

BANGARRA DANCE THEATRE



MATHINNA STUDY GUIDE 2010

Contents

Page 3	How to use these notes
Page 4	Company Vision
Page 5	Company Profile
Page 7	Chronology
Page 9	Key Aspects of Aboriginal Spirituality
Page 11	Message from Artistic Director, Stephen Page
Page 13	Mathinna Profile
Page 14	Music Notes, David Page
Page 16	Set Design Notes, Peter England
Page 18	Production Credits
Page 19	Suggestions for Study
Page 21	Further Reading

How to use these notes

These notes are designed to enhance students' knowledge about, and responses to, performance experiences. They provide information about the performance and suggest student activities.

The notes will give you the ability to prepare your students for the process of reading and interpreting a performance whether that be through performance themes, form and style, or design elements. This material will help you lead students to discover information, to explore processes, and to respond in critical and creative ways.

More information on the company is also accessible through Bangarra's website

www.bangarra.com.au

If you would like to be kept up to date with Bangarra news and performances please join our mailing list via our website.

Follow us on Twitter - <http://twitter.com/bangarradance>

Become a fan on Facebook - <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bangarra-Dance-Theatre/116457911727856>

Bangarra Dance Theatre
Pier 4/5 Hickson Rd
Walsh Bay NSW 2000
Ph: 61 2 9251 5333
Fax: 61 2 9251 5266
Email: bangarra@bangarra.com.au



'...a mature, distinctive, contemporary dance ensemble with a sophisticated sense of theatricality and a unique repertoire'

THE AGE

Bangarra's logo represents:

- a flame
- the headdress of a Torres Strait Island warrior
- the point of a spear used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island hunters

'Bangarra' means:

'To make fire' in the Wiradjuri language of New South Wales

Vision

Bangarra Dance Theatre is fuelled by the spirit, energy and inspiration derived from the culture, values and traditions of Indigenous Australians.

From these roots, we create theatre that is artistically innovative, technically outstanding and truly exciting to audiences throughout Australia and the world.

ABOUT BANGARRA DANCE THEATRE

There's a wonderful trust and exchange with the audience at a Bangarra performance. We guide you on a journey. It is a meeting of the urban, the traditional and pure abstract dance – we speak to all people. Passion, emotion and respect – this is what we need to survive.

Stephen Page
Artistic Director

Bangarra Dance Theatre was established in 1989 as a dance company that embraces, celebrates and respects Australia's Indigenous peoples and their culture. Under the artistic direction of Stephen Page since 1991, Bangarra has emerged as Australia's only national premier Indigenous performing arts company.

As Artistic Director, Stephen Page has developed an extraordinary signature body of work that has secured the company's reputation as a national and international dance phenomenon. Stephen is also committed to developing the next generation of Indigenous storytellers by mentoring emerging artists. In 2008, Stephen was named NSW Australian of the Year.

Each year, Bangarra performs to approximately 50,000 people around Australia and the world and its productions are regularly sold out.

The Sydney-based multi award-winning company, with 14 dancers, is chaired by Aden Ridgeway and led by Executive Director Catherine Baldwin.

At the heart of all of Bangarra's productions is the musical creativity of award-winning David Page, who is one of the most successful Aboriginal contemporary composers in Australia. David's music is the inimitable soundscape of Bangarra that lures audiences year after year.

Bangarra bases its creative spirit on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions and stories producing a powerful new language that combines the traditional and the contemporary. This potent, original and distinctive style tells the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples unifying the past and the present.

Bangarra's influence continues to resonate throughout the world with the company earning a prominent place on the international touring circuit. A 16-city sell out tour of the USA in 2001 established the company as a global dance phenomenon. Since then, the company has performed in Monaco, returned to the US twice – performing in New York City and in Washington, and performed in China, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan and New Zealand. In 2006, the company toured the UK, performing at London's prestigious Sadler's Wells Theatre. In 2008 & 2009, the company mounted successful tours to London, Paris, Canada, Hungary, Austria and Germany.

Bangarra travels the world, performs at private functions, for major arts festivals and special events such as the opening and closing of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and in regional Australia as well as capital cities annually. Underpinning all of its performances is the strong connection with the communities and people which remain its core inspiration.

In 2009, Bangarra Dance Theatre celebrated 20 years of bringing Australia and the world its original, evocative and inspirational dance theatre and eagerly anticipates the potential of the next 20 years, starting with *of earth & sky*.



Stephen Page with dancers in rehearsal for *Mathinna*. Photo: Robert Hamlin.

Company Chronology

- 1989 Bangarra Dance Theatre founded by Carole Johnson
Tour to Japan and New Zealand
- 1991 Stephen Page appointed Artistic Director
Up Until Now by Stephen Page (Sydney, North Coast NSW, Brisbane, Indonesia)
- 1992 ***Praying Mantis Dreaming*** by Stephen Page (Canberra, Central Western NSW, Melbourne, Brisbane)
Bangarra tours to China and Hong Kong
- 1993 *Praying Mantis Dreaming* (Sydney, Cairns, WA, North East Arnhem Land)
Bangarra tours to New York, Los Angeles and London
- 1994 ***Ninni*** By Stephen Page (Sydney, NT, QLD)
Best of Bangarra (Adelaide Festival)
Ochres presented as a 'work in progress' at the '94 Nambundah Festival at Belvoir Street Theatre
- 1995 ***Ochres*** by Stephen Page and Bernadette Walong-Sene (Sydney, Canberra, Perth, Melbourne, Adelaide, Arnhem Land, Berlin, Tokyo, Noumea)
- 1996 *Ochres* (Berlin, Japan)
Bangarra tours to Hong Kong, India and Indonesia
Flag hand over ceremony, Closing Ceremony Atlanta Olympic Games
- 1997 ***Fish*** by Stephen Page (Premiers at the Edinburgh International Festival for the Arts, Edinburgh, South Korea, Festival of the Dreaming, Sydney)
Rites with The Australian Ballet (Premiers at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, Melbourne, Sydney)
- 1998 *Fish* (Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Canberra NSW, VIC, Noumea)
Bangarra tours to Korea, Taiwan, Italy and Germany
DanceClan
- 1999 *The Dreaming* (New Zealand, USA, UK)
Fish (QLD, NT, WA)
Womad (Adelaide, Johannesburg, Rivermead, Seattle)
Rites with The Australian Ballet (Sydney, Melbourne, New York, Washington, Toronto)
DanceClan 2
- 2000 ***Skin*** by Stephen Page (Premiered at the Sydney Opera House, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane)
Awakenings (Sydney 2000 Olympic Games)
The Dreaming (Hawaii, Fiji)
DanceClan 3
- 2001 ***Corroboree*** a triple bill (*Roo, Turtle, Brolga*) by Stephen Page (Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, USA16 City tour)
The Dreaming (Noumea, NSW)

- 2002 **Walkabout** A double bill - *Rations* by Frances Rings and *Rush* by Stephen Page
(Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane)
Skin (Adelaide)
Corroboree (Beijing, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Monaco)
The Dreaming (VIC, SA)
- 2003 **Bush** by Stephen Page and Frances Rings (Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane)
The Dreaming (NSW, NT, QLD, ACT)
- 2004 **Clan** A double bill - *Unaipon* by Frances Rings and *Reflections* by Stephen Page
Bush (Washington, New York, Hawaii)
Spirit (QLD)
- 2005 **Boomerang** by Stephen Page (Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane)
Spirit (QLD, VIC, TAS, NSW)
Bush (Japan, New Zealand)
- 2006 **Gathering** with The Australian Ballet (Melbourne, Sydney)
Clan (NT, WA, QLD, NSW)
Bush (UK)
Spirit (Hobart)
- 2007 **True Stories** A double bill *Emeret Lu* by Elma Kris and *X300* by Frances Rings
(Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Newcastle, Canberra, Wollongong)
Clan (SA, VIC, TAS, NSW)
- 2008 **Mathinna** by Stephen Page
(Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Newcastle, Canberra, Wollongong)
True Stories (SA, NT, QLD)
Rites with The Australian Ballet (London, Paris)
Awakenings (Washington, New York, Ottawa)
- 2009 **Fire – A Retrospective** by Stephen Page
(Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Newcastle, Canberra, Wollongong)
True Stories (NSW, WA)
True Stories (Hungary, Austria, Germany)
- 2010 **of earth & sky** by Stephen Page
(Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra, Wollongong)
Mathinna (VIC, TAS)

Key Aspects of Aboriginal Spirituality

Aboriginal people lead a spiritual existence, where land and society are seen as mutually dependent. The land is both mother and father; it nurtures and provides shelter. The land is much more than economic good. It is a mystical phenomenon that forms the heart of Aboriginal religious beliefs and practices. To travel in Aboriginal countries is a religious experience because the landscape pulsates with power left by the Dreamtime beings as they performed their wondrous deeds.

The Dreamtime is at the very core of the Aboriginal belief system. This is the time of the ancestor, the mythical period when the totemic Ancestral Beings appeared and transformed the world. The Dreamtime is transmitted through story telling, paintings and dance. They recount the ancestors' wanderings across immense territories, modifying the landscape, creating flora and fauna, and humankind and teaching people their ceremonies.

The Dreamtime came to an end when the Ancestral Beings left the earth but their departure did not mean the loss of this mystical past, for it can be periodically recovered through ritual. Thus the Dreamtime is not a static mythical period. It is once again present through the practice of rituals and customs.



Photo: Jeff Busby.

When the rituals are performed, the performers become the Dreamtime beings and are able to tap into the power of the land and the Ancestral Beings. Song men and women praise the abundance and beauty of their countries, they chant the names of various places, the location of water holes, swamps and rich food places. They recount the journeys of their heroes and the sacred story sites. In this way young people become familiar with all aspects of their country.

By these songs and rituals, performers express their emotional connection to their land. It is their right and responsibility to sing the songs, relate the myths and perform the sacred dances. Other people may do so only if they are invited to participate.

It is in dances and special ceremonies called corroborees that much of the religious beliefs and practices about the Dreamtime are given expression. In dreams the fantastic occurs and the Dreamtime beings sing and show themselves as they really are. A dreamer who has slipped into Dreamtime sings in his sleep, but it is really the Dreamtime beings singing through the dreamer. From what the dreamer sees in his dream a dance is made up. Anyone who was at the camp when the dream occurred has a right to participate in the dance.

David McKnight 'People, Countries, and the Rainbow Serpent' (Oxford University Press, 1999)



Photo: Jeff Busby.

Message from Stephen Page

Artistic Director



Photograph: Jeff Busby.

Mathinna first entered my subconscious some years ago. In the early 90s, Leo Schofield showed me her portrait by Thomas Bock painted in the nineteenth century and that was our first introduction. She re-entered my life in 2005 while on tour with Bangarra in Tasmania. At that time, I was discussing ideas that might come to life for Tasmania's "Ten Days on the Island" Festival and Mathinna seemed to draw me to tell her story. Shortly afterward, I met with Lola Greeno and other local Elders in Hobart and we began discussing the protocols involved in entrusting Bangarra to awaken the tale of this remarkable young lady, Mathinna.

As I began imagining how the production might come together, it was her portrait that resounded in my mind. I began to immerse myself in her consciousness and learn about her life and

spirituality. I wanted to inject a tumultuous emotional journey into this production and bring to life the young girl in the red dress.

There's a harsh reality to Mathinna's story which is entrenched in the era in which she lived. The historical accounts of her life are generally derived from the white perspective and parts of the versions are fragmented and disjointed. It was very frustrating for me to filter through all this and at the same time very saddening to be faced with the horrific realities of what happened to Mathinna's generation of Aboriginal Tasmanians. In a way, I was being challenged to dig deeper to uncover her truth and to do that I needed to talk to the community to get the black perspective. That's really when the creative process started to evolve.

Mathinna is about a young girl innocently absorbing an unforgiving world around her, all the while reflecting on the truth of her own people's journey. I wanted to capture on stage her ancestral spirit that I believe guided her and her people throughout this journey.

This production really relies on the maturity of Bangarra's senior dancers. The dancers have had to draw upon their theatrical flair and embellish the emotional side of Mathinna's story in order to emulate the energy of the people and the era. I chose Elma Kris to portray Mathinna because of that maturity and her ability to bring a wonderful performance presence to the work.

I'm always looking new ways to awaken stories from the myriad of Indigenous communities around our country. In telling Mathinna's story I was continually re-educating myself about the varying spiritual perspectives and revisiting the disturbing truths of the stolen generation. It's been wonderful sharing this narrative with the dancers and shaping the work with them.

A big thank you to Peter England for connecting with me in the early realisation of this work, and to Jennifer Irwin and Damien Cooper for their creative support. A very special thanks to my brother David for creating such an emotional musical landscape for Mathinna. Mostly I am indebted to the people of Tasmania, particularly Lola Greeno and Vicki Matson Green, for their cultural support in sharing Mathinna's story with you.

Mathinna Profile



Photograph: Jeff Busby.

vulnerable to the troubles of contact with white settlers. Taken from her parents as a little girl, petted and spoiled by the Franklins, and then suddenly dumped in the misery of the Queen's Orphan School, she was caught between two cultures.

She was unpopular with the Aborigines, perhaps because she had been taught to despise her own culture and the conditions in which people were forced to live. Although white society had made a toy of her, it would not accept her because of her aboriginality. So (we may imagine) desperately lonely and unhappy, she drowned in a puddle after leaving a white settler's cottage in September 1856. She was 21 years old.

Read more:

Mathinna, The Companion to Tasmanian History

http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/M/Mathinna.htm

Mathinna was the daughter of Toweter and his wife Wongerneep, of the West Coast tribe, captured by Robinson in 1833. She was born on Flinders Island in 1835.

By 1841 she was living at Government House in Hobart with Sir John and Lady Franklin. There she was raised with their daughter, Eleanor. She was said to have the 'manners of a well-born child'.

Mathinna was sent to the Queen's Orphan School in Hobart in 1843, aged 8, shortly before the Franklins left the colony. She was sent back to Flinders Island in 1844, where she lived in the catechist's house with Fanny Cochrane and the other children. In 1847 she was sent back to the Queen's Orphan School when the Aboriginal settlement was removed to Oyster Cove. She returned to her people there in 1851.

At Oyster Cove, alcohol, obtained from settlers as payment for labour or the women's favours, became a problem for Tasmanian Aborigines for the first time. Mathinna was especially

The Music

David Page

In 2006 I ventured to the Southern most Aboriginal lands of our continent, Tasmania. For twelve days I travelled through areas of cultural significance, across dramatic landscapes, places of quiet contemplation, to the windswept , the ruggedly beautiful Flinders Island , peaceful Cradle Mountain and Oyster Cove, where many Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestors are buried.

It's funny the way we are guided though our lives, 12 months later Stephen told me he had decided to produce and choreograph a narrative dance work "Mathinna". My mind remembered the sounds of country, the wild oceans roar, the cold winds and the eerie feeling of the first time I was taken to Wybalenna, where Mathinna was born.



Photograph: Jeff Busby.

I am privileged to have been challenged with the responsibility of how to pay appropriate respect and bring to life musically such a powerful story. After an intense research period by Stephen, he passed on to me many stories from Mathinna's journey and allowed me to be free to draw on various music styles, which believe me, can be dangerous!

I experimented with fusing my interpretation of eighteenth century classical music, with different rhythms and sounds; from recording myself hitting rocks together in my Sydney studio to the elements of wind, water, voice and electronic synthesised instrumentation. "Mathinna" allowed me to explore and grow as an artist.

This is my thirteenth collaboration with my brother Stephen, I listened to his interpretation, watched the dancers rehearse and stayed passionate to the story. As a contemporary songman, I am a messenger of our old peoples stories through music, always seeking to expand my musical knowledge and taking a fresh approach to bringing to life our history on stage.

Thank you Stephen for your honesty and Mathinna, for making this possible. I hope you the audience, enjoy this musical, theatrical, dance experience.



Photograph: Jeff Busby.

Set Design

Peter England



Photograph: Jeff Busby.

The sad and tragic tale of Mathinna, stolen from her family “nest” at such a young age and thrust into a foreign and disconnected world only to be later discarded, strikes immediately and cruelly at the very heart of both family identity and traditional connections to the Land.

The opening imagery in *Mathinna* seeks to convey a sense of the natural landscape as the ultimate source of physical and spiritual sustenance. A river stone embodies the ancient weight of knowledge, tradition and kinship. A mass of tree branches represents the family “Nest”; providing shelter, tools and the tribal campfire. It is from this family hearth, this timeless cradle of nature, that Mathinna was stolen.

Entering the foreign world of Governor and Lady Franklin, the design seeks to convey a sense of the daunting and overwhelming emotions a young girl might feel, through the use of exaggerated scale. It also attempts to suggest the pervading power of nature in spite of this. Oversized black furnishings are etched with child-like blackboard scrawlings, alluding to the form and texture of her ancestral home. There is a sense that the deep knowledge of the Land ultimately permeates and surpasses all things.

These whispering echoes of nature continue as poor Mathinna’s journey tumbles through its series of cruel twists and turns. Perpetual displacement, for all its savagery, can distance but not destroy this life essence.

The final sad and tragic end to this little girl's life is seen magnified and distorted through the fragile vessels of poison which finally claimed her.

And meanwhile the essence of Mathinna's homeland breathes silently, endlessly, in the distance.



Photograph: Jeff Busby.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Artistic Director

Stephen Page

Choreographer

Stephen Page

Music and Sound Designers

David Page

Set Designer

Peter England

Costume Designer

Jennifer Irwin

Lighting Designer

Damien Cooper

Rehearsal Director

Catherine Goss

Production Coordinator

Phoebe Collier

Stage Manager

Kate Williams

Head Mechanist

Kayne Johnson

Head Electrician

Padraig O Suillebhain

Assistant Stage Manager/Wardrobe

Emma Howell

Dancers

Sidney Saltner

Elma Kris

Patrick Thaiday

Yolande Brown

Jhuny-Boy Borja

Deborah Brown

Waangenga Blanco

Tara Gower

Leonard Mickelo

Jasmin Sheppard

Daniel Riley McKinley

Katina Olsen

Perun Bonser

Ella Havelka

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS

For Primary Students

Activities

1. What shapes and sizes do the dancers make with their bodies and hands?
2. Develop a dance or song from a dream you have had or about the environment around you eg. trees, leaves, rivers, the sea, birds etc.
3. What is your favourite native animal or bird? What is its Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island name (teachers to investigate)? Create a short dance based on this animal's movements using rhythm instruments.

Research Activities

1. Who is Mathinna and what is her heritage?
2. What tribe did Mathinna's parents belong to?
3. Why do you think we know so little about Mathinna?
4. Where is Government House in Tasmania?
5. How would Mathinna's life have changed after being sent to Hobart?
6. Name some of the props used in the performance of *Mathinna*. How are they used?
7. Discuss how the Lowreenne people may have lived.
8. What is the language of the Lowreenne people?
9. How does the lighting, set design and music of the production of *Mathinna* convey her story?
10. What is unique about Bangarra Dance Theatre?

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS

For Secondary Students

1. Research European settlement in Tasmania from around 1803. Discuss the first interaction with Aboriginal people.
2. Describe the experiences of Tasmanian Aborigines following British settlement in the early nineteenth century.
3. Research the Lowreenne people and their language.
4. What is unusual about this Bangarra production?
5. Discuss the set design and lighting design in *Mathinna* and how the staging combines with the choreography, and the stories within the show.
6. Do you think that the set and lighting designs are effective in conveying the mood of the performance? Why?
7. What do you like/dislike about dance? Why?
8. How does the work use space (levels, direction, shape, dimensions and floor patterns)?
9. How are speed and duration of movement manipulated in each section of the work – include the use of beat, tempo and rhythm? Provide examples of how this affects the mood/atmosphere of the work.
10. Describe the movements in each section of the work (i.e. the degree of energy and control of movements; e.g. strong, light, sustained, bound, free, percussive).
11. Is Bangarra's style mostly traditional or contemporary/modern? Use examples from the work to support your argument.
12. Are there any recurring choreographic themes/issues? For example, does it address cultural, social, political, gender-based or environmental issues?
13. What experiences may have contributed to the choreographers' philosophy and methodology?
14. Find a press review of the production and write about whether you agree with the review.
15. Do you feel that Bangarra Dance Theatre, in presenting Indigenous perspectives, is an important part of Australian dance culture? Why?
16. How does a Bangarra Dance Theatre performance differ from other dance?

Further Reading

Reviews

'Mathinna – Bangarra Dance Theatre,' *Australian Stage Online*, by Erin White
<http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/brisbane/mathinna--bangarra-dance-theatre-1519.html>

'Mathinna,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, by Jill Sykes
<http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts-reviews/mathinna/2008/07/10/1215658022001.html>

'Review: Mathinna – Bangarra Dance Theatre,' *ArtsHub.com.au*, by Chloe Smethurst
<http://www.artshub.com.au/au/news-article/reviews/performing-arts/review-mathinna-bangarra-dance-theatre-national-172187>

Background Information

'Bangarra's Tribute to Mathinna at Opera House,' *The Daily Telegraph*, by Alex Lalak
<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/entertainment/arts/bangarratribute-to-stolen-life/story-e6frefxmi-1111116987030>

'A Savage Lesson in Civility,' *The Age*, by Cassandra Pybus
<http://www.theage.com.au/news/arts/a-savage-lesson-in-civility/2008/05/08/1210131163675.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap2>