

Schindler scribe's musical is out to float Broadway's boat

Eithne Shortall

THE Irish-Australian author of *Schindler's Ark* is to stage a musical based on the real-life story of an Irish woman who was sent to Sydney on a convict ship. *Transport*, which opens in New York next month, claims to offer a musical first — combining traditional Celtic music with Broadway-style show tunes.

Transport is written by Thomas Keneally, who penned the novel on which the Oscar-winning *Schindler's List* is based. The music has been composed by Larry Kirwan, a Wexford-born musician best known as the frontman of *Black 47*.

The musical follows the journey of four Irish female “convicts” shipped to Australia in the mid-19th century as punishment for petty crimes. The story is inspired by the factual journey of Keneally's wife's great-grandmother.

Mary Shields was sentenced to serve several years in Australia after she was found guilty of stealing some cloth from a shop in Limerick.

Keneally, who previously researched Shields's story for a

book, found diaries kept by a surgeon on board the same ship as the woman. “The surgeon was under some pressure to get the women to Australia healthy. He had to keep a daily log of what the women did, of their behaviour and of their health. These logs are now in our archives here in Australia. They're fascinating reading,” he said.

“Women convicts were a form of eugenics; it got the undesirables out of Ireland. It was also a form of gender balance in the colony — sodomy was beyond tolerance — and of course it was just punishment.”

The musical will run at the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York for two months and is then

expected to tour America. It is directed and designed by Tony Walton, who won an Oscar for his work on *All That Jazz*, and stars Dublin actress Terry Donnelly alongside several Broadway performers. The creative team is also looking at bringing the production to Ireland and Australia. Kirwan, who composed the music and wrote the lyrics, said he saw the production as an opportunity to mix two unassociated musical styles.

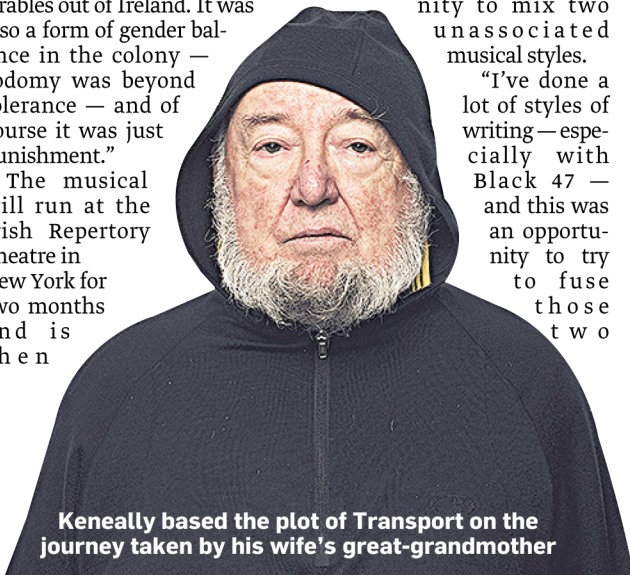
“I've done a lot of styles of writing — especially with *Black 47* — and this was an opportunity to try to fuse those two

elements: pure Celtic music and show tunes,” he said, citing guitar, mandolin, drums and piano as the main instruments used in the musical.

Transport is set entirely aboard a ship called the *Whisper*, and its central characters include an elderly female convict, a woman based on Shields and a Protestant prisoner. Keneally said female Protestant convicts were rare, but that he had found mention of one in a surgeon's logbook.

“She feels that she has been plunged among the barbarians,” said the author, whose grandparents also came from Ireland. “And especially since her crime, as a number of these crimes palpably were, was a bum rap, that she hadn't done it. So her world view has let her down.”

“My wife's great-grandny's ship took 129 days to get from Cork to Sydney. They were on it much longer because each county sentenced women, and they were all loaded before the ship left. Then they were left on the ship in Australia while [the authorities] worked out who would become servants and who would go to work in the female factories.”



Keneally based the plot of *Transport* on the journey taken by his wife's great-grandmother