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Stephen Page

# A gathering of great minds & bodies

With *Gathering*, The Australian Ballet continues a unique artistic relationship with Bangarra Dance Theatre, first realised in 1997 by then Artistic Director Ross Stretton, and now further cultivated by Artistic Director David McAllister. While the fruits of the earlier collaboration have made the inception of this new programme seem so natural, Bangarra's Stephen Page admits to initial apprehension. Emma Westwood looks at how these two distinctively different companies from opposite planes on the dance landscape have come together to create something of great importance.

Compared with The Australian Ballet, the history of Bangarra Dance Theatre is relatively short. Bangarra – which means “to make fire” in the Wiradjeri language of New South Wales – was founded in Sydney in 1989 by Carole Johnson, the first director of NAISDA, Australia's National Indigenous Dance School. The company's founding mission was to “respect and energise the link between Indigenous cultures of Australia and new forms of contemporary artistic expression”. This objective has most notably been achieved under Bangarra's current Artistic Director, Stephen Page, who was appointed in 1991.

While the tradition of ballet stretches over a few centuries, Bangarra draws its style from many millennia of living culture – in fact, over 40,000 years. In this way, both dance companies are steeped in established tradition – one Western and one Indigenous. The notion of bringing the two together for *Rites* was an ambitious and culturally invigorating undertaking on behalf of Ross Stretton, which has been further recognised and nurtured by David McAllister.

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Combining the talents of The Australian Ballet and Bangarra Dance Theatre was visionary. Stephen Page talks of Stretton with admiration, calling him a “big ideas man”.

“He was the one who was into the idea of collaborating – let's bring the two companies together, that would be exciting,” recalls Page. “And he took it up a notch by adding Stravinsky's music.”

This iconic ballet score had in itself caused controversy when it premiered in Paris in 1913. Reportedly, there were loud arguments in the audience between supporters and opponents of the work, which eventually degenerated into a near riot. As a consequence, Stravinsky was said to have made revisions to the score for a decade after its first performance.

Many years later, Page also felt perturbed by this score at first – if for an entirely different reason. He laughs as he recalls Stretton asking for his response to Stravinsky's music. “I told him I fell asleep!” he confesses, candidly. Having primarily worked with original music created by his brother David, Page says he felt alienated by the Western sensibilities of *The Rite of Spring*.

It was only after a week of persistent prodding by Stretton that Page eventually listened to Stravinsky's score in full and agreed to take the leap into tackling the collaborative piece, *Rites*.

It wasn't Page's debut into classical dance with The Australian Ballet; in 1996 Maina Gielgud – intrigued by Page's talents – had asked him to contribute to a triple bill with Meryl Tankard and Stephen Baynes. Page's work, *Alchemy*, was his initiation into the ballet world. Unlike *Rites*, however, he doesn't consider this a truly collaborative effort, as the Bangarra dancers did not perform in the production.

About this initial partnership, Page remembers: “I don't know what Maina Gielgud expected from me, and what she wanted me to bring to the company. The traditions of both companies are very similar but they were extreme in both areas. So for me to go to The Ballet, for me

to strip their ballet shoes off, was tricky at first. I made them squat on the ground – all my stuff is about being grounded because everything is drawn from the Earth, while the rhythms are usually off the beat, rather than on the beat. Then we got my brother, David, to compose some original, contemporary music.”

As for the ballet dancers, Page elucidates, “I don't think they were expecting to be imitating a kangaroo or an emu or other native animals in the first place. I was giving them something that was much more detailed. I would feed stories into their mind. It was about connecting them with their spiritual consciousness. I think they could see that in the way I would move and distil things in my body... and it was challenging.”

Page sees himself as “a big collaborator” who is motivated to pursue such collaborative assignments for the professional development of his Bangarra dancers. When he first came to Bangarra in 1991, the company was a small ensemble of six dancers primarily involved in educational and community-driven works. Their collaborative efforts were largely within Australia's Indigenous communities. Since then, Bangarra has moved towards the mainstream, including the opening and closing ceremonies of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, drawing large audiences and maintaining a consistent ensemble of twelve.

Today, Page talks of Bangarra collaborating with the likes of Circus Oz; and other Indigenous artists are now crossing over, such as didgeridoo player William Barton, who has collaborated on a number of successful projects with the Queensland Orchestra since 1998.

The concept of collaboration is certainly vogue within performing arts communities globally, especially unconventional pairings. Take, for example, local dance company, Balletlab, who are currently collaborating with an architectural firm where the stage ‘unfolds’ over the course of the work. And recently, UK pop duo The Pet Shop Boys teamed up with the German orchestra Dresden Sinfoniker. Nevertheless, the marriage between The Australian Ballet and Bangarra with *Rites* was a break-through production for Australia. Page readily admits that even 20 years ago, such a collaboration would never have occurred.

Both dance companies were wide-eyed with innocence when workshopping *Rites*, recalls Page. He says he believes it could have been the first time many of The Ballet's dancers had ever met an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, such was the initiation for these very contrary companies of professional dancers. Yet, both companies rose to the challenge, and *Rites* was a stunning success, and one that translated for an international audience when restaged in New York in 1999.



The Washington Post described Page as not so much choreographing the work as unleashing it – “so vivid are his images of slithering wildlife, blustering breeze and searing heat”, wrote the reviewer. In recalling that eventful opening, Page admits to catching New Yorkers unaware, especially with an impromptu performance by Bangarra’s senior dancer and traditional consultant, Djakapurra Munyarryun.

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“When we got to New York, Djakapurra felt really strange, his whole spirit was uplifted – uprooted from here and taken over there,” says Page. “I said to him that maybe we should have a get-together and he could sing a cultural song to unify us all. Djakapurra said he wanted to do a traditional song before we start the performance. I was fine with that, so I went to Ross (Stretton) and said Djakapurra’s going to sing a traditional song before the orchestra starts. And he said ‘Stephen... but does he need a mic?’ and I said ‘No, he’ll just do it acoustically. He’ll just sing a beautiful acoustic song for about a minute’.”

“I can tell you, I was sitting beside Lachlan Murdoch and all the big powerhouses who live in New York and when that happened everyone sat forward,” continues Page, enthusiastically. “It was so strong. This was also the first Aboriginal man sitting on the stage in New York. This is history breaking. This *is* history. Then Stravinsky – another great tradition – coming in straight after it... It was like we hypnotised them. It was opening night and it’s something I will never forget.”

Not surprisingly, a few years later, Page didn’t hesitate to accept David McAllister’s invitation to continue the relationship Stretton had forged.

When expounding on *Amalgamate*, his new work for *Gathering*, Page comments: “It’s a contemporary classical score... I don’t want to say it has an Aboriginal essence though. David (Page) is inspired by environment and land and traditional Aboriginal stories. He is really in-tune with spiritual-type driven inspirations. Elena (Kats-Chernin) is quite a temptress herself, she’s quite erratic but in a beautiful way. What’s interesting about this is they’ve been inspired by the energy of both companies coming together and coming to this one common ground and asked themselves how we observe each of these companies?”

“I wanted to take over from that process when the companies first met for *Rites*,” continues Page. “The Ballet was a completely different company then, and so was Bangarra. There’s 60 percent of each company that were in the original but aren’t involved in this one. So it’s a whole new generation tackling it but learning from the first experience. That’s why I called it *Amalgamate* – to amalgamate their energies so much more. It’s much more the human piece whereas *Rites* is much more about the elements, more serene in a way.”

Fittingly, Bangarra Dance Theatre refer to themselves as one of Australia’s youngest and oldest dance companies; such is their unique position in our dance landscape. Their mission also states: “We understand that maintaining the strength of our past does not mean we do not embrace change.” Whilst some may consider ballet unflinching in its style, by undertaking such collaborations with the likes of Bangarra, The Australian Ballet demonstrates that even traditional Western dance can take on wild and wonderful new forms.