

bangarra



Introduction

This teachers' resource has been designed to assist you in preparing your students to view a performance of Bangarra Dance Theatre's production of *Blak*.

Dance theatre, as a genre, involves a range of artistic disciplines that come together in a collaborative process to create a rich palette of physical, visual and sonic sensations. While abstract in form, dance theatre can be highly compelling and emotionally charged. The work may include narrative interpretation of a fictional or true story, a viewpoint regarding an issue (or issues) of social, political or psychological theme, or it can be simply a work of art to communicate concepts, such as beauty, light, perception or space.

When viewing a Bangarra performance of dance theatre, the audience is engaged in a conversation about contemporary reflections on Australian Indigenous culture – the world's oldest living culture. The audience is granted access to knowledge about Indigenous life, by story telling and theatrical presentation. This access is referred to as 'outside knowledge' – knowledge that may be shared, as opposed to 'inside knowledge' - knowledge that is not to be shared. It is the responsibility of the communities relevant to the numerous land and language groups to uphold this knowledge as sacred.

Context for education and curriculum

These notes provide information about the work *Blak*, including:

1. Ideas that inspired the work
2. Themes explored in the creative development period
3. Skills and practices of the artists involved in the creation and performance of the work
4. Suggestions for pre-show activities to enable teachers to prepare students prior to the performance
5. Suggestions for post show activities to extend the experience and the understanding of the performance

We hope that the information, additional references and suggested activities in this resource will assist in enriching your students' experience of the performance, while offering a range of study options related to the Australian Curriculum cross curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island histories and cultures, as well as the Arts curriculum.

A range of websites are suggested throughout this resource. It is recommended that you visit the sites and assess the suitability of the content for your particular school environment before setting the activities based on these resources.

About Bangarra

Bangarra Dance Theatre is Australia's leading Indigenous performing arts company, and is recognised nationally and internationally for distinctive theatre productions that combine the spirituality of traditional culture with contemporary forms of storytelling through dance.

Bangarra was founded in 1989 by dancer and choreographer, Carole Johnson. Since 1991, Bangarra has been led by Artistic Director and choreographer Stephen Page.

Bangarra exists to create a foundation for the care and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural life. Bangarra provides the opportunity for all people of all cultural backgrounds to be able share knowledge about the world's oldest living culture.

For more information about Bangarra and its productions go to:

www.bangarra.com.au

For specific Australian National Curriculum resources go to the Bangarra **Education Resources** page:

www.bangarra.com.au/education

Blak - description and synopsis

Introduction to *Blak*

Blak explores a sense of being 'black' in an urban world where personal identity is shaped through life experience and cultural knowledge. *Blak* is a testament to Indigenous Australia's resilience and survival.

Through the themes of gender, transition and celebration, a range of interconnected questions and situations are explored, such as ritual, pain, rites of passage, self-identity, community and spiritual cleansing.

Presenting *Blak*

Blak has been created in three distinct sections – *Scar*, *Yearning* and *Keepers*. The sections are closely related in their common focus, which is to explore and expose the experience of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives as they negotiate knowledge and respect for tradition and the reality of the challenges of modern 21st century society.

Scar, choreographed by Daniel Riley McKinley, looks at ascent to manhood and the rites of passage in both the traditional and the modern world that signify boys becoming men. In traditional cultural life, specific ritual and markings on the body represent the point in time where a boy becomes a man. The community decides the moment and from this point there are expectations of the young male to take on certain responsibilities. The modern world also exerts an importance on becoming a man, yet the process and the moment of transition is less clear and are a construct of contemporary attitudes and social perceptions. For Indigenous men who identify with, and respect traditional ways, yet live their day-to-day life in an urban contemporary setting, this presents many challenging questions.

Yearning, choreographed by Stephen Page, presents the female life experience – the strength of the feminine spirit, the knowingness of where you come from, the tragedy of loss, the sad fact of abuse, and the finding of self-identity. The female 'earth spirit' gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women the strong sense of grounding that supports them through the darkest and most difficult times. Traditional language is a vessel of knowledge, and knowing your language is critical to knowing where you come from and to whom you are connected.

Keepers, co-choreographed by Stephen Page and Daniel Riley McKinley, pays homage to those who travelled the journeys of past times and kept their culture strong. This section is both a celebration and thanksgiving. For the spirit to remain strong it needs to be cleansed. Elements of cleansing - water, smoke, and earth - symbolise the way the connections between nature, people, and culture are critical to the ultimate survival of culture.

Creating *Blak*

The creative process for *Blak* involved the choreographers and the dancers exploring their own experiences of an urban life that plays out amid an ongoing question of what it means to be an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in Australia today.

To create *Scar*, the men worked with Daniel around the questions of manhood – how it occurs and how it is recognised. One of the starting points was scarification (or cicatrization), a practice that was carried out in many lands and tribes throughout Indigenous Australia. Scarification was performed in relation to mourning, punishment, personal adornment, status and rites of passage. It was performed through a variety of means, cutting with stone knives or shells, or rubbing charcoal into fresh wounds.

When scarification is performed to acknowledge a boy passing into manhood, there are elements of pain, achievement and knowingness. There is also recognition and expectation. The young man will take on custodianship of cultural knowledge and be responsible for its care and ongoing transference of that knowledge to future generations. The Bangarra artists questioned and explored their own transition to manhood, and their observations and experiences in the urban community where they live and work.

To create *Yearning*, the women dancers worked closely with Stephen. They brought their thoughts, experiences and their feelings about themselves as Indigenous women into the creative process. These women are artists, performers, storytellers, but above all they are women who spend their lives expressing their aboriginality. Stephen chose some very specific situations and issues to illustrate the female 'strength spirit', a resilience of culture and identity: *Birth* (creation), *Loss* (a young girl's suicide), *Native Tongue* (knowing your language), *Broken* (abuse of domestic violence) and *Unearthed* (the journey of self-awareness).

To create *Keepers*, both choreographers worked with the entire ensemble of dancers (men and women) to illustrate the power of culture as a foundation for generations of Indigenous people – past and present, and to affirm their identity. As contemporary social and political issues develop and challenge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to remain strong and positive, it is important that tradition is respected and celebrated. These young custodians have a foot in both the ancient and modern worlds of Indigenous Australia.

Creative team

Choreographers

Stephen Page was born in Brisbane and is a descendant of the Nunukul people and the Munaldjali clan of the Yugambah tribe from south east Queensland.

“It is frustrating to hear and read of the social dilemmas in communities. When we spend time exchanging and sharing stories with both urban and more traditional communities – looking, learning and listening, we come face to face with social issues that can’t help but inform our work”.

Daniel Riley McKinley’s bloodline runs through the Riley clan of the Wiradjuri people, from the Wellington area of western New South Wales.

“The gritty, dirty and grimy energy of contemporary men’s business and the sacredness of the initiation ceremony were my main driving themes of Scar. Throughout the creative process, we as a group questioned ourselves and explored our own journeys and passages and what it takes to overcome the struggles of becoming a man in the 21st century”.

Composers

David Page is a descendant of the Nunkul people and the Munaldjali clan of the Yugambah tribe from south east Queensland.

“Bangarra tells stories through dance. I write music to support the dance and enhance the story. As an Artist-in-Residence for Bangarra I am so fortunate and happy to be here, and to experience Blak as an audience member too”.

Paul Mac is one of the leading figures in Australian electronic music and this is his first time collaborating with Bangarra’s long time composer David Page.

“Being able to experiment with sonics, rhythms and arrangement out of the straight jacket of pop music has been completely liberating”.

Set designer

Jacob Nash is a Murri man who grew up in Brisbane. He graduated from the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) Design Course in 2005.

“There is a complex emotional heaviness to this work. The design has to reflect this in some way without being heavy handed and also allow for moments of joy and sadness to live together in the same moment”.

Costume designer

Luke Ede studied design at NIDA graduating in 2005. *Blak* is Luke’s first Bangarra commission.

“The inspiration for the Scar costumes came from the streets and kids of NE Arnhem Land and their individual flair for wearing cloths. In Yearning I took a much more symbolic approach. (In) Keepers I really wanted the dancers to feel as if they were coming to life out of the set”.

Lighting designer

Matt Cox's career in theatre has spanned 15 years designing lighting in both Australia and the UK. *Blak* is Matt's second Bangarra commission.

"The (lighting) effects for Scar are quite urban, driven by bare street light and the idea of the last working light in an empty warehouse. In Yearning the mood is more domestic, porch lights, the glow from a phone box, the light on a camera. In Keeping, the lighting design leaves the real world and take a far more abstract approach".

Further references:

For general information about Aboriginal scarification

<http://australianmuseum.net.au/Aboriginal-Scarification>

Comprehensive information about responsible and appropriate engagement with Indigenous people and communities, and proper use of protocols for Indigenous studies and engagement with Indigenous communities is available:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies Handbook, Queensland Studies Authority, South Brisbane, QLD, 2010.

Also available online at:

http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/senior/snr_atsti_10_handbook.pdf

Learning activities

Pre-performance activities

Explore

Have students become familiar with Bangarra's work, if they are not already. Visit the Bangarra website: www.bangarra.com.au

You might like to focus on the following web page, which includes:

- Filmed interviews with Stephen Page and David Page
- Video montage of the *Blak* creative process: part 1 and part 2.
- Behind the scenes of the *Blak* photoshoot

<http://www.bangarra.com.au/performance/blak>

For a comprehensive archive collection of Bangarra's productions over the last 24 years, including video, images and information about the works, go to:

www.bangarra.com.au/performance

Reflect

Students can then be introduced to the themes explored in *Blak* by asking the following questions, conducting research and discussion.

For example:

1. What constitutes a 'rite of passage'?
2. Are there contemporary expressions of traditional customs?

3. How is a personal journey (a life) marked? What points in time represent changes from boy to man, from girl to woman?
4. What roles do women and men play in family and community settings as leaders, nurturers, role models?
5. What is meant by hardship and resilience?
6. What could be meant by the terms 'strength spirit' and 'earth spirit'?
7. What does men's business and women's business mean for Indigenous people and how do non-Indigenous people express similar cultural customs?
8. What does the term 'living with a foot in both worlds' mean in regard to Australian Indigenous people?

Post-performance activities

Respond

After attending the performance, students will have a more tangible sense of the production *Blak*. Their responses can be captured and explored in the context of Arts curriculum learning topics, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island perspectives, histories and cultures.

For example, students could be asked to create one or more of the following:

- A dance specific response – using the concept of ritual, story, hardship, strength of spirit, devise a choreographic framework for a dance composition piece. What type of movements would illustrate the chosen subject matter, and what range of dynamics would be explored? This task could be approached as exploration of an idea, performance of key movement phrases, and/or discussion.
- A short essay that identifies distinguishing choreographic motifs, structural elements (e.g. how the sections relate, how the design, sound, movement are integrated), and how contemporary dance language is 'spoken' through cultural expression of knowledge and tradition.
- A visual/graphic arts response – in the form of a poster, painting, drawing, animation, postcard, collage, short film, or t-shirt design
- A sound/music response – in the form of a song or rap, a soundscape, or a music composition
- A critical or creative writing response – in the form of a critical review, short story, short play, poem or a letter.

Students can investigate their response to the creative process used in the making of dance theatre by asking the following questions, based on their observations of the performance of *Blak*.

For example:

1. How are the three sections of *Blak* connected or separate and what linking techniques are used?
2. In what ways do the different sections reflect the different perspectives of the choreographers and composers?
3. How important is it for the dancers to contribute to the process of making the movements to tell their stories and is this evident in the work?
4. How are props and costumes utilized to tell the stories and enhance the choreography?
5. What use of technology is involved in the performance and how effective is it?
6. How does the music interact with the dance and assist with the story-telling, and what styles, vocal and musical content are most effective?
7. In what ways do the choreographers use individual performers, duets and the full ensemble to reflect their ideas about gender, personal life experiences and communities?
8. In what way do the ideas expressed through the set and costume designs contribute to the overall performance?

For theatre reviews and feature articles published in the media go to:

www.bangarra.com.au/performance/blak

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