

**Ruby Langton-Batty, Co-Designer on *Coranderrk* speaks to Cathy Hunt from Belvoir Education about the process of coming up with the design for this production.**

**CH:** *What was your starting point when you came to think about doing the design for Coranderrk?*

**RLB:** Well, I went to a workshop in Melbourne and I got to speak to all the creatives involved, at that point, which was Ralph, Isaac and the projection artist. There were a lot of different ideas floating around which have since evolved, but basically there was this idea of wanting to have in set very much in the contemporary world. We can look at the past from our contemporary perspective, and through the prism it will be hopefully much more interesting and helpful in gauging the differences and the similarities between now and then. So, Ralph and I and Isaac decided we wanted to set to be very simple. I realized that I am the ‘co-designer’ (which I have never done before), so I am doing some of the set, props and costumes. I’m doing all the costumes.

**CH:** *So you and Ralph had to work together to come up with the design?*

**RLB:** Yes. The original concept we came up with, although I think it was mostly Ralph, was to replicate onstage an ethnographic photograph. We wanted to use one of those very ‘staged’ Victorian era photographs of an Aboriginal person surrounded by objects such as boomerangs. That was about setting up an expectation for the audience, at the beginning of the show, which would then be dismantled and challenged. So that’s what we’ve done. I’ve organized a possum skin cloak, which is the iconic thing for Indigenous people from Victoria. It is still used today

**CH:** Do people wear them?

**RLB:** Oh yeah, definitely. That’s one of the main things they wore back then [pre-colonisation], but it is still worn today for special occasions.

Bjorn Stewart, Matthew Cooper, Jack Charles

Photo: Patrick Boland



**CH:** *Who did the cloak come from?*

**RLB:** It came from Aunty Joy Wandin- Murphy who is the Senior Wurundjeri elder of the Kulin alliance in Victoria, and we had it painted by Yorta-Yorta artist Treahna Hamm. She chose to paint on it one of Williams Baraks artworks. Jack looks really wonderful in it. As well as that, we also

have a spear, a boomerang and some native ferns. So that will be presented to the audience in the opening scene, and then it will be stripped back to an empty stage (apart from the projection screen).

For the costume designs, we started by looking at a collection of photographs that were taken in the early days of Coranderrk. In the first version that Ilbjeri put on at the opera house, they had the cast wearing contemporary outfits, such as jeans and t-shirts, with historical costumes pre-set onstage that they would change into depending on which character they were playing. I felt having the historical photographs projected on stage, and the period costumes on the actors, was unnecessary duplication of the same image. Also, it is impossible to properly replicate those costumes – they're so beautiful and there's just no way you could ever really do justice to those photos by having trying to emulate them. So I decided that we should have completely contemporary costumes. Strip it all back, but then have just little hints toward the silhouette of that time, or towards specific character. Because of the nature of an ensemble cast, and the fact that they are each playing many different characters, the costumes need to be quite adaptable.

I should say that the photos from Coranderrk are not actually ethnographic photos. They were taken at the request of the people who lived there, as they wanted to create a record of their lives. There are a few images where they reenacted the long walk to where they eventually built Coranderrk. There are images of couples, families and close friends all dressed in outfits that were extremely fashionable at the time. They had obviously gone to great lengths to look as stylish as they could in these photos. Some of the women have made matching dresses, and in many of the portraits you can see that people have shared the one fashionable accessory they possess.

**CH:** *So the historical photos are projected, the costumes are contemporary, but only Jack Charles will be wearing the cloak?*

**RLB:** Yes that right. However, while the possum skin cloak is an ancient garment, our one is actually very contemporary. You can't get the possum skins from Australia or Victoria because they're a protected species, so they have to be imported from New Zealand where they are a pest.

**CH:** *That's so funny because possums cause havoc in peoples houses and gardens.*

**RLB:** I know, it's funny. So it's very expensive to make one. The artist who made this cloak actually revived the tradition of making the cloaks (known as *biganga*) by conducting extensive research on the few that remained in Victoria. By doing that she was able to replicate the exact methods used originally. Eventually she developed her own method using contemporary tools and materials.

**CH:** *So, without giving anything away, how does the set transform during the show?*

**RLB:** The actors do it all. We've tried to strip back theatrical conventions as much as possible. It's just absolute bare bones designing.

**CH:** *So how much of the design reflects the historical images of Coranderrk you were looking at?*

**RLB:** Some the of photos are just of the land itself, so we really wanted to be able to just show those to the audience, and not try to turn the stage into a pretend version of Coranderrk. So, the stage does not reflect a physical representation of Coranderrk, but more of an emotional and psychological one.

One of the ways we've done that is to represent elements of the script on stage. For example, there is a story about a little boy, Phinnamore Jackson, who is beaten by the station manager, Strickland, with a horse reign, and it is absolutely horrific. This is spoken about in the enquiry by three different characters. I read that and I thought it would evoke a strong reaction from the audience to have a set of horse reigns on stage. Just hearing the story is horrible, but once you

can actually see the reigns and how thick the leather is, how heavy the metal is, you fully realize how brutal this man was.

Another example is when Jack Charles is representing Barak, and he is talking about using ochre, he is simultaneously painting up the actors, in an almost healing, ritualistic way, which is very beautiful.

**CH:** *What was the process like working with Isaac and working with another designer?*

**RLB:** Oh, it been great actually, Isaac is awesome, and Ralph is amazing. Yeah I've really enjoyed it a lot. There is a beautiful energy in the room and I feel very supported. They've been really trusting of me, and I've learnt so much from them.

**CH:** *This is the second main stage show you've designed at Belvoir, and one downstairs. Do you feel like you're getting the hang of designing the upstairs space?*

**RLB:** Yes, I think I am. Basically, simple is better is what I've learnt so far. The best thing you can do is to let the actors take the audience where they need to go. An object in a theatre space is only there to support the actor's needs, and the need of the story. That's pretty obvious – I kind of already knew that before I started designing professionally, but this process has helped it to become more instinctual.



Kate Beckett, Kelton Pell, Jack Charles, Matthew Cooper, Bjorn Stewart

Photo: Patrick Boland

**CH:** *How did you get started as a designer?*

**RLB:** I started an Arts degree at Monash University because I thought I wanted to be a Lawyer. But I didn't get good enough grades – I never really understood the purpose of writing an essay. I love learning and reading, but I was always able to communicate better in visual ways. So basically I ended up spending all my time drawing pictures of clothes instead of what my subjects required me to do and I just thought I should do what I really want to be doing.

I applied for fashion school and also the VCA production design course. I did really well in the long application for fashion school but in the end I knew I couldn't do something as superficial and greed-driven as fashion. I got really excited about the idea of doing production design, but I was

Ruby Langton-Batty, Set & Costume Designer on **Coranderrk** speaks about the design – 26/11/2013

hilariously naive when I went for the interview. I remember I had to make a model box of a hypothetical set design, but I didn't know the concept of scale existed, so the set I made was pretty surreal. I also showed up in clothing that I'd made – I taught myself how to sew in high school. I study fashion history and contemporary fashion in my own time, and I've always been interested in and involved in theatre from a young age.

**CH:** *Was there anything especially significant that you learnt about Coranderrk while working on this show?*

**RLB:** Most of what I learnt about Coranderrk was from my own private research I did while working on the show – anyone who already knows a little bit about Coranderrk will get more out of this show than those who don't.

I have been extremely grateful to learn about Jack Charles's life. He is an incredible person. His personal connections to Coranderrk are amazing. His great uncle is one of the people mentioned into the script – He refused to work unless he got equal wages to a white man. And that has been inspiring for everyone working on the show. Many people can look at Australian history as far and distant but it's not; those genuine personal connections exist.

One of the main things I learned was that there could have so easily been another fate for Aboriginal people in Victoria. That was the first real opportunity for land rights.

Matthew Cooper, Jack Charles, Kate Beckett, Melodie Reynolds-Diarra, Bjorn Stewart & Kelton Pell



Photo: Patrick Boland