



THE LINE

History: In December 2016, Cliff Dolliver (AD Downtcha Puppets, Cork) approached Nancy Black (AD Black Hole Theatre) to collaborate on a work set during the Black Wars in 19th Century Tasmania. They engaged Australian First Peoples Nathan Maynard and Irish storyteller Clare Murphy as writers, and, with a grant from the Cork City Council and Arts Tasmania, a skeleton team gathered in Cork in September 2017 to explore ideas. The results were as follows.

Synopsis: Set against the British invasion of Tasmania in the mid-19th Century, *The Line* examines a relationship between a Palawa (Tasmanian Aboriginal) woman, Muka, and a pregnant escaped Irish convict, Bríd. The work will be developed as a triptych, with the centre flanked by two smaller pieces, stylistically different, that examine Bríd's backstory, and present a contemporary Muka. The central action takes place during the infamous Black Wars – the attempt by the government and settlers to obliterate the Aboriginal population. Their tactics included forming a human line across a large part of the island and marching in a pincer formation towards the Tasman peninsula, believing they could entrap the Aboriginals in its path. Muka, formerly kidnapped and enslaved by sealers, is fleeing for her life; Bríd, indentured to a British farmer, raped, and pregnant now with his child, has fled into the wilderness to escape the abuse.

The two women meet by chance, and despite animosity, a relationship begins. The dynamics of that relationship will form the core of the work. The political, cultural, and ethnic differences that separate them will be countered by forces that bring them together. Both are tough women. Their mutual distrust fades as they move across the Tasman landscape. Respect grows. Stories are exchanged in Irish and Palawa-kani. They don't understand the words, but create a gestural vocabulary, and accept the expressions of each other's culture, humour, and the quirks of their personalities.

Then suddenly Bríd goes into premature labour. It goes badly; the baby is stillborn. Reality sets in. The bush will never be Bríd's home. Muka needs to rejoin her clan. They part.

Visual Concept: The human narrative is intersected and accompanied by two purely visual layers that are present throughout and that follow their own agendas: the environment and "the line". Both are dynamic, ever changing and unpredictable. Each can and will interrupt and overwhelm the scenes; sometimes they will drive the action; at other times, they stay in the background. Sometimes they operate in counterpoint to the human core, at others they support it. The "line" is an expression of the destruction wrought by the invaders on the land and the indigenous people – the war of course, but also fences, clearing land, the introduction of sheep. The environment is uncontrollable, savage, petulant – wind, rain, light and dark, winter and summer. These elements will be expressed through shadows, projected media, sound, and various forms of puppetry above and around the audience on screens, walls, and the floor – to create an immersive, unsettling world.

We imagine it could be played in a large open space such as a studio or warehouse, but possibly in a traditional theatre. We think the scale will be large enough to play to several hundred people.

Form: The synopsis offers the linear narrative that binds the centre piece. However, during our September 2017 development in Cork, the creative team devised a non-linear approach that we feel expresses its themes more forcefully. For example, images will occur and recur from different angles, questioning what we think we have seen. Early in the piece, Muka builds a fire – an apparently simple action; later we return to that scene and discover it's the cremation fire for the stillborn baby. Time is distorted – ie Bríd's labour is divided into three sections, providing the umbrella to events past and present. By using a structure that contains the narrative but is non-linear, we are able to focus on the dynamics of their relationships with one another and the environment.

Aim: We hope that the audience will experience how two people from opposing cultures, in a world over which they have no control, can meet and form a bond through their shared humanity. At this point we think the dialogue will be Palawa kani and Irish, with English surtitles.

Although we have deliberately eschewed telling a history play, we aim to expose this period of history to audiences who know very little about it. Australians are largely ignorant of the Black Wars. Most don't know that thousands of Irish were transported as convicts. The Irish know little or nothing about the Australian Aboriginal culture – let alone what it suffered. We have discovered strong resonances between the Aboriginal and Irish cultures, and parallel experiences of colonisation.

Led by our Palawa artists, our plan also includes developing an ongoing relationship with the Palawa community that will encourage and support emerging artists. We imagine an outcome that will include events, performances, and workshops.

Creative Team:

The skeleton team we assembled for our development in Cork, September 2017, has been greatly expanded!

Writers:

- Nathan Maynard, Palawa playwright from Tasmania, author of The Season among other works.
- Clare Murphy, Irish story teller and writer www.claremurphy.org

Set Design

- Cliff Dolliver, founder and AD of Downtcha Puppets, Cork www.downtcha.com

Sound Design:

- David Franzke, freelance composer and sound designer, Melbourne, www.jdavidfranzke.com

Musicians:

- Rory O'Brien – freelance music, Cork
- Dewayne Everettsmith, Palawa, Gunai/Kurnai, Tasmania

Directors:

- Nancy Black, AD of Black Hole Theatre, Melbourne www.blackholetheatre.com.au
- Eva Grace Mullaley a Widi woman from the Yamatji Nation in the Midwest Region of Western Australia

Lighting Design

- Chloe Ogilvie, Yamatji, WA

Actresses:

- Muka – Ebony McGuire
- Bríd – Noelle O'Regan - Cork

Puppeteer/mentoree:

- Denise Proctor - Pakana

Puppet Design:

- Rod Primrose, freelance puppeteer, maker

Timeline: This is an ambitious project, involving several cultures and international artists. We propose to develop it carefully, over an extended period of time. A 2nd creative development is planned for July 2018 in Tasmania, by which time we will have a script ready for investigation, and strong visual proposals. We will have a showing at the end, and extensive documentation. Further refinements, and a full development of the two backstories, will take place during 2019. We anticipate premiering the work in 2020 and will work toward a nationwide and international tour.

A number of Australian presenters have already expressed a keen interest in the project. We think it is an ideal festival offering and could appeal to diverse audiences here and overseas.

