

LANNY – Co-writer’s Note

In March 2021, Remy approached me with a project in mind. I said yes without even knowing what the project was. We had studied our Masters at VCA alongside each other (me dramaturgy, him directing) and had collaborated a number of times since on different projects, workshops, and developments, as well as being good friends.

With the blessing of Max Porter, Remy had permission to write an unofficial stage adaptation of Porter’s novel *Lanny* for the senior school play at Trinity Grammar School the following year. A hypnotic, eerie, and at times terrifying story set in England’s south-east home counties, Porter’s *Lanny* is the story of the reawakening of a folkloric spirit and his once-in-a-generation fascination with a local village.

One of our first discussions was about setting, location, style, and tone – what would our *LANNY* look like? We knew we couldn’t replicate Porter’s novel on stage – even for a professional company, the English countryside was radically different to our own (our history since 1778 particularly demonstrates this at large). I recalled Irish playwright Brian Friel – discussing his Chekhov adaptations, he noted ‘adaptations work most successfully when you can match the climate of the original and the new.’ I suggested relocating *Lanny*’s story to a small town in Tasmania – the wet dark forests evoked a wilder, stranger place to Porter’s while keeping the small-town feel intact. As we dug deeper into this new setting, we realised the island’s violent colonial history, alongside its more recent histories of logging, environmental violation, and the (at times visible) class disparity meant there was room to play, to make this *LANNY* our own.

We wrote a long and reasonably faithful version of the play, almost beat-for-beat from the novel, reshaping little bits for our own needs. When we corralled our friends for a reading and workshop, we realised it was too wordy and ran close to three hours. For a school production, we needed it to sit squarely inside 120 minutes (including an interval), and knew it could not get too caught up in the words. So we went back to the drawing board, pulled it apart, looked for a new way into the story in a sharper, more essential way.

By this time we were in lockdown (again), so our regular coffee discussions became dog-walks. Tossing the play’s structure between us we realised that while the first act worked well on the page, in drama – in space – too much served the same function, so we shaped an opening sequence which crossed between the family house, art lessons, and an adults’ lunch – all the story’s tensions and dynamics were there, just in a streamlined (and more dramatic) form. We debated the ending too – emotional on the page, in performance it could very easily become mawkish or twee; we discussed numerous different approaches before stripping it right back to its most essential form – I think we got the balance right.

Writing for a group of 15-17 year olds, we knew we couldn’t dwell on the darker aspects of Pete’s character, so Pete became Peta; the village became a more constant presence in the middle of the story; and the lead quartet – Lanny, Jolie, Robert, Peta – were double-cast to ensure maximum opportunities. Toothwort – a half-glimpsed and, at times, figurative folkloric presence in the novel – became a physical presence via the ensemble, able to spread around and amongst the stage action – all up, roles for forty-odd students. Dropping into rehearsals every week, it has been a delight to see the energy in the room, the willingness to engage with this brand new play and help us develop it in the process – each of the students like Lanny themselves.

From the beginning, Remy wanted to use binaural technology to augment the storytelling – sculpted three-dimensional sound, played in headphones worn by the audience. Rather than draw the audience out of the performance, it draws us closer and places us amongst the villagers whispering about the child’s disappearance, places us inside the story so we too are almost a participant.

When we premiere in April, it will have been a year since we first started work on the project. Seeing it in full-throttled adrenaline-fuelled life over four performances makes me giddy beyond words – in the face of the uncertainty and weirdness of lockdowns, we wrote a play that could be performed out the other side in ‘covid-normal,’ and the fact we were able to do so at all still feels surreal. I don’t know what comes next for the play, but I imagine Old Papa Toothwort’s never going to be far away.