

Reimagining The Drover's Wife: Leah Purcell weaves Indigenous Australia into classic tale

The Aboriginal actor and writer radically retools Henry Lawson's short story into a bush thriller with elements of her own family history

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In the rehearsal room at Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre, Goa-Gunggari-Wakka Wakka Murri actor and writer Leah Purcell shows me a beautiful brown leather carved satchel-purse that her father made her. Growing up, she wasn't allowed to acknowledge him as her dad.

Purcell is getting ready to perform in her radical rewrite of the Henry Lawson short story *The Drover's Wife*, retooled with strong Indigenous emphasis and autobiography, while retaining a few Lawson plot points: bullock shooting and rogue swaggies paying a sunset visit to the titular wife, played by Purcell.

In Lawson's original tale, a predator snake enters the house while the drover is away. In Purcell's version the snake is a totem and the intruder is an Aboriginal man assumed to be a murderer, played by Mark Coles Smith. Domestic violence is a key theme in Purcell's script, an early, 15-page version of which won her the 2014 Balnaves Foundation Indigenous Playwright's Award. Leticia Cáceres is directing the cast of five for its premiere, and plans are under way to adapt Purcell's script to a feature film, which she will direct herself.

Purcell, 46, likens this new bush tale thriller to *Deadwood* meets *Django Unchained*. For the role, she took lessons to "speak like a white person", with more refinement than the "broken and bushy" country vernacular envisaged earlier in writing.

The actor and writer has always striven to challenge herself. Nineteen years ago this month, Purcell donned a singlet and boxing gloves and threw punches at a heavy bag strung from the ceiling of the Sydney Opera House's Playhouse Theatre. In the autobiographical work *Box the Pony*, we learned she was a one-time Miss Murgon from up rural Queensland way, and about the strong, influential women in her life.

The play, co-written by Purcell and Scott Rankin, would tour on and off for three years, paying homage to Purcell's late maternal grandmother Daisy Walker, who was stolen from an Aboriginal camp by authorities at age five, along with her sister and younger brother. Daisy's white Scottish father dashed across town and grabbed his son from the cattle carts, but couldn't get to his daughters in time. They were transferred to a train and taken away to the missions.

In the third scene, Purcell sang a song, *Run Daisy Run*, composed in English and her grandmother's tongue: "*Wondah yarrmun taia nunni kurra mulli kai ngun ngun tulla yani yani.*" ("White man on horseback come and took my baby, where all I can do is cry.")

Purcell found her calling at Murgon high school during a three-month musical theatre course. She was dance captain in grade eight and choreographing junior kids in grade 10.

“When you’re good at something, it gives you motivation,” she says. “Because where I’m from in the bush, you’ve either got to be a nurse or work at the meatworks. Throw in the fact [I’m] from an Aboriginal family, and I’m not supposed to be where I am today.”

Purcell was the youngest of six children to Florence Chambers, her “beautiful, courageous” Indigenous mother who died in 1988, and to whom Purcell dedicated *Box the Pony*. The children’s father was a white man, a butcher and leather and rope worker who lived on the other side of town. Married to a white woman, with whom he had two other children, her father had two families at once. Purcell would go into his butcher’s shop and he would give her a wink and a chicken leg, but she wasn’t allowed to call him “Dad”.

She remembers writing and directing an episode of TV series *Redfern Now* which first aired in 2013. Titled *Consequences*, it was based on her own life. In the story, an Indigenous woman and cultural anthropologist Mattie, played by Tammy Clarkson Jones, races to share news of her PhD with her estranged white father, a butcher named Jack, played by Craig McLachlan. Mattie asks Jack: “Why did you leave my mother?”

“For a split second,” recalls Purcell. “The sun came out, a ray hit Craig and his face sort of changed. I went, ‘Is that my old man, standing there?’ Craig almost lost it. Afterwards we walked up and held one another. I said, ‘Mate, I think my old man just came in and said ‘thanks’.”

There will be complex moments of Purcell’s family history woven into *The Drover’s Wife* too: physical gestures of her father, who died six years ago aged 95, as well as narrative elements of an Indigenous great-grandfather’s story, Tippo Charlie Chambers, who was among those studied by the Perth-born anthropologist Norman Tindale. Tippo was touring with a circus around the time that Lawson’s *The Drover’s Wife* was published, circa 1893.

Purcell says she is grateful for her good career fortune (her credits include codirecting sci-fi series *Cleverman* and roles in *Janet King*, *House of Hancock* and *Love Child*, as well as directing and performing in Louis Nowra’s play *Radiance*) and has made it her business to speak as a role model to Indigenous communities in Queensland and NSW.

“I just told ’em my story,” she says. “I said I was pregnant at 17. I went, ‘I’m not just this fair-skinned big-noter up on the screen; I know what you guys are going through’.”

In a 2005 interview, Purcell said of her father, then still alive: “I don’t know if I could love him as a father, but the man that gave me life, yes.” Interviewer Andrew Denton challenged her to tell her father that.

Did she find the right words before he died?

“Yeah, I did. Me and him, we had great conversations, because he was a great storyteller himself ... I said, ‘I love ya’, you know. ‘Without you, I wouldn’t be here. Past is the past.’ You’ve got to do that for yourself. So it was a nice healing.”

. The Drover’s Wife is on at Belvoir Street Theatre from 17 September to 16 October

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