



Education Resource

Sandsong
(2021)

Recommended for Years 9 to 12

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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 Y. Johnson. From 1991 to 2022, Bangarra was led by director/choreographer Stephen Page, and since 2023 the company's Artistic Director has been Bangarra alumna and choreographer, Frances Rings.

The company is based in Sydney, Australia and presents performance seasons in Australian capital cities and regional towns, as well as some 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 culture. Through its dance theatre productions, Bangarra provides the opportunity for people of all cultural backgrounds to be able to engage in a contemporary experience of the world's oldest living culture. Bangarra has nurtured the careers of hundreds of Indigenous professional artists, including dancers, choreographers, composers and designers. In just over three decades, Bangarra has produced around 50 original works for its repertoire including the feature length film, *Spear* in 2016. In 2022, the documentary *Firestarter* (In Films) was released telling the story of the foundation of the company and the central role of the brothers, Stephen, Russell and David Page. 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 different First Nations tribes and language groups from all over Australia and the Torres Strait Islands. Many of the dancers are graduates of NAISDA Dance College (NSW), while others are graduates of dance courses delivered by universities and dance training schools around Australia and overseas. Prior to joining Bangarra, many of the dancers participated in Bangarra's Youth Programs activities with the NSW Department of Education, as well as the company's Rekindling program.

Background *Connecting to the source*

... telling the stories

Story telling in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life is the means by which cultural knowledge, systems and values are preserved and transferred. The stories of the ancestors are passed on through song, music and dance, maintaining the connection of people to the land, waterways and skies, while honouring ancient traditions and lore as the stories are passed from generation to generation.

... sharing and passing on of knowledge,

Each year Bangarra spends time On Country in specific Indigenous communities, meeting with elders and traditional owners of that community - learning about stories that connect the people and the creatures to the land, water and skies. Everyone who works at Bangarra feels very strongly about their role in the company's work. They make sure that the stories they tell are respectful of the traditional owners wishes, 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. While some information is provided in the program notes and study guides, the audience is free to respond to the work according to their individual thoughts and levels of experience.

Creating *SandSong*

... what is the inspiration for *SandSong*?

SandSong is inspired by stories from the lands of the Wangkatjungka and Walmajarri people of the Great Sandy Desert and Kimberley regions of Western Australia. *SandSong* is a journey into ancient story systems against the backdrop of ever-changing government policy. It tells a story of loss and survival and Aboriginal people's cultural resilience despite the exploitation of their natural resources, displacement from their lands, and the trauma that comes with removal and slavery.

At the heart of this place is the Jila – the living water – that resides in desert waterholes across the region. The waterholes are not only the site of a precious resource, but they are also a site where cultural practices underpin livelihoods and the connection to ancestors. Each Jila is home to a specific *Kurtal* serpent spirit, and it is important to approach the waterhole with the correct song and ceremony.

... where does the story come from?

The adjacent areas of Kimberley and the Great Sandy Desert cover a total area of about 700,000 square kilometres, yet it is one of the most sparsely populated areas in the world. There are three main weather seasons – the dry, the build-up, and the wet season, with sub-categories of these main seasons informing people when it's time to hunt, to move across the land, or to stay and take shelter.

When European settlers explored the northern parts of Western Australia into the Kimberley and further south looking for opportunities to establish grazing industries, the abundant water supplies provided them the means to build the vast cattle stations that exist today. Aboriginal people were conscripted into agricultural labour. Coercion and the use of chains to stop these workers returning to their homelands was common. Payment was in the form of rations and a place for the whole family to set up camp, with the understanding that people would return to the traditional lands for ceremony during the wet season. When the wages decision of 1967 was handed down, this system (often referred to as the 'accommodation') was abandoned, and another wave of disruption resulted. People gravitated to places like Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek and set up mixed communities.

From the late 1880s through to the 1960s, Protection policies were enacted to restrict Aboriginal people's movements and who they associated with, as well as their right to participate in many activities available to white people. As the impact of these racist policies persist, and the truth of the past becomes more obvious, the Culture has endured as a foundation for hope.

Presenting *SandSong*

SandSong is a production in four acts.

ACT 1. MAKURRA / COLD DRY SEASON

Poison – dark times ahead, but the Land is always present and resilient.

Dry – the season unfolds as part of an enduring and sustaining cycle

Skin – a young woman is guided through her kinship lines, affirming her place as a knowledge keeper.

Traditional women's dance

Totem – the men prepare a young man for ceremony.

Traditional men's dance.

ACT 2. PARRANGA, HOT DRY SEASON

Coolamon

The women hunt during cold weather time. The land is quiet. Water and food are scarce. Coolamon is a meditation on fragility, survival, balance, knowledge, life and death.

Spinifex

The smoking spinifex burns the land to maintaining the health of Country. The old people are talking to Country, they can sense the change coming. Colonisers and their cattle have created a dust storm which breaks the Land apart.

ACT 3. KARTIYA

Auction

The land has been interrupted. Mobs have left the desert. People begin their new life as laborers and domestics, in servitude to the pastoral industry, victims to the lawlessness of a new frontier.

Station Labour

The men toil from dawn to dusk in the stockyards paid only in rations of food and clothing.

Build Up / Walk Off

Wet season lies in the distance, reflecting the growing tensions of the people. A cyclone is brewing as the people stand up for their rights. Vincent Lingiari's voice fills the space, stabilising the energy, awakening the memory of the proud desert men that they once were, and giving them the strength and solidarity to walk off the stations.

ACT 4. YITILAL, WET SEASON

Fringe

A young boy is lost. Social trauma and intergenerational grief. His sister steps out from the shadows of his fear, carrying the spirit to cleanse him.

Lore Time

Mobs come together for Ceremony and to begin the healing.

Karnti: Women's Traditional Bush Potato Dance

Excerpts from the production *SandSong* in this resource.

Act 1: Dry
Skin

Act 2: Coolamon
Spinifex

Act 3. Auction

Act 4. Fringe
Painting mob

... how do the dances tell the story

Story telling through dance is a unique form of artmaking and passing on knowledge. As audiences experience the performance, they connect both emotionally and intellectually with the work, including the silences and moments of stillness.

Dance is often regarded as a universal language, as an art form it is constantly evolving. Invariably it involves other creative disciplines – music/sound, design, technology. It is driven by imagination and all the embodied knowledge of the artists involved.

The creative team worked collaboratively with each other and with the dancers to make a dance theatre 'telling' of these stories of the Walmajarri and Wangkatjungka peoples of the Kimberley and Great Sandy Desert.

Bringing the stories to the stage: the creative process

... research and preparation

The creative process for making the work *SandSong* started with extensive research and discussion with Wangkatjungka and Walmajarri Cultural knowledge holders on Bunuba country near the township of Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia. The company spent time On Country with Community members, visiting various important sites, both cultural and historical, listening to elders and learning traditional dances that would later be incorporated, with the communities' permission, into the production.

Research was conducted to build a historical timeline which would thread through the work and provide context for the stories of this vast area – an area that covers about a tenth of the Australian continent ranging from tropical wetlands in the north-west, to the arid red sands of the desert, ancient inland seabed deposits and wide open plains of eastern Kimberley.

... dance practice

The dancing body inhabits the craft of the human movement, and communicates 'in the moment'. Movement is the most natural way of telling how we feel, and how we question ourselves. Dance technique simply opens up the scope for choreography to stretch movement possibilities, add texture and inflection, and give the dance its own unique power.

SandSong's creative process is led by the choreographers, in close collaboration with cultural consultants, the dancers, the composer of the music, and the costume, set and lighting designers. The people who take on these roles form the creative team. The creative team collaborates closely during the entire creative process to enable the dance to reflect the overall focus of the choreographer's ideas.

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Images, articles, excerpts of text, design elements are fixed to the walls of the studio to create an informed creative environment. This also helps build context for the dancers.

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 structure, the choreographic vernacular and motifs for *Sand song*. Together they invent movements that are inspired by the stories and the responses to being on country, developing their artistic interpretations to build dance sequences into a cohesive structure to the work.

...dance skills

Using their dance technique and performance skills, the dancers work to blend the movements and make them clear, and technically achievable, before eventually settling on a final version of the choreography.

The rehearsal director is present throughout this 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 works with the dancers for many hours to make sure they can perform the dance consistently at the highest standard possible. At this point in the process, the technical elements of the designers – costume, set, and lighting – start to be incorporated.

... dance 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 work. How the work looks in the theatre is always different to the way it looks in the studio.

There is often a media call on the day of the premiere where photographers take pictures of the dancers in dress rehearsal, and journalists conduct interviews with the creative team. On premiere night reviewers will attend 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 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, the story is passed from one dancer's body to another as different dancers are taught the choreography.

Links & further reading

Books and articles

Paul Marshall (Ed), *Raparapa; Stories from the Fitzroy River Drovers*, Magabala Books, 2011.

Steve Hawke, *A Town is Born: the Fitzroy Crossing Story*, Magabala Books, 2013.

Patrick Sullivan, Hanson Boxer (Pampila), Warford Bujiman (Pajiman), Doug Moor (Kordidi), *The Kalpurtu Water cycle; Bringing Life to the Desert of the South West Kimberley in country, native title and ecology*. Ed: Jessica K Weir, ANU Press and Aboriginal History Incorporated, 2012.

Online

Kimberley Society

<http://www.kimberleysociety.org/>

Kimberley Land Council

<https://www.klc.org.au/>

Film

Putuparri and the Rain Makers,

Producers: Nicole Ma, John Moore. Director: Nicole Ma, 2015

<https://putuparri.com/>

Undermined: Tales from the Kimberley.

Producers: Stephanie King, Nicholas Wrathall. Director: Nicholas Wrathall Amnesia Productions, 2018.

<https://underminedfilm.com/>

Acknowledgements

Choreographers Stephen Page and Frances Rings

Cultural consultants Eva Nargoodah
 Putuparri Tom Lawford

Music/sound designer Steve Francis

Set designer Jacob Nash

Costume designer Jennifer Irwin

Lighting designer Nick Schlieper

Audio visual designer David Bergman

Dancers in these clips: Beau Dean Riley Smith, Rikki Mason, Rika Hamaguchi, Glory Tuohy Daniell, Baden Hitchcock, Ryan Pearson, Lillian Banks, Bradley Smith, Courtney Radford, Kassidy Waters, Kallum Goolagong, Gusta Mara, Kiarn Doyle, Emily Flannery, Maddison Paluch, Daniel Mateo.

Class Activities: Years 9 - 12 (Stages 5 & 6)

Overview

Under the vast Kimberley sky, the red pindan dust stretches across the desert homelands of the Wangkatjungka and Walmajarri, where the ancient knowledge of People and of Country is preserved through Songlines that have endured for hundreds of generations. At the heart of this land is Jila - the Living Water - that resides in desert waterholes across the region and is the basis of cultural beliefs and practices. SandSong tells the unique story of this Place and the survival of its People.

Summary of curriculum related links:

Cross curriculum priority: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.
General capabilities: Creative and Critical Thinking, Intercultural Understanding, Ethical Understanding, Literacy.
Learning areas: Focus on Arts (Dance, Music, Visual Arts), Science, Humanities and Social Sciences.

Things to Think About and Do

1) Before Viewing

Consider a range of cross-curriculum links that are relevant to the work *SandSong*.

Year 9 History – Historical Knowledge and Understanding – Making a Nation. The extension of settlement, including the effects of contact (intended and unintended) between European settlers in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples ([ACDSEH020 - Scootle](#).)

Year 9 & 10 Arts/Dance - Analyse a range of dance from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their dance making, starting with dance from Australia

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and including dance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider dance in international contexts ([ACADAR026 - Scootle](#))

Before the performance, the following questions might be useful to consider:

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

- Encourage the students to experience the artforms of Dance, Music and Visual Arts by:
 - moving their body both individually and with others; showing awareness of their body in **space** and in relation to objects around them
 - improvising and arranging music, using **texture, dynamics and expression** to manipulate the elements of music
 - experimenting with **visual conventions** and **materials**, including exploration of techniques used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, to represent a theme, concept or idea in their artwork
- Check that students are aware that they can interpret meanings from viewing and listening to **artworks** and **texts**, and that all artforms can tell stories which may have a beginnings, middles and ends?
- Encourage students' recognition that people from different cultures create and perform, and may have different reasons for doing so. Discuss the importance of conserving the remains of the ancient past, including the heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.
- Assist students to understand that as an **audience** member or viewer of art, it is important to concentrate on experiencing by viewing and listening.

Pose questions that help them understand the ideas that *Unaipon* is based upon?

- Who are the Wangkatjunka? Who are the Walmajarri?
- Where in Australia is the Kimberley and Great Sandy Desert region?
- What are some of geographical and environmental features of the location?
- What were some of the impacts of the building of the Trans-Australian Railway?
- How did Aboriginal people contribute to the building of the Australian cattle industry in WA?
- How did the atomic testing at Maralinga come about, and what were some of the impacts on Aboriginal people?

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 including those relating to place, landforms and the natural environment.

- Who are the dancers of Bangarra? Where do they come from?
- Where is the company Bangarra based?
- What is a cultural consultant and how do they contribute to the making of a new work?

2) As you view

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

3) After viewing

Pose questions that remind students of their viewing experience.

- How many sections of the full production are shown in the resource?

- How would you describe the **Elements of Dance**, **Visual Conventions**, and **Elements of Music** in String games section
- Describe the different costumes of the dancers in the four winds section? How do the costumes and the movements work together in this section.
- Describe the way the group moves/dances in the section called Power. How would you describe the **Elements of Dance**, **Visual Conventions**, and **Elements of Music** in this section?
- What are the characteristics/**dynamics** of the movement and/or music in the last section of *SandSong*?
- How do the lighting design enhance the work, especially the lighting on the floor for the stage?
- *SandSong* illustrates issues associated with exploitation of Aboriginal people in early and mid 20th century in relation to the agricultural industry. How is this evident in the work?

.....
In reference to expressing and developing ideas:

Collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions.

Movement and meaning

- Describe the way the dancers move across the stage in *Dry*?
- Describe the movements of the women dancers in *Coolamon*?
- Describe the movements of the dancers in *Auction*?
- What is the relationship between the dancers and the **audience**? Do any of the dancers look at the **audience**? Why/why not?

Non-movement aspects

- Describe the aesthetics of the artwork, including the colour of the background, floor, props and the lighting (colour, brightness, point/s of focus) in each section.
- Which sounds and/or instruments can you hear in the music/sound score?

4) Next steps

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another.

- Write or find a story that describes loss of identity as a result of major disruption and/or displacement.
- Use mime to describe the story through movement. Exaggerate and simplify the movements so that the gestures become easy to see.
- Explore different **dynamics** as you vary your movements, and determine the dance motifs that are a fundamental to your story.

Make dance sequences and experiment with a range of options when seeking solutions and putting ideas into action.

- Select your favourite parts of your 'story' making sure that you keep a mixture of different travelling movements. Repeat this sequence so that you are able to perform it in the same way each time.
- Teach your sequence to another student or small group.
- Choose a series of different sounds or play different pieces of music to accompany the movement. Which suits the mood /ideas of your dance best?
- Experiment with facing different directions and travelling to different parts of the room whilst performing your sequence.

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Explore situations using creative thinking strategies to propose a range of alternatives.

- Try performing your dance sequence at the same time as several other people. Try performing your sequence close to another person.
- Watch another group do this with their sequences. What do you see? Can you watch all of them at once or do you focus on one then another?
- Organise your sequences so that there is a point where you meet. What happens if you cross or interrupt each other's sequences? Create a new duo section you could perform together (you might drop or pass your object and the other person picks it up and/or uses it).
- How else could you link or contrast these sequences?

Explain and justify ideas and outcomes.

- What could you call your dance? What kind of costume or set could you make or choose to go with your dance? Why have you made these choices?
- How is the movement of the body used to represent your idea/s?
- How did the dancers use **space** and energy to create the ideas/feelings in this dance?
- Which **elements of dance** were used?
- What could you learn from watching people and creating sequences based on their movements?
- What movements could you learn, and use in a dance, based on everyday activities and other cultural practices?

Based on Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Level 5 & 6 statements from the Critical and Creative Thinking learning continuum for 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 03/06/15.