

# *The Australian Ballet*

ALCHEMY  
THE DEEP END  
RED EARTH



STATE THEATRE  
VICTORIAN ARTS CENTRE  
13 - 24 September 1996

# The Australian Ballet

in

the World Premiere Season of

## ALCHEMY

and

## THE DEEP END

followed by

the Melbourne Premiere Season of

## RED EARTH

with the

State Orchestra of Victoria

Concertmaster: Robert John



Front cover: Nicole Rhodes *Red Earth*

The cast for this performance is available on the nightly cast list which is issued free of charge to patrons

This season is proudly sponsored by



Nicole Rhodes & Nigel Barley *Alchemy*



## Stephen Page

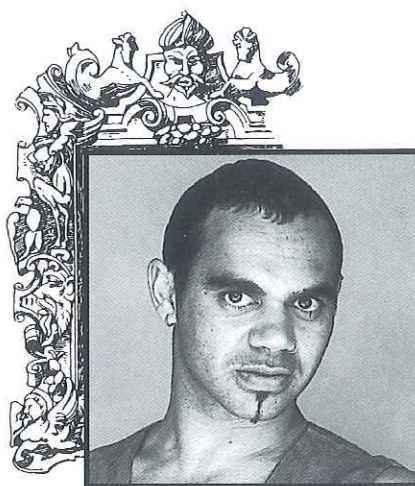
*Choreographer*

Born in Brisbane, Stephen Page is a descendant of the Munaldjali clan of the Yugambah tribe of south-east Queensland. He studied and trained at the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association in Sydney. He began his dance career with Sydney Dance Company performing in *After Venice*, *Wilderness*, *Nearly Beloved*, *Shining Poppy*, *Cafe*, *soft bruising*, *Company of Women* and *King Roger*. In 1991 he choreographed an original work, *Mooggrab*, for SDC's season *Shakespeare Dances*. Graeme Murphy re-created the role of Faun for him in *Late Afternoon of a Faun*.

Stephen Page joined Bangarra Dance Theatre as principal choreographer in 1991, creating *Up Until Now*; that same year he was appointed artistic director of the company. In 1992 he choreographed and directed Bangarra's first full-length work, *Praying Mantis Dreaming*. Recent works by Stephen Page for Bangarra include *Ninni* and *Ochres*, created with Bernadette Walong. He was recipient of the 1993 Mo Award for Dance Performer of the Year. In 1995 he was awarded a Young Creative Artists Fellowship and won the Green Room Award for Dance Artist of the Year.

Other choreographing credits include *Trackers of Oxyrhyncus* for Sydney Theatre Company; *Marriage of Figaro* for The Australian Opera; *Niki Nali* as part of Expo '92; the feature film *Black River*, winner of the 1993 Grand Prix Opera Screen Prize in Paris; *Pride*, part of ABC TV's series *Seven Deadly Sins*; and *The Wedding Song*, directed by Jim Sharman. Stephen Page directed and choreographed the flag handover ceremony for Australia at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games.

**The Australian Ballet gratefully acknowledges the financial support given by Mr Charles Le Feuvre and Mr Laurence Rentoul towards the commissioning of *Alchemy*.**



## David Page

*Composer*

David Page pursued music studies at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music (CASM), Adelaide University, where he studied saxophone, voice, composing and song arrangement. He toured extensively with the performing ensemble of CASM and went on to become musician and songwriter for Azur, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander band. He sang, acted and danced in stage productions of *Murras*, written by Aboriginal playwright Eva Johnson, and Reg Livermore's *Big Sister*.

As a composer, David Page teamed up with his brother, choreographer Stephen Page, and created music for *Kayn Walu* and *Djunba Women*, the annual productions for the NAISDA ensemble and *Mooggrab* for Sydney Dance Company's *Shakespeare Dances*.

David Page joined Bangarra Dance Theatre in 1991 as resident composer and songman where he has composed and performed in productions including *Up 'Til Now*, *Gapan Sagnal* and *Black Vine*. In 1992 he composed the soundtrack for Bangarra's first full-length work, *Praying Mantis Dreaming*, followed by *Niki Nali*. Other recent credits include *Ninni* and *Ochres*.

His television credits include *Poison*, Michael Riley's film for *Blackout*; Stephen Page's *Pride*, part of *Seven Deadly Sins*; and most recently the theme music for *Heartland* for which he received a nomination for the APRA and ARIA Music Awards. This year he collaborated with composer Carl Vine to create the music for the flag handover ceremony at the Atlanta Olympic Games.

# Alchemy

*Commissioned Work – World Premiere Season*

**Choreography** *Stephen Page*

**Music** *David Page*

Vocals by David Page, Leah Purcell, Kirk Page, Connie Mitchell & Ningali;  
electric & acoustic guitar by Steve Francis; commissioned by The Australian Ballet;  
published by Sony Music; language groups: Umpila, Yugambah, Walmadjarri

**Set Design** *Fiona Foley*

**Costume Design** *Jennifer Irwin*

**Lighting Design** *Jo Mercurio*

## Interval

### Choreographer's Note

*Alchemy* is a metaphor for mankind's propensity to quest for gold, versus our need to respect the spiritual essence of nature.

#### Mercury

mother earth calls  
a life force awakens  
running hunger  
she nurtures its journey

#### Salt

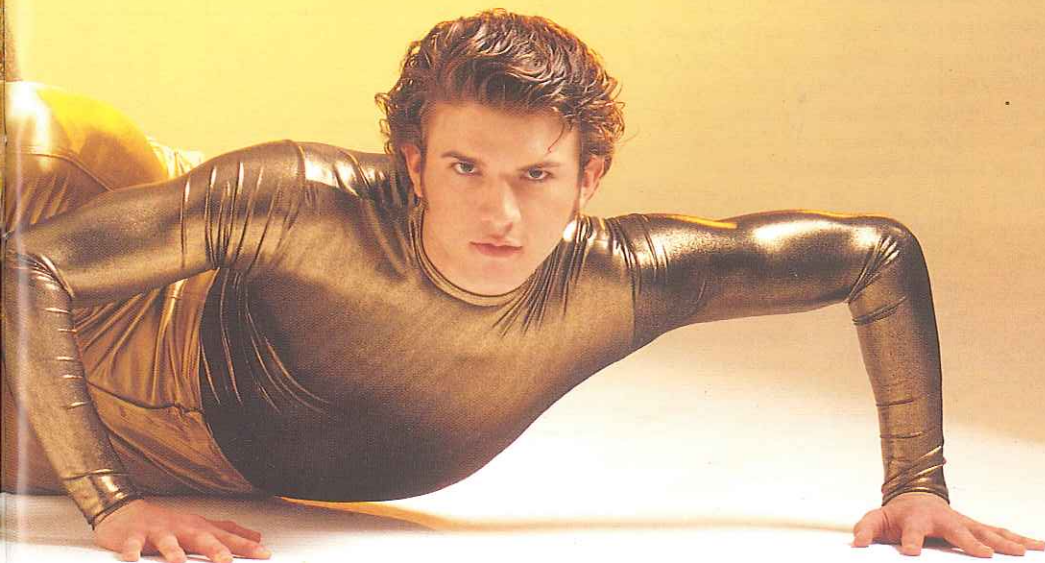
tears of salt  
expose the soul  
taste the earth  
a sacred medicine

#### Lead

a storm brewing  
industrial initiation  
the harbinger of destruction  
scars the earth

#### Gold

a morning star  
abundant riches  
earth's jewels  
the power to corrupt



# Alchemy

*Commissioned Work - World Premiere Season*

Nicole Rhodes, Lynette Wills & Nigel Burley *Alchemy*



## Fiona Foley

*Set Designer*

Fiona Foley is a graduate of Sydney College of the Arts and Sydney Institute of Education. She has been a recipient of a Commonwealth Artist Exchange to Canada and



winner of the 1995 Lloyd Rees Award for Outstanding Urban Design. Residencies include Griffith University, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Tasmania, as well as extensive travel to the Northern Territory and overseas trips to the UK, Hungary, Cuba, the US, Canada, Germany and Korea. She has just returned from a cultural exchange in Chile.

Fiona Foley's work includes painting, mixed media, photography and installation art. She has had numerous solo and group exhibitions including Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane, National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of NSW and Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Her work is represented in 17 collections throughout Australia including national and state galleries and museums.

Design commissions include Australia Post, Adelaide Festival and Museum of Sydney. *Alchemy* is her first project for The Australian Ballet.

## Jennifer Irwin

*Costume Designer*

Jennifer Irwin works regularly with Australia's leading choreographers to design and produce dance costumes. Since 1982 she has worked with Sydney Dance Company as resident costume designer and wardrobe supervisor. In 1984 she received a Theatre Board grant to study at La Scala, Milan. Her first design commission was for SDC's *Sirens* in 1986, followed by a further 14 commissions for Graeme Murphy and SDC including *Synergy with Synergy*, *Shining*, *Protecting Veil*, *soft bruising* and *Berlin*. She has designed *Praying Mantis Dreaming*, *Ochres* and *Moograh* for Stephen Page; *Arbos* for Ohad Naharin; and *Saccharin Suite* for Gideon Obarzanek. She designed and



constructed over 200 costumes for 70 dancers in Murphy's event *Vast* for the Australian Bicentennial celebrations.

Jennifer Irwin has worked with Australia's top stage designers including Kristian Fredrikson, Brian Thomson, Andrew Carter, Michael Pearce and Kenneth Rowell. Her dance film credits include the ABC's *Sensing* for the SDC and *Gluttony*, part of *Seven Deadly Sins*.

Last year she made costumes for The Australian Opera's *Les Troyens I and II*. Most recent credits include SDC's production of Graeme Murphy's *Free Radicals* and dance costumes for the Paralympic handover ceremony in Atlanta this year.

**The Australian Ballet gratefully acknowledges the financial support given by Floris of London towards the commissioning of Jennifer Irwin's costumes for *Alchemy*.**

## Jo Mercurio

*Lighting Designer*

Jo Mercurio was born in Melbourne and raised in Fremantle. As part of the Mercurio dynasty his exposure to the entertainment industry commenced at an early age.



Following his sister Connie into ballet at the age of six triggered his fascination with dance. He decided to leave the barrel rolls to his brother Paul and moved into lighting. At 16 one of his first jobs was for Swy Theatre Company where his brother Michael was a founding member.

Jo Mercurio's career has spanned the entire entertainment spectrum, working predominantly in lighting - from rock and roll, film, television, drama, dance theatre to corporate shows. His career has been fuelled by a fascination with lighting and the manipulation of light; it is not only what you see but what is concealed that interests him.

Film credits include *Blackfellas*, *Dingo* and *Michelle's Third Novel*. For television he has lit *Waltz through the Hills*, *Under the Skin* and *Ship to Shore*. Dance credits include *Scenes in a Prison*, *Six Feet Late*, *Traces*, *Window on the Clubbed*, *Praying Mantis Dreaming*, *El Amor Bruco*, *Ninni* and *Ochres*.

Jo Mercurio is also production manager of Bangarra Dance Theatre.

# Earthly Origins

by Jill Sykes

The word alchemy may have a medieval ring to it, but its broad meaning of change that seems magical in its chemistry is exactly right for the approach that the Page brothers, Stephen the choreographer and David the composer, are bringing to dance and music in late 20th-century Australia.

Brought up in urban Queensland, they have turned to their Aboriginal heritage for the spirit of their creativity. The results are a blend of past and present influences: dance techniques that are current worldwide, infused with Aboriginal references, and music that brings electronic immediacy to resonances of an ancient culture.

Both are acutely sensitive to the responsibility they have to the traditional Aboriginal people who have passed on their knowledge. Permission to use material must be sought before it is shared with a wider public, and even then its presentation has to be undertaken with care.

The respect and commitment given to beliefs sustained over tens of thousands of years imbue these two streetwise brothers with an intriguing sense of otherness. In many ways they are no different from many Australians of their age and ambitions in the arts, yet their talk about work quickly swings into areas beyond run of the mill.

They have never analysed the way they operate as a team. "We've been guided by our ancestral kinship," they say of a partnership that is largely responsible for the success of Bangarra Dance Theatre's *Ochres* around Australia and overseas.

In conversation, their thoughts often dovetail and they recall the time when *Ochres* was in its early stages, with Stephen in his Bangarra office working on the marketing and David up in his resident composer eyrie writing a song for it. When they got together they found they had come up with almost identical words: "Ochre colours of earth on skin to dance and celebrate the spirits of the land."

In developing his musical ideas for *Alchemy*, David says he has been "basically picking up a vibe of Mother Earth because she has been really wounded." He is referring to the mining that leaves raw gouges on the land, its mineral relationship to alchemy and the difficulty of balancing care for nature with a pragmatic use of resources.

"You don't know the answer but you can express what you feel. What I see, relating to our cultural ancestry, is that simplicity of respecting the land and taking in moderation - and always giving back." A mingling of synthetic sounds and the human voice will give tongue to his feelings.

Stephen says he has always been concerned about "the mining of the landscape or some sense of destruction of the landscape: what is the purpose behind it? What do you intend when you play with nature? There is always going to be a struggle..."

And in relation to *Alchemy* the ballet: "I want to give the positive essence of the process behind the alchemist's work, and why one does transform, mix and mould - whether it is self-indulgence or love of creation."

With a grin, he places himself in the alchemist's role. It is a thrilling, challenging and ground-breaking experience to link his twin heritage of traditional and contemporary in a dance style that draws as much on the eclectic influences of his years with Sydney Dance Company as the community dances from Yirrkala that he learned as a student of the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association.

Yet the most binding element seems to have been the upbringing of these two creative people - not to mention another brother, Russell, an outstanding dancer - in a Brisbane family of 12 children descended from the Munaldjali clan of the Yugambeh tribe in south-east Queensland.

At the age of three, Stephen's sisters were putting him in a dress and wig to take off the Supremes or Janis Joplin. Older brother David's professional career was already on its way, with performances on the *Mike Walsh Show* and *Countdown*, and two solo singles released when he was only 13.

On the home front, their father was always telling them stories that Stephen recalls having a special power because they were real, the history of his ancestors. It was their father who gave them some memorable and practical advice - "Poke along steady" and "Follow your gut" - and their mother who not only encouraged their talents but directed them well.

1996 has been an astonishing year in which the continuing triumphs of *Ochres* have been interrupted by the engagement of David and Stephen as key providers of the music and dance for the Atlanta Olympic Games flag handover to Sydney and now the opportunity to create a work for Australia's national ballet company. How did Stephen feel about approaching classical dancers with a style built on elements of his Aboriginal background? "It is not about structure and steps," he replied. "It is the essence, not literal motifs. If I had a bottle of the essence of my style and made them drink it, they could still have that classical style but have this spirit in their bodies. I think all they can get is a taste of that earth. If they can feel the motor of the land come through the rhythm and style..."

David has another way of putting it. "When you watch traditional dance, you have to sit back and go with that pace and that time. What Stephen is saying about working with The Australian Ballet is grounding them." Which brings us back to Mother Earth and the magic of alchemy.

*Jill Sykes is a freelance arts commentator and dance critic.*