



Education Resource

Unaipon

(2004 – reproduced 2019)

Recommended for Years 5 to 10

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Bangarra Dance Theatre

Background

... who is Bangarra?

Bangarra is an Aboriginal and 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 Y. Johnson. Since 1991 Bangarra has been led by Artistic Director and choreographer Stephen Page.

The company is based 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 and Nunga), Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (Yolngu and Yarawu), 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 and dance training schools around Australia.

Background *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 *Unaipon*

... what is the inspiration for *Unaipon*?

David Unaipon was born in 1872 and died in 1967. Most Australians are familiar with Unaipon's face as the man depicted on the Australian fifty-dollar note, but know little about his extraordinary life as a scientist, inventor, philosopher, writer, story teller and Christian preacher. He was also an advisor to government and an activist who chose to influence the society he lived within through his words, his dialogue, his literature, his scientific contributions, and by the sheer enormity of his efforts to rise to any challenge.

David Unaipon's father James Unaipon, was one of the first Aboriginal men to embrace Christianity, becoming an active member of the laity and an influential member of the mission community of Point McLeay. In 1871, under the patronage of Scottish missionary George Taplin, he became the first Christian church deacon and his marriage was the first Christian wedding ceremony on the mission.

Unaipon lived on the Point McLeay mission until he left at the age of thirteen to spend five years in Adelaide in the house of Charles Burny 'CB' Young. David was brought to the Young household as a servant, but was also provided the chance to learn about philosophy, science and music. He read Classic literature, studied the great philosophers, learned to speak Latin and Ancient Greek and became skilled at playing Bach on the organ. He showed an insatiable thirst for knowledge which did not diminish till the day he died.

Unaipon lived at a time when the White Australia policy was enacted and implemented, and the general belief was that Indigenous people and their culture were heading for extinction, yet he regarded his Indigenous culture as on the same platform as all the other great cultures of the world. This perspective was both courageous and unique. Unaipon argued that even though Aboriginal people lived very simply, and in harmony with nature rather than in a society that exploited the environment in the name of progress, their culture was just as complex and impressive as any of the other great civilisations of the world.

... where does the story come from?

David Unaipon was a Ngarrindjeri man of the Warrawaldi clan, born in 1872 at Point McLeay Mission in South Australia. Unaipon is an Anglicised version of his traditional Potawolin family name, Ngnunaiton. He was the fourth of nine children born to James Unaipon and Nymbulda, a Karatinjeri clanswoman and his early life was spent learning traditional ways of his People.

The Ngarrindjeri are the people of the lower Murray River and the Coorong region, around Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert. In the early 1800s the area was visited by many whalers

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and sealers and at one point was one of the most heavily populated regions in Australia until a smallpox epidemic came down the Murray River and decimated the population.

The land of the Ngarrindjeri is rich in supply of many food sources and the people of this region known for their outstanding cooking, fishing and farming practices. They are also known for their weaving craft, a practice that continues to this day. Baskets, matting and nets were used for multiple purposes and were regarded as superior to the European products that were introduced by Europeans. Many Ngarrindjeri rituals are well documented, including the unique significance of the umbilical cord being sacred to the Ngarrindjeri and appears many of their weavings and paintings. The Nhung e umpie is treated in a way that preserves it for a considerable time. It is then placed with a roll of Emu feathers and the wound round with fibre from the bark of the tree or mallee. The Nhung e umpie symbolises womanhood, generations and relationships – nobility, matriarchy and inheritance.

Presenting *Unaipon*

The production of *Unaipon* is created as three sections – *Ngarrindjeri, Science, Religion* - woven together as a complete production. Each section offers aspects of Unaipon's life and work, telling an interconnected story of the rich cultural fabric of this man's life, his thirst for knowledge and his vision to use knowledge to create a better world for his people.

| | |
|--------------|---|
| NGARRINDJERI | In the beginning Sister baskets String games |
| SCIENCE | Motion Four winds Power |
| RELIGION | <i>'Wonderful is the soul of man. A capacity for the Great Spirit of the Eternal God'. David Unaipon, 1924.</i> |

Excerpts from the production *Unaipon* in this resource.

Ngarrindjeri:

In the beginning
String games

Science:

Four winds
Power

Religion

Religion

... how do the dances tell the story

Story telling through dance is a unique form. As audiences experience the performance, they connect immediately – both emotionally and intellectually. Every second is alive with meaning, including the silences and moments of stillness.

Dance is a universal language and as an art form it is constantly evolving. Invariably it involves other disciplines – music/sound, design, technology – and is informed by imagination and all the embodied knowledge of the artist involved.

The creative team worked collaboratively, and together with the dancers they have created a dance theatre 'telling' of this powerful story of David Unaipon – a story of intercultural connection, worlds of knowledge, and the human spirit's unyielding quest to understand the world we live in, and validate the reason we are here.

Bringing the stories to the stage: the creative process

... research and preparation

The creative process for making the work *Unaipon* started with extensive research and discussion with the Ngarrindgeri community. The work was first premiered in 2004 as part of the Clan program.

Rings first heard about Unaipon's story from her sister, Gina Rings. *"I thought the story would be a great subject for a dance work. and the more I found out about him the more I wondered why no one talks about this man?" People like Unaipon, Namatjira, Bennelong and Truganinni were people that were 'in between', they straddled Aboriginal and white culture, their spirits walked between two worlds with dignity and grace.*

The historical record focuses on Unaipon's achievements – his inventions, his role in Aboriginal political affairs, his profile as a celebrated figure in Australian history – however the reality of his situation as a man who could not travel freely, own property, earn money commensurate with his level of contributions is not well known.

We are very fortunate to have a great deal of Unaipon's own research and writing preserved and accessible, in particular his book, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*, 1924, as well as illustrations of his inventions and patent licenses. However, as we learn more about Unaipon, it is important to be cognisant of the story behind the story, and be aware of his challenges and reality of times in which he lived.

... dance practice

The dancing body inhabits the craft of the human movement, and communicates 'in the moment'. Movement is the most natural way of telling how we feel, and how we question ourselves. Dance technique simply opens up the scope for choreography to stretch movement possibilities, add texture and inflection, and give the dance its own unique power.

Unaipon's creative process is led by the choreographer, in close collaboration with cultural consultants, the dancers, the dramaturg, 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 choreographic vernacular and motifs for *Unaipon*. 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

Books

Unaipon, David, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*, Edited & introduced by Stephen Muecke & Adam Shoemaker, Melbourne University Press, 2001.

Bell, Diane, *Ngarrindjeri Wurrurarrin: a world that is, was, and will be*. Spinefex, Melbourne, 1998.

Kartinyeri, Dr Doreen, *Ngarrinjeri nation: Genealogies of Nhgarrinjeri Families*, Wakefield Press, 2006.

Jenkin, Graham. *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeri*, Raukkan Publishers, 1979.

Jones, Philip, 'Unaipon, David (1872-1967)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 12, 1990.

Online

Ngarrindjeri Regional Council (short video films) <https://www.ngarrindjeri.org.au/videos>

Indigenous Unit, State Library of NSW <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/about-library/services/indigenous-services>

South Australian Museum <http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/>

Reserve Bank of Australia <https://banknotes.rba.gov.au/australias-banknotes/people-on-the-banknotes/david-unaipon/>

Podcast

https://abcmedia.akamaized.net/rn/podcast/2010/01/hht_20100117.mp3

Acknowledgements

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Choreographer | Frances Rings |
| Cultural consultants | Family of David Unaipon; Harold Kym Kropinyeri, Judith Kropinyeri, Elaine Kropinyeri, Corrina Kartinyeri, Donna Smith |
| Additional consultancy | Gina Rings, Katrina Power, Mrs Ward (deceased) |
| Music/sound designer | David Page |
| Set designer | Peter England |
| Costume designer | Jennifer Irwin |
| Lighting designer | Nick Schlieper |
| Dancers in these clips: | Tara Gower, Ella Havelka, Beau Dean Riley Smith, Rikki Mason, Rika Hamaguchi, Glory Touhy-Daniell, Baden Hitchcock, Ryan Pearson, Lillian Banks, Brad Smith, Courtney Radford, Kassidy Waters, Kallum Goolagong, Gusta Mara |

Class Activities: Years 7 - 10 (Stages 4 & 5)

Overview

Unaipon is a dance theatre production that explores the story of David Unaipon, a Ngarrindgeri man who was an inventor, philosopher, writer and storyteller.

Bangarra's telling of Unaipon's story is told from the Aboriginal perspective, illustrating the enormous intercultural tensions and personal conflicts that have existed since settlement that continue to impact the lives and cultures of Indigenous people today.

Summary of curriculum related links:

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Cross curriculum priority: | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. |
| General capabilities: | Creative and Critical Thinking, Intercultural Understanding, Ethical Understanding, Literacy. |
| Learning areas: | Focus on Arts (Dance, Music, Visual Arts), Science, Humanities and Social Sciences. |

Things to Think About and Do

1) Before Viewing

Consider a range of cross-curriculum links that are relevant to the work *Unaipon*.

Year 7 History – Historical Knowledge and Understanding - Students build on and consolidate their understanding of historical inquiry from previous years in depth, using a range of sources for the study of the ancient past. The importance of conserving the remains of the ancient past, including the heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples ([ACDSEH148 - Scootle](#))

Year 7 Arts/Dance – identify and connect specific features and purposes of dance from contemporary and past times to explore viewpoints and enrich their dance-making, starting with dance in Australia and including dance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples ([ACADAR019 - Scootle](#))

Year 7 English – *Literature and Context* - Explore the interconnectedness of Country/Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors ([ACELT1806 - Scootle](#))

Year 9 History – Historical Knowledge and Understanding – Making a Nation. The extension of settlement, including the effects of contact (intended and unintended) between European settlers in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples ([ACDSEH020 - Scootle](#))

Year 9 & 10 Arts/Dance - Analyse a range of dance from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their dance making, starting with dance from Australia and including dance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider dance in international contexts ([ACADAR026 - Scootle](#))

Before the performance, the following questions might be useful to consider:

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

- Encourage the students to experience the artforms of 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 a 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.
- Assist students to understand that as an **audience** member or viewer of art, it is important to concentrate on experiencing by viewing and listening.

Pose questions that help them understand the ideas that *Unaipon* is based upon?

- Who are the Ngarrindjeri?
- Where in Australia is the Coorong area?
- What are some of the food resources used by the Ngarrindjeri?
- What are some crafts/s that the Ngarrindjeri are famous for?

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 place, landforms and the natural environment.

- Who are the dancers of Bangarra? Where do they come from?
- Where is the company Bangarra based?
- What is a cultural consultant and how do they contribute to the making of a new work?

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 students 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 String games section
- Describe the different costumes of the dancers in the four winds section? How do the costumes and the movements work together in this section.
- Describe the way the group moves/dances in the section called Power. 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 of Unaipon?
- How do the lighting design and Milky Way backdrop enhance the work?
- *Unaipon* illustrates issues associated with perceptions about Aboriginal people in early and mid 20th century in relation to education and achievement. How is this evident in the work?
- How is David Unaipon's story unique in the context of relationships between Aboriginal people and non-Indigenous society?
- How does the work illustrate the concept of how Aboriginal people negotiate the two worlds of Indigenous and Western culture?

.....
In reference to expressing and developing ideas:

Collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions.

Movement and meaning

- Describe the way the dancers in *Power* move?
- Describe the movements of the dancers in Four winds section?
- Describe the movements of the dancers in *Religion*?
- 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 artwork, including the colour of the background, floor, props and the lighting (colour, brightness, point/s of focus) in each section.
- Which sounds and/or instruments can you hear in the music/sound score?

4) Next steps

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another.

- Write or find a story that describes loss of identity as a result of major disruption and/or displacement.
- Use mime to describe the story through movement. Exaggerate and simplify the movements so that the gestures become easy to see.
- Explore different **dynamics** as you vary your movements, and determine the dance motifs that are a fundamental to your story.

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

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- Select your favourite parts of your '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.
- 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. Try performing your sequence close to another person.
- 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?
- 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?

Explain and justify ideas and outcomes.

- 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?

Based on Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Level 5 & 6 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 03/06/15.