

THE STORY OF BANGARRA DANCE THEATRE



FIRESTARTER



AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF MEDIA

Written by Thomas Redwood
with Bangarra Dance Theatre

<https://theeducationshop.com.au>

<https://metromagazine.com.au>

© ATOM 2021 ISBN: 978-1-76061-458-4

**STUDY
GUIDE**

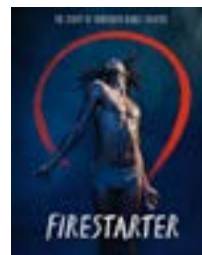


Photographer: Daniel Boud

1. INTRODUCTION

Firestarter marks Bangarra Dance Theatre's 30th anniversary. Taking us through Bangarra's birth and spectacular growth, the film recognises Bangarra's co-founders Carole Y. Johnson and Cheryl Stone and tells the story of how three young Aboriginal brothers — Stephen, David and Russell Page — turned the newly born dance group into a First Nations cultural powerhouse. But as *Firestarter* reveals, the company's (inter)national success — the NY Times called Bangarra 'a company like no other' — came at a huge personal cost. As it enters its fourth decade Stephen Page continues to lead the company, finding a way to channel grief and sorrow into the strength to forge

ahead, with a new generation of Indigenous dancers relying on his genius to tell their stories. Through the eyes of the brothers and company alumni, *Firestarter* explores the loss and reclaiming of culture, the burden of intergenerational trauma, and — crucially — the power of art as a messenger for social change and healing.



CONTENT HYPERLINKS

- 3 2. SYNOPSIS**
- 4 3. ABOUT BANGARRA DANCE THEATRE**
- 5 4. ABOUT STEPHEN PAGE**
- 5 5. DIRECTORS' STATEMENT**
- 6 7. FIRESTARTER AND CLASSROOM SAFETY**
- 6 6. CULTURAL SAFETY**
- 7 8. FIRESTARTER AND THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM**
- 9 9. WINHANGA-RRA**
- 10 10. ACTIVITIES**
- 10 1 BANGARRA: AN INTRODUCTION**
- 11 2 BANGARRA DANCE THEATRE**
- 12 3 BANGARRA: DANCING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**
- 12 4 QUOTES FROM BANGARRA COLLABORATORS**
- 13 5 CONNECTION TO COUNTRY**
- 14 6 BANGARRA & CULTURAL ACTIVISM**
- 15 7 BANGARRA & FIRST NATIONS' HISTORIES**
- 17 8 ART, CULTURE & HEALING**
- 18 9 BANGARRA AND THE REKINDLING YOUTH INITIATIVE**
- 19 11. RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS**



Photographer: Michael Bianchino

2. SYNOPSIS

“As the 20th century turns into the 21st, you can’t tell the story of Aboriginal Australia without featuring Bangarra – indeed they tell the story. And at the core of it there are these three beautiful boys. The holy trinity.” – Hetti Perkins, Art Curator, author.

Hetti Perkins sums it up perfectly. Bangarra Dance Theatre is one of Australia’s most successful performing arts companies and the only major contemporary dance company with its cultural origins in the Land. Its development from a small dance group in Glebe, Sydney, in the late 80s to a company of international renown, was and is driven in large part by its Artistic Director Stephen Page and his brothers, composer David Page and lead dancer Russell Page.

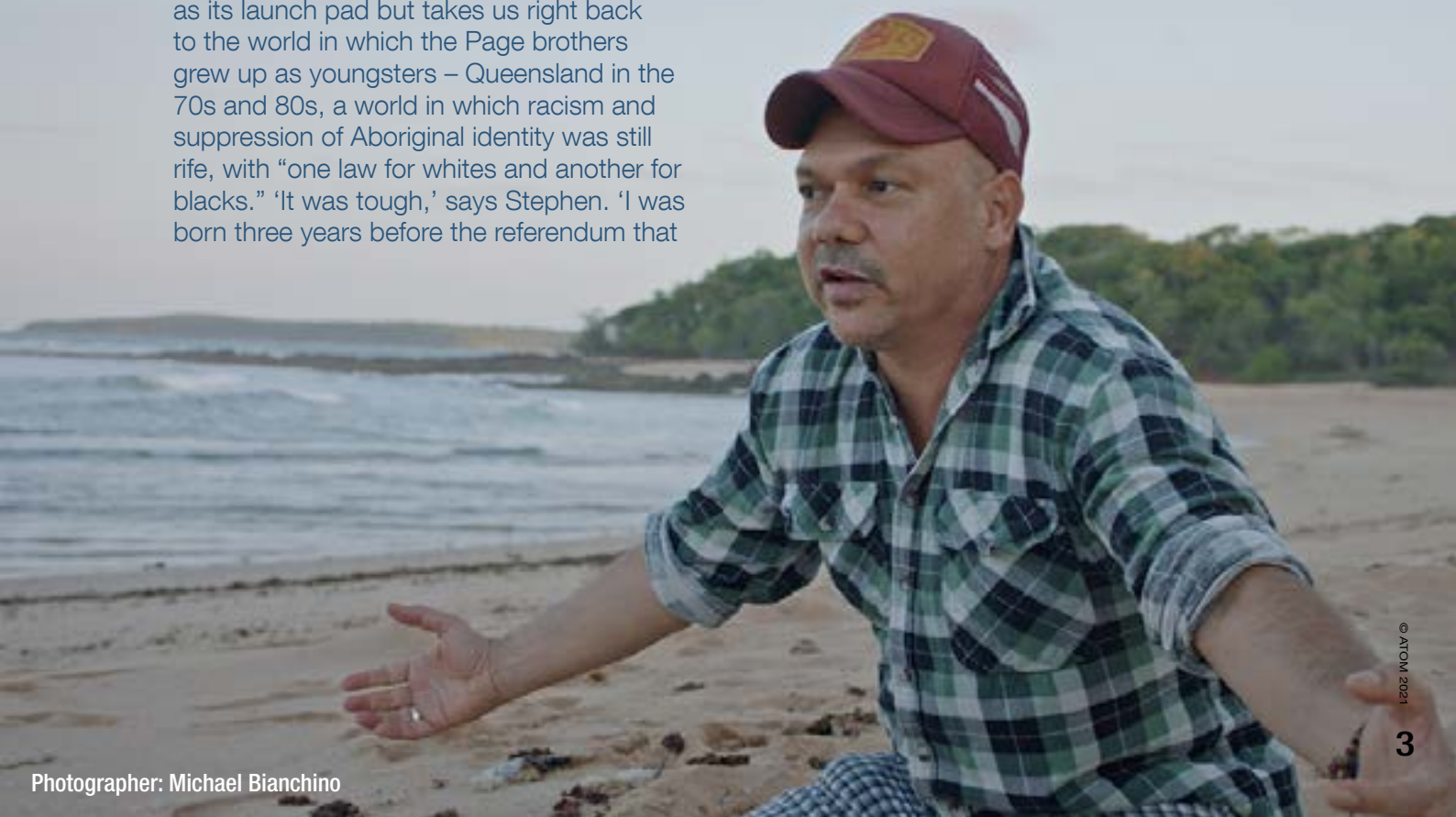
Firestarter takes Bangarra’s anniversary year as its launch pad but takes us right back to the world in which the Page brothers grew up as youngsters – Queensland in the 70s and 80s, a world in which racism and suppression of Aboriginal identity was still rife, with “one law for whites and another for blacks.” ‘It was tough,’ says Stephen. ‘I was born three years before the referendum that

constitutionalised Aboriginal people being respected as humans.’

Family home video footage, shot by David as a child, and selected rare archival film takes us through the boys’ younger years, interweaving their story with the late 80s/early 90s rise of black ‘activism’ and the start of Bangarra. The company, an offshoot from the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA), was founded by visionary Carole Y. Johnston and NAISDA graduates, all playing a vital role. After two years, Stephen Page is appointed Artistic Director, age 26. Bangarra performs at Paul Keating’s delivery of the famous ‘Redfern Address.’

As the film tracks the rise of Bangarra, towards its era defining work *Ochres* and a spectacularly triumphant contribution to the 2000 Sydney Olympics opening ceremony, we start to realise what commentator Hetti Perkins means at the start of the film when saying: ‘once you pick up the torch, you never get to put it down. And that sort of thing comes at a cost.’

Art imitates life. Stephen’s work starts dealing with social-political issues. *Firestarter* unpicks the tragedy of colonialisation, the intergenerational trauma it caused and the devastating effect it has had on the Page family. Theirs is a story that tells of a much



Photographer: Michael Bianchino



greater issue. 'This sort of thing is bloody everywhere in Australia' says Stephen. Graeme Murphy, former director of the Sydney Dance Company, where Stephen was a dancer in the late 1980s, says: "Great artists are all releasing that dark matter from that big black hole in your brain."

The prevalence of traumatic experiences across so many lives and generations of Indigenous Australians is present in a great deal of Bangarra's dance theatre storytelling. One example is the 2017 work *Bennelong*. *Bennelong* is a dark and evocative work that explores the story of an Aboriginal man who strikes a unique relationship with the first governor of New South Wales, Arthur Philip, and struggles to 'live in two worlds'. 'The

scale was exceptional,' says Frances Rings, a Bangarra alumna and choreographer who was recently appointed Associate Artistic Director. 'It was an opera. It was *our* opera.'

As Stephen becomes a grandfather and a new generation of dancers takes us into the future, *Firestarter* is ultimately *not* a story of tragedy. It's the story of art as medicine, and its role as the messenger of social change and pride. It's a story of resilience, of overcoming obstacles and the embrace and re-birth of a 65,000-year-old culture, the longest continuously surviving culture in the world. A culture that white Australia once tried to wipe out. In vain. Bangarra is arguably Australia's greatest cultural treasure.

3. ABOUT BANGARRA DANCE THEATRE

Bangarra's mission is to create inspiring experiences that promote awareness and understanding of our cultures. An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation, Bangarra is one of Australia's leading performing arts companies, widely acclaimed nationally and around the world for its powerful dancing, distinctive theatrical voice and utterly unique soundscapes, music and design.

Led by Artistic Director Stephen Page and Associate Artistic Director Frances Rings, it's currently in its 33rd year but its dance technique is forged from over 65,000 years of culture, embodied with contemporary movement. The company's dancers are professionally trained, dynamic artists who represent the pinnacle of Australian dance. Each has a proud Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, from various locations across the country.

Bangarra was birthed in 1989 from the energy of NAISDA (National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association) founder Carole Y. Johnson, along with NAISDA graduates, and Rob Bryant and Cheryl Stone. That spark continues to animate the company today. Its relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are the heart of Bangarra, with repertoire created through a process that begins 'on Country' and is inspired from the stories shared by community Elders and Cultural Consultants.

It's this inherent connection to Land and People that make Bangarra productions unique. Bangarra's annual program includes a national tour of a world premiere work, performed in Australia's most iconic venues; a regional tour allowing audiences outside of capital cities the opportunity to experience Bangarra, and an international tour to maintain its global reputation for excellence. In this way, any Bangarra work can be experienced by audiences in remote Indigenous communities in Australia, as well as in international centres such as New York and Paris.

Complementing this touring roster are various youth outreach, community and education programs - planting the seeds for the next generation of performers and storytellers to continue with this important work.

'With Bangarra, there is this beautiful gifting of stories and trust that our people give us. It's a reciprocal relationship- we trust that you are going to tell this story respectfully and in the right way; and that you'll bring it back to us. It's a beautiful exchange'. Frances Rings, Associate Artistic Director, 2019.

Bangarra co-founder
Carole Y. Johnson



Photographer: Tyson Perkins



Photographer:
Tyson Perkins

4. ABOUT STEPHEN PAGE

Stephen is a descendant of the Nunukul people and the Munaljali clan of Yugambah country from South East Queensland. In 1991, Stephen was appointed Artistic Director of Bangarra. He has developed a distinctive body of works that have become milestones in Australian performing arts.

Stephen continues to reinvent Indigenous storytelling within Bangarra and through collaborations with other performing arts companies. He directed the Indigenous sections for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games Opening and Closing Ceremonies and created a new dance work as part of the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony. Stephen has choreographed over 30 works for Bangarra. His most recent works include the Helpmann Award winning work *Bennelong* in 2017, *Dark Emu* in 2018, choreographed together with former Bangarra dancers Daniel Riley and Yolande Brown, and *SandSong*, co-choreographed with Frances Rings, Bangarra Associate Artistic Director.

Stephen's first full-length film *SPEAR* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival before screening at various arts festivals around Australia in early 2016. He has also directed the chapter *Sand* in the feature film *The Turning* (2013) and choreographed the feature films *Bran Nue Dae* (2009) and *The Sapphires* (2011).

In 2015, Stephen was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Creative Arts by the University of Technology Sydney. In 2016, he received both the NAIDOC Lifetime Achievement Award and JC Williamson Award. In 2017, Stephen was honoured with the Australia Council Dance Award for significant contributions to the cultural and artistic fabric of the nation and was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO).

5. DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

As Bangarra enters its fourth decade, it has more performers, is creating more works and doing more national and international tours than ever before. Award-winning sell out shows, highly regarded by audiences around the world ...Bangarra is one of Australia's premiere cultural ambassadors, both nationally and overseas.

The creative artists of 'Bangarra's world' are strong, fit, and in peak performing condition. So why is it that their friends and family are struggling and encountering tragedy? Why is it that the main character of our film, Bangarra's artistic director Stephen Page is having to deal with loss and grief so consistently?

Bringing our joint perspectives to the project – that of an Aboriginal man and a non-Indigenous woman, each with a strong interest in the social political side of the arts – we wanted to explore these questions, using Bangarra's 30th anniversary as a unique lens.

We look at the status of Indigenous people in the country today, by examining the life of a company and its leader, who despite commercial success, pride and empowerment are still hurting. The trauma isn't 'in the past' as many Australians, including sometimes the government, would assert.

There is generational suffering that is continuous and isn't stopping and won't stop until people listen. Bangarra plays a huge part in the movement for such positive social change. As Stephen once told us "Bangarra was in the business of reconciliation long before it became fashionable."

(Directors: Wayne Blair & Nel Minchin)



Photographer: Jacob Nash



6. CULTURAL SAFETY

Before proceeding with this study guide it is essential for teachers and students to become familiar with standards for cultural safety. The following links provide directions in (1) developing cultural safety in the classroom, (2) tackling the problem of tokenistic study and discussion of Indigenous subject matter and (3) creating safe environments for the use of visual media.

Cultural Safety and Respect in the Classroom

Where appropriate, providing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, Elders, families and wider community members to share their perspectives, histories and cultures in the classroom can be incredibly enriching. However, it is important for teachers and educators to be careful not to assume what stories or knowledges can be shared by particular community members, students, or children, and when, where and with whom they can be shared. This activity encourages staff to consider scenarios, evaluate policies and principles and consider how cultural safety could further be promoted within the wider school or early learning service community.

www.narragunnawali.org.au/professional-learning/90/cultural-safety-and-respect-in-the-classroom

Tackling Tokenism

'Tokenism' is often cited as a barrier to demonstrating respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples and perspectives, particularly in visible and tangible ways. This activity encourages staff to reinterpret or reinvent a demonstration of respect which may, on the surface, appear to be tokenistic. In doing so, they consider how to effectively turn 'tokenism' into meaningful symbolic and practical action.

www.narragunnawali.org.au/professional-learning/40/tackling-tokenism

Ensuring Film Screenings are Culturally Safe and Respectful

The following link provides general guidelines around how to facilitate culturally safe and respectful screening sessions and pre-screening or post-screening discussions.

www.sbs.com.au/sites/sbs.com.au/home/files/reconciliation_film_club_planning_guide.pdf

7. FIRESTARTER AND CLASSROOM SAFETY

Firestarter involves explicit language and themes relating to mental illness, substance abuse and suicide. Given its content *Firestarter* is suitable for use only with senior secondary students (Years 9-12).

Teachers are strongly advised to view the documentary *before* showing it to students and to prepare for student reactions to any explicit content.

It is incumbent on the teacher to frame discussions of *Firestarter* in a way that is safe and responsible for students, in line with student

support programs prioritised in your state or territory. The following links to mental health support services are therefore not comprehensive.

Beyond Blue Secondary School Program:
www.beyondblue.org.au/healthy-places/secondary-schools-and-tertiary/secondary-schools-program

Black Dog Institute School Services: www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/education-services/schools

SAFEMinds at Headspace: headspace.org.au



8. FIRESTARTER AND THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Cross-Curriculum Priorities: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

The Australian Curriculum sets consistent national standards to improve learning outcomes for all young Australians. ACARA acknowledges the gap in learning outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous peers. It recognises the need for the Australian Curriculum to provide every opportunity possible to 'close the gap'.

Therefore, the Australian Curriculum is working towards addressing two distinct needs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education:

- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are able to see themselves, their identities and their cultures reflected in the curriculum of each of the learning areas; can fully participate in the curriculum and can build their self-esteem;
- that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority is designed for all students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world's oldest continuous living cultures.

General Capabilities: The Australian Curriculum specifies seven General Capabilities which are to be developed throughout all learning areas. One General Capability is *Intercultural Understanding*.

Intercultural Understanding: In the Australian Curriculum, students develop intercultural

understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages, and beliefs, and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture. Intercultural understanding involves students learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect.

National Programs and Standards for Teachers

The National Professional Standards for Teachers specify many key areas in which teachers should develop programs inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities. Programs also need to be developed which are informed by a knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and languages. Examples of these areas are listed below (From http://www.qct.edu.au/pdf/QCT_AustProfStandards.pdf):

Standard 1.4: Develop teaching programs that support equitable and ongoing participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by engaging in collaborative relationships with community representatives and parents/carers.

Standard 2.4: Provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and languages.



Curriculum Links

Firestarter can be linked to the following subject areas within the Australian Curriculum.

- **History**
- **English**
- **Drama**
- **Art/Dance**
- **Geography**
- **Civics & Citizenship**
- **Media Arts**
- **Health & Physical Education**

Year 11 Modern History, Unit 2: 'Movements for Change in the 20th Century'

Recognition and rights of Indigenous Peoples

- The nature of the relationship of Indigenous peoples with their land and their response to perceptions of, and feelings about, the arrival of the colonisers (ACHMH070)
- The basis on which the colonists claimed sovereignty and imposed control, including conquest, treaty and the doctrine of 'terra nullius'; and the consequences for the legal status and land rights of Indigenous peoples (ACHMH071)
- The nature of government policies and their impact on Indigenous peoples, for example protection, assimilation (including the Stolen Generations), and self-determination (ACHMH072)
- The role of individuals and groups who supported the movement for Indigenous recognition and rights, including the methods they used and the resistance they encountered (ACHMH073)
- The economic, political and social challenges and opportunities Indigenous peoples have faced, including the role of cultural activity in developing awareness in society (ACHMH074)
- The achievements of Indigenous peoples at the end of the 20th century, including the right to vote, land rights/native title, and attempt at reconciliation (ACHMH075)
- The continued efforts to achieve greater recognition, reconciliation, civil rights, and improvements in education and health (ACHMH076)

Year 9 History

- Historical Knowledge and Understanding – Making a Nation. The extension of settlement, including the effects of contact (intended and unintended) between European settlers in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACDSEH020)

Senior Secondary English (Unit 1)

- Explaining how texts are created in and for different contexts (ACEEN001)
- Analysing how language choices are made for different purposes and in different contexts using appropriate metalanguage; for example, personification, voice-over, flashback, salience (ACEEN002)



Photographer: Jhuny-Boy Borja

- Evaluating the choice of mode and medium in shaping the response of audiences, including digital texts (ACEEN003)
- Explaining the ways language features, text structures and conventions communicate ideas and points of view (ACEEN004)
- Explaining the ways text structures, language features and stylistic choices are used in different types of texts (ACEEN005)
- Analysing how vocabulary, idiom and rhetoric are used for different purposes and contexts (ACEEN006)
- Evaluating the impact of description and imagery, including figurative language, and still and moving images in digital and multimodal texts. (ACEEN007)
- Purpose, taking into account that a text's purpose is often open to debate (ACEEN008)
- Personal, social and cultural context (ACEEN009)
- The use of imaginative, persuasive and interpretive techniques. (ACEEN010)

Year 10 English

- Understand that people's evaluations of texts are influenced by their value systems, the context and the purpose and mode of communication (ACELA1565)
- Identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences (ACELY1750)

Years 9 & 10 Drama

- Evaluate how the elements of drama, forms and performance styles in devised and scripted drama convey meaning and aesthetic effect (ACADRM052)
- Analyse a range of drama from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their drama making, starting with drama from Australia and including drama of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider drama in international contexts (ACADRM053)



Year 10 Arts/Dance

- Analyse a range of dance from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their dance making, starting with dance from Australia and including dance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider dance in international contexts (ACADAR026)

Year 9 Arts/Dance

- Analyse a range of dance from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their dance making, starting with dance from Australia and including dance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider dance in international contexts (ACADAR026)

Years 9 & 10 Civics and Citizenship

- Account for different interpretations and points of view (ACHCS085) and (ACHCS098)
- Recognise and consider multiple perspectives and ambiguities, and use strategies to negotiate and resolve contentious issues (ACHCS086) and (ACHCS099)
- Reflect on their role as a citizen in Australian, regional and global contexts (ACHCS089) and (ACHCS102)

Years 9 & 10 Geography

- Reasons for, and consequences of, spatial variations in human wellbeing in Australia at the local scale (ACHGK080)

- The perceptions people have of place, and how these influence their connections to different places (ACHGK065)

Years 9 & 10 Media Arts

- Evaluate how technical and symbolic elements are manipulated in media artworks to create and challenge representations framed by media conventions, social beliefs and values for a range of audiences (ACAMAR079)
- Manipulate media representations to identify and examine social and cultural values and beliefs, including those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACAMAM074)
- Analyse a range of media artworks from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their media arts making, starting with Australian media artworks, including media artworks of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and international media artworks (ACAMAR079)

Years 9 & 10 Health & Physical Education

- Evaluate factors that shape identities and critically analyse how individuals impact the identities of others (ACPPS089)
- Critique behaviours and contextual factors that influence health and wellbeing of diverse communities (ACPPS098)

9. WINHANGA-RRRA

Bangarra's Professional Learning Program for educators

Winhanga-rra (hear, think, listen) workshops is a professional learning program for teachers across Secondary, Primary and Early Learning that explores processes and practices for engagement

with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in an educational context. Workshops include lecture presentations, discussions, and practical tasks.

CURRICULUM RELEVANCE

Learning across the curriculum priority: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures;

General capabilities: Intercultural Understanding, Critical and creative thinking, Literacy, Personal and social capabilities;

Learning Areas: Arts (Dance, Music, Visual Arts), Humanities and Social Sciences, Health & Physical Education, English, Languages.

Read more about Winhanga-rra: Studio and online workshops:
www.bangarra.com.au/learning/teachers-professional-learning/



10. ACTIVITIES

1 Bangarra: An Introduction

'Bangarra's work draws on an incredibly rich culture of over 65 000 years, and we have a vital role to play as caretakers of these stories.'

-Stephen Page, Artistic Director



Photographer: Daniel Boud

* Ancient Origins

Bangarra Dance Theatre was founded in 1989. However the company's origins are far, far older. Stories, Songlines and Knowledge systems from which Bangarra draws inspiration for so many of its productions stretch back tens of thousands of years. These ancient stories originate from the many Cultures and Languages of this land's First Peoples. They tell of the creation of the land and landforms: of living creatures; of waterways; of plants, and the vastness of the stars in the night sky. They also tell of natural events that occurred thousands of years ago. These stories are some of the oldest stories in the world, kept alive for tens of millennia through storytelling, ceremony, songlines, art and dance. A critical part of the way Bangarra works to give these stories contemporary expression, is the consultation that occurs throughout the creative process with the Traditional Custodians of these stories.



Photographer: Daniel Boud

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Discuss some of the traditional practices for stories and knowledge to be passed on through generations?
- Referring to the AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia, approximately how many Indigenous language groups are there?
- Explore the distinctions between Clan, Language Group and Nation.
- The following broad names are often used to refer to Aboriginal people from a large area comprising a number of language groups. From what area of the country do people come from if they identify with the follow names: (1) Koorie (2) Koori (3) Murri (4) Anangu (5) Noongar (6) Palawah (7) Yolngu?
- What does the term Traditional Custodians refer to?



Photographer: SBS Archives



* Contemporary Origins

As a performing arts company, Bangarra's origins stretch back to 1972, when African-American dancer and activist Carole Y. Johnson toured Australia with a pioneering New York based dance company led by choreographer Eleo Pomare. Pomare used contemporary dance to communicate the political experience of Black America, confronting and actively engaging audiences with the civil rights movement for the 1960s and 70s.

When Carole Y. Johnson toured Australia she noticed the unexplored potential of contemporary dance to represent the marginalised voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As she explains in *Firestarter*, 'in terms of dance, Indigenous people were actually ahead and I thought [they] had something very unique and special to offer.' Carole settled in Redfern, Sydney and became involved in the pioneering *Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre*, which in the 1970s was leading the way in Australia as a Black theatre company dedicated to addressing racism and provoking political and cultural reform.

Carole Y. Johnson's efforts to create a space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance led to the creation of the Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Scheme in 1976. This later became known as the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association, and is now referred to as *NAISDA Dance College*. From the time of its foundation, the college soon thrived as a hub for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancers to share their Cultures as they trained and created new dance works together. As more and more graduates developed their skills in performance and choreography, the seeds were sown for the foundation of Bangarra Dance Theatre. NAISDA is currently based on the NSW Central Coast and continues as an important training institution for young First Nations artists.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- **What were some of the key Civil Rights events in Australia in the 1960 and 70s?**
- **What is meant by the term Post Colonialism? How was the Civil Rights Movement a part of Post-Colonialism?**
- **In what year was the Racial Discrimination Act finally passed in to Federal law in Australia?**
- **Explore the role and activities of the Sydney based Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre.**
- **What formative role did Carole Y. Johnston play in the formation of NAISDA Dance College and Bangarra Dance Theatre?**

* Bangarra's first Thirty Years

In 1991, just two years after Bangarra was founded, dancer and choreographer Stephen Page (a descendent of the Nunukul people and Munaldjali clan of the Yugambah Nation) was selected to become the company's Artistic Director. He was only 26 years old at the time. Thirty years later he remains in the role, accompanied now by Associate Artistic Director, Frances Rings.

Since taking on the role of Artistic Director, Stephen has worked with hundreds of collaborators - two of the most important being his talented brothers Russell and David Page. Under his directorship Bangarra has produced and performed more than 30 productions and contributed to many important cultural events, most famously the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympics.

For a full list see: <https://bangarra-knowledgeground.com.au/productions>

Bangarra Dance Theatre acknowledges and collaborates with the many different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Clans, Mobs, and language groups across Australia – in urban settings, on traditional lands in regional and remote communities; saltwater and freshwater; elders and young people. Bangarra's works are inspired by the Land and by Culture; true stories of the colonial past; current stories that challenge the mainstream to think critically about the future of this country and its relationship with its Indigenous Australians.





For example:

- 2008's *Mathinna* explores the true story of a young Palawah girl who was one of the first 'stolen' children.
- 2004's *Unaipon* draws on the life of visionary Aboriginal inventor and philosopher David Unaipon (the man on our fifty dollar bill) and the histories of the Ngarrindjeri people of the Coorong area in South Australia.
- 2016's *Nyapanyapa* is inspired by the life and paintings of Yolngu artist Nyanpanyapa Yunupingu who lived in North East Arnhem Land.

Cultural consultants, dancers, designers, and other artists come from all over Australia to work with Bangarra. The representation has multiplied, varied and changed over the years and has also included non-Indigenous artists. Bangarra has also significantly extended its touring programs over its three decades as a company, performing in all Australian capital cities as well as regional towns and small remote communities, in international centres in Europe and North America and places in Mongolia and the Asian sub-continent.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- **Explore the repertoire of Bangarra productions. What are some of the different Indigenous communities, histories and stories that have inspired productions?**
- **What do Bangarra's various productions tell us about the company's mission to educate, inform and change cultural attitudes?**
- **In groups select one or more of Bangarra's past productions. Research the production and present to the class a brief outline of the production's story, themes and place in Bangarra's 30 year history.**

Bangarra Dance Theatre

A powerful and unique voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Cultures.

"Before Cook and Philip, there was no 'Aboriginality' in the sense that is meant today... Before contact there were Yolngu, Pitjantjatjara, Warlpiri, Waka Waka... and so on."
 – Marcia Langton, *So I Heard it on the Radio and I saw it on the Television*

Artists and cultural consultants who work with Bangarra Dance Theatre belong to a diverse range of First Peoples, Nations and Cultures. Some (like Djakapurra Munyarryun in *Firestarter*) come from extremely traditional communities like Yirrkala in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Others, like the Page brothers, grew up in predominantly urban environments in cities like Brisbane. In many of its productions, Bangarra challenges common preconceptions of 'Indigenous' cultures and histories by speaking from Indigenous perspectives, and engaging with audiences on both an intellectual and emotional level of connection and make audiences think about their own understandings. Ancient stories are told not as artefacts belonging to the past, but as continuing songlines. As contemporary tellings of ancient stories, Bangarra works challenge the audience to step into the unfamiliar, to become vulnerable and open in the presence of the original cultural knowledges and artforms of this land.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- **How are Bangarra Dance Theatre's works unique, and/or different to other mainstage performing arts companies? Bangarra's mission to be a voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is widely acknowledged as being important for positive change. What might some of the changes be, and how might they impact our society in the future?**
- **In *Firestarter* we learn that in the early days of Bangarra's development, some audiences and critics were confused by Bangarra's use of contemporary dance to tell traditional stories. Where might this confusion come from?**
- **Why does Stephen Page argue that traditional Indigenous cultures and modern techniques can and should work together?**



Photographer: Daniel Boud



Photographer: Daniel Boud

3 Bangarra: Dancing Between Two Worlds

“Bangarra Dance Theatre has its roots in two worlds and through dance we connect to both -embodying ancient practices and igniting contemporary songlines. Our productions are our contemporary acts of Ceremony, our way of protecting and preserving our unique songline.”

– **Bangarra Dance Theatre: Knowledge Ground digital archive** ([Knowledge Ground](#))

Australia is often described as a multi-cultural nation, with nearly thirty percent of the population being born overseas and from all corners of the globe. However, Australia’s institutions, governance systems and many socio-cultural practices are essentially based on western culture.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders this can be a particularly challenging reality to negotiate. The colonial destruction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures through *dispossession*, *assimilation* and *marginalisation* means that being an Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander in 21st century Australia often means not just *living* one’s culture, but having to find ways to reconnect to it and to keep it alive. Indigenous people have to work within the dominant white culture brought by colonisation, and at the same time find ways to live, discover and express their own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities.

Bangarra Dance Theatre strives to maintain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities alive by working across and within two worlds:

- Firstly, Bangarra works with the traditional world of story, culture and lore by respectfully collaborating with the Traditional Custodians of stories from different First Nations communities to draw upon and express ancient knowledge.
- Secondly, Bangarra works in the world of contemporary dance theatre to develop stories for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences.

The productions are innovative and contemporary in creative design but also imbued with cultural knowledge, and traditions seamlessly woven through the works.

Bangarra sometimes refers to its productions as ‘*contemporary acts of Ceremony*’. Traditionally Ceremony includes song, dance, narrative, painting



and other forms. Cultural knowledge is expressed through all these aspects, not just through words. Likewise, in Bangarra's contemporary interpretations, cultural knowledge is conveyed not just through words (or in text) but through music, visual design and, fundamentally, through the body and movement. The contemporary expression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's Culture and Connection to this land through dance theatre is a key premise

of Bangarra's work. This requires close care and attention and deep listening. The depth of inheritance that lives in every Indigenous individual can be hard to pin down in words - but through dance it can resonate with contemporary audiences on a level that is extremely powerful.

'Sometimes when you just have the bare essentials, something else has to come out, so another passion has to come through.' -Bernadette Walong-Sene.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What was the aim of Assimilation policies in the 1950s and 60s, and in what ways were generations of First Peoples forced to adapt to Western culture ?
- As told in *Firestarter*, what is the Page family's experience of Assimilation policy?
- How did the Page brothers experience their traditional culture in their upbringing?
- What do you think Stephen Page is referring to when he talks about '*Contemporary acts of Ceremony*'?
- In what ways do Bangarra productions navigate traditional and contemporary existences?

4 Quotes from Bangarra Collaborators

"I almost always focus first and foremost on the story. I always start by doing my homework. Because dance is such an abstract medium, it's as much the job of the lighting design to help tell the story as it is of any other element. It's so easy to light dance and just make pretty pictures, but that's the easy way out. You actually need to be subtly telling the audience where they are in a story the whole time – that spine is much more important to me."

– Nick Schlieper, Lighting Designer (*Bangarra: Thirty years of sixty-five thousand program*).

"I can do things for this company that I can never do for other performing arts companies – because with Bangarra, it's always collaborative. I provide a skin, by using texture and fabric and dyeing and painting, and they turn it into something else: a work of art."

–Jennifer Irwin, Costume Designer (*Bangarra: Thirty years of sixty-five thousand program*).

"My most exciting job is to work on a Bangarra production. For a composer, there's a lot of pressure. But it's so liberating because you're a part of the core creation process in writing the music. When you do a piece with Bangarra, from the get-go you are a part of telling that story through the music – they're my proudest moments."

–Steve Francis, Composer (*Bangarra: Thirty years of sixty-five thousand program*).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are some examples of collaborative artforms?
- How are collaborative multi discipline arts practices different from artforms created by one artist?
- What skills base of the artists make up the Creative team in a Bangarra Dance Theatre production?
- What is the role of Cultural Consultants, in Bangarra's collaborative approach?
- Examine and consider the [Cultural Creative Lifecycle](#) of Bangarra's productions?
- What are the different collaborative artistic elements involved in a Bangarra Dance Theatre production?
- In the above statements, Bangarra collaborators Nick Schlieper, Jennifer Irwin and Steve Francis each describe their participation in Bangarra productions. What do their statements have in common?



5 Connection to Country

“When I took over Bangarra it was my mission that we’d always come back and tells stories here on Country.”
– Stephen Page in *Firestarter*

As a western or colonial concept, the idea of ‘land’ or ‘property’ is mostly understood as a defined area, marked by borders (natural and/or imposed) and operating on principles of sovereignty or ownership. This concept of landownership in the western frame, can apply to the borders of a vast nation state, or simply to the boundaries of a suburban house block. Fundamentally, the core idea is the same. The western concept of ‘property’ asserts the right of an individual to claim and own land as an asset.

The concept of Country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is extremely different. In Indigenous cultures Country is a lot more than just a physical area. Someone’s ‘Country’ is rather the basis of their spiritual life and cultural identity. In Mary Graham’s words:

“The land is a sacred entity, not property or real estate... Therefore, all meaning comes from land.” (Mary Graham, “Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews”)

For a materialistic culture it is very difficult to conceive



Photographer: Daniel Boud

of land as something that has a spiritual dimension. The Indigenous sense of Country is better understood as a relationship. Through Connection to Country one connects with ancestral history, culture and, importantly, other people. Our complex relationships, between places and people, plants and animals, the Earth and the stars, are like “threads in a tapestry of cultural identity.” (Bangarra Teachers’ Resource Guide 2019) These connections of identity have been expressed from time immemorial through song, story and dance.

We see in *Firestarter* the enormous significance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people place on Connection to Country and how the directors/ artists of Bangarra hold this importance as central to everything they create. The stories of Bangarra productions are mostly connected to specific places. They are the stories belonging to those places and in their development, Bangarra works extremely closely with the Traditional Custodians of those places and stories. We also see Stephen Page on



Photographer: Danielle Lyonne



Photographer: Danielle Lyonne



Photographer: Edward Mulvihill

his own Mununjali Country, his father's birthplace. It is the place he returns to heal from tragedy and grief his family has suffered over the years and over generations.

One of the strongest examples of connection to Country is the seminal early production *Ochres* (1993), choreographed by Stephen Page and Bernadette Walong-Sene, which features several times over in *Firestarter*. *Ochres* avoids conventional 'western' plot driven narrative to instead approach the spiritual meanings of Culture and Country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The production, in Bangarra's words, 'is a portrayal of this early substance, its myriad purposes and its spiritual significance to Aboriginal people.' You can explore more about this production on Bangarra's Knowledge Ground website.) <https://bangarra-knowledgeground.com.au>

Another landmark Bangarra production is *Terrain* (2012), choreographed by Frances Rings, which transports the audience to Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre (SA), the place of Australia's inland sea. *Terrain* explores the fundamental connection between Aboriginal people and land – 'how our land looks after us, how we connect with its spirit and how we regard its future'. *Terrain* | Bangarra Dance Theatre - Knowledge Ground (bangarra-knowledgeground.com.au)

* Class Activity

Watch the following video from Bangarra's Knowledge Ground titled *Homelands*, with Jacob Nash, (Head of Design), Sidney Saltner (Director of Youth Programs) and Frances Rings (Associate Artistic Director) explaining the importance of this very critical part of the company's Creative Cultural Life Cycle.

<https://bangarra-knowledgeground.com.au/productions/spear/homelands-nurturing-the-bangarra-clan-through-return-to-country>

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- From what you have seen and heard in the *Homelands* video, what is involved in the process of being on Country and engaging in cultural exchange with Traditional Custodians?
- Why do you think Stephen Page explains: "When I took over Bangarra it was my mission that we'd always come back and tells stories here on Country"?
- Why is the process of being 'on Country' so important in the development of Bangarra productions?
- In what ways is Bangarra's commitment to Connection to Country shown in *Firestarter*?
- How do Indigenous values of land contrast with colonial ways of valuing land?
- What are some forms of expressing the sacredness of land in Indigenous cultures?
- Explore *Ochres*, *Terrain* and other Bangarra productions on the Bangarra Knowledge Ground website. How is *Connection to Country* approached and expressed in some of these productions?



Photographer: Greg Barrett



Photographer: Daniel Boud

6 Bangarra & Cultural Activism

“I think Stephen Page is one of our greatest cultural activists that we have seen in Australia. I think he is someone who has the vision, the compassion, the drive and as my father would say, the fire in his belly...”

– Hetti Perkins in *Firestarter*

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, being ‘apolitical’ is simply not an option. To address one’s identity, history and culture as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person in 21st century Australia necessarily makes art political. As Stephen Page explains in the film *Firestarter*: “You know there’s always pressure if you’re dealing with social issues. I don’t think you can escape politics. It’s just in you.”

Cultural leaders like Hetti Perkins (quoted above) argue that Indigenous artists have an important role to play as *cultural activists*. She suggests that Reconciliation in Australia involves changes not only of government or law, but also fundamentally of culture. It is through cultural experiences like seeing Bangarra’s works that non-Indigenous Australians can develop respectful and compassionate ways of knowing more about Indigenous relationships to Country, Culture, Knowledge and History. Non-Indigenous Australians can begin to feel what Connection to Country means and what it is to be dispossessed, traumatised, and marginalised by colonisation and failings of government policies.

Bangarra Dance Theatre tackles all of these things and more. Through story, music, sound, dance, and design, Bangarra invites audiences into a welcoming experience of *Reconciliation* without divisive rhetoric. In the intimate space of a Bangarra production audiences can engage with First Peoples’ stories, knowledges and perspectives in an open and sympathetic way -allowing for a process of transformation to take place.

Cultural activism may take many forms. It may be discomforting like Warwick Thornton’s *Samson and Delilah*. It may be wry and unsettling like Daniel Boyd’s visual work. It may be highly personal like Archie Roach’s songwriting. Or it may be compelling and emotionally resonant like Bangarra’s repertoire. Fundamentally, whatever approach an Indigenous artist takes, it will be a form of activism that aims to break through the many barriers that prevent non-Indigenous societies from shedding the embedded racism that permeates western institutions and lifestyles.

* Questions

- **Why do you think Stephen Page says that as an Aboriginal artist he ‘can’t escape politics’?**
- **What political themes and struggles are talked about in *Firestarter*?**
- **What historical examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism are depicted in *Firestarter*?**
- **Explore a range of Bangarra productions. What forms of *cultural activism* are some of these works taking on? In groups, explain to the class the *cultural activism* of one Bangarra production.**

7 Bangarra & First Nations' Histories

"Australia as a nation, wants to forget. It wants to think that it only has this much history. And so... it's trapped in a cycle. When you experience a lot of trauma, you repress memories just to deal with life. But unless you deal with those repressed memories as a person, and in this case as a country, we will never move on."

– Wesley Enoch in Firestarter

In the quote above, Wesley Enoch argues that as a nation Australia "wants to forget" its history. He suggests there are things in the nation's past we simply don't want to know. He argues that as a result many Australians live with the trauma of not knowing their true cultural inheritance.

To date, most children who are educated in Australian schools learn about events like Gallipoli, Captain Cook's voyage and the founding of New South Wales in 1788. But there has been far less focus on Australia's First Nations cultures who have lived in this country for 65 000 or more years. Australian education curricula has only recently begun to acknowledge this country's much ignored Indigenous history. This is especially the case, in regard to Indigenous people's experiences of having their land stolen, and the devastating impact of colonisation.



Photographer: Daniel Boud

We have only recently begun to ask questions like:

- **Who are the Traditional Owners of the Country on which you live, work and study?**
- **Australia is the only Commonwealth country that doesn't have a treaty with its Indigenous people. Why is this and why does it matter to many Indigenous Australians that a treaty has never been negotiated to a point where it could be signed into constitutional law?**
- **How did the definition of Australia as *terra nullius* attempt to justify the claiming of land by European settlers?**
- **It is a fact that many Aboriginal communities were attacked and massacred by European settlers. Did genocide take place in this country?**
- **How did protectionist and assimilationist policies impact Indigenous cultures and histories? What are the consequences of these policies for our contemporary knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories?**
- **Is it important to know the history of the country you live in and benefit from? Why?**

Addressing these questions will go some way in addressing the gap in the Australian population's knowledge of their country's history and the experiences of Indigenous cultures.

In an effort to inform attitudes and change preconceptions towards Australia's Indigenous cultures and histories, Bangarra Dance Theatre has developed a number of productions exploring the Indigenous experience of colonisation – from early colonial times to more contemporary settings. The following two productions *Bennelong* (choreographed by Stephen Page) and *Unaipon* (choreographed by Frances Rings) are particularly strong examples of Bangarra Dance Theatre's storytelling about Indigenous and colonial relations.



Photographer: Daniel Boud

Work in Focus 1: Bennelong (2017)

Explore the following classroom resources on the Bangarra website and answer the questions. www.bangarra.com.au/learning/resources/classroom-resources/bennelong/

Who was Bennelong? Woollarawarre Bennelong was the first Aboriginal man to visit Europe and return. He was born on the south shore of the Parramatta River around 1764. In late November 1789, Governor Arthur Phillip had orders from King George III to use “every possible means” to open ‘dialogue with the natives.’ Since none had ventured into Sydney Cove, Phillip resorted to abducting Bennelong. Within three months Bennelong was communicating well with the Governor, but in May he escaped. Later that year Phillip was speared, and Bennelong enquired about the Governor’s health, re-establishing a relationship. Phillip eventually built Bennelong a house and in time Bennelong and his friend Yemmerrawanne joined Phillip on a trip to England to meet King George III. Yemmerrawanne died in England but Bennelong eventually returned home in 1795, where he re-joined his people and practiced his culture. He died in 1813.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Where is Bennelong’s country?
- What do the interactions between Governor Phillip and Bennelong suggest about the attitudes brought by British to intercultural exchange with Gadigal, Cammeraygul and Wangal people during the earliest months of British colonisation?
- Why do you think Governor Phillip was so intent on assimilating, or educating Bennelong to British cultural norms?
- Why were Bennelong and Yemmerrawanne taken to England?
- Are you surprised that Bennelong returned to his traditional cultural life after living in England?
- Bangarra’s Bennelong Study Guide states: “There is no doubt that Bennelong’s story is important to the way we reflect on Australia’s story of colonisation.” Discuss this statement. What core themes, questions and lessons about colonisation can be learnt from Bennelong’s story?
- Why do you think Stephen Page chose to tell the story of Bennelong?
- Discuss the following statement from Stephen Page: ‘*Bennelong’s a victim. He’s an experiment. We’re all a Bennelong.*’

For more information on Woollarawarre Bennelong see the following:

- Australian Museum Website: [Woollarawarre Bennelong - The Australian Museum](http://www.australianmuseum.net.au/woollarawarre-bennelong)
- ‘They Have Come to Stay’ -Episode 1 of *First Australians*: [ATOM Study Guide Available Documentary on SBS On Demand](http://www.sbs.com.au/atom)

Work in Focus 2: Unaipon (2004)

Explore the following classroom resources on the Bangarra website, and the Unaipon pages on Knowledge Ground, and answer the questions. www.bangarra.com.au/learning/resources/classroom-resources/unaipon
<https://bangarra-knowledgeground.com.au/productions/unaipon>

Who was David Unaipon? Most Australians are familiar with Unaipon as the man depicted on the Australian fifty-dollar note, but know little about his extraordinary life as a scientist, inventor, philosopher, writer, story teller and Christian preacher. David Unaipon was a Ngarrindjeri man of the Warrawaldi clan, born in 1872 at Point McLeay Mission in South Australia’s Coorong region. He showed an insatiable thirst for knowledge which did not diminish until the day he died, and he used his education at the service of his people. He was an advisor to government and an activist who chose to influence the society he lived within through his words, his dialogue, his literature, his scientific contributions, and by the sheer enormity of his efforts to rise to any challenge. He lived an extraordinarily, long and active life until he died in 1967.

QUESTIONS

- What language group and Clan did David Unaipon belong to?
- Locate David Unaipon’s country on a map. What are some of its characteristic environmental features?
- What were some of David Unaipon’s most important achievements?
- What were some of the racist barriers that David Unaipon had to contend with in his life?
- In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, what was the prevailing belief held by non-Indigenous people regarding the fate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples?
- What were the main principles/ideas of *assimilationism*?
- What important referendum took place in the year of Unaipon’s death?
- Former Bangarra dancer Frances Rings states that “people like Unaipon, Namatjira, Bennelong and Truganinni were people that were ‘in between’, they straddled Aboriginal and white culture, their spirits walked between two worlds with dignity and grace.” What do the lives of Bennelong and Unaipon have in common? And how were they different?
- Why do you think Bangarra Dance Theatre, as a contemporary dance group, are interested to tell the stories of First Peoples who have lived ‘in between’ Aboriginal and white worlds?



Photographer: Greg Barrett

In *Firestarter* we are introduced some of these major historical developments, including:

- **1967:** The Referendum to change two parts of the Australian Constitution so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be included on the census and the Commonwealth would be able to make laws for them.
- **1972:** The establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, which is an ongoing occupation site to protest just Land Rights for Aboriginal people.
- **1988:** More than 40,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (and others) marched in Sydney to protest the national celebrations of 200 years of white European settlement and British control of First Nations country and peoples.
- **1992:** The *International Year of the World's Indigenous People* was launched in Redfern, Sydney, where Prime Minister Paul Keating delivered the now famous *Redfern Address*. Bangarra Dance Theatre performed immediately before Keating's speech.
- **2000:** *The Walk for Reconciliation* in Sydney saw 250,000 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge. It was the largest political demonstration ever held in Australia.
- **2000:** Bangarra took a leading role in designing and directing of the opening ceremony for the *2000 Olympics*.

When you asked before what we learnt about our culture as children, I mean what we learnt was basically, the struggle... And you just can't escape it! It's here."

- David Page in *Firestarter*

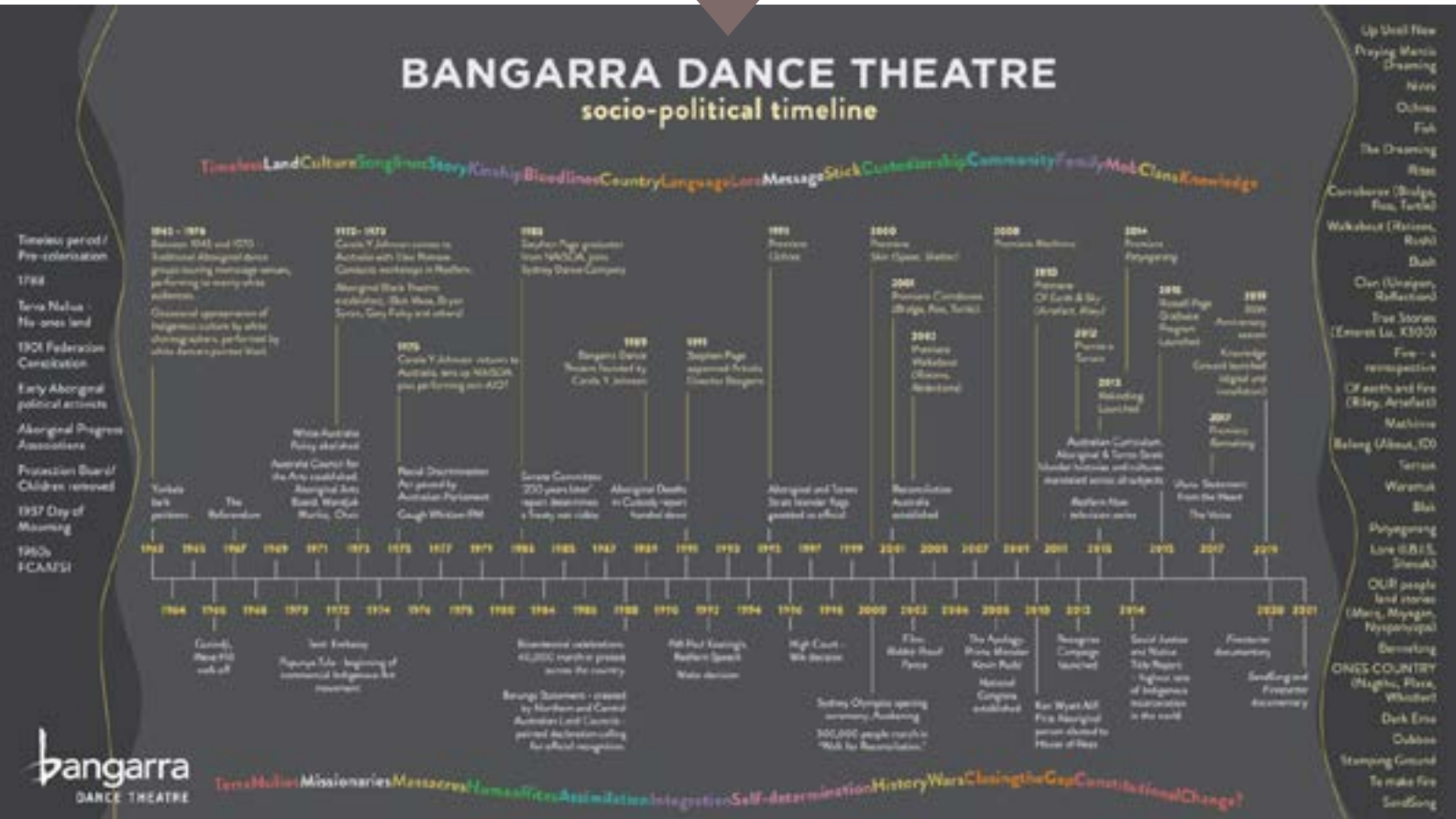
The lives of Stephen, David and Russell Page and Bangarra Dance Theatre have played out concurrently with a number of major developments in the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and non-Indigenous people, society, law and governments.



Photographer: Danielle Lyonne



An evolving and contemporary arts organisation, Bangarra has continually responded to, and reflected to these decades of great change. In *Firestarter* Wesley Enoch notes how Bangarra led the way for Indigenous artists to creatively respond to the social and political changes of the early 1990s. This timeline effectively demonstrates Bangarra's responsiveness to socio-political change since the company's beginnings.



QUESTIONS

- From the timeline, what key connections do you notice between Bangarra productions and important historical developments in Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in this country?
- How can schools get involved in Reconciliation?
- Does your school have a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)?
- What are your plans for Reconciliation Week and NAIDOC Week?
- As a class read through the Redfern Address given by Prime Minister Paul Keating in 1992. (https://antar.org.au/sites/default/files/paul_keating_speech_transcript.pdf)
- What was the key message of the Redfern Address?
- In *Firestarter* Wesley Enoch explains: “the 80s and 90s was this moment we were turning back to our

- history and embracing it... We see the growth of almost every Indigenous theatre company, dance company, Indigenous gallery etc- all of this stuff came out of this reassessment of who we are.” How did Bangarra during this time embrace Indigenous histories and cultures in an energetic new way?
- Research the 2000 Walk for Reconciliation. ([Walk for reconciliation](#))
- In *Firestarter*, what important role did Bangarra play in the 2000 Olympics and how did Bangarra incorporate people of different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander places into the event?
- How far do you think Australia has come as a nation since the beginning of the Reconciliation Movement in 1991? What key achievements have been made? What key challenges still need to be addressed?

Photographer: Tyson Perkins





8 Art, Culture & Healing

“Art, dance, music they’re such good medicines... storytelling is the best medicine is the best medicine you can have you know. It’s what sustains us as a society.”

– Stephen Page in *Firestarter*

Health and culture are deeply interrelated.

For many Indigenous and/or traditional cultures health is approached with much more emphasis on the interrelationships of different aspects of the human being, with the community and with the environment. Such ways of approaching health are *holistic*. These ways of approaching health work with the connectedness of the body, the mind and the spirit.

The concept of *healing* is particularly important when thinking about the relationship of art and health for Indigenous Peoples. You will notice the idea of *healing* is raised numerous times in *Firestarter* and it is discussed by a great many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. What does *healing* refer to?

Hetti Perkins speaks in the film of the ‘shadow’ Aboriginal people of her generation feel, of being ‘haunted by the past’. Wesley Enoch likewise refers to the ‘trauma’ of Australian history, while David Page explains in a more personal way how his Aboriginality was explained to him as a boy:

“We were basically taught our culture was dying out, it was always taught by teachers. You know, your



Photographer: Tiffany Parker

culture is dying out you’ve got to adjust into the white man’s world, and you know that’s your way of survival. Music was my release. It was the channel that I know, well I knew I could learn about my culture and where I was from.” -David Page

For Indigenous artists cultural expression can be a way to challenge colonial attitudes, in particular the oppression and racism that has objectified, dehumanised and disempowered First Peoples for centuries. But culture can also be a way to express the authenticity of one’s own cultural identity and *release* negative experiences, feelings and thoughts. David Page explains above that after many years of being belittled, marginalised and dehumanised by white society, music enabled him to process that trauma and rediscover his cultural self-expression.

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People speak of *healing* -they are often meaning the word in this sense. The healing is cultural and historical, directed towards the recovery of strong cultural identity after a colonial age of dispossession, genocide, assimilation and marginalisation. As a collaborative artistic company, Bangarra engages in this process of healing through creative expression and release in a vast number of ways.



Photographer: Daniel Boud



Photographer: Daniel Boud

9 Bangarra and the Rekindling Youth Initiative

www.bangarra.com.au/community/rekindling/

In 2013, Bangarra launched a new initiative for First Nations youth: *Rekindling*. Rekindling's vision is to inspire pride, kinship and a sense of strength in young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders through a series of dance residencies with secondary school-aged students. The Rekindling program is tailored to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teenagers in regional and urban communities. Participants research and gather stories with guidance from Elders within their communities, developing skills to produce thought-provoking performances and community events.

Rekindling aims to inspire Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth to:

- have pride in their cultural background
- have a strong sense of kinship and connection to their communities and country
- understand their role as the future custodians of their culture
- establish the foundations for positive career choices

Bangarra delivers Rekindling as a free program to communities across Australia, relying on philanthropic support to transform the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

* Class Activity

As a class watch these videos that document the experiences of some of the communities who have engaged with the program to date.

on Rekindling, documenting some very different schools and communities' engagement with the program.

Video 1: www.bangarra.com.au/community/rekindling/

Video 2: [Bangarra's Rekindling Youth Program 2017 - YouTube](#)

Discuss how the videos raises the following concepts and practices:

- Learning from Elders
- Custodians of Culture
- Connection to Country
- The Passing of Cultural Knowledge through Song, Dance and Culture
- Collaboration
- Cultural Expression and Identity

* Quotes on healing from Firestarter

"Storytelling is the best medicine you can have you know. It's what sustains us as a society."

-Stephen Page

"We went up to Yirrikala just for like 8 weeks. And it was the best medicine, the best remedy for me. I mean I've spent hundreds of dollars on counselling and stuff like that, but I went away and put my feet into the earth and it was the best thing."

-Russell Page (dec)

"We were fortunate working in the arts. Cleansing through story, cleansing through what we do. That was the medicine."

-Stephen Page

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does Indigenous storytelling and art serve as a 'medicine'?
- In the film *Firestarter*, what are some references to the healing power of connecting with Country?
- What do you think Stephen Page means by 'cleansing' when he talks about going 'on Country' to heal?
- How does Bangarra engage both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences to reflect on the the social and cultural histories of this Land, and their own relationships to those histories?



Photographer: Michael Bianchino



11. RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

Bangarra Home Page: [Home](#) | [Bangarra](#)

USEFUL LINKS INCLUDE:

- *Past Productions: Productions - Bangarra Knowledge Ground* | [Bangarra Knowledge Ground \(bangarra-knowledgeground.com.au\)](#)
- *Winhanga-rra - Teachers' Professional Learning: Teachers' Professional Learning* | [Bangarra](#)
- *Education Resources: Education Resources* | [Bangarra](#)
- *Knowledge Ground: Knowledge Ground - a celebration of history, knowledge, culture and community* | [Bangarra Dance Theatre - Knowledge Ground \(bangarra-knowledgeground.com.au\)](#)
- *Rekindling Youth Program: Rekindling Youth Program* | [Bangarra](#)
- *Bangarra Dance Theatre YouTube Channel: bangarradance theatre - YouTube*

SOME FURTHER USEFUL LINKS:

- Reconciliation Australia www.reconciliation.org.au
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education: Resources for pre-service teachers: rrr.edu.au
- Narragunnawali (Reconciliation Australia's education focus): www.narragunnawali.org.au
- NAIDOC: www.naidoc.org.au
- The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) aiatsis.gov.au
- United Nations UNDRIP: www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html
- Australian Human Rights Commission – Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/indigenous-deaths-custody-report-summary
- Paul Keating's 1992 Redfern Address: https://antar.org.au/sites/default/files/paul_keating_speech_transcript.pdf
- "Bringing Them Home", National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families: bth.humanrights.gov.au/
- The Uluru Statement: www.ulurustatement.org
- UNESCO 2019 Year of Indigenous Languages: www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2019/01/2019-international-year-of-indigenous-languages
- Human Rights - No Place for Racism: www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/no-place-racism
- Closing the Gap website outlining the many different areas of the government led initiative. closingthegap.gov.au
- Lowitja Institute - Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health Research www.lowitja.org.au
- Australian Human Rights Commission – Social Determinants and the health of Indigenous peoples in Australia - a human rights based approach. www.humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/

[social-determinants-and-health-indigenous-peoples-australia-human-rights-based](#)

- Creative Spirits is an independent website covering a wide range of Aboriginal cultural, social and political issues. www.creativespirits.info
- Free the Flag: kooricurriculum.com/blogs/news/free-the-flag
- The Aurora Project – for more information on initiatives in Indigenous education. www.auroraproject.com.au
- Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the Australian Curriculum: <https://indigenousknowledge.unimelb.edu.au/curriculum>

ARTICLES AND BOOKS

On Dance, Art and Cultural Expression

- Burridge, Stephanie & Dyson, Julie (ed.). 'Shaping the Landscape: celebrating dance in Australia'. Routledge, New Delhi, India & Abingdon, UK, 2012.
- Dunbar-Hall, Peter & Gibson, Chris. 'Deadly Sounds, deadly places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia'. UNSW Press, Sydney, 2004.
- Thompson, Liz (Compiler). 'Aboriginal Voices: Contemporary Aboriginal artists, writers and performers'. Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney 1990.
- The Deep Archive: Wesley Enoch on Contemporary Indigenous Arts Practice. Real Time Arts, 2017. <https://www.realtime.org.au/the-deep-archive-wesley-enochoon-contemporary-indigenous-artspractice/>
- Johnson, Carole (1940-). National Library of Australia <https://trove.nla.gov.au/people/1491391?c=people>
- Carole Johnson – Delving into Dance with Ausdance Victoria (2017) <https://www.delvingintodance.com/podcast/carole-johnson?rq=carole%20johnson>

On Culture, History, Country and Identity

- Mary Graham, "Some Thoughts About the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews" in *Australian Humanities Reader*, no. 45 (2008) pp. 181-94
- Grieves, Vicki, (2009) *Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal Philosophy, the basis of Aboriginal Social and Emotional Well-Being*. Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health. Casuarina, N. T.
- Marcia Langton, *Welcome to Country: An Introduction to our First Peoples for young Australians*. Hardie Grant, Richmond, 2019
- Karen Martin, *Childhood, Lifelihood and Relatedness: Aboriginal Ways of Being, Knowing and Doing*. Pearson Education Frenchs Forest, New South Wales, 2008
- Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu: Black Seeds, Agriculture or Accident?* Magabala. Broome, 2013
- Simone Barlow & Ashlee Horyniak, *Dark Emu in the Classroom: Teacher Resources for High School Geography*. Magabala. Broome. 2014
- Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. Text Publishing. Melbourne. 2014



AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF MEDIA

ATOM study guide

This study guide was produced by ATOM.

© ATOM 2021. ISBN: 978-1-76061-458-4

Terms of use: <<https://theeducationshop.com.au/terms-conditions/>>

Contact: editor@atom.org.au

Study guide design: Pascale van Breugel.

More resources

To download other study guides, plus thousands of articles on Film as Text, Screen Literacy, Multiliteracy and Media Studies, visit <<https://theeducationshop.com.au>>.

Join our invitations list

Join ATOM's email broadcast list for invitations to free screenings, conferences, seminars, etc. Sign up now at <https://metromagazine.com.au/email_list/>.

