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Leah Purcell pulls no punches in her new show *The Drover's Wife*

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When Leah Purcell was a kid, she loved westerns. "I grew up on them," she says. "Spaghetti westerns. *The Magnificent Seven*. John Wayne in *Hondo*. I'd always be barracking for the Indians."

Forty years later, Purcell, an award-winning actor, writer and director, is drawing on that love of American frontier drama for her very Australian new play, *The Drover's Wife*. "These days I'm more influenced by things like *Deadwood* and [Quentin Tarantino's] *Django Unchained* and *The Hateful Eight*."

The Drover's Wife, Purcell says, will "f--- people up".

"I'm making no apologies," she says. "There's violence. I want people to leave the theatre in silence, like they've been hit with a good left hook."

And Purcell knows how to throw a punch. Her dad, a butcher, trained boxers back in the day and she regularly trains at her local gym, hitting the long bag with her partner of more than 25 years, film, documentary and theatre producer Bain Stewart.

"We both like our sports – boxing, martial arts, the footy. I still want to get up in the ring for an exhibition boxing match but Bain says I'm getting a bit long in the tooth for that now," Purcell laughs.

It's been nearly 20 years since Purcell and Stewart produced their first major work together, Purcell's semi-autobiographical monologue *Box the Pony*, which debuted in the 1997 Festival of the Dreaming, the first of the Olympic Arts Festivals in the lead-up to the 2000 Sydney Olympics. It went on to be seen across Australia and internationally and it opened many doors for Purcell, including a stint on what was then the top TV drama of the day, *Police Rescue*, and her first role for Belvoir (2000's *The Marriage of Figaro*).

She has maintained a strong connection with Belvoir ever since, appearing in *Parramatta Girls* (2004), *Stuff Happens* (2005) in which she played Condoleezza Rice, *The Dark Room* (2011) and *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (2012). Purcell directed a revival of Louis Nowra's *Radiance* for the company last year and *The Drover's Wife* debuts on Belvoir's famous corner stage this week.

As life and work partners, Purcell and Stewart connect on every level, Purcell says. "Bain is great at selling an idea. I'm great at having ideas. He's got his place and I've got mine. So it's a really nice working partnership in that way. He really believes in me and with him behind me, I fear nothing. We're both get up and go people. If we believe in it, we'll make it happen."

Purcell's new project is a case in point. Its origins lie in the time Purcell and Bain spent in the Snowy Mountains in 2006, when Purcell was acting in the Ray Lawrence-directed feature film *Jindabyne*.

"It was autumn and already snowing. It was beautiful," Purcell recalls. "So we started thinking, what else can we do up here? That's when the idea for something on *The Drover's Wife* came to me for the first time."

As a child, Purcell was intimately familiar with the original Henry Lawson short story, the tale of an isolated woman whose husband is away droving. At sunset one day, a snake crawls under her house. The woman puts her children to bed and waits with her dog, Alligator, for the snake to re-appear.

"My mother used to recite *The Drover's Wife* to me when I was a little girl," Purcell says. "I've still got that book, with all my scribbles in it. Mum always used to say to me, 'don't write on the words'. So all the drawings are on the blank pages and in the margins of this tattered little book."

The idea became one of many of the backburner until, in 2013, it suddenly boiled over.

"I was a director at a writers' workshop and I was so frustrated because I wanted to be there as a writer," Purcell says. "It was obviously time to write my next play. So I went home, pulled that tatty old copy of *The Drover's Wife* off the shelf and away I went. I didn't even reread the story. I just decided to go with what I remembered."

Using Lawson's story as inspiration and drawing on research into her own great-grandfather's story, Purcell wove elements of fact and fiction into her treatment, one that foregrounds the Aboriginal men Lawson mentions in the story. "The man who stacked the wood the snake got in under – I made him the hero," Purcell says. "That allowed me to put my great grandfather's story in there, too, because it is amazing." Her maternal great-grandfather, Purcell explains, worked in a South African-owned circus in 1901. When the show folded, he was left destitute in Melbourne.

"His journey is how my black man comes into this story," Purcell says. "He leaves Melbourne, follows the mountains and comes up into the ranges. Then there's an incident for which he gets blamed, he helps the drover's wife out and she helps him out of a sticky situation he's in."

Purcell's script – or rather the first 15 pages she submitted to the judges – went on to win the 2014 Balnaves Foundation Indigenous Playwright's Award, worth \$20,000.

"I'm the vessel for this story, I believe it," says Purcell. "I wrote the first act in five days, the second act in two. It just poured out. At first, I thought, this can't be any good, it's too fast. But I gave it to Anthea [Williams, Belvoir's literary manager] and she said this is really good. I dunno. There's obviously some higher power wanting me to tell this story."

Purcell is playing the drover's wife herself, directed by Leticia Caceres. "The drover's wife is strong, hell yeah. She has to be to survive," Purcell says. "It's going to be dangerous. The violence is exciting. I'm a physical kind of actor. The physicality is big but there's a beauty in the story. Lawson was the poor man's poet. It will be emotional. That's all I want. Theatre that moves you, theatre that has an impact."

Aged 46 and a happy grandmother ("I love the babysitting. The kids close the lid on my laptop and say it's time to go outside and play. They keep it real."), Purcell says she's entering "elder territory".

"I feel good about it," Purcell says. "I've been doing this for 25 years and that's a good innings. Now it's about passing that knowledge on, especially to the younger ones who missed out on Auntie Justine [Saunders], Uncle Bob [Maza] and Uncle Kevin [Smith]. That generation is gone now and we're missing that wisdom and those times when you have to shut up and listen.

"I want to go out to young people to pass on my skills and teach them how to be brilliant," Purcell says. "I want them to go out and tell their stories in film and theatre and TV. We need people with that ability."

Purcell says she's "in a good place right now". She knows she's on the right path.

"My grandmother came to me in a dream and I asked her about this show," Purcell says. "I asked her, am I doing all right? And she bowed to me. The ancestors are happy, you know? I'm doing the right thing."

***The Drover's Wife* plays at Belvoir from September 17 to October 16.**

NEW DIRECTION

Having directed one episode of the ABC's six-part indigenous sci-fi *Cleverman* last year, Leah Purcell is now gearing up to direct another three in the show's second season.

It's an important project, she says. "It's not just that the idea came from an Indigenous person [Ryan Griffen]. It's because that's our mythology up there, on the screen. I know a lot of Aboriginal kids out there who are sci-fi buffs and there's real pride in *Cleverman*," she says. "It's a genre that so many people can get involved in and we're using it to tell our stories, share our culture. Australia is so ready for stories told by blackfellas."

For a few days, Purcell notes, *Cleverman* was one of the most frequently downloaded and shared TV shows in the world. "We were more popular than *Game of Thrones*!" she laughs. "I know it's illegal and all that but it is still kind of cool."

With *Cleverman*, and at least two other film and television projects in the works for next year, and a possible tour of *The Drover's Wife*, Purcell isn't planning for a lot of downtime in 2017. "One thing is a secret project I can't talk about yet – a drama series for TV. And I just had people wanting to meet me about direct a miniseries," she says.

The Drover's Wife may have a life after the stage, too, Purcell says. She's already working on the screenplay. "Screen Australia is very excited, so by 2018, I reckon we'll be ready to shoot. That will be awesome. Seen the play? Here's the film!"

Cleverman season 2 is expected to start filming in November.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/leah-purcell-pulls-no-punches-in-her-new-show-the-drovers-wife-20160912-gre8xh.html>