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Bangarra Dance Theatre: history in movement

By Sharon Verghis

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Bangarra dancers rehearse the company's new work, Patyegarang.
Picture: Sam Mooy*Source:* News Corp Australia

OUTSIDE, it's a bright late autumn's day in Sydney. But here, in this studio at Bangarra, all is in heavy shadow. The pale moon face of company director Stephen Page swims out of the dancing dust motes, followed by the rest of his stocky, short-legged frame as he "hunts quietly" — his metaphor for the creative process — on the perimeter of his six male dancers. Under Page's instructions they hunt quietly too, flowing into graceful geometries: squares, rectangles and triangles, reforming into a spearhead of birds in flight, a pillar of advancing soldiers. In one corner guest artist Thomas Greenfield stretches his rubbery frame as Bangarra dancer Jasmin Sheppard watches in meditative silence.

At 48, Page, Bangarra Dance Theatre's artistic director since 1991, remains surprisingly nimble, at one point corkscrewing his pudgy body into a one-armed handstand. There is a respectful hush around "Mr Boss Man" as he's affectionately been called by Bangarra's cultural elders: company dancer Waangenga Blanco says he "could be quite stern" in his younger years though he's mellowed somewhat these days, more benign patriarch than

autocrat, a man of dry jokes, always up for a boogie and a game of pool, happy to clean and mop the green room, write rental references for his dancers, buy them lunch. But still, there's a palpable deference in the room. This, after all, is "that clever bastard Stevie," as older brother David describes him — indigenous icon and contemporary elder, grand man of Australian dance.

Step by step, Bangarra's latest work, *Patyegarang*, is being readied for its premiere this month. Marking the company's 25th anniversary, it tells the tale of the young Eora woman, Patyegarang, played by Sheppard, who befriended First Fleet astronomer Lieutenant William Dawes and taught him her language; Dawes recorded Patyegarang's gift, the words of the Eora people, in notebooks that were only rediscovered in 1972. This is no "white guilt"-inducing polemic, says Page, but a powerful "story of reconciliation and hope and pride" between black and white Australia; it's a timely counterpoint, too, to the current negative public discourse around racial identity, skin colour and the push for indigenous recognition in the Constitution.

"It's long overdue," he says with some exasperation of the latter. "It's such a human symbolic gesture and yet people beat around the bush about it. To think that over 220 years ago, there was this sense of understanding, the sharing of language. Where is that today? Where is our Patyegarang?"

NEXT door in the dark cave of his studio, surrounded by a Kawai piano with yellowing keys and a bank of computers, composer David Page, an owlish figure in a black suit, is hunting quietly himself through a thicket of notes and chords for the soundscape for the new work. "It's a tale of first contact," he says, scratching his bald head. "How do you tell this story in music?"

From contemporary Patyegarangs (is she Bangarra chair Larissa Behrendt, asks Page, "with her iPads and Jimmy Choos and fluent language?") to reconciliation, from tall poppies to art as political medicine, the Page brothers are in a reflective mood this morning as they sit down for a chat with Review. Bangarra's quarter-century milestone sparks the unfurling of a rich spool of memories about early ambitions and blueprints, the sometimes perilous and always highly sensitive tightrope walk they've had to negotiate between cultures and values, the goals scored and missed, politics, personalities and protocols. For all the plaudits — Bangarra "is the engine room for the debate about bigger questions of identity, who we are; it takes Australia, reinterprets it, and serves it back to us," says director Rachel Perkins — there have been plenty of stones thrown and "mean-spirited chatter" says Behrendt; for all the praise for innovation and creativity there have been fingers pointed over perceived cultural inauthenticity and "stagnant" movement vocabulary.

Who'd want to lead a pioneering company like Bangarra, such a highly visible, tempting target for many? Stephen Page, say his many loyal supporters, has had a lonely and sometimes torrid time of things as Australia's arguably most prominent indigenous cultural

face. “Lucky my back is tough like a goanna’s for collecting the cultural spears and bullets,” the director grunts as he dissects a sandwich during lunch break.

Looking around at the company — these days boasting a staff of 46, 14 dancers, an annual budget of $7.2 million, an alumnus of more than 100 leading indigenous artists and 30 clan elders, a demanding international touring schedule (recent stops include Vietnam, Mongolia, Jakarta and the Holland Dance Festival), and a scenic harbourside home at Walsh Bay (though David’s had enough of this “floating” business and hankers for a return, full cycle, to a land base in Redfern) there’s a quiet sense of a job well done, a hard journey accomplished.

Rising from a tiny ensemble operating out of a humble Glebe living room to Australia’s premiere indigenous cultural flagship, Bangarra — indigenous incubator, archive, library, memory bank, engine room — owes a debt to many, says Stephen. From indigenous and Torres Strait Islander cultural elders to the activists and artists of the 60s and 70s — the Mazas and Perkins, Dixons and Syrons — who laid the foundations for black self-determination, Bangarra, say the Pages, “belongs to them all.”

Indigenous dance pioneer Carole Johnson, who arrived in Australia in 1972, a year that ‘marked a crucial turning point in the affairs of the Aborigine’. Picture: Elaine Syron Source: Supplied

“I was supposed to be an experiment for the (Australian Arts) Council to see what would happen when a black American dancer came into contact with the Aboriginal people.” So wrote charismatic African-American activist, arts administrator, Juilliard graduate and dancer Carole Johnson in an article examining the rise of dance and theatre as political tools in black Australia, titled “For The Australian Aborigine — Now Is The Time to Dance”, two years after she first arrived in Australia on tour with New York’s Eleo Pomare dance company. Johnson arrived in 1972, a year which “marked a crucial turning point in the affairs of the Aborigine,” as she put it. Struck by the passionate energy of the burgeoning indigenous self-determination movement exploding across the nation and expressed so vividly at Redfern’s National Black Theatre and at Canberra’s Tent Embassy, she stayed on, eventually getting a grant to set up a dance workshop in a dusty Redfern church hall that drew curious members

of Sydney's urban Aboriginal population "who knew as little about their own traditions as they did mine."

Slowly, these early workshop pieces took on a political flavour coloured by the times; before 1972, Johnson later noted, "Aboriginal peoples had not considered contemporary dance as a vehicle for social change or building culture." Johnson marched alongside her students at massive land rights demonstrations in Sydney and Canberra, her workshop's first theatrical performance, *Embassy*, based on an embryonic fusion of contemporary and traditional dance styles, debuting at a Quaker meeting house in Surry Hills in September 1972. Johnson would then lead a new Careers in Dance indigenous dance training course in Redfern that sowed the seeds for the birth of the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre in 1976. "Creating arts companies, especially theatre companies, were goals that I heard from black people, Aboriginal people, shortly after my arrival in Australia," Johnson says in an email to Review from the US. "That was the dream and cry I heard from the people I met in the early 70s. We've got so many talented people. Why aren't we?"

AIDT (later NAISDA) would go on to become an influential indigenous political and cultural hub, but in 1989, as internal feuds erupted over management and cultural politics, Johnson left to set up Bangarra (a Wiradjuri word meaning "to make fire") as a professional performing company for AIDT graduates before Cheryl Stone and Robin Bryant took over the administrative leadership.

David Page describes Bangarra's founder as a dynamic high achiever who some found "quite scary" courtesy of her brisk, no-nonsense efficiency and who sadly fell victim to prevailing racial politics, which discriminated against non-Aborigines in leadership positions: "She felt a bit uncomfortable, I think, because she wasn't indigenous. That kind of behaviour, especially from our mob, made me very, very sad. I used to stick up for her and say 'Hey, she was our founder'. If she hadn't come here, there wouldn't be Bangarra as we know it. I guess there'd be something else — we'd probably be performing dance down at Circular Quay."

He winks and claps a hand over his mouth. "No, no, don't say that!"

Despite testifying to the presence of "quite a bit of politics and tension at that time," Johnson, for her part, bears no ill-will; she says she is "profoundly proud to be part of this legacy ... The work of the founders of the incorporated body that we named Bangarra and especially that of Robin Bryant, Cheryl Stone, Bernadette Walong and Djakapurra laid the firm foundation for it to become one of Australia's national companies. Stephen Page carried the vision and burden … to nurture and develop Bangarra's strong artistic direction. He's done a wonderful job."

Bangarra was initially run out of Stone's living room. David Page fondly recalls those early days of doing everything from hand sewing costumes and composing to "driving the bus and changing light bulbs". In late 1991, Stephen Page, a mouthy, politically fired up, cockily talented AIDT graduate, dancer and rising choreographer from a large working-class

Brisbane clan, was appointed Bangarra's artistic director, joining brothers Russell and David at the company. Stephen notes pragmatically that "politically, Cheryl saw that an indigenous person would be more attractive, I suppose, in terms of finding funding and all those other issues". Johnson, however, had deep reservations: "I think she thought I was way too confident. That would scare anybody, really, especially if you have the legacy of running a college since the 70s and you're about to have a professional arm and this 24-year-old comes in. You think, 'Is he the right guy?"'

From the start Page had big dreams for the company. In an early chat about Bangarra's identity, "Cheryl said, OK, we are indigenous, that's unique enough, now how serious and professional should we be and Stephen said — 'very serious; let's dive straight into deep water with a major performance,'" David recalls. This was 1992's *Praying Mantis Dreaming*, crafted at their new home base at the Police Boys' Club in Redfern ("we'd have to leave at 3.30pm when all the judo kids and ballet kids arrived," David recalls) and featuring the dazzling mix of Russell dancing, Stephen directing and choreographing, and David composing. It launched Bangarra — and the "rock star" Page boys — on to the public radar; Neil Armfield recounts how struck he was by Stephen Page's "sense of destiny" at their first meeting in Newtown in the 90s when "both of us were beginning our big life's work with our artistic directorships": he compares Page's early brio and ambition to the unstoppable self-confidence of then Belvoir board member Baz Luhrmann.

Decades later, Bangarra watchers still recall the company's explosive arrival on the Australian arts scene, the start of a wave of indigenous political and artistic creativity that had been given fresh momentum by the Bicentenary protests. Former Bangarra chairman Aden Ridgeway lived around the corner and "I would often walk past and stick my head in; I knew that they were there and were doing these wonderful things": NAISDA executive director Kim Walker saw the company's rise as "a real coming of age of contemporary indigenous dance".

Armfield says Bangarra drew on "a kind of inspired energy coming from indigenous arts. At the same time, there was Keating's Redfern speech, and this sense of this great unacknowledged lie of terra nullius that had sat underneath Australia finally being addressed. In the mid-1990s there was this feeling of a lid being blown off, and Bangarra came in and showed the country how to do it. I think we were instantly aware of the potential and depth and dimension of what there was to learn from this highly evolved ancient culture that was so deep and sexy and thrilling, and right in the middle of the city."

There were early growing pains, of course. Ridgeway says the company, like Yothu Yindi, initially struggled to find its niche in Australia's cultural scene (were they uniquely Australian or a kind of "world music" exotica?); also, as Bangarra went through a "real growth spurt" in the 90s, Stephen Page and some board members agonised about commercial expansion due to "real fears" that this could potentially sever ties with vital cultural elders such as northeast Arnhem Land's Munnyarryun and Marika families. But the "huge gamble"

paid off, with 1995's *Ochres*establishing the company's signature dance vocabulary, fusing contemporary and indigenous dance styles, followed by other company landmarks, ranging from *Bush*(a healing work after youngest brother Russell's tragic 2002 suicide), *Boomerang*, and *Rites* with the Australian Ballet, to the 1000-strong *Awakenings* segment in the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony, Frances Rings' *Unaipon*, and the award-winning *Mathinna*.

Observers describe it nowadays as a tightly run ship, a slightly battered but triumphant survivor of sometimes bitter internecine cultural politics, and, says NAISDA's Raymond Blanco, "the erratic nature of arts funding in Australia". Though there is much speculation over succession (have the Pages stayed too long, some critics ask), its internal climate and culture remain very much shaped by the brothers, a "very funny" pair of "great dancers, great comics, and fantastic storytellers and imitators," says Perkins (though Stephen, says Behrendt, tends to more serious and reflective than the "irreverent and cheeky" David).

Sheppard says Stephen is "incredibly creative. Working with him is akin to taking a ride inside his working mind." He can be blunt and direct, will tell you if you're not cutting it and should try other things, says Waangenga Blanco. But always there is that strong father figure sensibility, the glue that holds Bangarra's diverse young tribe together: for many of them, Blanco says, Bangarra is "the reason we get out of bed in the morning."

Behrendt hails Page's "amazing stamina: it is incredible to see the calibre of work he consistently churns out, and there is absolutely no sign of him slowing down". But the man himself, you sense, is not feeling as gung-ho. He looks fatigued at close quarters, afflicted with a certain psychic strain: Page would be the first to testify that his tenure as artistic director has been a tough juggle of responsibilities and obligations, of walking a difficult line between black and white, urban and remote.

"It's hard being the sole national torchbearer for so long because you end up being taken advantage off, because you're the only major indigenous performing arts company and so people get lazy around the thought of that, they say, oh it's just Bangarra. There can be a disrespect towards the company so it's hard to keep the flame alive."

He's had to be a "cultural shield, as well as put a shield around himself," notes Perkins. Even in a crowded room, "he comes across sometimes as a lonely man," says Ridgeway, who testifies to the "creative resentment and jealousy" he attracts from certain quarters. Armfield points to flak Page encountered from certain quarters of the indigenous community in taking on the role of artistic associate for the STC's*The Secret River*: "I think Stephen was always troubled by some of the voices he had to answer to, but at the same time he was able to judge the importance of the story on his own terms."

It is no secret that for all its legions of admirers, Bangarra has plenty of critics, targeting everything from a perceived lack of cultural authenticity, to an "overused" and unvarying style and musicality. After a "very clever, sharp, fresh start" in the early years, it has stagnated somewhat due to overreliance on a narrow pool of traditional cultural sources,

believes dance critic Lee Christofis, who admires the company but argues it should not only look more widely across and outside Australia for cultural inspiration but also expand its subject matter: “the broader question is does Bangarra always need to draw on traditional material in order to create good work?” *The Australian*’s dance critic Deborah Jones says Bangarra “is in the difficult position of working as a contemporary dance company with its basis in traditional, very ancient, and often highly sensitive stories. That means it can be misunderstood on both sides. It may be not pure enough for those for whom dance contains sacred material and is not done for entertainment, and it can be seen as not authentic enough by those who want to see Bangarra as a kind of folkloric company.”

To those who claim it produces slickly “Disneyfied” versions of indigenous culture on stage, NAISDA’S Blanco says “once you take traditional/cultural dance out of country then you contemporise it. Simple. Contemporary Aboriginal dance can only give a very small insight into cultural practice and should never be seen as representative of cultural practice in a traditional community ... Yes, Bangarra’s productions are glossy but are of high-production quality. I would imagine that Stephen would say this is what has been required to educate non-indigenous audiences to the quality and richness of Aboriginal cultures.”

As to the criticisms about Bangarra’s approach to cultural protocols and the use of highly sensitive traditional material (do sacred, fragile ceremonial rituals “lose their souls” when they’re taken out of context, not staged with the right costumes or songs or settings for example, and performed in the commercial sphere?) David Page points out firmly that nothing is done without the full permission of Bangarra’s long-term cultural custodians, primarily the Munyarryun and Marika families of northeast Arnhem Land: there is a web of trusted connections forged by long years of creative input and cultural exchanges. Without this “well source”, there is no Bangarra. “Some people go, ‘you can’t use it’. But these elders will let you know what you can and can’t use. They have a group of songs, and they say, ‘here, you can use these because they’re children’s songs. They’re safe, they’re innocent. But these are ceremonial songs, so no.’ It’s black and white.”

What will happen when the Djakapurras and Kathy Marikas are no longer around as cultural consultants and touchstones? Says Stephen Page: “We’re assessing that at the moment. They have a love and passion for the company but they have their own immediate families, their own things to do back home. They want to keep the generational contact with Bangarra — Djakapurra is working with me on a feature film I’m doing and he wants to keep that connection with the dancers and we’re doing workshops with the community. I know the Marika family is also very keen on keeping it alive. It’s all very organic— you go up there, and at the end of the year, there could be someone there who says, you know, I would really love to part of this dance teaching process and out of that comes a relationship and stories.”

For Bangarra’s many fans, no slings can dent the weighty legacy created by their 25 years of dancemaking. Actress Ursula Yovich says Bangarra “has been integral to the recognition of Aboriginal people in the performing arts industry and also in the social mainstream” while for

Waangenga Blanco, Bangarra's true value lies in the pride it nurtures among young people in remote communities when it goes back to perform, as well as Page's championing of urban indigenous stories. This has been vital for those of his generation "who were told we weren't really black because we were mixed blood."

Behrendt says it "is no small thing to have led Australia's only indigenous company now in the major performing arts for 24 years. This has paved the way for others to aspire to reach that same level" while Perkins says it "has redefined dance as we know it in Australia. When the Aboriginal and the secular culture combines, it makes something in the new space that is really exciting, particularly internationally, as people haven't seen it before." So where to for Bangarra and its leaders? David Page pauses. "We're not ready to go yet. It's tough for Stephen. Some people say, 'Well, you shouldn't be here any more, and I say, 'well, what gives you the right to say that?' We pretty much built this company, and if we left today, all the followers would go 'oh'. A production would come out, it would be different music, different choreography, and they'd just freak out.

"Honestly, that's the reality of it. Because you know, we have a following, and people love it. Sure, we can't please all the people all the time, there are people who go, 'bloody Bangarra again', but that happens with everything, there's always someone with a different view."

Stephen Page is unsure. He admits he's fatigued ("I need to look after my spirit better"), that he is at a personal crossroads — his 84-year-old mother is in failing health, and his son Hunter, turning 21, is returning to live with him. The company is in good shape, "but in a way, the more it grows the more you feel to have to constantly strive to keep that vision alive so there's one side of me, the caretaker, who is scared of that flame going out."

To the likes of Armfield and Ridgeway, the company — and Page's strong leadership — is more necessary than ever as a "voice of sanity and reason when you have this negativity and despair and meanness and a desire to go back to some colonial view of the world," says Ridgeway. "Bangarra and the Pages of the world are there to remind us identity and related issues are not tied to the colour of a person's skin, that culture itself is dynamic and living and evolving, and that's what Bangarra best represents."

Patyegarang *opens in Sydney on June 12.*