



Education Resource: *About* (2011)

From the production *Belong* (2011)

Recommended for years 5 and 6 (Stage 3)

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Bangarra Dance Theatre

Background

... who is Bangarra?

Bangarra is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation and 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.

Bangarra was founded in 1989 by American dancer and choreographer, Carole Johnson. Since 1991, Bangarra has been led by Artistic Director and choreographer Stephen Page, a descendant of the Nunukul people and the Munaldjali clan of the Yugambeh tribe from South East Queensland.

The company is based at Walsh Bay in Sydney, Australia and presents performance seasons in Australian capital cities, regional towns and remote areas. Bangarra has also taken its productions to many places around the world including Europe, Asia and USA.

... why is the work of Bangarra important?

Bangarra exists to create a foundation for the care and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural life. Over the twenty five years of Bangarra's existence there have been over thirty new productions created for performance seasons and touring, providing the opportunity for audiences of all cultural backgrounds to be able to experience and share knowledge about the world's oldest living culture. Bangarra has nurtured the careers of hundreds of Indigenous professional artists - dancers, choreographers, composers, filmmakers and designers. Bangarra has also collaborated on the creation of new productions with other Australian performing arts companies such as The Australian Ballet and the Sydney Theatre Company.

... who are the artists?

Bangarra's dancers and collaborating artists come from all over Australia, including the major groups in relation to location, for example: Torres Strait Islanders, Queensland (Murri), New South Wales (Koori), Victoria (Koorie), South Australia (Anangu), Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (Yolngu), Coast and Midwest Western Australia (Yamatji), Southern Western Australia (Nyoongar), Central Western Australia (Wangai) and Tasmania (Palawah). Some of the dancers are graduates of NAISDA Dance College (NSW), while others received their training at the Aboriginal College of Performing Arts (Qld), and others are graduates of dance courses delivered by universities and schools around Australia.

Connecting to the source

... telling the stories

Story telling in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life is one of the means by which cultural systems, values and identity are preserved and transferred from generation to generation. Telling stories through song, music and dance connects people directly to their land, their language and their community. Stories about culture and the traditions of their ancestors need to be transferred, as this is the way knowledge is preserved.

... connecting to community,

Each year Bangarra spends time in specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, meeting with elders and traditional owners and living with the people of that community - learning about stories that connect the people and the creatures to the land, and sharing the music and dance of that community. Everyone who works at Bangarra feels very strongly about their role in the company's work.

... respecting and upholding protocol

Engaging with and within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural life requires awareness and observance of the correct protocols of each community. Protocols are rarely in written form, so an appropriate level of community consultation prior to any research or residency that Bangarra might seek to facilitate is critical. Bangarra *must* make sure that the stories they tell through their productions are true to the traditional owners of those stories and uphold the integrity of the stories' meanings.

... experiencing dance in a theatrical context

It is important to note that dance theatre works are essentially the creation of artistic invention to express a broad range of ideas and thoughts. Whether the work is structured through narrative, or through abstract expressions the audience is free to interpret the work according to their individual perspectives, emotional responses and level of experience in the viewing of performing arts.

Exploring *About*

Choreographer Elma Kris

... what inspired the dance work *About*?

About is inspired by the culture and practices of the people of Torres Strait Islands. These islands are located between the tip of Northern Queensland and the southern coast of Papua New Guinea. There are approximately 270 islands in the Torres Strait but only 17 of these islands are inhabited.

Prior to European settlement, the people of the Torres Strait relied on hunting, fishing and gathering, as well as trading objects made of hair, pearl, turtle shells and stone tools, including weapons collected during warfare. Since colonisation, modern economic and technical developments have occurred however the traditional practices continue to function among the new ways of life. The introduction and influence of Christianity in 1871, notably through the establishing of the London Missionary Society on Darnley Island, made a significant socio-cultural impact on Islander society. Christianity is practiced widely in the islands of the Torres Strait, including an annual celebration of singing, dancing and feasting on 1 July of each year.

For more information about the Torres Strait go to: <http://www.tsirc.qld.gov.au>

... what is the choreographer expressing in the work?

About expresses the choreographer's personal cultural connection and continuing curiosity about the four winds (*Gub*) of the Torres Strait Islands. While the conventional western calendar of seasons (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter) are broadly determined by dates, the rise and fall of temperature and the noticeable changes to the landscape, it is the winds of the Torres Strait that are the seasonal forecasters for the people who live in this region. The behaviours of these winds guide the people in their daily lives, and the spirits of these winds inform the essential elements of their cultural life.

Elma Kris was born and raised on Thursday Island, one of the main islands of the Torres Strait. Kris wanted to explore the influence that the four winds have on the land, the sea and the sky as well as the way people of the Torres Strait have incorporated them into their cultural lives and their everyday sustainability.

The four winds of the Torres Strait are named *Zey*, *Kuki*, *Sager* and *Naigai*.

Living on Thursday Island as a child, Kris admired the way her parents talked about these four winds. She knew at a very young age that the winds played a central role in the daily life of the Islanders. In creating the work *About*, Kris wanted to explore the way the winds move and shape themselves in magical and mysterious ways, the way they paint the colour of the day and night, and how they orchestrate the conditions of the seas. Kris says, "They are like spirits swiftly passing by and merging with nature. They guide and nurture day-to-day life". In creating this work Kris was able to journey with the winds and bring them to life through dance.

The characteristics of the winds are explored and interpreted through movement. These movements depict qualities like calmness and delicacy, power and aggression, serenity and playfulness. Shifts in the winds' behaviour are sometimes subtle but occasionally they are dramatic and swift.

About is a dynamic portrayal of life and culture of the Torres Strait and gives the viewer the chance to share the Islanders' relationship to the four winds of their island home.

About: Excerpts from the production.

The film clip shows excerpts of the four winds.

... Zey (pronounced Zay)

Zey is the cool breeze that comes from the south. For Kris this suggested female characteristics - gentle, calm, alluring - capturing you and causing your body and mind to relax as it responds to the gentleness of this breeze. This dance is matched to the colour blue to enhance the cool character of this wind and its fluid texture. When Zey is blowing, people take time to relax, to prepare for the next change of wind. The female solo dancer creates soft movements that move with a gentle breath, and without any sudden interruption.

... Sager (pronounced Sa-gerr)

Sager is the turbulent wind that causes the sea's waves to swell and the sea foam or spume to build up near the shore. It comes from the southeast and is strong and gusty – it is impatient and persistent. This is a good wind to use to travel out in boats to go fishing or pearl diving, or travelling between islands. The dancers are costumed in chalky white to represent the dust and the sand that Sager collects along its journey.

... Kuki (pronounced Cook-ie)

Kuki is the wind of the tropical storms and rough seas that blow from January to April; it's the northwest wind, dominating and aggressive. Kris sees this wind as black in colour, due to the dark and threatening nature of its behaviour. During the time this wind blows, the tides are high and people don't go out in their boats. At the same time people welcome this wind as it brings a great deal of rainfall, replenishing fresh water supplies. The rainfall generated by Kuki is seen as cleansing, and having medicinal properties. The choreography in this section involves many different levels of movement to depict Kuki's turbulent nature.

... Naigai (pronounced Nai-gai)

This is the calmest wind. When Naigai blows you can hear the birds sing and the people chatting as they prepare to go fishing for turtle and dugong. There is no need to resist this wind as it carries boats out and back with the tide. It allows the energies to settle. People feel like they are in the presence of something like royalty such is the regal nature of this delicate wind. The colour that bathes this wind is silver to depict its sparkling glorious nature.

... the human presence

Elma Kris appears between the sections and at the beginning and end of the work to represent the special relationship between the people and the four winds. Kris' role provides the continuous presence of the Torres Strait people – past, present and future – their unique coexistence with the winds and the importance of their knowledge of the winds' natures.

... how do the dances tell the stories about the winds

To create the choreography, Kris drew on her traditional dance knowledge and developed new movement language that expressed how she felt as she explored these four winds. The colours that Kris chose to represent each wind's character illustrate her personal response to the winds and help the viewer share her interpretations.

Kris worked with the dancers to create the choreography, asking them to think about how they watch the wind, how it makes them feel; looking at the shapes and movements of the clouds, the ripples on

the water and how the light hits the land and the sea when the different winds blow. She encouraged the dancers to talk to the winds with their movements and imagine the impact of the winds through their various dance dynamics.

The creative process

... Remembering

The creating of *About* began with Kris spending a great deal of time remembering and recreating in her mind, the time when she was a child and her parents would take her fishing. As an adult, she realised the importance of her parents' knowledge about the winds.

The people of the Torres Strait often associate themselves individually with one of the winds; they take their choice of wind as a totem and use the nature of this totem to suggest their own personalities, and connect to the spiritual nature of the wind. These themes and practices set the background for Kris' creative processes in the making of *About*.

... Choreographic processes

About was created by the choreographer, in close collaboration with the dancers, the composer, and the costume, set and lighting designers. This group makes up the creative team. This collaborative process enables the various disciplines (art forms) employed to create works that weave together to achieve the overall vision of the choreographer.

The choreographer, the rehearsal director and the dancers work together in the dance studio for many hours each day over several weeks to create the choreographic (dance movement) elements for the dance. Together they invent movements that are inspired by the story, developing their artistic interpretation of the story's underlying themes.

They experiment with each movement, trying them many different ways and practicing them over and over again. They build these movements into phrases and arrange the phrases into sequences that are structured in sections. Gradually the sections of the dance are formed into the order that the choreographer decides is best for the coherence of the work as a whole. Linking the sections of a work is an important feature of choreography. The creative team wants the audience to stay focussed on what they experience and engaged with the spirit of the work as they respond to each new section.

... Dance skills

As the work takes shape, the dancers use their dance technique and performance skills, to blend the movements and make them clear and consistently achievable. There are often rather challenging movements that the choreographer desires the dancers to be able to perform but it can take sometime to find a way that is safe, smooth and aesthetically correct for the choreography.

The rehearsal director is present throughout the creative process in order to rehearse the dance, so that the key qualities and details of the choreography as set by the choreographer are retained and remembered. As the work moves closer to its premiere date, the rehearsal director will work with the dancers for many hours to make sure they can perform the dance at the highest standard possible. It is during this period in the process, the technical elements of the designers – costume, set, and lighting – start to be incorporated. The dancers and the creative team also need to be aware that often the work will be performed for several weeks, up to eight times a week and the dancers need to have the physical stamina and strength to cope with this demand.

... Production processes

In the week of the premiere performance, the dancers, rehearsal director, creative team and production crew move from the Bangarra dance studios to the theatre where they spend many hours

rigging the set, positioning and programming the lighting, checking the sound levels and making necessary adjustments to the choreography to fit the space of the stage. This is called the 'bump in' and the production crew is largely responsible for coordinating this stage of the process. There is much excitement during this bump in week because no one has actually seen the finished dance theatre work until the dress rehearsal. There is often a media call at the dress rehearsal where photographers take pictures of the dancers during the final 'run through' and journalists conduct interviews with the creative team.

Finally, the premiere of the new work takes place and everyone involved, together with the audience experiences the work fully for the first time. Dance reviewers attend the premiere to write about the work for their respective newspapers, websites and blogs. These reviews are usually published as soon as possible after the premiere.

...The life of a dance

During the lengthy process of creating a new Bangarra production, ideas will change and surprising shifts in the original plans will occur. This is the normal nature of the creative process, and probably one of the most exciting things about making a new work. Importantly, the elements that *do not* change are the traditional stories and original cultural elements, which always remain respected and intact. As the dance is performed over time, slight changes in the performances evolve as new dancers take on the roles of the previous dancers. This is a positive and normal maturing of a work and something that keeps the work dynamic for both performers and audiences.

The creative team.

Elma Kris - choreographer

Elma Kris was raised on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait. She is a descendant of the Wagadagam, Kaurareg, Sipingur, Gebbara, Kai Danggal Buai of the Western and Central Islands of the Torres Strait.

"I want to share my connection with my culture and pass it on to future generations, both Torres Strait Islanders and all Australians. The winds are like spirits swiftly passing by, and merging with nature; they guide and nurture day-to-day life. I wanted to take a journey with them, travel with their moods and see how I could bring them to life through dance".

David Page/Steve Francis – composers

David Page is a descendant of the Nunukul people and the Munaldjali clan of the Yugambah tribe from southeast Queensland.

Steve Francis is a Sydney based composer who is a regular collaborator on Bangarra productions.

"The language story telling is the hook of the About soundtrack. The story concept is simple; it is about the winds. These winds, featured in relations to the people that the story is about, are unpredictable but powerful as well".

Jacob Nash – set designer

Jacob Nash is a murri man who grew up in Brisbane.

"The challenge for Elma and me was how to translate the natural element of wind into a visual form of contemporary design. Fortunately we were able to travel to the Torres Strait being a part of the landscape and observing it change throughout the day whilst listening to Elma describe what we were experiencing added a deep layer of understanding, inspiration and greater knowledge to the birth place of Elma's story".

Emma Howell - costume designer

Emma Howell graduated from NIDA in 2004 and has worked as a costume designer ever since in Australia and UK.

“The idea of all the debris and dust getting swirled up and collected by a hurricane was inspiration for Kuki; I have incorporated feathers, grasses and tattered fabrics into the costumes. Zey uses fabrics that move in a fluid motion with the body and we experimented with ombré dyeing techniques to portray the feel of the cool wind. Naigai called shimmering, shining details which we have created through cut-out panels and layered fabrics”.

Matt Cox – Lighting designer

Matt Cox’s career in theatre has spanned 15 years designing lighting in both Australia and the UK.

“I sat in the workshop with Jake as he played with different set designs and with Emma as she experimented with her costumes and colours. And I joined David in his studio as he and Steve created the sounds and music. I needed to be sure to choose the right colour palette and lighting fixtures”.

Peggy Misi - Cultural Advisor

Peggy Misi is from Mabuiag Island and is a descendent of the Kaigas Augadh clan. Peggy acted as cultural consultant for the making of the work about and is a former dancer with Bangarra Dance Theatre.

For full Biographical details go to:
www.bangarra.com.au

Links & further reading

Links

Gab Titui

<http://www.gabtitui.com.au>

The Torres Strait Regional Authority

<http://www.tsra.gov.au>

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

<https://50years.aiatsis.gov.au>

Further reading:

The Torres Strait Islands

Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art

Brisbane, Australia, 2011.

Stars of Tagai: The Torres Strait Islands

Sharp, Nonie.

Aboriginal Studies Press

AIATSIS, Canberra, ACT, Australia, 1993.

Landscapes of Indigenous Performance: Music, song and Dance of the Torres Strait and Arnhem Land.

Magowan, Fiona and Neuenfeldt, Karl.

Aboriginal Studies Press

AIARSIS, Canberra, ACT Australia 2005.

Acknowledgements

Choreographer

Elma Kris

Cultural consultant

Peggy Misi

Music/sound designers David Page and Steve Fancis

Set designer

Jacob Nash

Costume designer

Emma Howell

Lighting designer

Matt Cox

Dancers

Sidney Saltner, Elma Kris, Yolande Brown, Patrick Thaiday, Jhuny-boy Borja, Deborah Brown, Waangenga Blanco, Tara Gower, Leonard Mickelo, Daniel Riley, Jasmin Sheppard, Ella Havelka, Tara Robertson, Travis De Vries, Kaine Sultan-Babij.

Class Activities: Years 5 & 6

Overview

Bangarra's production of *About* is inspired by the culture and practices of the people of Torres Strait Islands, focussing on the four winds of the Torres Strait - *Gub*.

Things to Think About and Do

1) Before Viewing

Pose questions that help them understand the ideas that the dance is based on?

- What do you know about the Torres Strait?
- Where are the Torres Strait Islands and how many are there?
- Name some of the main islands?
- Can you name a language of the Torres Strait?
- From which island of the Torres Strait is the choreographer of *About*?

Expand students' understanding that contemporary Indigenous people participate in all facets of the community and as artists they may choose to communicate ideas based on traditional stories, community issues and cultural practices.

- How does the work of Bangarra help us become more aware of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and culture?
- What is a cultural advisor?
- Who are the dancers of Bangarra? Where do they come from?
- Where is the company Bangarra based?

What do students already know about body skills and what are some things that they can do?

- Encourage the students to experience moving their whole body. Encourage the students to experience isolating different body parts: divide the body in to body zones focusing on head, chest, arms, hips and legs.
- Ask students to use increasingly complex combinations of space including level, direction, dimension, shape, planes and pathways.
- Encourage students to use combinations of time including: metre, tempo, accent, and phrasing.
- Provide opportunities for students to use combinations of dynamic qualities including: sustained, percussive, suspended, swinging, collapsing, vibratory
- Ask students to move both individually and with others; showing awareness of spatial relationships, groupings and in relation to other dancers and to objects around them.

Encourage students to identify and prioritise what they know about choreographic processes through:

- encouraging students to use choreographic devices including abstraction, transitions, variation and contrast, and to recognise different forms and structures.
- checking that students are aware that choreographers use the elements of dance to express intent.
- discussions that encourage students' recognition that dance can relate to its social and historical context.
- assisting students' understanding that there are specific protocols for viewing and performing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dances.

2) As you view

Ask students to watch and listen to the excerpts of *About*, be a respectful audience and try to remember as much as they can about what they are seeing, hearing and feeling.

Students may take notes as they watch in order to capture details to describe, analyse, interpret and evaluate the work. Ask students to devise their own methods of notation to capture details. Allow scope for students to identify and justify their chosen method of notation.

3) After viewing

Pose questions that remind them of their experience. Expand on this by identifying some of the main ideas, then selecting and clarifying information from the students' responses.

- Name and identify the order in which we see each wind.
- Describe identifiable features of each wind including: colour, movement motifs, movement quality, accompaniment.
- Compare similarities and differences between the four winds of the Torres Strait and the conventional western calendar of the seasons.
- What could each colour connote about the personality and role of each wind?
- What could be the significance of the choreographer taking on the role of the 'human presence'? The movements of the 'human presence' contrast in the beginning and end sections. What could this signify?

Collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions focusing on: Movement Aspects, Non-movement Aspects, and Societies and Cultures

Movement Aspects

In the dance, the characteristics of the winds are explored and interpreted through movement. These movements depict qualities like calmness and delicacy, power and aggression, serenity and playfulness. For each wind, analyse the depiction of these qualities by asking students to:

- Describe the way the choreographer has used space, time and dynamics.
- Identify, describe and analyse recurring movements.
- Discuss the ways the dancers interact with each other through spatial placements, gaze, partner work and solo work.
- Describe the movements of the ensemble versus the soloist. In what way does the ensemble support the soloist? Draw the spatial relationships in this section.
- Analyse the structure (choreographic devices) of this section.

Non-movement Aspects

- Describe the stage set including the colour of the background, floor, props and the lighting (colour, brightness, point/s of focus) in each section.
- Describe the features of the soundtrack in each section. What instruments are used? What do they sound like? What language is the voice-over speaking? What are some key aspects of this text?
- What might the use of smoke haze represent? Which sections/winds is this theatrical element predominately used and how?
- How would you describe the costumes of the dancers in each section? Why do some dancers wear identical costumes, whilst others have distinct features? What is the source/s of the design for these costumes?

Societies and Cultures

The production of *About* tells of the four winds of the Torres Strait.

- Why might the choreographer have chosen to develop a work based on her cultural connection and continuing curiosity about the four winds?
- From the sections you have viewed, discuss how Elma Kris has achieved this.
- The performance is on a stage in a theatre. Is this a traditional or contemporary place for Torres Strait Islander people to dance?
- What influence do the winds have on day to day life?

4) Next steps

Expand on known ideas to create new and imaginative combinations through improvising, exploring and experimenting with movement. Use these processes to make a dance sequence.

- Compare yourself to the four winds and make connections between the characteristics of each wind and your own personality. Associate yourself with one of the winds, as the people of the Torres Strait Islands are known to do.
- Explore different movements using your wind as a stimulus (e.g. the way the wind makes them feel, how they watch the wind, the shapes and movements of the clouds, the ripples of the wind on the water) in a similar way Kris asked her collaborating performers to do.
- Abstract these movements by altering space (e.g. size, direction, level), varying time (e.g. stillness, tempo, duration) and contrasting dynamics (e.g. sustained versus collapsing, percussive versus swinging).
- Select your favourite movements maintaining the original order. Repeat these phrases so that you are able to perform them in the same way each time. Encourage students to talk to their wind with their movements and imagine the impact of the wind through their various dance dynamics.

Explore situations using creative thinking strategies to propose a range of alternatives. Reflect on, explain and check the processes used to come to conclusions, explaining ways students can check their thinking and deal with setbacks.

- Try performing your dance sequence at the same time as several other people. Watch another group do this with their sequences. Can you watch all of them at once or do you focus on one then another?
- Develop a duo. Allow yourselves to cross or interrupt each other's sequences.
- Perform your dance in front of your peers. Ask them what they saw and felt when they watched your dance. Did they see a story, series of events or an idea?

Explain and justify ideas and outcomes.

- How would you describe your dance? Write a short statement of intent?
- How is the movement of the body used to represent your intention?
- How did you use space and dynamics to create the ideas/feelings in this dance?
- What kind of costume could you make or choose to enhance your dance? Why have you made this choice?

Based on Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Level 4 statements from the Critical and Creative Thinking Learning Continuum: Inquiring – identifying, exploring and organising information and ideas; Generating ideas, possibilities and actions; Reflecting on thinking and processes; and Analysing, synthesising and evaluating reasoning and procedures areas. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Australia (CC BY NC SA) licence. Accessed April 2015.