



Education Resource: *Moth*
From the production *Bush*, 2003.

Recommended for years 5 and 6

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Bangarra Dance Theatre Education Resource



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Moth

(from the production **Bush**, 2003)

Background

... who is Bangarra?

Bangarra Dance Theatre is Australia's leading Indigenous performing arts company, and is recognised nationally and internationally for distinctive theatre productions that combine the spirituality of traditional culture with contemporary forms of storytelling through dance.

Bangarra was founded in 1989 by American dancer and choreographer, Carole Johnson. Since 1991, Bangarra has been led by Artistic Director and choreographer Stephen Page.

Bangarra's vision is to:

Respect and rekindle the links between traditional Indigenous cultures of Australia and new forms of contemporary artistic expressions;
Create inspiring dance theatre productions of integrity and excellence that resonate with people throughout Australia and the world.¹

The company is based at Walsh Bay in Sydney and presents performance seasons in Australian capital cities, regional towns and remote areas. Bangarra has also taken its productions to many places around the world including Europe, Asia and USA.

... why is the work of Bangarra important?

Bangarra exists to create a foundation for the care and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural life. Through its performance seasons and touring of dance theatre productions, Bangarra provides the opportunity for all people of all cultural backgrounds to be able to share knowledge about and have a contemporary experience of the world's oldest living culture. Bangarra has nurtured the careers of hundreds of Indigenous professional artists, including dancers, choreographers, composers and designers. In just over two decades, Bangarra has produced over thirty original works for its repertoire. Bangarra has also collaborated on the creation of new productions with other Australian performing arts companies such as The Australian Ballet and the Sydney Theatre Company.

... who are the artists?

Bangarra's dancers and collaborating artists come from all over Australia, including the major groups in relation to location, for example: Torres Strait Islanders, Queensland (Murri), New South Wales (Koori), Victoria (Koorie), South Australia (Anangu), Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (Yolngu), Coast and Midwest Western Australia (Yamatji), Southern Western Australia (Nyoongar), Central Western Australia (Wangai) and Tasmania (Palawah). Some of the dancers are graduates of NAISDA Dance College (NSW), while others received their training at the Aboriginal College of Performing Arts (Qld), and others are graduates of dance courses delivered by universities around Australia.

¹ Annual Report, Bangarra Dance Theatre, 2012

Connecting to the source

... telling the stories

Story telling in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life is the means by which cultural systems, values and identity are preserved and transferred. Telling stories through song, music and dance, in order to connect people to land, and teach them about culture and the traditions of their ancestors is the way knowledge is passed from generation to generation.

... sharing and passing on of knowledge

Each year Bangarra spends time in specific Indigenous communities, meeting with elders and traditional owners and living with the people of that community - learning about stories that connect the people and the creatures to the land. Everyone who works at Bangarra feels very strongly about their role in the company's work. They make sure that the stories they tell are true to the traditional owners of those stories and uphold the integrity of the stories' meanings.

... experiencing dance in a theatrical context

It is important to note that dance theatre works are essentially the creation of artistic invention to express a broad range of ideas and thoughts. While some information is provided in the program notes, the audience is free to interpret the work according to their individual perspectives, emotional responses and level of experience in the viewing of performing arts.

Telling the stories: Bush (2003)

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

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

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

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

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

(From printed program for *Bush*, 2003)

... where do the stories come from?

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

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

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

Moth (an excerpt from Bush, 2003).

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

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

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

...how does the dance tell the story?

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

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

... some specific features of *Moth*

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

Bringing the stories to the stage; the creative process

... dance practice

Moth was created by the choreographer, in close collaboration with the dancers, the composer of the music, and the costume, set and lighting designers - the creative team. This enables the dance to reflect the overall focus of the choreographer's ideas and direction.

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

The choreographer, the rehearsal director and the dancers work together in the dance studio for many hours over several days to create the choreographic elements for the dance. Together they invent movements that are inspired by the story, as they develop their artistic interpretation of its meaning.

They experiment with each movement, practicing them over and over again. They slowly build the movements into phrases and arrange these phrases into sequences of movements.

... dance skills

Using their dance technique and performance skills, they work to blend the movements and make them articulate, and technically achievable, before eventually settling on a final version of the choreography.

The rehearsal director is present throughout this process in order to rehearse the dance, so that the key qualities and details of the choreography as set by the choreographer are retained and remembered, as the artists move on to create other sections of the work. As the work moves closer to its premiere date, the rehearsal director will work with the dancers for many hours to make sure they can perform the dance consistently at the highest standard possible. It is during this period in the process, the technical elements of the designers – costume, set, and lighting – start to be incorporated.

... dance production processes

In the week of the premiere performance, the dancers, rehearsal director, creative team and production crew move from the Bangarra dance studios to the theatre where they spend many hours rigging the set, positioning and programming the lighting, and making necessary adjustments to the choreography to fit the space of the stage. This is called the ‘bump in’ and the production crew is largely responsible for coordinating this stage of the process. There is much excitement during this bump in week because no one has actually seen the finished dance theatre work until that first performance in the theatre. In that moment everyone involved in the new production together with the audience experience the work for the first time and really understand what has been in the minds of the creative team.

There is often a media call on the day of the premiere where photographers take pictures of the dancers in dress rehearsal, and interviews with the creative team are conducted. On premiere night reviewers will attend to write about the work for their respective newspapers, websites and blogs. These reviews are usually published as soon as possible after the premiere.

... the life of a dance

During the lengthy process of creating a new Bangarra production, ideas will change and surprising shifts in the original plans will occur. This is the normal nature of the creative process, and probably one of the most exciting things about making a new work. However, the things that do not change are the traditional stories and original cultural elements, which always remain respected and intact. As the dance is performed over time, the story is passed from one dancer’s body to another as different dancers are taught the choreography.

Links & Maps

Map of NE Arnhem Land

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

Map of Australia

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

The Arts Centre in Yirrkala

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

Creation stories from around the world

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

Acknowledgements

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

Class Activities: Years 5 & 6

Overview

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

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

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

Things to Think About and Do

1) Before Viewing

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

- 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 an 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 moth look like and how does it move (on the ground and in the air)?
- What are its habits and rituals?
- Where in Australia is this insect found?
- What is metamorphosis and what are the stages in the life cycle of a moth?
- If the first two dances in the *Life Cycle* are called *Leaf* and *Caterpillar*. What could this dance be called?

Expand students understanding that contemporary Indigenous people participate in all facets of the community and as artists they may choose to communicate ideas or based on traditional stories including those relating to animals which 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 children to watch and listen to the dance, be a respectful audience and try to remember as much as they can about what they are seeing, hearing and feeling. Ask them to notice if the choreographer uses symmetrical or asymmetrical shapes, whether there is a clear beginning, middle and end, and whether there is any repetition.

3) After viewing

Pose questions that remind them of their experience.

- What sort of shapes did you see?
- Did the dancers perform in close proximity?
- What sort of formations did they make?
- Did they travel far across the stage?

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

The dance *Moth* reflects the last stage of a lifecycle and the birth of a new creature. It also depicts a story of spiritual inheritance and spiritual existence.

- Why do you think there are two dancers?
- What do they represent?

Collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions.

- The dancers are leaning forward and stretching out at the beginning of the dance. What do you think these gestures represent?
- How do their movements change towards the end of the dance?
- This dance is performed on a stage. Where does the light for us to see the dancers come from?
- There is a lot of dust on the stage. What do you think it is? What do you think it represents? What do you think it is made of?

4) Next steps

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

- How can we change from one way of moving to another? Explore different arm and leg gestures that lead toward, away from, and around their own body. Repeat the movements but alter them subtly each time so that the direction and or gesture changes.

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another.

- Choose a shape which takes up a large amount of space. Now gradually change that shape so that it shrinks. Reverse the process back to the original shape.
- Experiment with gestures which remind you of the movements of a particular animal. Try to use different parts of your body to explore the same idea. (a hand, leg, shoulder or head could draw the pathway of a snake; a chin, elbow knee or chest could describe the movement of a brush turkey).
- Play a knots game. Stand in a circle putting your hands into the centre taking hold of two different people's hands. As a group unknot yourselves without pulling or hurting others. (A tip! you can release your grip on someone else to make the movement more comfortable)

Make dance sequences

- Make a shape with others. Link your bodies in some way (back to back, side to side, elbow to shoulder). Move together as a group keeping the links but changing the shape. Repeat this so that you can remember the pathways you need to travel to get to your new shape.
- Develop your animal movements into a sequence which travels across the space. Choose three different points to travel to and rest before moving on.
- Join with a partner, who is creating different animal movements, and teach each other your movements.

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

- Experiment with performing the same sequences at the same time; contrasting your sequences and following each other's movements in canon.
- If *Moth* represents the 'pupae to moth' stage of the life cycle, what would the metamorphosis from your animal's movements to your partner's movements look like?

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

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

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

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

Communicate ideas through art works.

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

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

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

Explain and justify ideas and outcomes.

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

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