



Education Resource: *Brolga*
From the production *Corroboree*, 2001.

Recommended for years 5 and 6

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Brolga

(from the production *Corroboree*, 2001)

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: Corroboree (2001)

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

Corroboree explores the transformation of the human spirit, the relationship between Aboriginal people, creatures and the land, and what it is that unifies us as human beings. *Corroboree* is about challenging, awakening and cleansing the spirit. *Corroboree* also explores contemporary social issues, and relates them to traditional dreaming stories.

"An evocative journey that is both earthy and mystical, allowing us to relate yet also dream"

"Corroboree challenges, but also unites us on the common ground of the Australian spirit"

Courier Mail, 22 June 2001

... where do the stories come from?

Corroboree is a contemporary interpretation of creation stories of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia.

Bangarra has a long relationship with the Aboriginal families in Yirrkala, Dhulunbuy and Bremer Island, with several Bangarra productions drawing inspiration from the stories, people and land of the region. Cultural consultant, Djakapurra Munyarryun, a songman and elder of the Dhulunbuy community provided valuable knowledge and advice during the creation of *Corroboree*. Djakapurra also performs in sections of *Corroboree*. All permissions and source material used in the creation of *Corroboree* needed to be cleared with the Yolngu elders and Djakapurra Munyarryun is their spokesman.

Corroboree was directed and choreographed by Stephen Page with choreographic contributions for another section of the work, *Turtle*, provided by Peggy Misi, a descendant of the Kaigas Augadh clan from Thursday Island in the Torres Strait. The music for *Brolga* is a blend of contemporary sounds and music from the Yirrkala and Nhumbuwah lands in NE Arnhem Land.

***Brolga* (an excerpt from *Corroboree*, 2001).**

...what is *Brolga* about?

Brolga (*Gudurrku*) is the first section of the production *Corroboree*. (The second and third sections are *Roo* (*Garrtjambal*) and *Turtle* (*Waru*). The dance *Brolga* illustrates the concepts of ceremony, connection and transformation between a human spirit and the spirit of a creature.

Brolga is also inspired by totemic systems in Australian Aboriginal culture, where every person is assigned a creature totem related to their clan. The brolga is just one of the many animal, plant or natural element totems that are handed down from generation to generation.

At the start of the dance the girl enters the sacred ground of the brolgas who live in the wetlands of Arnhem Land. She plays, mimics and discovers the sensual and magical nature of the environment, but she has to learn to respect the secret brolga knowledge. A flock of brolgas joins her to protect her on her journey of learning as she prepares to become a woman. She walks between the brolgas as they teach her. She surrenders herself to become one of them in an alliance of understanding and a sense of belonging to her own Dreaming.

... some specific features of *Brolga*

A solo female dancer and the full ensemble of Bangarra perform *Brolga*. The music draws its inspiration from the land, the air, the spirit of the sacred Brolga grounds and the creature itself. The language heard in the music is Yolngu Matha.

The dance involves movements that emulate the elongated body of the large bird, the way it delicately places each long limb as it walks with its wings folded neatly out of sight, and the dipping and lengthening of the neck. The brolga's natural movements are often referred to as 'dancing'. The dancers hold their arms behind their bodies, with elbows bent and wrists touching their lower backs. The ensemble dancers move around the girl in circles, sometimes towards her and sometimes away. She copies them and learns the movements from them, as they lead her in their dance and transfer their knowledge.

The costume worn by the dancers, illustrates the grey and white colouring of the brolga and the slender shape of its body. The performers paint a red patch along the crown of their heads to represent the distinctive markings of the bird.

This excerpt from *Brolga* demonstrates the choreographic possibilities of movements (movement vocabulary) inspired and influenced by particular physical attributes and movement characteristics of animals. Examples of this are the way the dancers extend their legs in front of their body, hold one arm aloft and one arm folded behind the back. They move in circles and respond to each other as members of a flock.

Bringing the stories to the stage; the creative process

... dance practice

Brolga 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 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 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 & 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>

Brolga Dancing in Northern Territory Australia (available on You Tube)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCJVmINmtZg>

Acknowledgements

Choreographer	Stephen Page
Cultural consultant	Djakapurra Munyarryun
Composers	David Page/Steve Francis
Music producer	Steve Francis
Set designer	John Matkovic and Stephen Page
Lighting designer	Joseph Mercurio
Costume designer	Jennifer Irwin
Dancers in this clip (2009)	Deborah Brown with Bangarra ensemble – Waangenga Blanco, Perun Bonser, Jhunoy Boy Borja, Yolande Brown, Tara Gower, Ella Havelka, Elma Kris, Kathy Balngayngu Marika, Leonard Mikelo, Katina Olsen, Sidney Saltner, Patrick Thaiday.
Dancers - original cast (2001)	Francis Rings with Bangarra ensemble - Joel Blanco, Victor Bramich, Yolande Brown, Elma Kris, Lewis Lampton, Peggy Misi, Djakapurra Munyarryun, Russell Page, Desley Roberts, Sidney Saltner, Peta Stachen, Sani Townsen

Class Activities: Years 5 & 6

Overview

Inspired by a brolga plain in Northeast Arnhem Land and stories told by Djakapurra Munyarryun, *Brolga* represents a contemporary rite of passage for a young woman who plays with the birds, mimics their movements and learns to respect their sacred knowledge.

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, and the 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 understanding 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 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 part of an audience, 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?

- What does a brolga look like and how does it move? What are its habits and rituals? (nesting, feeding, dancing, habitat)
- Where in Australia is this bird found?
- Why do some Aboriginal people use another word to describe this bird?
- Does this type of bird live anywhere near you?
- What are some of the ways it moves (on the ground and in the air).

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Expand 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 that represent spirits.

- Who are the Aboriginal people/s who live in Arnhem Land?
- Who are the dancers of Bangarra? Where do they come from?
- Where is the company Bangarra based?
- Who is Djakapurra Munyarryun?

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 dancers are on the stage at the beginning of the dance?
- In which direction do the first group of dancers move?
- Are they male or female?
- How many are there in the first group?
- What are they wearing?
- What is on their skin and hair?
- Who has red paint on their head?
- Are all the dancers covered in this?
- There is a mound-like prop behind the dancers. What could this represent?
- Where do the dancers go when they move upstage and who comes back on stage with them?
- Are they male or female?
- Are there fewer or more dancers this time?

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

- Which dancer do you think is the soloist?
- Why do you think the soloist is on her own?
- How can you tell she is different?
- What role do you think she is playing in the story?
- Why is she in the middle of the circle?

The dance *Brolga* represents a young woman, who plays with the birds, mimics their movements and learns to respect their sacred knowledge. (To mimic means to copy).

- Why does the girl seem to be following and copying the birds?
- Why and how does she start to look like one of them?
- What could you learn from watching different animals ?

Collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions, for example, brolga movements are often described as dance movements.

Movement and meaning

- Do the dancers look anything like the real brolgas?
- Do the dancers move like the brolgas? In what way/s?

- Describe/draw the formation that the five dancers make around the 'girl'?
- Towards which direction is the big group of dancers facing?
- Draw the formations and pathways of the small and large groups.
- Why might they be moving/facing the same direction?
- Describe the movements of the small group of five when they are on a low level.
- Where on the stage is this group placed?
- Describe the movements of the large group. Is there any emphasis placed on any particular movements? (repetition, size)
- Can you see when the dancers are moving in unison? In canon?
- The dancers make special shapes with their bodies, their arms and their elbows. What do you think these shapes represent?
- What is the relationship between the dancers and the audience? Do the dancers acknowledge the presence of the audience or do you get the impression we are onlookers? Why?

Non-movement aspects

- Describe the stage set including the colour of the curtaining, floor, props and the lighting (colour, brightness).
- There is a lot of dust on the stage. What do you think it is? What do you think it represents?
- The music could be described as a soundscape. Which sounds and instruments can you hear?
- The performance is on a stage in a theatre. Is this a traditional or contemporary place for Aboriginal people to dance?

Societies and Cultures

- Djakapurra Munyarryun performed in the opening of the Sydney 2000 Olympics. What role did he play?
- The dance *Brolga*, created and performed by Bangarra is about growing up, finding meaning in learning and rites of passage. What is a rite of passage?
- What are some other rites of passage experienced in different cultures?
- What are the symbolic stages of a 'rite of passage'?
- How do rites of passage show what a society values?

4) Next steps

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

- Explore following one person, copying what they do as they move around the room. The person leading should move slowly so that the person/s behind can copy easily.
- Take turns leading a group. Try following in a line or in a triangle behind the leader. Which group formation makes it easier to see what the leader is doing?
- Move on different levels (high medium low), on the spot and when travelling.
- In small groups explore copying another person changing levels as you move from one place to the next.
- Explore leg and arm gestures that lead toward, away from, and around your body.
- Experiment balancing on two legs then one leg; shift between different body bases – hands, feet, bottom, back, forearms.
- Use different parts of your body to make patterns in the air – straight, angular, twisting (think of drawing with a sparkler at night but with different parts of your body).

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- Make patterns in front of your body, behind and all around. Change the size of the movement to very small or very large. Travel as you make the patterns in the air.
- Explore moving in unison, then copying the same movement one after the other - in canon.

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another

- Using just your head, neck and shoulders experiment with movements which remind you of the actions of birds. Try to vary your movements so that you are describing the birds doing different things - nesting, feeding, searching.
- Use your arms to describe the same actions.
- Use your whole body to describe the walking actions of a brolga. How does it move when it is in a hurry? How might it move slowly?
- Explore different dynamics as you vary your movements.
- Explore different combinations of dancers moving at the same time.
- What does it feel like to be moving as a part of a group? What does it feel like to be dancing separate to the group?

Make dance sequences

- Explore different ways of moving in a group: running, jumping, sliding, rolling, slithering, spinning, shrinking, exploding and collapsing.
- Watch animals which move in groups (fish, kangaroos, ants). What formation do these groups make? What floor and/or air pathways do they take? Use these pathways to create a sequence of events.
- Contrast the movements of one dancer with the patterns of the group. Take turns in the solo role.
- Use sounds to accompany the movement. Do some sounds suit the different ways of moving more than others?

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

- Experiment with making and recalling movements using different leading body parts for each. Choose your four favourite movements. Show your partner each movement and teach it to them. Now swap roles.

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

- Try taking turns performing each of your four movement sequences. A then B
- Perform both of your sequences at the same time. A and B
- Join both sequences so that they flow from one to the other. A joined onto B.
- How else could you link these sequences?

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

- Try moving using different dynamics to describe a sequence of events involving a group of animals.
- What are some of the things that a chosen animal may do? Create two sections of the sequence which are in a particular place and other sections where you travel.

Communicate ideas through art works

- Combine a sequence based on specific gestures, with a sequence using air pathways and a sequence of different group shapes. Choose the order in which you will

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perform each sequence and in which direction or part of the room you will perform the sequence.

- Is there a story in the dance?

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. 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

- 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 the animal or idea?
- 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 animals and creating sequences based on their movements?

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