



Education Resource: *Moth*

From the production *Bush*, 2003

Recommended for years 3 and 4

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Moth

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.¹*

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.

¹ 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 stories: Bush (2003)

... what is the inspiration for the production *Bush*?

***They sang the songs and danced over the land,
They struck the ground with their walking sticks and created fresh water.
Created the different landmarks, animals, sacred sites
Created all living things.***

From the traditional song *Two Sisters (Wirrkul Manda)*, Dhuwa language group

Bush is inspired by a collection of Aboriginal Dreamtime creation stories. *Moth* is one of the stories told in *Bush*.

The work is described as a "*bush galaxy of poetic imagery and stories that illuminate Aboriginal and Torres Strait culture. From the last breath of sunset to the first light of dawn is a mysterious and secret space – the land erupts pushing up mountains and carving waterholes, reptilian creatures slither from dark caves, a moth emerges from its cocoon*".
(From printed program for *Bush*, 2003)

... where do the stories come from?

Bush is a contemporary interpretation of creation stories of the Yirrkala people of Arnhem Land in the north-eastern part of Northern Territory in Australia.

Bangarra has a long relationship with the Yirrkala community, with several Bangarra productions drawing inspiration from the stories, people and land of the region. Bangarra's

artist-in-residence, Kathy Balngayngu Marika, a senior artist of the Yirrkala community, was cultural consultant during the making of *Bush*. Kathy also performs in some sections of *Bush*.

***Moth* (an excerpt from *Bush*, 2003).**

...what is the dance *Moth* about?

Moth (*Dhumar*)² is the third dance in a section of *Bush* that is titled *Life Cycle*. The first two dances in the *Life Cycle* section are *Leaf* and *Caterpillar*.

The dance *Moth* represents a story of spiritual inheritance and spiritual existence. It also reflects the last stage of a lifecycle and the birth of a new creature. The dance illustrates the final process of metamorphosis, which begins with the ova, through the larvae and pupae stages until finally the moth emerges from its cocoon to discover its environment.

...how does the dance tell the story?

The two dancers seen in the clip represent the concept of spiritual guidance, where the old spirit is guiding the new, and where what is sacred and delicate is transferred with the right energy. The young spirit must listen well and see clearly to enable it to learn about life.

One dancer shadows the movements of the other. Observing the qualities of the dancers' movements shows how the dance can tell a story by creating interesting dynamics through movement. The dancers are light on their feet; their knees are bent to absorb the quick transference of weight. Their arm movements change from being outstretched to folded into the body. They execute these movements by controlling the centre of their body so they can stay balanced as they move their arms in very quick, but controlled wing-like actions.

... some specific features of *Moth*

In the dance *Moth*, the dancers illustrate the way the moth feels the air for the first time beyond the protection of the cocoon. The two dancers interact and support each other using partnering techniques (*pas de deux*). Some of the choreography has the dancers moving in unison; at other times we see them mirror each other. The excerpt *Moth* also demonstrates the choreographic possibilities of movements (developing a movement vocabulary) inspired by biological attributes of animals as they relate to their own unique physical features. Examples of this are quick expansions and contractions of movements, small shifts to inhabit another space, and soft movements that have faded endings. This demonstrates the use of space and dynamics.

Bringing the stories to the stage: the creative process

... dance practice

Moth 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.

² Dhumar is the Yolngu language word for Moth. Yolngu is spoken in NE Arnhem Land

The choreographer, the rehearsal director and the dancers work together in the dance studio for many hours over several days to create the 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 of movements.

...dance skills

Using their dance technique and performance skills, they work to blend the movements and make them articulate 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, 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 that first performance in the theatre. In that moment everyone involved in the new production together with the audience experience the work for the first time and really understand 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. However, the things 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 & Maps

Map of NE Arnhem Land

<http://www.goveonline.com/files/users/michael/NhulunbuyMap.jpg>

Map of Australia

<http://www.ga.gov.au/images/GA1073.jpg>

The Arts Centre in Yirrkala

<http://www.yirrkala.com/theartcentre>

Creation stories from around the world

<http://www.magictails.com/creationlinks.html>

Acknowledgements

Choreographer	Stephen Page
Cultural consultant	Kathy Balngayngu Marika
Composer	Steve Francis
Vocalist	Jamie Wanabe
Set designer	Peter England
Costume designer	Jennifer Irwin
Lighting designer	Nick Schlieper
Dancers in this clip (2009)	Deborah Brown Leonard Mikelo
Dancers in the original cast (2003)	Deborah Brown Sani Townsen

Class Activities: Years 3 & 4

Overview

The dance *Moth (Dhumar)* represents a story of spiritual inheritance and spiritual existence. It also reflects the last stage of a lifecycle and the birth of a new creature. The dance illustrates the final process of metamorphosis, which begins with the ova, through the larvae and pupae stages till finally the moth emerges from its cocoon to discover its environment.

In this dance, the moth emerges and transforms, reflecting the human lifecycle and the passing on of knowledge. *Moth* represents the resilience of the spirit of Indigenous Australians.

Note to teachers: Be aware that Indigenous students in your classrooms may share these understandings. Be open to discussing these ideas. Connect with your local Indigenous community to discuss and share their ideas about cultural life.

Things to Think About and Do

1) Before Viewing

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

- Provide the students with experiences of moving their body both individually and with others; showing awareness of their body in space and in relation to objects around them.
- Give students opportunities to raise their awareness of body position and understand the difference between different parts of their body, moving in different directions, levels, shapes and pathways.
- Encourage children to move with another person and explore moving around, side-by-side and in front and behind.
- Check that children understand that movements can be used to explore and improvise dance ideas for example gliding like a bird, jumping in the mud.
- Invite students to interpret meanings from watching dance and understand that when part of an audience it is important to concentrate on experiencing the dance by watching and listening.

Pose questions to expand their knowledge of the ideas the dance is based on.

- What kind of creature is a moth?
- Can you find out its name in any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language? What is the name and what is the language?
- What does this insect look like?
- What is metamorphosis?
- What are the stages in the life cycle of a moth? Egg, caterpillar, pupae, adult.
- If the first two dances in the *Life Cycle* are called *Leaf* and *Caterpillar*. What could this dance be called?

Bangarra is a company of Aboriginal and Torres Strait dancers based in Sydney. The dancers are from all different parts of Australia. Pose questions that expand students' knowledge about where and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people live. Expand

Bangarra Dance Theatre Education Resource

students understanding that contemporary Indigenous people participate in all facets of the community and as artists they may choose to communicate ideas on based on traditional stories including those relating to animals which represent spirits.

- Where do you find moths?
- Are there different kinds of moths?
- Where is Arnhem Land? Who does the land there belong to?
- Who are the dancers of Bangarra? Where do they come from?

2) As you view

Ask the children 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 dancers are there?
- Are they male or female?
- What are they wearing?
- What do the things on the screen behind the dancers look like? What else do they look like?
- Which different stages in the moth's life cycle did you see?
- Which moments remind us of the pupae stage?
- Which movements help them look like they are winged moths?

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

- Why do you think there are two moths?
- Why don't the dancers fly off the floor?

This dance reflects the last stage of a lifecycle and the birth of a new creature. It is a story of spiritual inheritance and spiritual existence.

- What else could the second dancer represent?

Collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions.

- The dancers are leaning forward and stretching out at the beginning of the dance. What do you think they are doing?
- How do their movements change towards the end of the dance?
- Why don't the dancers flap their arms at the end of the dance?
- Why do the two dancers stay close together?
- Why is the stage quite dark?
- There is a lot of dust on the stage. What do you think it is? What do you think it represents? What do you think it is made of?

4) Next steps

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

Bangarra Dance Theatre Education Resource

- How can we change from one way of moving to another? This is an example of metamorphosis.

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another.

- Choose a shape where one specific body part is in contact with the floor (eg your back). We call this body part your base. Now gradually move off that base (your back) and onto another chosen base/s (eg your left shoulder, ear and the front of your lower legs). Choose a third base/s (eg the side of your body) and move into a shape where only that part of your body is in contact with the floor. Now return to your first base and shape. Slowly and smoothly move through each of the three shapes repeating the sequences several times as a cycle.

Shape artworks

- Explore one way of moving such as walking then gradually change this to running, then skipping. Now choose a movement which involves having two feet and two hands on the floor. Without stopping gradually change this movement to one where you are moving only on your feet. Gradually return to the first movement then find a way of changing the way you move so that you get closer and closer to the floor until you are able to slide. Repeat this sequence and share with another person.

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

- Experiment with making shapes with your whole body. Try making round, elongated, symmetrical and asymmetrical shapes. Choose your four favourite shapes and teach them to another person.
- If *Moth* represents the 'pupae to moth' stage of the life cycle, what would the metamorphosis from egg to caterpillar, or the caterpillar to pupae, look like?

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

- There are a number of triangles used throughout the dance. Look at the costumes and at the moments when the choreography uses triangles. What do you think the triangles may represent?

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

- Moths don't have hands but they do have other appendages. What else could the dancers use their arms to represent? Look closely at pictures of moths for ideas.

Communicate ideas through art works

- Choose one of the sequences based on travelling, a sequence involving using different bases and a sequence of different shapes. Teach each sequence to another person or group. Choose the order in which you will perform each sequence and in which direction or part of the room you will perform the sequence.

Reflect on, explain and check the processes used to come to conclusions

- Reflect on this order to see if you now have a clear beginning, middle and end. Alter the order to improve the changes between each sequence. Are you communicating a story in your dance?
- Perform your dance to another group. Ask them what they saw and felt when they watched your dance. Could they see you metamorphosing from one thing to another?

Bangarra Dance Theatre Education Resource

Explain and justify ideas and outcomes

- What could you call your dance? What kind of music could you make or choose to go with your dance? Why have you made these choices?

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