



Education Resource: *Terrain* (2012)

Recommended for years 7 to 10

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## ***Bangarra Dance Theatre***

### ***Background***

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

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

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 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 25 years, 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.

### ***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 viewing performances of dance theatre.

## Exploring *Terrain* (2012)

### ... what is the inspiration for *Terrain*?

*Landscape is at the core of our existence and is a fundamental connection between the natural world and us. The power of that connection is immeasurable. It cleanses, it heals, it awakens and it renews. It gives us perspective. It reminds us of something beyond ourselves and it frees us. But more importantly when we are surrounded by nature we begin to understand our place and how we are a very, very small part of a much larger, much bigger picture. .... TERRAIN is where spirit and place meet.*

Frances Rings, Choreographer, *TERRAIN*, 2012

*Terrain* is Bangarra Dance Theatre's twentieth production and the first full-length commission by choreographer and Bangarra artist-in-residence, Frances Rings. Prior to creating *Terrain*, Rings had made a number of shorter works for the company, and had also co-choreographed sections of other works in the repertoire.

Link to bio: <http://bangarra.com.au/people/artists-in-residence/frances-rings>

*Terrain* is inspired by the power of natural forces and the vulnerability of ecosystems within a landscape that has existed and evolved as long as the Earth itself – a landscape from where human beings draw life and express meaning to that life. *Terrain* explores the fundamental connection between people and land - how we treat our land, how we understand its spirit, and how we regard its future. *Terrain* looks at the area of Australia known as Lake Eyre. Lake Eyre is a great salt lake of tectonic origin situated in the remote north west of South Australia. As a closed inland drainage basin with an area of 1,140,000 km<sup>2</sup>, the Lake Eyre basin is one of the largest areas of internal drainage in the world. It has a vastness and diversity like no other landscape in the world. To the Aboriginal people of this land it is known as *Kati Thanda*.

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

Lake Eyre (*Kati Thanda*) is the home of the Arabunna people who have maintained their deep connection with the Lake Eyre basin for thousands of years. In May 2012 the Arabunna won land rights for Lake Eyre and its surrounds. Their understanding of the landscape, and all the variances of its ever-changing behaviour enable the Arabunna to read the landscape, know its purpose and be able to share stories with us about how *Kati Thanda* survives and thrives through its very dramatic natural cycles of flood, drought and everything in between.

The Arabunna read the Lake Eyre landscape by different methods and indications from modern western ways. Days are measured by the length of shadows, or when the afternoon

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clouds roll in; months are measured by the level of salt crust on the surface of the lake; and years are measured by the rise and fall of waters, the sweep through ancient river systems, transforming the desert and bringing new life. Even more importantly, this knowledge serves to maintain the cultural life that has existed for the tens of thousands of years of Aboriginal people's relationship to the terrain of central Australia.

Environmental imbalance is also a theme in the work. In *Terrain*, Rings references the collective responsibility that we all have to protect these lands – not only for the cultural importance but the environmental

### *Presenting Terrain*

Bangarra's production of *Terrain* is presented as nine sections or 'states of experiencing' the terrain of Lake Eyre. The sections depict particular features of the Lake Eyre environment as well as the culture of the Arabunna people.

Certain themes or provocations are presented throughout the work as Rings. These themes include:

- How we feel and acknowledge connection to 'place'.
- How we experience the emotion and the power of an untouched landscape.
- How we sense our responsibility to care for the land.
- How we hear and share the stories from the traditional dreaming of the Arabunna.
- How the experience of a place like 'Lake Eyre' can inspire us to think about the power of an ancient land.

Other themes explored in the work can be identified and discussed across a range of perspectives.

*Terrain* is a full-length work of about 60 minutes. The **9 sections** are:

#### *RED BRICK*

Looking beyond the urban landscape to hear an ancestral Calling to Country.

#### *SHIELDS*

Reflecting on the struggle for Land Rights and Recognition that continues to affect Indigenous people today.

#### *REBORN*

Land is passed down through the lineage along with knowledge and customs.

#### *SPINIFEX*

Inspired by the trees in and around Lake Eyre that resemble the gatherings of spirit women waiting, suspended in time.

#### *SALT*

Beyond the white salt vastness lies an abstract landscape that resonates an ancient power.

#### *SCAR*

The impact of man's actions scars and disrupts the delicate balance between man and environment.

#### *LANDFORM*

Through each evolution, the land regenerates and heals, awakening the cultural ties that connect people to place.

#### *REFLECT*

Traversing the horizon to glimpse the sacred realm where earth and sky meet.

### *DELUGE*

Waters begin their journey towards Lake Eyre bringing with it transformation and ensuring the life cycle continues.

The film clip in this resource shows excerpts from **five of the nine sections**.

### Five excerpts from the production *Terrain*.

#### **RedBrick**

This section looks at Aboriginal people's sense of 'calling' to 'go to country'. With the pressures of modern life and living in urban environments, the need to reconnect to country is an extremely strong - a chance to refuel. This section is performed by a solo female dancer, supported and manipulated by four male dancers.

#### **Spinifex**

This section was inspired by Rings' experience of sitting in the open landscape near Lake Eyre and imagining the contorted spinifex trees as women from thousands of years ago, waiting for the waters to come and the transformation of landscape to happen. The design of the women's costumes is integral to this section.

#### **Salt**

This section expresses how the vast amounts of salt crystals in the lake completely change the landscape as the waters dry up. While the salt is beautiful, it is also quite dangerous. The chemical compound of the salt is acidic and burns the skin, something that early explorers discovered when they decided to take a swim in the lake. The salt produces extraordinary sculptural forms as well as creating a unique light that completely disrupts the horizon and is sometimes hazardous for pilots. The two male dancers who perform this section depict the nature and texture of salt crystals.

#### **Landform**

Landform is about the land's capacity to heal itself, to regenerate after damage that is caused by man or nature. The land's strength is in its undying spirit, despite being ravaged by traumatic events. The group of dancers in this section illustrate the shifting shapes of land over the millennia and the connectedness that people have with land they know and/or land that they come from.

#### **Deluge**

This section illustrates the event of the waters travelling down through the ancient channels to fill the lake with life. It is a spectacular event, and one that has been occurring for thousands of years. Then as the water evaporates the event is over, and the cycle of transformation begins again. The dancers move as an ensemble, and towards the end of the section they slowly leave the stage – reflecting the cycle of the waters arriving and leaving as they have for thousands of years.

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

To create the choreography, the music and the design elements, the creative team worked together with the dancers to create a dance theatre 'telling' of the powerful sense of connection to land through culture, people and place.

With the *in situ* experience of Lake Eyre and a significant amount of research material in hand, (images, literature, stories), ideas become translated through movement, sound and imagery. The choreographer and the dancers develop a language of movement, using elements of dance that are carefully shaped to resonate the feelings, thoughts and ideas explored by the whole creative team.

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

#### **... research and preparation**

Prior to working with the dancers in the studio, Frances Rings (choreographer), Jacob Nash (set designer) and David Page (composer) travelled to Lake Eyre at a time when the lake was full of water. They spent time on country and also viewed Lake Eyre from the air. They experienced the 'deafening silence' of the vast and monumental landscape. Rings travelled again to the area when the lake was dry – when the colours, the wildlife and the climate are completely different to the wet conditions.

The artists were introduced to Arabunda elder Uncle Reginald Dodd, who led them onto his country and shared his knowledge about the land, the resources, and the reasons why it is so important to preserve the Lake region for future generations. They experienced the landforms, the colours, the air, the animal life – but most importantly the spiritual presence of ancestors and the stories that embed the land with cultural meaning. As cultural consultant for *Terrain*, Uncle Reg was critically important to the development and presentation of the work. He guided and supported the artists, making sure their interpretations reflected his own sense of responsibility to country.

In Rings words, *“Being with Uncle Reg on his country and hearing his stories made me think deeply about Indigenous people like myself who live in urban areas and our relationship to country. I realised that although the location may be different the connection is the same. We have a profoundly visceral understanding of country that goes beyond brick walls, concrete and an urbanised lifestyle”*.

The journey of discovery and the creative process involved in the making of *Terrain* are closely linked through the journey of emotional response and the processing of ideas.

#### **... dance practice**

*Terrain* was created by the choreographer, in close collaboration with the dancers, 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 *Terrain*. 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*

#### Online

**Comprehensive information** from the Australian Government Department of the Environment

<http://www.environment.gov.au/water/environment/lake-eyre-basin>

Examples from an **exhibition of images** by Murray Fredericks

*Lake Eyre: a reflection in the outback*

Australian Geographic

<http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/journal/Lake-Eyre-reflection-in-the-outback.htm>

Summary information about the Lake Eyre Basin

<http://www.lakeeyrebasin.org.au/>

#### Film

**Salt** (JERRYCAN Films)

Producer/director – Michael Angus

<http://www.saltdoco.com/index.htm>

#### Books

*Lake Eyre: A journey through the heart of the continent*

Paul Lockyer

ABC Books, Australia, 2012

*Floods of Lake Eyre*

Kotwicki, Dr. Vincent.

Oxford University Press, UK, 1999.

*The Spell of Lake Eyre*

Dulhunty, Roma.

Lowden Publishing, Victoria, Australia, 1975.

### *Acknowledgements*

Choreographer            Frances Rings

Cultural consultant      Reginald Dodd

Music/sound designer   David Page

Set designer             Jacob Nash

Costume designer        Jennifer Irwin

Lighting designer        Karen Norris

Dancers in these clips: Elma Kris, Yolande Brown, Deborah Brown, Jhuny-boy Borja, Waangenga Blanco, Tara Gower, Leonard Mickelo, Daniel Riley, Jasmin Sheppard, Ella Havelka, Tara Robertson, Travis De Vries, Kaine Sultan-Babij, Luke Currie-Richardson.

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

### Overview

*Terrain* is inspired by the area of Australia known as Lake Eyre a landscape from where human beings draw life and express meaning to that life. *Terrain* explores the fundamental connection between Aboriginal people and land - how we treat our land, how we understand its spirit, and how we regard its future.

### Summary of curriculum related links:

Cross curriculum priority:	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.
General capabilities:	Creative and Critical Thinking, Intercultural Understanding, Literacy.
Learning areas:	Focus on Arts (Dance, Music, Visual Arts) Links to History, Geography and English.

## Things to Think About and Do

### 1) Before Viewing

#### History / Year 7 / Historical Knowledge and Understanding / Investigating the ancient past

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.

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#### Geography / Year 7 / Geographical Knowledge and Understanding / Unit 1: Water in the world

#### Geography / Year 8 / Geographical Knowledge and Understanding / Unit 1: Landforms and landscapes

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

- Who are the Arabunna people and what do we know about them?
- Where in Australia is the Lake Eyre basin?
- What is a salt lake and where are there other salt lakes in the world?
- What is meant by internal drainage of a salt lake?

- What is the landscape like in the Lake Eyre region?

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 landforms and creatures that represent spirits.

- Who are the dancers of Bangarra? Where do they come from?
- Where is the company Bangarra based?
- What is a cultural advisor?

### 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

English / Year 7 / Language / Language for interaction

English / Year 9 & 10 / Literacy / Interpreting, analysing, evaluating

Pose questions that remind them 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 *Redbrick*?
  - Describe the costumes of the dancers in the second section - *Spinifex*? How do the costumes and the movements work together in this section?
  - Why might the two dancers in the third section - *Salt* - be costumed differently?
  - Describe the way the group moves/dances in the section – *Landform*? 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 – *Deluge*?
- .....

English / Year 7 & 8 / Literature / Responding to literature

English / Year 10 / Language / Language for interaction

Geography / Year 10 / Geographical Knowledge and Understanding / Unit 1: Environmental change and management

History / Year 9 / Historical Knowledge and Understanding / Australia and Asia / Making a nation

History / Year 10 / Historical Knowledge and Understanding / Rights and freedoms / Rights and freedoms (1945 – the present)

- How are the colours and the backdrops relevant to each of the sections? The dance theatre production of *Terrain* illustrates issues associated with care for the environment.
  - Are there any issues arising from colonisation evident in the work?
  - What influence has mining had on the Lake Eyre region?
  - What is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' approach to **custodial responsibility** and environmental management of Lake Eyre?
- .....

Collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions.

Movement and meaning

- Describe the way the dancers in *Spinifex* move?
  - Describe the movements of the dancers in *Salt*?
  - Describe the movements of the dancers in *Deluge*?
  - What is the relationship between the dancers and the **audience**? Do any of the dancers look at the **audience**? Why/why not?
- .....

### English / Year 7 - 10 / Language / Expressing and developing ideas

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 each section?
- .....

### English / Year 7 & 8 / Literature / Literature and context English / Year 9 & 10 / Literacy / Texts in context

Societies and Cultures

The production *Terrain* describes the powerful sense of personal and cultural connection Aboriginal people have for land, and the need to reconnect and go 'on country'.

- Why do you think the choreographer chose to develop this dance theatre production based on the Lake Eyre region?
  - The performance is on a stage in a theatre. Is this a traditional or contemporary place for Aboriginal people to dance?
  - What is the cultural context in which this dance was developed, or in which it is viewed, and what does it signify? What are the stylistic differences in cultural dances from different countries including Asia, Europe and the USA?
- .....

## 4) Next steps

### English / Year 7 - 10 / Language / Expressing and developing ideas

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another.

- Write or find a story that describes losing and/or finding something precious.
  - 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 what you do with the imaginary object, for example, scoop the object into your hand, hold it tight, throw it in the air playfully, run to catch it, and/or swing it around.
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### English / Year 7 - 10 / Language / Expressing and developing ideas

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 precious object 'story' making sure that you keep a mixture of different travelling movements. Repeat this sequence so that you are able to perform it in the same way each time.
- Teach your sequence to another student or small group.
- 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?

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