

BELVOIR



TELL ME I'M HERE

Written and Adapted for the stage by
Veronica Nadine Gleeson

Based on the book by
Anne Deveson

Directed by
Leticia Cáceres

20 AUG – 25 SEP



TELL ME I'M HERE

Based on the book by **Anne Deveson**

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RUNNING TIME

2 hours & 20 minutes (including 20 minute interval)

CONTENT WARNING

Tell Me I'm Here contains adult themes, scenes of violence and suicide and the use of strong language. This production also uses herbal cigarettes.

CAST

Tom Conroy Jonathan

Deborah Galanos Ensemble

Nadine Garner Anne

Raj LaBade Joshua & Others

Sean O'Shea Ellis, The Architect & Ensemble

Jana Zvedeniuk Georgia & Others

CREATIVES

Playwright **Veronica Nadine Gleeson**

Original Author **Anne Deveson**

Director **Leticia Cáceres**

Set Designer **Stephen Curtis**

Lighting Designer **Veronique Benett**

Composer and Sound Designer **Steve Francis**

Composer and Sound Designer **Alyx Dennison**

Costume Designer **Ella Butler**

Dramaturg **Ruth Little**

Choreographer **Charmene Yap**

Fight Director **Tim Dashwood**

Accent/Vocal Coach **Laura Farrell**

Assistant Director **Claudia Osborne**

Stage Manager **Luke McGettigan**

Assistant Stage Manager **Holly Fernanda**

Tell Me I'm Here is the proud recipient of the **Blake Beckett Trust Award**

Supported by **The Group**

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we share our stories. We also pay our respect to the Elders past and present, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Leticia Cáceres

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

LETICIA CÁ CERES

The journey of taking Anne Deveson's powerful memoir to the stage started back in 2019, on a sunny afternoon in the heart of Melbourne city. As we sipped on our lattes, Veronica Gleeson proposed this herculean idea to me. She shared her long history with this book, her thrilling ambition for the work, her deep love and admiration for Anne. It was evident that Anne's memoir had had profound impact on Veronica's life, and I wanted to know why. I raced to buy a copy of the book. I devoured it. I sobbed. I understood. I called Veronica and I told her "I'm in".

During the pandemic, Veronica wrote, I read, we researched, and together we dreamed of a perfect stage that would contain this story. Was

it in Melbourne? Was it in Sydney? Could it be Adelaide? But as the script began to take shape, we both knew, beyond a doubt, *Tell Me I'm Here* belonged at Belvoir.

I made the approach. Eamon Flack, and the then resident dramaturg Louise Gough offered us some actors to read the work, over Zoom. It was another wintry day, when we all gathered around our computers and heard this play, in its early iteration, begin to delicately take theatrical form. Even through the harsh, fraught platform that is Zoom, this story reverberated out and through us, resonating powerfully in our hearts. We fought back tears. Eamon offered us a slot in his season. Veronica and I were elated! And terrified.

What followed were more workshops with actors, meetings with creatives, and interviews with experts and people who knew Anne at the beginning of her life. I had the honour of meeting Margaret Leggatt (who makes a mean cup of tea) who co-founded the organisation SANE with Anne. She gave us her blessing and insisted on the urgency of telling this story (still!). We met filmmaker Sari Braithwaite who shared incredible details of Anne's final moments of her life during the filming of *Paper Trails*. We also collaborated closely with one of Australia's great dramaturgs, Ruth Little, who was also a dear friend to Anne in her later years. Ruth kept encouraging us to be brave with this story, as brave and sharp as Anne, as uninhibited and creative as Jonathan.

In autumn of this year I took a trip to the National Library of Australia and poured over the archival material that Anne Deveson left us all to explore and learn. Again, I found myself humbled and deeply moved by her capacity to investigate, to articulate, to persist, to care, to advocate, to be so playful (I was shushed by librarians more than once). But mostly, what I found in the neat boxes was a professional woman of breathtaking intelligence and a boundless capacity for empathy. What I found in those boxes was a woman who fought passionately, tirelessly for her son.

Finally, rehearsals came. The actors, the creatives and I made a pact: we will not betray Jonathan and Anne's legacy by creating "an allegory of horror".

We hope we have not shied away from the relentless cruelty of this brain disease and the profound impact it had on their families and loved ones. We have employed the full power of the theatre to anchor the work in a language that allows us to bear witness to all our complexity and humanity at our most lucid and at our most lost.

I have so many people to thank, firstly all the actors who have read this work in workshops and provide invaluable insights. Thank you to Louise Gough and Dom Mercer who championed this play in its infancy giving us wonderful guidance and encouragement; to Eamon Flack whose skills for developing new Australian writing are second to none; to my design team who have pushed me to be inventive and trust the power of theatre; thank you Ruth Little for your exceptional and astute dramaturgical eye and your phenomenal theatrical understanding; to my assistant director Claudia Osborne who went above and beyond; to choreographer Charmene Yap who's understanding of the body enthralled and inspired us all; to this outstanding cast who wrestle this beast of a play with me with such love and rigour. And the stage management team, who weave their unseen but essential magic. Every day in the rehearsal room was a gift.

But mostly, I want to thank Veronica Nadine Gleeson who entrusted me with this story. What she has done to encapsulate this love story and a titan like Anne Deveson, is truly courageous and humbling.



Leticia Cáceres &
Charmene Yap



Nadine Garner, Deborah Galanos, Raj LaBade, Jana Zvedeniuk, Sean O'Shea

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

VERONICA NADINE GLEESON

Tell Me I'm Here is a title, a line, a plea from a young man who is losing his mind. I often wonder whether Anne Deveson also intended these words for herself. This drama unfolds through the short life of Jonathan Blain. But it is Anne's journey. In attempting to save her son, Anne trod the long dark night of her own soul. She was confronted by convention, dogma, received wisdom and infuriating orthodoxies. She tried to control the uncontrollable. She sought desperate remedies. Experienced compassion of the highest order. Joy. Weirdness. Judgement. Reprieves. Shocks. Countless others have walked this terrain. Few have been able to speak to it with the precision Anne did. Out of grief and despair she wrote hard and vivid truths, and in so doing brought forth a legacy of catharsis and connection. Her writing shattered stigma. It invited others to share their stories. It helped people understand.

I carried the possibility of this play inside me for a long and lonely time. At the end of my wandering I am overjoyed to discover how many people *Tell Me I'm Here* still helps. Anne's story still invites. It still raises profound questions about madness, chaos, difficulty and disintegration. It continues to explore. And the scope of that exploration tells us that in the face of uncertainty, we are complex. We are horrified, and sometimes horrifying. We are hilarious, confused, exhausted and wry - in the course of one day, one hour, inside a handful of minutes. We all strain to make sense. To locate hope. To stay the course, or even see where it is. We are heartbroken, but not destroyed. It tells us that if we persist, we create something of purpose. Something that lives beyond us. Jonathan might have called it magic. For Anne, it was love. Whatever the name, it reminds us we're here. There is no greater response to terror.

This play would not exist without the courage and giftedness of Leticia Caceres, the genius of Ruth Little and the vision and generosity of Eamon Flack, Dom Mercer and the Belvoir team. I am forever indebted to Joshua Blain, Odessa Blain and Andrew Taylor for allowing this adaptation. To Louise Gough, Sari Braithwaite, Margaret Leggatt, Sophie Plumridge, the staff of SANE, Benjamin Paz, Nellie Flannery, Amaya Alvarez and Dr Michele Blanchard for helping us along the way. To my daughters and husband, and our extraordinary cast and crew. And finally, always, to Anne Deveson. Rest in peace.



Raj LaBade, Jana Zvedeniuk, Sean O'Shea, Deborah Galanos

SET DESIGNER'S NOTE

STEPHEN CURTIS

How do you portray something as complex as schizophrenia on stage? Is this Jonathan's story, or Anne's? How do we allow Anne to be both *in* the story while also being the storyteller?

Leticia and I began unpicking answers to these questions in a similar way to how we set about working on *Barbara and the Camp Dogs* and *The Drovers Wife* – we began with the Belvoir stage. It is a space that provides its own solutions: literally two walls and a floor. These planes became our means.

It is Anne's space: precise, white, ordered. An image from the documentary *Paper Trails* made with Anne towards the end of her life gave us the bookcase with her collection of books and the

table around which she built her family and sustained her web of friends.

It is Anne's space, but it is Jonathan who places Anne within it; in the simplest of gestures he draws a place for the story to begin, and in the way of imagining Belvoir audiences are very familiar with this becomes bed, room, grave... In life Jonathan was a draw-er. I find the drawings of people suffering from schizophrenia compelling. It seemed right that Jonathan's drawings could become part of our storytelling, and a way of enacting his creative-destructive energy and the deep impression he leaves on Anne and his family, and on us as we watch.



Nadine Garner



Raj LaBade, Jana Zvedeniuk, Nadine Garner



Raj LaBade,
Nadine Garner



Tom Conroy



Charmene Yap



Deborah Galanos



Nadine Garner,
Sean O'Shea



Raj LaBade





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Tell Me I'm Here is supported by The Group, a collective of inspiring like-minded women committed to supporting female creatives and bringing more women's stories to the Belvoir stage, including Yve Blake's *FANGIRLS*, *A Room of One's Own* and Sally Sara's *Stop Girl*.

Members enjoy a range of active networking opportunities and behind-the-scenes events. To join or find out more about The Group, email development@belvoir.com.au or call 02 8396 6219.