

MEDIA RELEASE

29 June 2026

New Australian opera *The Drover's Wife* makes its highly anticipated Sydney premiere



Opera Australia, (OA) in association with the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) and Oombarra Productions, will present the groundbreaking new First Nations opera, *The Drover's Wife*, at the Sydney Opera House this August.

In a first-time co-commission by OA and QPAC in association with Oombarra Productions, *The Drover's Wife* is an adaptation of the play, novel and film of the same name by leading Australian author, playwright and actor, Leah Purcell AM, who will direct the work, blending contemporary First Nations storytelling with traditional grand opera.

Based on Henry Lawson's classic 1892 short story, this quintessential Australian story has been transformed through a collaboration between Purcell and celebrated Australian composer George Palmer AM, known for his operatic adaptation of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* that was hailed "a resounding triumph" by *The Australian*.

Approached to adapt the work by Palmer after he spotted the novel on his wife's bedside table, Purcell said *The Drover's Wife* had been in her heart since 1975, but the desire to bring the story to life began in 2014, taking shape across many genres and platforms.

"The intensity and scale of this Australian story makes it ripe for an operatic retelling, I've enjoyed the challenge. While this opera may not follow traditional expectations, it will offer something uniquely Australian – bold, grounded and full of heart," Ms Purcell said.

"I've loved diving back into *The Drover's Wife* and looking at how we can use the libretto, First Nations language and the full might of an orchestra to take the storytelling to the next level and distinguish this version from its predecessors.

"I want people to say, 'I've read the book, I've watched the movie and now I'm seeing the opera'."

For *The Drover's Wife*, Palmer's ravishing score will be accompanied by Purcell's libretto, which Palmer also contributed to, sung in English with Indigenous language woven in, allowing the story to soar to new heights and deliver a greater intensity and raw emotion than music alone can evoke.

Purcell, who performed Molly Johnson in the play and film adaptations, is entrusting the next generation of First Nations performers to bring this new interpretation to life on the stage.

Leading the cast will be celebrated young soprano Nina Korbe, a proud Koa, Kuku Yalanji, Wakka Wakka woman, following in her aunt Leah Purcell's footsteps, taking on the role of Molly, while Bundjalung tenor Marcus Corowa who has had acclaimed performances in *Bran Nue Dae*, *The Rabbits* and *Beautiful: Carol King the Musical* will play Yadaka.

Palmer's luscious orchestrations, played by the formidable OA orchestra under the baton of Tahu Matheson, captures the beauty and violence of the Australian High Country in a setting by Designer Isabel Hudson and Costume Designer Tess Schofield, with Lighting Designer Karen Norris and Sound

PATRON-IN-CHIEF
DR HARUHISA HANDA

HERO PARTNER

GOVERNMENT PARTNERS



CREATIVE VICTORIA

Designer Michael Waters.

Former Bangarra dancer, Bidjara woman Yolande Brown's choreography will further drive the drama on stage through physical movement that adds a layered dimension to the storytelling.

The opera follows Molly Johnson who is heavily pregnant and living in a remote district in the Snowy Mountains with her children while her husband is away droving sheep. When Yadaka, an Aboriginal man on the run from authorities finds his way to her homestead and begs for shelter, Molly's eyes are opened to the world outside her solitude, and the course of her life is forever changed.

Purcell's new rendition of this moving Indigenous Australian story is a compelling piece that will confront audiences with the reminder of our country's brutal but shared history while also showcasing the strength and resilience of First Nations people and continue to further inspire reconciliation and change.

The Drover's Wife is co-commissioned by Opera Australia and the Queensland Performing Arts Centre in association with Oombarra Productions. *The Drover's Wife* opera is based on *The Drover's Wife* play, originally commissioned and produced by Belvoir St Theatre in association with Oombarra Productions through The Balnaves Foundation Indigenous Playwright's Award. The opera's production partner is The Balnaves Foundation.

7 – 15 August | Joan Sutherland Theatre, Sydney Opera House

Creatives

Composer **George Palmer AM**
 Libretto **Leah Purcell AM with George Palmer AM**
 Conductor **Tahu Matheson**
 Director **Leah Purcell AM**
 Choreographer **Yolande Brown**
 Set Designer **Isabel Hudson**
 Costume Designer **Tess Schofield**
 Lighting Designer **Karen Norris**
 Sound Designer **Michael Waters**
 Video Designer **Craig Wilkinson**
 Associate Director **Imara Savage**
 Producer **Bain Stewart for Oombarra Productions**

Cast

Molly **Nina Korbe**
 Yadaka **Marcus Corowa**
 Danny **Nick Smith**
 Black Mary **Shauntai Abdul-Rahman**
 Swaggy / Thomas McNeally **Barry Ryan**
 Peddler/Douglas Merchant **Shane Lawrencev**
 Trooper Leslie **Elias Wilson**
 Robert Parsen **Simon Meadows**
 John McPharlen **Zoy Frangos**
 Jock **John Longmuir**

Opera Australia Orchestra

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Performance information

Evenings at 7:30pm

Aug 7, 11

Matinee at 12:30pm

Aug 15

Matinee at 2:00pm

Aug 9

Running time

Approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes including one interval.

Performed in English.

This production contains graphic depictions of violence including violence against women, themes of racism, replica firearms and gunshot effects.

Bookings

Adult tickets from \$79 (fees may apply)

Opera Australia Box Office
 (02) 9318 8200
www.opera.org.au

**Joan Sutherland Theatre,
 Sydney Opera House**