



Education Resource: *I.B.I.S* (2015)

Recommended for years 3 to 6

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## ***Bangarra Dance Theatre***

### ***Background***

#### **... who is Bangarra?**

Bangarra is an Aboriginal & 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.

The company is based at Walsh Bay in Sydney 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. Through its performance seasons and touring of dance theatre productions, Bangarra provides the opportunity for all people of all cultural backgrounds to be able to have 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. Over the last 28 years, Bangarra has produced over thirty original works for its repertoire including the feature length film, *Spear* in 2016. 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), Northern Western Australia (Yawru), 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 dance training schools around Australia.

### ***Connecting to the source***

#### **... telling the stories**

Story telling in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life is the means by which cultural systems, values and identity 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, and honouring the ancient culture, traditions and knowledge as it is passed from generation to generation.

### **... sharing and passing on of knowledge,**

Each year Bangarra spends time in specific Indigenous 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. 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 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. While some information is provided in the program notes, the audience is free to interpret the work according to their individual perspectives, emotional responses and level of experience in viewing performances of dance theatre.

## **Creating *I.B.I.S* (2015)**

### **... what is the inspiration for *I.B.I.S*?**

*We're both from Murray Island in the Torres Strait – a beautiful, isolated, sunny, wild land of smiles and loud laughter. We wanted to create a work that puts a smile on the face and gives you an insight into life on the islands – a place where despite challenges of displacement and climate change, the culture remains strong and the people optimistic.*

Deborah Brown & Waangenga Blanco, Choreographers, *I.B.I.S*, 2015

The initial concept for the work *I.B.I.S* came for Bangarra's Artistic Director Stephen Page. Stephen invited senior artists, Deborah Brown and Waangenga Blanco to create a new work that focused on Torres Strait Island culture – both traditional and contemporary. They started with the following questions, "What would happen if we highlighted moments that you would see at the store? What happens at the store at night when this frozen aquarium of jellyfish, stingrays and crayfish comes to life? The choreographers used these questions as a starting point for creating the work.

*I.B.I.S* stands for the Island Board of Industry and Services. IBIS was founded in 1905 and provides goods and services (food and basic commodities) to the inhabitants of the Torres Strait Islands. The company operates 19 stores and 1 service station and is critical to Islander life, providing fresh and preserved food products and essential services, and they also serve as a social gathering place for the community.

For the work *I.B.I.S*, we've created a fictional store where the people are modern day hunters and gathers. The characters portrayed in the work evoke the spirit of the communities of the Torres Strait, their strength, their humour and their very unique way of life. Music, song and dance play a huge role in the lives of the Torres Strait Islanders, providing the means to pass on the knowledge and traditions that keep this community strong.

### **... where does the story come from?**

There are 274 islands in the Torres Strait, with only 17 of these being inhabited. The islands stretch between the southern part of Papua New Guinea to the tip of Cape York, across an

area of 48,000 square kilometres with the Coral Sea to the east and the Arafura Sea to the west.

Torres Strait Islanders are mainly of Melanesian descent, and are distinct from Papua New Guinea and mainland Aboriginal people. Many of the traditional languages are still spoken as well as an English based Creole ('Broken'). The Islands are often referred to in three groups – Eastern, Central and Western.

It was not until the discovery of large pearl shell fields in 1868, that Europeans established any permanent settlements on the Islands. Christian missionaries soon followed and to a large extent, the Islanders embraced this new belief system and participated in the practices of Christian worship. However, they infused their own songs and music into the Christian services and did not surrender their traditional culture, retaining their songs, music, dance, art and craft, as well as hunting and fishing practices, all of which continue through to today.

### ***Presenting I.B.I.S***

Bangarra's production of I.B.I.S illustrates the unique culture and life of Torres Strait in a work of 4 short acts.

#### ***Act 1. Debe Idim (Good Morning, Meriam Mer language):***

It is morning on the island. The community begins to stir.

***Ni Ngoe Dhe Goiga*** ('You Are My Sunshine', Ka La Lagau Ya language)

**Gathering**

**Tup song** (*Sardine Song*, Ka La Lagau Ya language).

#### ***2. Waru (Turtle, Ka La Lagau Ya language)***

It is egg laying season. The men are called to gather their prized turtle eggs.

***Stalking***

***Turtle Egg***

***Neck Tie***

#### ***3 Freezer***

Back in the store, what will we find in the freezer.

***Cool Down***

***Rising Water***

***Crayfish***

#### ***4. Debe Ki (Good night, Meriam Mer language)***

It is closing time, but the community sill shines.

***Re-gather Rice***

***Company Rice***

### **Lore**

**Ooura** (*Kir Kir Keber Dance*, Meriam Mer language)

### **In this e-resource, the four excerpts from the production *I.B.I.S* are:**

**Debe Idim** Debe Idim is 'Good morning' in Ka La Lagau Ya language.

The store keeper is getting ready for the day – celebrating the sunshine and welcoming the people to the store. It's a very social part of the day. The store provides not only food and essential goods, but a place to share stories, gossip and news. This excerpt shows all three parts of Debe Idim - *Ni Ngoe Dhe Goiga* ('You Are My Sunshine' in Ka La Lagau Ya language), *Gathering* and *Tup song* (*Sardine Song*, Ka La Lagau Ya language).

**Waru** (Turtle, Ka La Lagau Ya language)

This excerpt shows part of *Stalking* and *Turtle Egg*. Fishing for turtle is a very important food gathering practice in the Torres Strait islands. Traditional hunting techniques are very sophisticated and take into account the caring and maintaining of the environment and having deep understanding about the ecosystems of the area.

### **Freezer**

In this excerpt, we see the *Crayfish* section. The beautiful Tropical Rock Lobster of Painted Crayfish is the species most that is most abundant in Torres Strait. Their movement is languid and smooth, despite their armour of hard chitin, which acts to protect their soft bodies.

**Debe Ki** ('Good night' in Meriam Mer language)

The section *Ooura* is shown in this excerpt – a traditional Kir Kir Keber Dance in Meriam Mer language. The day has ended.

### **Traditional instruments used in the performance or music score for *I.B.I.S***

**Warup** - hourglass shaped drum made from a timber found in Papua & New Guinea. The skin of the drum is generally made of goanna, but can also be made from the skin of a goat or a snake. Beeswax is applied to alter the sound and sometimes the drum is decorated with cassowary hair. This drum is played on the ground or can also be held.

**Lemut** (or Thrum) – a bamboo percussion instrument (slit drum). A slit is carved into the bamboo and the drum is struck with a wooden stick. Sometimes played on a small stand or simply balanced between the legs of the player. The Lemut is often painted in the colours of the Island of the maker of the drum.

**Kir Kir Keber** - is a clapper made from a section of the small bamboo species called *pater*. The reed-like section is split longitudinally except for one end. Then a small section is removed along the inside of close to the joined end to enable the two split pieces to beat together.

**Kulap** or **Gor** – is a percussive instrument similar to a rattle. Seed pods are gathered from the beaches, cut in half and tied together with rope. This instrument is a feature of body percussive dancing.

**Boo-shell** – made from a large conch-like shell with a hole carved into the top of the shell. The Boo-shell is played by blowing forcefully through the hole into the shell.

### **... how do the dances tell the story**

To create the choreography, the music and the design elements, the creative team worked together with the dancers to create a dance theatre 'telling' of the powerful sense of connection to land through culture, people and place.

By spending dedicated time in the Torres Strait conducting research and talking to the people who live there, ideas start to become translated through movement, sound and imagery. The choreographer and the dancers develop a language of movement, using elements of dance that are carefully shaped to resonate the feelings, thoughts and ideas explored by the whole creative team.

### ***Bringing the stories to the stage: the creative process***

#### **... research and preparation**

Prior to working with the dancers in the studio, the choreographers and the designer Jake Nash, travelled to the Torres Strait (Thursday and Murray Island) in 2014, to spend time on country and in the community, to nourish their ideas, as well as talk with cultural consultants, William Satrick and Peggy Misi and work on a new 'sit-down' song on the language of Kala Lagaw Ya. Pinau Ghee and Aunty Betty Mabo also joined this stage of the process by coming down to Bangarra from Thursday Island to contribute stories and share knowledge. Both Misi and Ghee are former dancers with Bangarra so they had a keen understanding of the company's creative processes. Ghee is also a manager of an IBIS store.

The cultural consultants provided the artists with an authentic essence of tradition as ideas emerged, and also facilitate the necessary permission and guidance in the making of a dance theatre piece that involves story, song and music inspired by the Islands and the communities that live there. The protocols that underpin this stage of the creative process are fundamental to the outcome of the work and are always a critical part of any new creation.

#### **... dance practice**

*I.B.I.S* was created by the choreographers, in close collaboration with 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.

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 movement vocabulary and motifs for *I.B.I.S*. 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 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, the story is passed from one dancer's body to another as different dancers are taught the choreography.

## ***Links & further reading***

### **Online**

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/>

### **Books**

*The Torres Strait Islands*

Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art  
Brisbane, Australia, 2011.

*Woven Histories, Dancing Lives.* Davis, R.

Ch.1. 'Torres Strait: the region and its people'.

Lawrence, D. and Reeves Lawrence, H.

Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS, ACT 2004.

*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, AIATSIS, Canberra, ACT Australia 2005.

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## ***Acknowledgements***

Choreographers Deborah Brown, Waangenga Blanco

Cultural consultant Peggy Misi, William Satrick – *Ka La LaGau Ya language*

Pinau Ghee, Aunty Betty Tekahika (Mabo) – *Meriam Mer language*

Music/sound designer Steve Francis

Set designer Jacob Nash

Costume designer Jennifer Irwin

Lighting designer Karen Norris

Dancers in these clips: Elma Kris, Yolande Brown, Deborah Brown, Waangenga Blanco, Tara Gower, Leonard Mickelo, Jasmin Sheppard, Tara Robertson, Kaine Sultan-Babij, Luke Currie-Richardson, Nicola Sabatino, Beau Dean Riley Smith, Rikki Mason, Yolanda Lowatta, Rika Hamaguchi, Kyle Shilling.

## ***Class Activities: Years 3 - 6 (Stages 2 & 3)***

### **Overview**

*I.B.I.S* is inspired by the area just north of the Australian mainland known as the Torres Strait Islands. The work is about life on the islands and captures the regions unique style of dance, music and story-telling.

### **Summary of curriculum related links:**

Cross curriculum priority:	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.
General capabilities:	Creative and Critical Thinking, Intercultural Understanding, Literacy.
Learning areas:	HASS (History, Geography, Civics and Citizenship) Arts (Dance, Music, Visual Arts) English.

### **Things to Think About and Do**

#### ***1) Before Viewing***

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

- Encourage students to experience the artforms 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 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.

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 landforms and creatures that represent spirits.

- Who are the dancers of Bangarra? Where do they come from?
- Where is the company Bangarra based?
- What is a cultural advisor?

#### ***2) After viewing***

Pose questions that remind them 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 *Debe Idim*?
- Describe the costumes of the dancers in the second section *Waru*. How do the costumes and the movements work together in this section?

## Bangarra Dance Theatre Education Resource

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- Describe the way the group moves/dances in the section called *Crayfish*. 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 *Debe Ki*?
- .....

- How are the colours and the backdrops relevant to each of the sections? The dance theatre production of *I.B.I.S* illustrates life on the Torres Strait Islands. Are there any aspects of Torres Strait Island life arising from colonisation evident in the work?
  - What influence has Christianity had on the Torres Strait Island people and culture?
  - What is the Torres Strait Islander Peoples' approach to **custodial responsibility** and environmental management of the land and seas in the Torres Strait?
- .....

- Describe the way the dancers in *Waru* move?
  - Describe the movements of the dancers in *Crayfish*
  - Describe the movements and the song are intergrated in *Debe Ki*?
  - 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 production, including the colour of the set, floor, props and the lighting (colour, brightness, point/s of focus) in each section.
  - Which sounds and/or instruments can you hear in each section?
- .....

## 4) Next steps

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another.

- Write or find a story that describes a special place in the local area.
- Use mime to describe the people, animals or landforms through movement. Exaggerate and simplify the movements so that the gestures become easy to see.
- Explore different **dynamics** of the movements – move very slowly, move very small, gradually make the movements bigger, try the movement as solo, duo, or group.

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

- Select your favourite parts of the dance making and develop into sequences that are repeated so that it is the same each time.
- Teach the sequence to each group with slight variations.
- 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.

Explain and justify ideas and outcomes.

## Bangarra Dance Theatre Education Resource

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- 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?

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