



Education Resource: *Mathinna* (2008)

Recommended for years 9 and 10

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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.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 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 1869.² 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

² 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

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 9 & 10

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 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.

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 whole body and isolating different body parts.
- Give them opportunities to transfer their weight from one part to another and utilise different body bases.
- Ask students to use increasingly complex combinations of space including level, direction, dimension, shape, planes and pathways.
- Encourage students to use combinations of time: including metre, tempo, accent, and phrasing.
- Provide opportunities for students to use combinations of dynamics.
- Ask students to move both individually and with others; showing awareness of spatial relationships, groupings and in relation to other dancers and to objects around them.
- Assist students in gaining confidence in interacting with others and showing emotional connections and expression.
- Encourage students to use a variety of choreographic devices including abstraction, transitions, variation and contrast and to recognise different forms and structures.
- Check that students are aware that choreographers use the elements of dance to express intent.
- Encourage students' recognition that dance can relate to its social and historical context.
- Assist students' understanding that there are specific protocols for viewing and performing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dances.

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 Tasmania are Port Davey, Flinders Island, Hobart and Oyster Cove?
- Who were Mathinna's parents and where were they from?
- 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 excerpts of *Mathinna*, be a respectful audience and try to remember as much as they can about what they are seeing, hearing and feeling.

Students may take notes on subsequent viewings that capture details that assist in describing, analysing, interpreting and evaluating the work.

3) After viewing

Pose questions that remind them of their experience.

- What is the sequence of movements in section 1 - *Father*?
- What is the prop that this dancer holds?
- Describe the dancer's costume and stage makeup .
- 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' costumes?
- What is the sequence of events in section 2 and how do the dancers interact with the props?
- What is content of the voice over? What is the source? (letter from Mathinna)
- Describe 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.

- What could the significance of the rock be in section 1 - *Father*?
- Approximately what age is Mathinna in section 2 - *Nursery*?
- Where is section 2 set?
- How would you describe the costumes of the women (culturally and historically)?
- What is the source/s of the design for these costumes?
- Approximately what age is Mathinna in section 3 – *Moonshine*, and how many other dancers are on stage in this scene?

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.

- What long-term impacts of imperialism on Aboriginal lives are described in *Mathinna*?
- What influence did John and Jane Franklin have on the colony of Hobart?
- What living conditions are represented (European, Aboriginal)?
- Which examples of technological development are shown in the dance?

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- What political and philosophical ideas led to the deportation of Aborigines to Flinders Island and the 'adoption' of Mathinna by the Franklins?
- What factors may have caused Mathinna's death 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 thing he holds?
- Why does Mathinna need to put on socks and shoes?
- What instrument does the dancer who represents Lady Jane 'play'?
- How can you tell that Mathinna is still quite young?
- Describe her movements. Does she look comfortable?
- Why does the dancer Elma Kris look so different in sections 2 and 3? What has happened to her character?
- Describe the use of space in section 3. What is the significance of the change in levels?
- Describe the movements of the other dancers in red. In what way are they supporting the soloist? Draw the spatial relationships in this section.
- What is the relationship between the dancers and the audience? Do any of the dancers look at the audience? Why?
- Analyse the structure of these three sections of the dance with reference to use of:
 - specific movement vocabulary (eg literal and nonliteral)
 - space (eg groupings, pathways, size, and level)
 - structure (choreographic devices) and how they contribute to the intentions of the choreographer.

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?
- Which language is the voice-over speaking? What are some key aspects of this text?
- What colour is the doll's dress? Why is this significant?
- Describe the features of the soundtrack in each section?
- What might the glass jars represent in section 3?
- Why do the other dancers' costumes match Mathinna's? What/who might they symbolise?
- Mathinna removes her dress. What is the significance of this use of a costume?

Societies and Cultures

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

- Why might the choreographer have chosen to develop the dance based on the story of the Aboriginal girl Mathinna?
- From the sections you have viewed evaluate how successfully Stephen Page achieved this.

- 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).
- Abstract these movements (eg make them larger, remove or add repetitions, use different body parts).
- Pretend to hold an object which is precious to you. Show its size and weight in the way that you hold it.
- Explore movements which describe different activities. Ask if another person can guess what you are doing.
- Abstract these movements by altering the dynamics of the movement.
- Turn non-locomotor movements into locomotor movements.
- Experiment with moving on different levels.
- Respond to words as stimulus for movement (eg run, jump, catch, slide, wobble).

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another.

- Write a letter to someone you know describing a new experience or place that you have experienced.
- Underline all the verbs in your letter then use these verbs as stimulus for movement, keeping in mind their meaning in the context of your letter.
- Experiment with a mixture of whole body movements and isolations, locomotor and non-locomotor. Try to avoid using movements from a specific genre.

Make dance sequences.

- Select your favourite movements maintaining the original order and a variety of body actions. Being aware of your breath, form these into phrases of movement which flow comfortably together. Repeat these phrases so that you are able to perform them in the same way each time. Link phrases into longer sequences where appropriate. Is there still any link with your letter or has a new meaning developed?
- Teach one of your sequences to another student or small group.
- Record your sequences using your own notation.

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

- Explore the potential of text based accompaniment.
- Experiment with making and performing your sequence/s to an audio recording of your letter. Allow the words to 'coexist' with the movement rather than attempting to match them up.
- Try saying the words at the same time as you perform them.
- Vary the relationship by altering the dynamics of the text and/or the movement.
- Incorporate text with other found sounds and/or music.

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

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- 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?
- Develop a duo which involves two different sets of words.
- Allow yourselves to cross or interrupt each other's sequences.
- 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.

- Utilise another person's list of verbs or completely reorder your own. Develop a sequence using the same processes as you did for your own set.
- How different is it to work with words that lack a context?

Communicate ideas through art works.

- Combine several different dance sequences to show different ideas or emotions.
- Place them in an order which helps the audience understand the narrative or as a contrast experiment with using unrelated or non literal movement ideas.

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

- If you are communicating a story in your dance, is it clear? Reflect on this order to see if you now have a clear beginning, middle and end.
- Alter the order to improve the transitions between each sequence.
- If you are working with a non literal sequence, is it still necessary to have a beginning middle and end?
- Perform your dance to another group. Ask them what they saw and they felt when they watched your dance. Did they see a story, series of events or an idea? Could they see different actions without being aware of a specific narrative?

Explain and justify ideas and outcomes

- How would you describe your dance? Write a short statement of intent?
- How is the movement of the body used to represent your intention?
- How did the dancers use space and dynamics to create the ideas/feelings in this dance?
- How did you incorporate text into the accompanying soundtrack?
- What kind of costume could you make or choose to enhance your dance? Why have you made this choice?
- What could you learn from using text as a stimulus for movement?

Based on Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Level 3 statements from the Critical and creative thinking learning continuum for generating ideas, possibilities and actions, Reflecting on thinking and processes and analysing, synthesising and evaluating reasoning and procedures areas. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Australia (CC BY NC SA) licence. Accessed June 2013.