

dance

Indigenous dance: The place, not the space

Contemporary Australian Indigenous dance has reached new heights of international recognition in the last five years. This has been spear-headed by the critical and popular success of Bangarra Dance Theatre under the artistic direction of Stephen Page. Bangarra's success has strong links with the 25 year history of the National Aboriginal & Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) where most of Bangarra's dancers trained, and Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT), the professional company associated with NAISDA and headed by Raymond Blanco which preceded Bangarra. Choreographers connected with these institutions at different times have included Matthew Doyle, Monica Stevens, Marilyn Miller, Albert David, Bernadette Walong and Frances Rings.

The foundation for contemporary Indigenous dance is firmly based in an ancient and evolving dance tradition which is part of the spiritual life of Australian Aboriginal people. It is important, however, to understand that it is not one tradition, it is many, and that the dances are as diverse as the numerous language and regional groups that make up Australian Aboriginal culture. Different styles of dancing express different narratives in very different landscapes and constitute a rich source of inspiration and meaning for contemporary dance and its interplay of aesthetic and spiritual concerns.

The dances of these communities are increasingly being performed by cultural groups who travel within Australia and throughout the world. The Doonooch Dancers, based in the Shoalhaven region of the South Coast of New South Wales, and the Torres Strait Island Cultural Group, both appearing at the 8th Festival of Pacific Arts, are examples of such groups. Among the many others are the Tal-Kin-Jeri Dance

Group who research and perform the dances and stories of the Ngarrindjeri people of South Australia. The White Cockatoo Performing Group from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory are a group of senior men from several language groups sharing the same social and familial affiliations. The company has completed two world tours, recently returning from a tour to Sweden, Switzerland, Austria and Hannover, Germany where they were part of EXPO 2000.

More important than playing to international audiences is the opportunity for communities to experience each other's dance and music and for cultural groups to perform for Aboriginal children in schools. Many communities have lost their languages and their dances over the last two hundred years. Gurruwun Yunupingu, principal at Yirrkala School in North East Arnhem Land, talks about performing Yolngu music and dance in schools: "Many audiences were astonished and unsure how to react because they had never seen or heard traditional dance and music before. It made many cry, for in some parts of the world some Indigenous people have lost their culture because of the assimilation and colonisation" ("Language and Traditional Dance Performing in Public Schools", *Dancing comes from the land*, Writings on Dance 20, 2000). The Darwin-based Tracks, a dance company working closely with Indigenous people, conducts residencies in remote Aboriginal communities and regional areas to help maintain and develop dance traditions.

A strong connection with tradition is found also in contemporary dance. Not only is there a wealth of dance to draw on but also spiritual resources. Djakapurra Munyarryun is a dancer and songwriter with the Sydney-based Bangarra Dance Theatre, He is also the company's

cultural consultant, providing traditional knowledge in consultation with the elders of the Munyarryun Clan in Dhälinbuy, North East Arnhem Land, where he grew up.

Even with developments in touring, education and other assistance, Raymond Blanco worries that "a major shift toward the company form of dance" has resulted in insufficient accommodation for traditionally based Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island dancers. "This is the root from where our dance stems. It doesn't need to be dressed up and served in a certain way. It is culture and needs to be understood entirely." Marilyn Miller, dancer, choreographer and assistant to Raymond Blanco for the Opening Ceremony of the 8th Festival of Pacific Arts, says of Blanco's years as the Artistic Director of AIDT, that "he was courageous enough to say, 'well there are all these different types of traditional dance—Torres Strait and numerous mainland dances', so he always made the effort to stage both Islander culture as well as Aboriginal culture. He staged Lardil influences and Tiwi influences and I actually thought that was ground-breaking, showing how much there was to choose from and avoiding clichés."

As in other art forms, a recurrent topic of debate in dance is the relationship between Indigenous and western forms of expression, with Indigenous artists often experienced in both. Reviewers look for a synthesis of forms and are disappointed if they don't see it. People wary of the dilution of tradition see Indigenous forms as suffering cultural assimilation. Marilyn Miller describes the complexities of the engagement between Indigenous and western dance: "With traditional dancing, it all comes from the place where the people are—the geography informs the type of stepping that is done, and the actual story and your totem's relation to that story will determine how you actually form the dancing.

"In contrast, contemporary dance caters for the stage. That takes the dance out of any real life environment—you only have to know your place on the stage. The meaning of place is so much stronger in Indigenous dance because the place where the dancing is is determined by the bigger event—whether you're dancing for a funeral or you're dancing for a change of season or a wedding. In contemporary dance it is just a matter of spacing rather than place. And there are not as many guidelines for contemporary choreography, or as much meaning to the sequencing of the move-

ments, or as much meaning to the movements themselves...and that's something that I say to the younger ones—you have to know the meaning behind the movements, whether it's traditional or contemporary, otherwise you can't perform it—you're just putting it there."

Asked about the future for Indigenous dance, Miller sees a significant role for NAISDA students: "A few of the graduates have already gone back to their communities and hold dance classes and choreograph which helps with identity in remote communities." As for the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous companies, Miller offers a mix of reserve and optimism: "Some directors have brought Indigenous people in to choreograph works, but it has not become part of a general Australian dance vocabulary; they're out there as isolated dance pieces...Once collaborations start to gel with the non-Indigenous dance sector there will be many more avenues to explore within Australia." Miller sees Indigenous dance as potentially providing an Australian dance vernacular. She hopes too that more companies than the internationally renowned Bangarra will come into prominence: "If there was an understanding that prior to settlement there were over 200 types of languages and dance styles, then that would lead to the support and development of a greater variety of Indigenous contemporary dance forms."

The Editors

Quotations from Marilyn Miller and Raymond Blanco come from interviews conducted by Erin Brannigan for this guide.

References

Dancing comes from the land, Writings on Dance, number 20, 2000; publishers and editors Sally Gardner, Elizabeth Dempster; PO Box 106, Malvern, Victoria, 3144. Includes essays and dialogues on dance and land, ceremony, property rights and education.

Sylvia Kleinert, Margo Neale eds, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, November 2000.

For general information on Australian dance: Dance Forum, Journal of the Australian Dance Council, editor Julie Dyson, Ausdance PO Box 45, Braddon, ACT 2612. national@ausdance.org.au

Ausdance website: ausdance.anu.edu.au

Bangarra Dance Theatre

One of Australia's leading Indigenous performing arts companies, renowned for its unique fusion of cultural tradition and contemporary technique: modern day Dreaming infused with the sacred myths and traditions of the past. Artistic Director Stephen Page works in close collaboration with the creative team which includes composer David Page. Djakapurra Munyaryyun is Bangarra's cultural consultant as well as a leading dancer, didjeridu player and songman. In consultation with the elders of the Munyaryyun Clan in Dhälinbuy, North East Arnhem Land, where he grew up, Djakapurra is the source of Bangarra's traditional knowledge.

Bangarra's *Ochres* (1995) toured internationally. *Fish* (1997) premiered at the Edinburgh Festival ahead of a sell-out season at the Festival of the Dreaming in Sydney. Bangarra joined the Australian Ballet in *Rites*, choreographed by Stephen Page to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* for the 1997 Melbourne Festival. Performances at the Sydney Opera House and at New York's City Center brought a new level of attention for the company. This year, American artists agency ICM Artists took on Bangarra's overseas tour management.

New works in Bangarra's repertoire include *Skin*, a double bill comprising a work for the female dancers entitled *Shelter*, and *Spear* which explores the challenges for Aboriginal men in urban and remote communities. *Skin* premiered at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Arts Festival for which the company also performed the opening ceremony, *Tubowgule*. In 2001 Bangarra will tour North America.

Centuries old experience mixed with contemporary energy...Bangarra is a dance company like no other.
The Guardian, London



Bangarra Dance Theatre resonates with a spiritual and physical power... vibrantly alive, radiatingly fresh and powerful...
Berliner Morgenpost



Raymond Blanco

Raymond Blanco is a highly regarded choreographer and leader in the development of Indigenous dance in Australia and internationally. In 1991 Blanco was appointed Artistic Director of the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT), an elite ensemble of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancers who toured the world. He directed the Aboriginal participation in the International Theatre Workshop in Nottingham, UK in 1992. In 1993, he premiered a new work, *Colours*, at the Sydney Festival and toured throughout Australia and Japan.

On the Spot, Blanco's homage to five black women, premiered in 1994 at the New Zealand International Festival and toured South America, South East Asia and Europe. His *Warup Kodomir*, based on a legend of the Torres Strait

Islands, toured the Pacific in 1996. In the same year, he choreographed and co-directed Marrugeku Company's *Mimi*. In 1997 he produced *Edge of the Sacred* for the Festival of the Dreaming in collaboration with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and composer Peter Sculthorpe. In 1998 *Aji Aboro* premiered in Noumea at the opening of the Centre Cultural Tjibaou as a commissioned collaboration with Kanake Dance Company, *We Ce Ca*.

In 2000 Raymond was commissioned by the Sydney Festival to collaborate with the French street theatre company *Plasticien Volants*. The work *Ngalyod* premieres in Melbourne before a European tour in 2000. This year Raymond is working with Marrugeku Company on their new work, *Crying Baby*, and is Artistic Advisor to the Sydney Olympics Opening Ceremony.

In conceiving and producing the opening event for the 8th Festival of Pacific Arts, Raymond Blanco, assisted by Marilyn Miller, will collaborate with an established network of local dancers, community workers, teachers, elementary and high school children and others involved in New Caledonian performing arts. The spectacular event will reflect the diversity of Pacific cultures and the Festival's theme "Words of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow". The event will take place at Noumea's Magenta Stadium and be broadcast live on television. *8th Festival of Pacific Arts, 2000*.



Marilyn Miller

Following her early training in classical ballet Marilyn Miller attended the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA). In the course of her studies she visited several remote Indigenous communities both learning and teaching dance, returning to work as Rehearsal Director for Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre and Course Co-ordinator for NAISDA. She danced with the Queensland Ballet, the One Extra Dance Company, the AIDT and Bangarra Dance Theatre. As both ensemble member and soloist she has performed throughout Australia and toured internationally. She has lectured on dance in Australia from an Indigenous perspective and has taught extensively. She has choreographed dance as well as theatre and ceremonial works.

In 2000 Marilyn guest-choreographs with a major theatre company, develops a new work of her own, takes on a documentary writing project and directs the Paralympic Torch Lighting Ceremony. With choreographers Vicki Van Hout and Pinau Ghee, Marilyn recently established Fresh Dance Company which brings together a group of freelance Indigenous dancers. Fresh recently co-ordinated a series of dance performances for Live Sights at the Sydney Olympic Games. Marilyn collaborates with Raymond D Blanco as Rehearsal Director on the opening ceremony for the *8th Festival of Pacific Arts, 2000*.



The Doonooch Dancers

A traditional performance and teaching group who have taken part in major cultural events and arts festivals in Australia and internationally. Based in the Shoalhaven region on the South Coast of New South Wales, the dancers are: Cecil Nadjatajan (Monaro/Dhungutti) who is also a recognised songman and accomplished didjeridu player, Larry Jugerajah (Monaro/Wagaman), Andrew Jingrala (Monaro/Wagaman), Joe Toonkoo (Monaro and Tomakin Wandandian), Reuben Goodju-Goodju (Monaro/Bunjalung), Arthur Goonj (Monaro and Tomakin Wandandian) and Robert Googar (Murawari and Waghkumara).

The company was founded in 1991 by singer-songwriter and traditional lore keeper Robert McLeod (Monaro and Tomakin/Wandandian) who initially established programs for Aboriginal men and youth which recognised culture as the touchstone of Indigenous wellbeing. The Doonooch Dancers have participated in festivals and cultural awareness programs throughout Australia and in the USA, Scotland, New Zealand and Vietnam. Robert McLeod was recently invited to co-teach an undergraduate course on Indigenous Cultures and Modern Technology at the Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Maryland, USA.

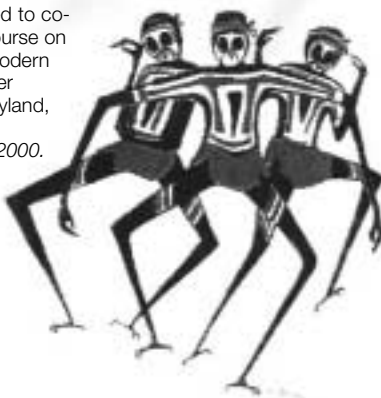
8th Festival of Pacific Arts 2000.

Torres Strait Island Cultural Dance Group

A company of 16 dancers and musicians who create performances relating to the history, culture and life style of the people of the Eastern Torres Strait Islands. As well as their program of dances and songs, the company, aged from five to fifty, includes storytellers and craftspeople who are able to lecture and demonstrate traditional weaving and carving skills of the region. The musicians play the warup (large drum), lumut (hollowed bamboo drum) and gorr (bean pod shakers).

In the face of encroaching western cultures, the aim of the group is to share and promote a strong sense of heritage and identity among the Indigenous population of the Torres Strait, especially the young people. The company works in schools and Aboriginal communities around Australia and has travelled extensively within the Pacific region as well as to the USA, Canada, Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

8th Festival of Pacific Arts, 2000





Mornington Island Dancers of the Lardil People

Drawing from the living Aboriginal tradition of the Lardil People where songs that are received in dreams are translated into dance, the company presents the traditional Aboriginal song and dance of Mornington Island. This reinforces the closeness of the people to the land in revealing the presence of the unseen spirits of nature, from hunting and the birdlife, animals and sea creatures to the powerful presence of legendary ancestors of creation such as the Rainbow Serpent.

The performances are lead by either one or a number of traditional songmen. The music (didjeridu) and song is always presented live. Dancers are selected from the community at Mornington Island. Now, after 27 years of touring, the company's lead dancers are the children and grandchildren of the original performers. Adult male dancers will usually be initiated into the cultural law ceremony and recognised by the community to represent them in sharing their unique tradition. Men and women lead various dances and where appropriate younger children are included. Through their extensive touring program the company has participated in many Australian and overseas events.



Bernadette Walong

Bernadette is an independent dancer-choreographer and teacher based in Sydney. She has danced in works by many Australian choreographers and was former Assistant Artistic Director, choreographer and dancer with

Bangarra Dance Theatre. In 2000, Bernadette participated in New Moves (new territories) 2000 in Adelaide and Glasgow, Scotland. She has toured Australia and Asia, the Pacific and Europe and has worked as choreographer in residence in Australia, Cuba, Vietnam, China and Taiwan.

Her work *Savage Burn*, based on a poem, "to want...to have...to hold, bind...to let," and describing the various stages of a personal relationship, continues an ongoing exploration of dancing en pointe on surfaces such as stones (*Slipstream*, Australian Ballet, 1998), gravel (*The Seed*, NORPA, 2000), and natural ochre (*Ochres*, Bangarra Dance Theatre, 1994-6). In *Savage Burn* (Australian Dance Theatre, 1999) the surface was sand.

Outside the Camp is complex and beautiful...never overstated, despite the depth of emotion involved in these memories of our recent past. *RealTime*

Tracks Inc.

Outside the Camp

A child travels across Darwin's harbour to an island where he is about to spend the rest of his life. This sad story of a boy taken from his family is told through dance, puppetry and song. It is a work of fiction based on the stories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's experience of the Channel Island Leprosarium (1931-1955). For this performance, Tania Lieman, Ken Conway and Tracks' co-director David McMicken are joined by Stanley Stanislaus, whose father is of Tiwi descent, his mother from Central Australia, and Allyson Mills, a Larrakia/Jawoyn/Gurindji/Kungarakka woman. Originally performed with the harbour as backdrop at the Darwin Festival, 2000.

Tracks is a cross-cultural Northern Territory dance and performing arts company with strong links with Indigenous artists and communities. The company is known for innovative, large scale outdoor performances that bring together participants from diverse cultures and disciplines. Central to the company's work are residencies in remote Aboriginal communities and regional areas.

