoying — and she's a bad-tempered emo-kid in denial.

They're unlikely allies and uneasy friends. Claryssa is interested in Sebastian, but he is too immature and whiny for her.

The play is also about escaping, her into a cave and him into an ecstatic fantasy which mixes up Old Testament angels and vengeful manga heroes. (St Sebastian appears to the boy as a moth which he keeps in a big jar.) Life's so bad that Claryssa and Sebastian would rather destroy the world than endure it.

As you'd expect from Arena, Malthouse and director Chris Kohn, the production values of *Moth* are outstanding, from lighting and sound design to the high-torque acting. There's a gimmickry in the language I found less than convincing at times, but it's a minor distraction in an otherwise excellent piece.