

THE AUSTRALIAN

A Tarantino Drover's Wife as seen through indigenous eyes



Playwright and actress Leah Purcell preparing for her new show at Sydney's Belvoir theatre. Picture: John Feder

EMILY RITCHIE THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM September 21, 2016

Growing up in southwestern Queensland, young Leah Purcell was soothed to sleep by her mother reading Henry Lawson's short story *The Drover's Wife*.

The famous tale outlines the hardships of a woman in the late 19th century left to fend for herself and her children in the bush while her husband was away droving. Her connection to the story led Purcell to choose it as the basis for her submission to the third annual Balnaves Foundation Indigenous Playwright's Award back in 2014.

"I've still got the book that Mum would read it from," she said.

"Every time she read it to me, I'd stop her so I could say the boy's famous last line: 'Mother, I won't never go a drovin'.' And if my Mum didn't pass away when I was 17, I would probably still be home being that little boy looking after her, not going a drovin'."

Purcell, also an actress well-known for roles in *Janet King* and *Jindabyne*, won the \$20,000 award, including \$12,500 for a commissioned play.

Opening tonight at Sydney's Belvoir, *The Drover's Wife* is a milestone for the award; the first of five Balnaves indigenous playwright commissions to have a major theatrical production. "I think it comes down to my experience; I've been writing and performing for 25 years now," said Purcell, who also stars in the play.

"But I think, across the board, we need more nurturing of Australian new works — you can't expect someone to write something great in six months."

Foundation trustee Hamish Balnaves believes these productions are an important step to reconciliation. "This is a way for stories about indigenous Australians to be heard. Told through theatre, they have real power to change minds and attitudes."

Purcell's *The Drover's Wife* is a western, a romance and a thriller, heavily inspired by the films of Quentin Tarantino. She has also implanted the true story of her great-grandfather to give the play a broader indigenous context.