



Education Resource: *Mathinna* (2008)

Recommended for years 5 and 6

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### ***Mathinna* (2008)**

#### ***Background***

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

Bangarra Dance Theatre is Australia's leading Indigenous performing arts company, and is recognised nationally and internationally for distinctive theatre productions that combine the spirituality of traditional culture with contemporary forms of storytelling through dance.

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.

Bangarra's vision is to:

*Respect and rekindle the links between traditional Indigenous cultures of Australia and new forms of contemporary artistic expressions;  
Create inspiring dance theatre productions of integrity and excellence that resonate with people throughout Australia and the world.<sup>1</sup>*

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 share knowledge about and 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. In just over two decades, Bangarra has produced over thirty original works for its repertoire. 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 around Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> Annual Report, Bangarra Dance Theatre, 2012

### **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. Telling stories through song, music and dance, in order to connect people to land, and teach them about culture and the traditions of their ancestors is the way knowledge 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 the viewing of performing arts.

### **Telling the story: Mathinna (2008)**

#### **... what is the inspiration for the production *Mathinna*?**

Bangarra's production of *Mathinna* is based on the true story of a young Tasmanian Aboriginal girl, Mathinna, who lived in the early 1800s. The production describes her personal journey and illustrates some of the key political, cultural and social interactions that occurred at the time of colonisation.

The focus of the production *Mathinna* is the social disruptions that occurred as British settlers relocated the Aboriginal people from their tribal lands and intervened in their cultural practices and challenged their traditional values.

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

Mathinna was the daughter of Towterer and his wife Wongermeep who originated from the Lowreenne (alternate spelling Lowgernown) people, one of the southwest Tasmanian clans. In 1833, Towterer and Wongermeep were captured by the Chief Protector of Aboriginals, George Augustus Robinson and relocated to an Aboriginal mission settlement on Flinders Island called *Wybalenna*. Flinders Island is located just off the north east coast of Tasmania. Mathinna was born at *Wybalenna* in 1835.

In 1839, Mathinna was sent to live with the Governor of the colony, Sir John Franklin and his wife Lady Jane to be raised alongside their own daughter, Eleanor. She was taught reading and writing, and was also introduced to modern European toys and children's games.

In 1843 the Franklins were recalled to England and Mathinna was sent to the Queen's Orphan School in Hobart. She was 8 years old. A year later she was sent back to Flinders

Island only to be returned to the Orphan School in 1847. In 1851 she was sent to re-join her people at Oyster Cove.

The Oyster Cove group did not accept Mathinna's 'white ways'. Her life quickly descended into one of loneliness and desperation. Her culture, her identity and her personal sense of self-worth had been ravaged and she died in terrible circumstances in 1856 at the age of 21.

Mathinna was one of Australia's first stolen children. During her time spent living with the Franklins, she was introduced to the ways of privileged society, and accepted as a member of their family. When she returned to her Aboriginal community, she was caught between two cultures where her identity and sense of belonging was intensely disrupted.

### **Mathinna (Excerpts from the production).**

#### **... Father, Nursery, Moonshine**

Bangarra's production of *Mathinna* shows how movement, imagery, design, music and sound all come together to present a narrative about social and cultural perceptions. *Mathinna* tells the story of one young Aboriginal girl's life journey amid the social issues and hardships that emerged during the early days of Australia's colonisation. Through this contemporary theatre production, the viewer connects not only to the events and actions, but also to the more nuanced impact and responses that those who actually lived the story might have experienced. The three excerpts in the clip explore some of these events and outcomes.

The first section in the clip is titled *Father* and is performed by one male dancer. The dancer is holding a large rock, and moving in a way that suggests great care and sacredness. The rock symbolises traditional knowledge, and the importance to guard and protect that knowledge in order that Aboriginal culture can be preserved into the future.

The second section in the clip is titled *Nursery*. Mathinna is trying to copy the movement (and the behaviour) of Lady Jane but everything she is trying to understand is mysterious and new – like shoes. The shoes make walking difficult and for Mathinna their purpose is not clear. The shoes also symbolise her struggle with 'walking in the ways' of another culture. During the dance, the music (sound score) includes the reciting of a letter written by Mathinna to her father Towterer.

Below is some of the text from the letter in the book of fiction, *Wanting*, by Richard Flanagan published in 2008. Much of the book is based on Mathinna's story.

*'Dear Father'*

*I am good little girl. I do love my father. I have got a doll and shift and a petticoat. I read books not birds. My father I thank thee for sleep. Come her to see me my father. I thank thee for food. I have got sore feet and shoes and stockings and I am very glad....*

MATHINNA  
(*Wanting*, Flanagan, 2008. p.221).

The third section is titled *Moonshine*. It illustrates the time in Mathinna's life when she was returned to her Aboriginal clan, who by this stage had been relocated to Oyster Cove. The

community was suffering the impact of displacement, the loss of many family and clan members, and the destructive impact of alcohol.

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

In *Father*, the dancer moves in a very grounded manner – no sudden movements. His movements are determined and slow, careful and calm. He achieves this quality of movement by focusing on how he transfers his weight, and the concentrated and smooth isolation and coordination of separate parts of his body.

In *Nursery*, the dancer who represents Mathinna performs movements that reflect the type of body language that can be associated with innocence and fear. The movements are impulsive, but cautious - starting and stopping abruptly. The movements are small and the dancer's focus is down.

The movement performed by the dancer who represents Lady Jane is broad and open to show the contrast with Mathinna's movements. She dances in a way that is gracious but rigidly defined, her movements are purposeful and very measured to reflect the position of power and control that she holds as a member of the aristocracy.

In *Moonshine*, the female dancer who represents Mathinna, as well as 6 female dancers of the ensemble perform the section. They use a particular prop – a large over-sized bottle. The bottles represent both the impact of alcohol in the community and the sense of drowning as the desperate circumstances overtake Mathinna. The movements are slow and heavy to illustrate how the weight of the situation is overwhelming for Mathinna and the women. There is no lightness in the movements and it is mostly orientated to the floor.

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

### ... research and preparation

The creating of Bangarra's production of *Mathinna* began with extensive research of historical records, as well as various literary and visual interpretations. Most importantly, there were close consultations with several Tasmanian Aboriginal elders.

There is not a great deal of factual primary source material about Mathinna or her tragic story. There are some references to her in the diaries of George Augustus Robinson and Jane Franklin, as well as an article in the Hobart Mercury of 7 June 1869.<sup>2</sup> However, her story has survived and has clearly provided inspiration for writers and theatre makers. The occasion of her portrait being painted by the convict artist Thomas Bock is significant and has provided a face to Mathinna's story.

### ... dance practice

*Mathinna* was created by the choreographer, in close collaboration with the dancers, the composer of the music, and the costume, set and lighting designers - the creative team. This enables the dance to reflect the overall focus of the choreographer's ideas and direction.

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

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<sup>2</sup> Postscript to R Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008). <http://www.scribd.com/>

choreographic elements for the dance. Together they invent movements that are inspired by the story, as they develop their artistic interpretation of its meaning.

They experiment with each movement, practicing them over and over again. They slowly build the movements into phrases and arrange these phrases into sequences to form the dance.

### **...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 artists move on to create other sections of the work. 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 consistently 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.

### **... 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 dance theatre work until its first performance in the theatre. In that moment everyone involved in the new production, together with the audience, experiences the work for the first time and really understands what has been in the minds of the creative team.

There is often a media call on the day of the premiere where photographers take pictures of the dancers in dress rehearsal, and interviews with the creative team are conducted. 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*

#### *Links*

"Mathinna", 1842, watercolour, Warwickshire, England 1790/93

Hobart, Tasmania 1855

Collection: Museum and Art Gallery

[http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion\\_to\\_tasmanian\\_history/M/Mathinna.htm](http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/M/Mathinna.htm)

Queen's Orphanage School

<http://www.orphanschool.org.au/aborigines.htm>

Australian Dictionary of Biography for George Augustus Robinson and Lady Jane Franklin

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/>

ABC Tasmania

<http://www.abc.net.au/tasmania/stories/s1195837.htm>

#### *Further reading:*

Flanagan, Richard. *Wanting*, Random House Australia, 2008

Eberhard, Adrienne. *Jane, Lady Franklin*, Black Pepper Publishing, Melbourne, 2004

Plomley, N. J. B. *Weep in Silence: a history of the Flinders Island aboriginal Settlement with Flinders Island Journal of George Augustus Robinson (1835-1839)*, Bubble Head Press, Hobart, 1987.

Chauncey, Nan (1900 - 1970). *Mathinna's people*, Oxford University Press, London, 1967. Republished 1975.

### *Acknowledgements*

Choreographer            Stephen Page

Music/sound designer   David Page

Set designer             Peter England

Costume designer        Jennifer Irwin

Lighting designer        Damien Cooper

Dancers in this clip:

Father                     Patrick Thaiday

Nursery                  Elma Kris, Yolande Brown

Moonshine                Elma Kris, Yolande Brown, Deborah Brown, Tara Gower, Katina Olsen, Jasmin Shepherd.

Dancers (original 2008 cast):

Father                     Patrick Thaiday

Nursery                  Elma Kris, Yolande Brown

Moonshine                Elma Kris, Yolande Brown, Deborah Brown, Tara Gower, Katina Olsen, Jasmin Shepherd.

### ***Class Activities: Years 5 & 6***

#### **Overview**

Bangarra's production of *Mathinna* is based on the true story of a young Tasmanian Aboriginal girl called Mathinna, who lived in the early 1800s. The story tells of her personal journey and illustrates some of the key political, cultural and social interactions that occurred at the time of colonisation.

The focus of the production is the social disruption that occurred as British settlers relocated the Aboriginal people from their tribal lands, intervened in their cultural practices and challenged their traditional values.

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

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

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

- Encourage the students to experience moving their body both individually and with others; showing awareness of their body in space and in relation to objects around them.
- Give them opportunities to develop an awareness of their ability to isolate different parts of their body and make specific actions and gestures.
- Include cross lateral movements in movement activities.
- Ask students to make contrasting shapes with their body (curved/angular; symmetrical/asymmetrical).
- Assist students to understand that movements can be used to explore and improvise dance ideas by controlling and combining different movement qualities.
- Give students opportunities to know that it is possible to show similarity and contrast through movement, for example, can they change the size and speed of their movement and follow pathways on the floor or in the air?
- Provide opportunities for students to practice controlling movement by pausing or freezing, and using contrasting qualities such as smooth and sustained, followed by percussive movement.
- Have students form groupings such as lines or group shapes, and lead or follow others in these groupings, moving close together and/or far apart.
- Give them experiences which assist them to understand that movements can be joined together in order to move on the spot or travel in different ways.
- Check that students are aware that they can interpret meanings from watching dance and that dances can tell a story which may have a beginning, middle and end?
- Encourage students' recognition that people from different cultures dance and may have different reasons for dancing.
- Assist students to understand that when an audience member, it is important to concentrate on experiencing the dance by watching and listening.

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

- Who is Mathinna and what do we know about her?
- Where in Australia are Port Davey, Flinders Island, North West Bay?
- Who were Mathinna's parents and where were they from?

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- Who was George Augustus Robinson and what did he have to do with the history of the Tasmanian Aborigines?
- Who are Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin?
- What was life like for the early European colony in Hobart Town? For the free settlers, for the convicts, for the Aborigines?

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 animals that represent spirits.

- Who are the Aboriginal people/s who live in Tasmania?
- What is a cultural advisor?
- Who are the dancers of Bangarra? Where do they come from?
- Where is the company Bangarra based?

### 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 them of their experience.

- How many sections of the full production are shown in the resource?
- How many dancers are on the stage in section 1 - *Father*?
- What is the prop that this dancer holds?
- What is the dancer wearing?
- What is painted on his skin?
- How many dancers are in section 2 - *Nursery*?
- What are the objects on the stage and what type of room do they represent?
- What are the dancers wearing and what are they doing?
- What are the props in section 3 - *Moonshine*?
- Have you seen the central performer in one of the other sections?

Identify some of the main ideas and select and clarify information from the students' responses.

- Which dancer do you think is Mathinna?
- Who do you think the other characters are?
- Why does one character wear a long dress? Who does she represent?
- Why does another hold a rock? Why might this be a special rock? What could it represent?
- How old was Mathinna when she died?

The dance theatre production of *Mathinna* tells of the disruption that occurred as British settlers relocated the Aboriginal people from their tribal lands, intervening in their cultural practices as they imposed modern European values and systems into their lives.

- Which European influences on Aboriginal lives are shown in the dance?
- What influence did John and Jane Franklin have on the colony of Hobart?
- Why do you think Mathinna died at such a young age?

Collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions.

Movement and meaning

- Describe the way the dancer in *Father* uses his hands?
- Can you tell what he feels about the object he holds?
- Why does Mathinna need to put on socks and shoes?
- What instrument does the dancer with the long dress pretend to play?
- How can you tell that Mathinna is still quite young?
- Describe her movements. Does she look comfortable?
- Why does Mathinna look different in section 3, compared the way she looks in section 2? What has happened to her?
- What is she sitting on in section 2 and in section 3?
- Describe the movements of the other dancers in red. What are they doing?
- What is the relationship between the dancers and the audience? Do any of the dancers look at the audience? Why?

### 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.
- Which props look like they represent Mathinna's Aboriginal heritage and which represent European colonisation?
- Why do some of the props seem to be outlined in white and some seem more realistic and solid?
- What is the voice-over component referring to. What is being spoken about?
- What colour is the doll's dress?
- Which sounds and instruments can you hear in each section?
- What might the glass jars represent?
- Why are the other dancers wearing red dresses too? Who might they be?
- Why does Mathinna remove her dress?

### Societies and Cultures

The production *Mathinna* describes a girl's journey between two cultures.

- Why do you think the choreographer chose to develop this dance theatre production based on the story of the Aboriginal girl Mathinna?
- The performance is on a stage in a theatre. Is this a traditional or contemporary place for Aboriginal people to dance?

## 4) Next steps

Expand on known ideas to create new and imaginative combinations through improvising, exploring and experimenting with movement.

- Explore different movements based on daily activities (waking up, cleaning teeth, getting dressed, and eating breakfast).
- Experiment with these movements making them larger and simpler (just choose the important movements and remove most of the repetitions).
- Experiment with moving on different levels (high, medium, low), on the spot and when travelling.
- Explore movements which describe wearing different clothes. Ask if another person can guess what you are 'wearing'.
- Pretend to hold an object which is precious to you. Show its size and weight in the way that you hold it.

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another.

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- Write or find a story that describes losing and/or finding something precious.
- Use mime to describe the story through movement.
- Travel across the room while you hold your object.
- Exaggerate and simplify the movements so that the gestures become easy to see.
- Explore different dynamics as you vary your movements and what you do with the imaginary object, for example, scoop the object into your hand, hold it tight, throw it in the air playfully, run to catch it, and/or swing it around.

Make dance sequences.

- Select your favourite parts of your precious object '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.

Experiment with a range of options when seeking solutions and putting ideas into action.

- 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.

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.
- 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?
- What catches your attention?
- Try performing your sequence close to another person.
- What does it look like if they are standing still? What does it look like if you are both moving?
- 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?

Draw on prior knowledge and use evidence when choosing a course of action or drawing a conclusion.

- Use gesture and mime to describe parts of other stories you know or are reading.

Communicate ideas through art works.

- Combine several different dance sequences to show different scenes in a story.
- Place them in an order which helps the audience to understand the series of events.

Reflect on, explain and check the processes used to come to conclusions, explaining ways students can check their thinking and deal with setbacks.

- Reflect on this order to see if you have a clear beginning, middle and end. Alter the order to improve the changes between each sequence. If you are communicating a story in your dance, is it clear?
- Perform your dance to another group. Ask them what they saw and felt when they watched your dance. Could they see different pathways, formations and gestures? Did they see a story, series of events or an idea?

Explain and justify ideas and outcomes.

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- What could you call your dance? What kind of costume 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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