

The Drover's Wife shortlisted for prestigious International Opera Award



The Drover's Wife. Photo credit: Carlita Sari

Leah Purcell's critically acclaimed operatic adaptation of Henry Lawson's short story *The Drover's Wife*, which had its world premiere in Brisbane's new Glasshouse Theatre in May and a sell-out season at the Sydney Opera House in August this year, has been shortlisted in the World Premiere category of the prestigious International Opera Awards.

In a first-time co-commission by Opera Australia and Queensland Performing Arts Centre in association with Oombarra Productions, *The Drover's Wife – The Opera* is a collaboration between Purcell and celebrated Australian composer George Palmer AM, blending contemporary First Nations storytelling with traditional grand opera.

Palmer's luscious orchestrations capture 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, Video Designer Craig Wilkinson and Sound Designer Michael Waters. Former Bangarra dancer, Bidjara woman Yolande Brown's choreography further drives the drama on stage through physical movement that adds a layered dimension to the storytelling.

Internationally acclaimed author, playwright and actor, Purcell was approached to adapt the work by Palmer after he spotted the novel of the same name on his wife's bedside table. *The Drover's Wife – The Opera* is the latest incarnation in Purcell's evolution of Lawson's 1892 short story, having originally been commissioned as a play by Belvoir St Theatre, then a novel and eventually a feature film.

*"I'd like to think that... this new piece will be in the repertoire in 30+ years, because The Drover's Wife is a brilliant achievement for the ages in every way. **Stage Noise***

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.

*"A monumental opera of wide appeal, graced with a stunning score and gripping story to match and truly deserving of a place as a staple in its repertoire." **Australian Arts Review***

Following its highly praised Brisbane and Sydney seasons, *The Drover's Wife – The Opera* will have its Melbourne premiere in May next year as part of OA's 2027 season, playing at the newly reopened Ian Potter State Theatre.

Founded in 2012 the International Opera Awards are an annual celebration of excellence in opera around the world. Previous winners of the World Premiere category include The Royal Opera, Hungarian State Opera, Dutch National Opera, Deutsche Oper Berlin and Teatro alla Scala to name just a few. Winners for the 2026 awards will be announced at a ceremony in Austria on 21 November.

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.

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