



K: I'll start by asking you what inspired you to write *Neighbourhood Watch*?

L: I had a conversation with Robyn Nevin, probably about four years ago... in a foyer. It was her going away party at the Sydney Theatre Company, and it was just a brief conversation. I really liked her. We got on really well and I said to her, "It's such an honour to be here", 'cause it was such a beautiful night and the celebration of her time at STC... and she said, "We should work together sometime" and I said, "Reeeeaally?" and I said, "Well why don't I write you a play?" And she said "Yeah!" And I said, "Oh my gosh, well what do you want the part to be like?" and she said, "tough and funny!" So then I just got obsessed and all I thought about was, I've got to get Robyn Nevin a part where the part is tough and funny. I kind of had a character in my imagination but I needed to find someone from life... that I could drain - that I could steal their life.

One day, it was kind of a funny time in my life, this thing called, Saturn's Return? Where you're in your late 20's when everything changes. I was sort of a bit lost. I remember it was after - I don't really know that much about politics or anything - but it was just after the Rudd government got voted in 2007, for years and years we'd had the Liberal government in, and so I thought, "I wonder if it will be different now we don't have the liberal government" and so I went out onto the street and I was just hanging around there one morning and I heard this, "You girl come on my gate"... and across the road was this little head behind a white picket fence, with her hair piled up high, wearing rose coloured glasses, and next to her this big German Shepherd-Doberman Pinscher barking and growling, and I thought she can't mean me but she said, "You girl, what you stupid? Come on my gate!" And so I went over and she started talking to me. And then she went and got this photo of when she was young and she looked really handsome in the photo, and I was like, "Beautiful!" and she said, "Yes!" And she's Hungarian. And then she launched right into this story about her father being blown up in the street, sort of mixed in with stuff about the street. We talked for about 20 minutes and at the end I thought, tough and funny - this is her! And I said, "Can I see you again?" and she said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah" and went inside.

Soon after I put a note in her letterbox saying... call me, but she didn't. So time when by and then... her dog had been in a fight in the street, and I sort of went and helped her and then for about two years I sort of lived with her in a way, all day all night listening to her talk. So I guess the inspiration for it came because I wanted to write a play for Robyn and then I'd met Ana who was the sort of the life blood for the play. So I guess that's initial place it came from.

K: So you had found the character of Ana. From what ideas did you start to construct a play – a form?

L: I didn't find a form for some time. For a long time I was just writing down little stories that Ana had told me. I didn't actually start writing it properly for about three years. And also when I first started writing it there was this Apocalypse Bear - who I've had in a lot of my plays - and a Hope Dolphin. They're not in it anymore but they kind of created the structure of the play. It was sort of like this Apocalypse Bear world, and this young woman AKA me, sort of, meets this older woman who she believes is the keeper of the Hope Dolphin and is gonna lead her to hope, I guess. So a lot of the play was structured around that. So it was a really useful device when I was writing it. By the end of three years, by then it was a commission for Belvoir because I came in and met with Eamon Flack and with Annette Madden and just told them about Ana and they wanted to do it. Meanwhile I wasn't writing it, I wasn't writing it, I wasn't writing it and finally it was time to write it! And also by then, I'd contacted Robyn and said - 'cause I thought, mmm... better tell Robyn, because Belvoir's being too nice, not that Robyn's not nice, but I thought if I tell Robyn that I'm gonna write it and then I don't then I'll be "forever in the shame". Although, I would be "forever in the shame" too if Belvoir commissioned me to write it and then I didn't!

So, it finally came time to write the first draft. So what I did is I printed out all of the scenes that I'd written or little snippets which was about 300 pages... and then I read them all and I put them in order of where they would go. And this is a trick I have, that I do all the time now. I printed out on Wikipedia... how to write a hero's journey and also how to write a three-act structure, and using those... I kinda arrange and go, well this must be in act 1 and this in act 2, act 3... and put them all in order... And I find that really useful having that document... so some things I'll just retype, or some things I'll have to add a scene or...and then you kinda know where you're going.



And then I just stayed awake for about four days writing it. The first draft was like 150 pages or so – it was way too long! It sort of had everything in it. And so from there that was the original first draft I guess.

K: It's interesting that you use the traditional three-act structure and hero journey structure to write contemporary plays. It is interesting for budding playwrights to wonder about the use of these traditional forms and new forms.

L: Well, I never used to, I used to make things up as I went along, and that was great. But now I actually find that it is really useful, because it just means that you're going to have a story... or hopefully it will. The weakness in my writing was always plot and story. I guess it was just something I didn't feel confident in. Eventually I didn't sort of want to feel like I was writing a certain way 'cause I didn't know how to write another way. I just thought I don't want to have one flat tyre all my life. And it is harder, I find, writing to try and have a story or plot because it's harder to make things just be alive, 'cause you're sort of following it. I guess it always comes down to why the characters are doing certain things. And it has to be their desires that guide it. And it shouldn't feel like their... just filling out plot. Which is the challenge in it, I guess. But now everything I write I do that, I go to Wikipedia and do that. I guess, when I was younger too, I was more interested in what my own mind was going to do, and now I'm, I mean I'm still interested in it in a way, but I'm not so enchanted with it as I was earlier.

K: Perhaps it's because now you have found your voice, and so you can fit that with the traditional dramatic structures.

L: Yeah, I guess that's the thing. I mean I guess before I was sort of like, "My voice, my voice!" And now I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's my voice," and I know what that can do and... I'm not so impressed with it anymore. It's not that I'm against it. It's just... not enough for me for it just to have voice anymore. It has to be pushed and pulled and challenged and stuff, otherwise I think you end up writing the same thing over and over again... or I would... I can't speak for other writers... some people will prefer sometimes my earlier stuff... just like a dream or crazy or whatever, just kind of alive, but I felt like, if I wanted to reach a bigger audience, and I do want to, that I had to learn how to let the world in a little bit more.

K: So how did the play evolve? When did you realise that you had a play? The original title was "The Hope Dolphin Rides Again" is that right?

L: Ah, "The Hope Dolphin Rides Tonight".

K: Okay great, so tell us about that title.

L: That was because it was originally, 'cause I'd written a lot of Apocalypse Bear plays, and this was gonna be a Hope Dolphin play. In a way it is 'cause it's about hope. When I was first hanging out with Ana in her house, it was kinda like magic. First of all her house – its all green and blue and... from about 3 'till almost 9 I lived in Miami. The sea is this turquoise aqua colour and there's palm trees everywhere so for some reason... its those things that always make me feel calm and at home and so Ana's house... was those colours... it was almost like it was under water or something. So straight away that kind of spoke to this core element in me where I was going, "Oh my God... I'm here, I'm here."

And then add Ana to it, this person who you can't actually believe that she's real 'cause she's like a witch. She's magic. Wild birds fly into her hands and she can talk to animals and... she changes the atmosphere around her. This is a street in suburban Kew in Melbourne, but she makes it magic. Like you kind of come and walk on to the street and think, something's different here. This isn't like other streets. And it's 'cause there's a witch living on that street... that is what she is to me anyway.

So I was sitting in her house listening to her stories, which were kind of like in a Hollywood movie when someone starts telling a story, and then twinkly stuff happens on the screen and then you're in the story. I was sort of in all her stories. It was the first time I'd lived someone else's life, more than I was living my own life... I was sort of used to thinking about myself... and I suddenly I was thinking like Ana. And I'd be riding my bike along the street, and I used to kind of sing songs about my own life and suddenly I was singing songs, as Ana, about her life. I guess I'd learnt her... I fell in love with her. Not romantically but absolutely in love with her and learnt her life.



I just knew her by the end of it as well as I know, probably better than I know anyone else because I'd studied her. With Ana I could kind of predict exactly what was going to happen in every situation in her life. I mean she always surprised me, and shocked me and excited me and stuff but... by the end I knew her probably better than I knew myself... the actual play though, it was translating Ana from life. The whole time I knew, whenever she'd be speaking I was like, "This is a play, this is a character." I couldn't believe it... that I found her. That I had asked a question and the world had given me Ana. It was like a rush! Like a physical thing. She'd be speaking and I couldn't believe the words she was saying. Adrenalin was coursing through my veins, I couldn't believe how lucky... I find that, whenever you get a real idea or a real inspiration, it's almost a physical thing, that kind of takes over your body. I knew that she was special, I knew that she was a play... well she could be anything you know. So the first draft of the play, needed a lot of work because it was kinda just like... Ana in real life is like, you know sometimes we have conversations, but a lot of the time it's like Ana kind of talking at me or Ana talking to other people. And that wasn't that interesting on stage. Her stories are amazing but...it needed to be more theatrical. That was a big part of the process, of realising what the play needed next... to make it more theatrical and I guess, more dramatic.

K: And so is that where you brought in the Hope Dolphin and the Apocalypse Bear?

L: Well, no they were already in it. They were sort of trailing though it... the plot devices, from personal apocalypse to hope. And kind of global hopelessness to hope, like in the end Obama gets in so it's like this thing of hope. So really I was working a whole lot on the texture and plot and stuff with Eamon Flack and Simon Stone. They were really involved in the drafting of the play.

K: To make it more dramatic?

L: Yeah, to make it more dramatic, and to get rid of a lot of superfluous stuff. I guess what happened in the end was, it had to be... made slightly untrue. Not untrue to the heart but untrue to life. I had to become a little bit removed from it and I had to take out things... everyone always says you have to kill your darlings, and I think one of the reasons I wrote it was for, well one of my inspirations for writing it initially was the Apocalypse Bear and the Hope Dolphin, and then in the end they had to be taken out in order to make it, to have room for Ana in it I think.

K: Perhaps having the inspiration of those bigger ideas in the beginning could bring Ana to where she is now?

L: Absolutely! Yeah, and I think they did that. They were really good tools for the writing of it. Really useful. But then weren't actually necessary for the play in the end.

K: When converting things from real life, how do you negotiate staying true to your aesthetic while at the same time using this raw material? And what do you personally do to make sure that when you're writing from real life, it's not too real for theatre?

L: I guess it's your instinct. Hopefully, like you know sometimes your instinct is wrong or it's boring or whatever but... I guess the bits that really strike me in real life I just take. Maybe morally that's a bit up in the air you know. It's like... if there's something in a dream and I wake up and go – "Oh, I felt that"... the texture, the heart, whatever. So basically I just take what I feel. And so I just follow my instinct. If I feel something I use it. And if don't, then I don't so some things from real life... like sometimes I'd be writing stuff from Ana and I'd be like, I don't really feel this, and other things I would. And then I guess the things that you don't feel you take out and then you fill in the gaps. I always think... we're all made up of mathematics in a certain way. Our genetic memory, our soul or whatever makes up our mathematics and then add magic to that and you have imagination. Everything that you create is sort of a mixture between mathematics and magic a little bit.

Really, there's no short cut to it, I mean I would advise to any young writers to follow their instincts. To do what they think is good. Because you can't guess at something. I mean you can teach yourself... but you have to write what you think is good. Follow your heart. But at the same time the only way your instincts are actually developed is through work, is through writing, writing, writing and through seeing theatre. Since I was 16 or whatever I've been in theatres constantly, and so... I'd like to think that I'd kind of innately know if something is, I guess my instincts have grown or been taught... 'cause I've spent so much time in theatre, watching theatre, making theatre, just being around theatres... I spent as much time in theatres as I've spent anywhere else, so I kind of know now,



I think, when something from life will work in a theatre. But when I write a play I don't picture a stage and I don't picture actors... I just picture the real life thing and I kind of write that. Which can be very frustrating for directors later - 'cause then it'll have a swimming pool or the sea fills the stage - and it's a bit tedious but they can work out stuff for that. But it's when I get into rehearsals and I start doing rewrites there and work with the actors - that's when I will write with the stage and theatrics in mind. So I guess before that hopefully it's like a second nature, writing things theatrically, and then once I'm in the rehearsal room then I'm actually writing to the production I guess.

K: Your previous work is a lot more fantastical. The idiosyncratic voice people recognise as yours is far more in the fantastical realm. *Neighbourhood Watch* seems to be dealing more with the real. Is this a progression for you, or did you just feel that Ana's story required more truth? Are you moving in new ways?

L: I guess I am moving in new ways. It's a funny thing 'cause you don't want to throw out away the things that have been your friends... your travelling companions... but at the same time you don't want to go over the same thing over and over again. I guess it's just me changing as a person too because I think for years and years, my imagination was bigger to me than the world and so my dreams were almost bigger than life to me. So that was a place of truth that I was writing from. And now I'm in my early thirties and I guess, the world, it's changed a bit. I'm a bit more based in a shared reality I guess than I was when I was younger. Not that that's a good or a bad thing, it's just where I am. I guess also it was a conscious thing too.

I wanted to invite more people into my writing and so I guess I wanted to set up a world that... more and more people could have access to. And then once they're in that world - to kind of change the rules and shift things. Rather than before where the world would just be ... like a surreal place right from the beginning. I guess I did want to include more people. I was also so interested in writing about myself, and about my own dreams and imagination, or characters that came out of there for so long that I've just run a little dry on that so I'm sort of more interested in writing about other people now. It's just a natural thing, I'm just taking people from the world, so their world is reflected in the plays I write I guess.

K: How was working with Simon Stone and Eamon Flack in the development of the play? How did they work with you to bring to the stage what we will see on opening night?

L: I loved working with them. I guess with Simon and Eamon - I feel like we're creatively on the same page. I really love their work and I get where they're coming from so straight away we had a really easy dialogue together. It wasn't like they read the first draft and went you've gotta totally change this, it was sort of like we came to changes together, so we got on the same wavelength I guess. And we worked on the plot and cleaning things up and stuff.

I guess in a way too, a little bit I got on Simon's wavelength in a way and sometimes I was writing to his taste and... but I would do that with any director in a way. That's when you start writing to the production and I don't think that's a bad thing I think it's a good thing if you spark well with the director... because it means you go in slightly a different direction and you grow and learn. And working with Simon and Eamon... I feel like I learnt a lot... about structure and plot. I'd never worked with them before and I feel like, their working processes I found really good, really useful. I feel that without a doubt the play that it is now - If I hadn't worked with them it would be a completely different play. Not to say better or worse but I'm very happy with the result.

K: How did the subplots of Milova, Christina, Ken, and others come about and work to complement the main through line? Were any subplots lost?

L: I actually should mention a man named Julian Meyrick also initially worked on the play too. I had at first all these enemies of Ana in the play... Milova was just like one enemy. And he said, "Oh you should just make them all into one"... And that was really useful, like that was a really good tying up of things. That was like, "Oh yeah, good, that's teaching me something, that's concentrating it into one thing."

And Simon and Eamon had a lot to do with [the plotting] because... we got all this butchers paper and we wrote down all the scenes. All this stuff is so useful, all this stuff people tell you to do in... writing class.... that I never used to do when I was younger - I just thought it was... I just didn't do it - and it is actually really useful. And then we just kind of worked out where things sat best with each other.... originally the Ken character wasn't in love with



the Catherine character and then we thought it's more dramatic if he is, much to the dismay of my real life friend Ben who Ken is based on who's disgusted by the fact that now his character's in love with mine.

We worked really hard on how each scene...on the... order of things and how things weaved in and out of each other and Simon and Eamon had a huge influence in that... also they could see outside of it, clearer than I could 'cause I was right in the middle of it too so I mean there was a really good example of, for me, of dramaturgy that was really useful. So...the plots of Ken and Milova and everything hopefully they all kind of– that's the thing... a play is like a piece of music and like different chords should kind of fit together and sort of form the song together... hopefully that's how this will work, I guess.

K: The play was originally set in Melbourne, where the real events in the play took place. How did you negotiate changes to suit a Sydney stage?

L: Well there were really very few references to Melbourne... and its funny like every time we had a reading of the play or any time I walked around Sydney impersonating Ana - not like in a kind of cruel way - but just 'cause for ages all I did was talk like Ana. Everyone had to say, "Stop being Ana!" Everyone would say, "Oh, I know women just like her in Bondi"... so I think she's quite a universal character so... she could be in Sydney, she could be in Melbourne she could even be in Brisbane or whatever... I sort of feel like she could be in whatever city. I just think it's more enjoyable for the audience if the play is based in their city. And half the work I've done on this play was in Sydney... so why shouldn't it be in Sydney? And then if we do it in Melbourne... we can set it in Melbourne again. To be honest [it's] just a few name changes really.

K: What's particularly different about this process than previous play developments?

L: It was so extended. I was working with Eamon and Simon for so long. It was written specifically for Robyn. And Ralph was quite involved... Ralph Myers. He and I actually had an initial conversation like ages ago, we just went for this little walk... and we were walking and he said "I never want to be that guy who tells the playwright that they should take out the... crazy, wacky thing in the play but I just have this feeling that you don't need the Apocalypse Bear." And I'd been having a similar feeling. I'd thought for a while that maybe the Apocalypse Bear and Hope Dolphin... I had suspicions they didn't belong in the play and then I said, "You know what, Ralph Myers, you're right, I don't think it belongs!" And that was the beginning of taking it out.

What else is different?...I guess... it was quite a technical way of working, like writing everything down on butchers paper and having so many readings spaced out over time and at the same time I was meeting with Robyn all the time and talking about the play with her. I guess also... crafting it to be something that I would hope Belvoir audiences would like too.

K: Speaking of Robyn. Do you feel satisfied that Ana is just as Robyn Nevin requested – tough and funny? And do you think this play advocates for new types of female roles to emerge in theatre?

L: I hope so! I hope so! I write for men and women but I find it very hard to write something where there's not a central woman somewhere involved because you know, I'm a woman. And I like to write women. But yeah I hope that she's a good character for Robyn. So far in rehearsals, Robyn's been amazing and she's brought the character to life more than I could have dreamed. I hope from the bottom of my heart that the season is a fulfilling experience for her and that she's pleased that she's gone on this adventure and everything. That's one of the most important things for me.

I really want to advocate for interesting female roles on our stages and our screens... but... to be honest it's not something I think a lot about... It's not something I think - "I want to write this play 'cause I want there to be good female roles." It's more like... "I just want to write this role! Oh this woman's amazing!" To be honest it's not coming from a political or... it's not like I feel like I should be doing it it's just 'cause I wanna do it. It's hard to do things because you feel like you should. In my mind I just kind of go, "Why wouldn't you wanna write these great female roles? Wouldn't you want the best female actors doing big amazing... roles? Why wouldn't people be striving to do that?" In a way, it seems ridiculous to me that it would be a political thing, because there's so much joy in it I think. But if it needs to be a political thing to push things to happen and everything then sure, you know, great... if that helps other people... but for me that's not where I'm coming from...

K: How have you found your experience as a young Australian playwright coming up the ranks and developing work for Australian stages?

L: Look, I've had an amazing time. I've been really supported by a lot of older writers. I've been really mentored... and I remember when I was young, in my late teens early 20's and I was really competitive and... whenever I talk to younger writers and they're like that, I don't think it's a bad thing 'cause I think it's almost like this hormonal thing... when you're really young, that you have this angst almost. You feel like you're not ahead enough or... like you're behind and so you do feel really competitive and stuff and I remember being really humbled quite a few times by these writers who were older than me because... when I was younger I sort of thought... these older more developed writers would want to keep the younger writers down because they'll kind of wanna keep everything for themselves and it just wasn't the case.

I've been shown so much kindness and generosity from older writers on so many different occasions. That really humbled me and made me go, "Okay, maybe you don't have to be competitive." Maybe all that happens is if someone helps you up or makes room for you, all that happens is there's more room. I mean in Australia sometimes it can be hard, or anywhere, because there's never enough money for everybody but I think we should never take that attitude into our work. If we can we shouldn't carry that round with us 'cause all it breeds is bitterness and I don't think good work comes from bitterness. I think we should assume there's enough room for everyone and act that way and that will mean that there is more room. I've been really lucky in a lot of ways.

In all fairness I have worked very hard... it hasn't been like I've sort of just got picked up by companies or whatever. I put on my own work for years and years, I spent my own money, had bake stalls everyday... you know cleaned out theatres, did front of house everywhere, so it was like I really had a lot of experience in a lot of different ways and it was through that that I met people who eventually kind of helped me and stuff and... I guess cause I lived theatre so much I was always around it so I met the people that I wanted to work with and sort of who... promoted my work.

So I don't want to make it sound like it's something like, you meet the right people and it's fine... you have to work for it, you have to work really hard. And I do see sometimes, like overseas... sometimes young writers who are picked up... they write one play and they're... picked up and put on main stages... which is fantastic... but I also worry for them 'cause I think, if their next play doesn't go so well, what happens to them then? Do they kind of get dropped? And they haven't sort of worked their way up and so where do they go if they get dropped? And so I guess you just hope that companies will be careful with these writers and... make sure there are... structures to look after them and stuff. If they write a great play, yeah, put it on, but then make sure that they are learning about theatre and how theatre works and everything, 'cause that will stand them in good stead for their careers. I guess early on I started doing plays with Michael Cantor and Stephen Armstrong at the Malthouse and they really supported me – started putting my plays on in a big company, and Belvoir did and Sydney Theatre Company and now Melbourne Theatre Company and stuff... I feel really lucky to get to work with all these companies and I really love them and stuff...

K: How do you think you've changed as a writer since when you were 16?

L: Hopefully I'm learning how to do structure and plot and... I'm hopefully going deeper into things... I guess I've become more interested in the world whereas when I was younger I was more writing just from myself and I think that's a natural thing when you're younger and that's maybe what changes in your writing as you get older to a certain extent. I guess also just being around the theatre so much and seeing so much theatre I've been influenced by that in my writing.

K: And if you were going to give advice to high school students wishing to pursue writing for theatre, what would you tell them?

L: I'd say, you know, go for it! But... just put your heart and soul into it and see as much theatre as you can, volunteer... just be around the theatre as much as you can. Put on your own work. Just get people together and just put on a play anywhere that you can put one on... like in a pub or whatever. The only way you learn is by being around the theatre, and by hearing your own words over and over again. If you have a play on, see it every night. Just be as involved as you can and just work as hard as you can.



K: How does it feel having your work brought to life for the first time? What is of key importance when giving birth to a work for the stage at its premiere?

L: Look, it feels really exciting. I feel really excited about it. I'm nervous and excited. I always get nervous about – will people like it? What will the reviewers say? All that kind of stuff. I guess the thing about giving birth to a play is making sure that you're around to make sure things are going okay but also letting others take ownership and put their lives and energy into it... putting positivity into it and belief I guess... always giving it energy. Almost like a baby, like you have to breast-feed it all the time. You kinda have to do that with new work as well I guess.

K: Is there anything else you want to say on your experience of building *Neighbourhood Watch* and working with the cast?

L: I feel really lucky... this cast is great! It's been a party. It's been really fun! I feel like everyone in the cast are ultra talented. They come from a lot of different theatrical backgrounds... I feel like it's been a really good mix of people. It's been a really kinda heartwarming, fun time. They've all been really generous with their thoughts and... they've all had input into cuts and changes in the script. And its been really fun being around Belvoir all the time. Up 'till now it's been great and just hopefully... the season... I know the performances will go well, I just hope the season will go well...

K. Thanks very much and I hope opening night goes fantastically.

L. Thanks Kate.