



Education Resource: *Mutton Bird*  
From the production *Mathinna*, 2008.

Recommended for years 5 and 6

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## ***Mutton Bird***

(from the production *Mathinna*, 2008)

### ***Background***

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

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

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

Bangarra's vision is to:

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

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.

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<sup>1</sup> Annual Report, Bangarra Dance Theatre, 2012

### **Connecting to the source**

#### **... telling the stories**

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

#### **... sharing and passing on of knowledge,**

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

#### **... experiencing dance in a theatrical context**

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

### **Telling the story: Mathinna (2008)**

#### **... what is the inspiration for the production *Mathinna*?**

Bangarra's production of *Mathinna* is based on the true story of a young Tasmanian Aboriginal girl, Mathinna, who lived in the early 1800s. The production describes her personal journey and illustrates some of the key political, cultural and social interactions that occurred at the time of colonisation.

The focus of the production *Mathinna* is the social disruptions that occurred as British settlers relocated the Aboriginal people from their tribal lands and intervened in their cultural practices. The section *Mutton Bird* represents the totem of the clan to which Mathinna belonged.

#### **... where do the stories come from?**

Mathinna was the daughter of Towterer and his wife Wongermeep who originated from the Lowreenne (alternate spelling Lowgernown) people, one of the southwest Tasmanian clans. In 1833, Towterer and Wongermeep were captured by the Chief Protector of Aboriginals, George Augustus Robinson and relocated to an Aboriginal mission settlement on Flinders Island called *Wybalenna*. Flinders Island is located just off the north east coast of Tasmania. Mathinna was born at *Wybalenna* in 1835.

In 1839, Mathinna was sent to live with the Governor of the colony, Sir John Franklin and his wife Lady Jane to be raised alongside their own daughter, Eleanor. She was taught reading, writing and also learnt about modern European children's games.

In 1843 the Franklins were recalled to England and Mathinna was sent to the Queen's Orphan School in Hobart. She was 8 years old. A year later she was sent back to Flinders

Island only to be returned to the Orphan School. In 1851 she was sent to re-join her people at Oyster Cove.

The Oyster Cove group did not accept Mathinna's 'white ways'. Her life quickly descended into one of loneliness and desperation. Her culture, her identity and her personal sense of self-worth had been ravaged and she died in terrible circumstances in 1856 at the age of 21.

Mathinna was one of Australia's first stolen children. During her time spent living with the Franklins, she was introduced to the ways of privileged society, and accepted as a member of their family. When she returned to her Aboriginal community, she was caught between two cultures where her identity and sense of belonging were intensely disrupted.

### ***Mutton Bird (an excerpt from Mathinna, 2008).***

#### ***...what is Mutton Bird about?***

*Mutton Bird* is a contemporary dance representation of the mutton birds (shearwaters) that inhabit the coastal areas of Tasmania, and their significance as the totem to the clan to which Mathinna belonged. The dancer representing the Father of Mathinna is seen briefly in the opening scene of the clip.

Mutton birds are also one of the main sources of food for the aboriginal people of Tasmania.

Mutton birds are large birds who make their nests in the ground. In this way, they have a strong connection to land, and the people who share the land with them.

#### ***...some specific features of Mutton Bird***

Three dancers from the Bangarra ensemble perform *Mutton Bird*. The dancers are seen suspended in the air, with their feet secured by foothold that are built into a solid beam.

The shapes that the dancers create with their bodies, as they are suspended upside down, reflect the mutton birds as they hover above the ground. The dancers move mostly in unison – slowly twisting and turning, smoothly folding their bodies upwards and unfolding them back down. The dancer in the centre of the three suspended dancers is featured. He remains in the light as he releases his body to the floor to stand on two legs as a man.

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

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

*Mutton Bird* 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***

Image of mutton bird gatherer in Tasmania

<http://www.nma.gov.au/collections-search/atsiaa/display.php?irn=146780>

Information about the harvesting of mutton birds.

<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au>

Image and information about the hunting of mutton birds.

<http://www.nma.gov.au/collections-search/atsiaa/display.php?irn=146780>

### ***Acknowledgements***

Choreographer	Stephen Page
Composer	David Page
Set designer	Peter England
Costume designer	Jennifer Irwin
Lighting designer	Damien Cooper
Dancers in this clip (2010)	Sidney Saltner, Daniel Riley McKinley, Perun Bonser
Dancers original cast (2008)	Sidney Saltner, Daniel Riley McKinley, Perun Bonser

### ***Class Activities: Years 5 & 6***

#### **Overview**

In this dance, mutton birds represent the totem or spirit of the clan; a life source of food for the traditional people.

#### **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 how they might be able 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 practise 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 being an audience member, 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 mutton bird look like and how does it move? What are its habits and rituals? (nesting, feeding, migration, habitat)
- Where in Australia is this bird found?

- What are some other names used to describe this bird? (The Short-tailed Shearwater or Slender-billed Shearwater, *Puffinus tenuirostris*, Yolla or Moonbird)
- Does this type of bird live anywhere near you?
- Why is this bird killed for food and where does this happen?
- How are the chicks of this bird 'harvested'?

Expand students understanding that contemporary Indigenous people participate in all facets of the community and as artists they may choose to communicate ideas based on traditional stories including those relating to animals which represent spirits.

- Who are the Aboriginal people/s who live in Tasmania?
- What is a cultural advisor?
- Who are the dancers of Bangarra? Where do they come from?
- Where is the company Bangarra based?

### 2) As you view

Ask the students to watch and listen to the 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?
- What position are they in?
- Are they male or female?
- What are they wearing?
- What is on their skin and hair?
- Do any of the dancers leave the stage? When?
- One of the dancers is holding something. What is that?
- From which body part/s are they hanging?

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

- Which dancer do you think has a different role in the dance to the others?
- How can you tell he is different?
- Why do you think the three dancers are hanging upside down?
- There is a stick-like pole prop above the dancers. What could this represent?

The dance *Mutton Bird* represents a life source of food for the traditional people.

- Why might the choreographer have chosen to represent the mutton birds in this way?
- Why is the harvesting of these birds important to Tasmanian Aboriginal people?

Collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions about the hunting and harvesting of mutton birds. (see the Links section of this resource)

Movement and meaning

- Do the dancers look anything like the real mutton birds?

## Bangarra Dance Theatre Education Resource

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- Describe/draw the formation of the three dancers on the pole prop?
- Do the dancers move like the mutton birds? In what way/s?
- Some of the dancers' movements look like 'reaching'. What could this represent?
- What might some of the other movements represent? Is there any emphasis placed on any particular movements? (repetition, size)
- The dancers make special shapes with their bodies. Why are the dancers arms held at angles?
- Why do the dancers eventually leave the pole prop? If this is a transition for the spirit of the bird, what could it mean?
- 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 background, floor, props and the lighting (colour, brightness, point/s of focus).
- The dancers' bodies are heavily decorated with body paint. Why?
- Which sounds and instruments can you hear in the music (soundscape)?
- The performance is on a stage in a theatre. Is this a traditional or contemporary place for Aboriginal people to dance?

### Societies and Cultures

In the dance *Mutton Bird*, the bird represents the totem or spirit of the clan.

*A totem is a being, object, or symbol representing an animal or plant that serves as an emblem of a group of people, such as a family, clan, group, lineage, or tribe reminding them of their ancestry (or mythic past)*

Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition, 1999..

- In what way is the mutton bird a totem for some Tasmanian Aboriginal people?
- Why is it important for Aboriginal people to continue cultural practices?
- What are some of the cultural practices your family does each year? These may not include hunting but may include shopping for or preparing specific things to eat.
- Do any of these involve specific songs, movements or dances?

## 4) Next steps

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

- Explore different movements: stretch, reach, extend, twist, pull, push, drop, expand, contract.
- Experiment with these movements balancing on different body parts.
- Move on different levels (high medium low) on the spot and when travelling.
- Explore leg and arm gestures that lead toward, away from and around your body.

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another.

- Read the information found in the link to Tasmanian Parks & Wildlife Service, and look at the diagram describing the migration of the Mutton Bird. The Shearwater or mutton bird negotiates an incredible 30,000 km migration journey from the Arctic

Region all the way to the southern parts of Australia. Once on our shores, they return to the same burrow every year where each pair lays just one egg.

- Draw a map of the migration flight of the Shearwater.
- Explore moving in specific ways to different places in the room, for example, run, then walk, then slide, then crawl. When you arrive at a nominated place change your movement to represent the instruction given to you. eg jump on the spot, make wide and low movements, spiral to the floor.
- Take turns leading a group travelling different pathways.
- Draw a map of your daily 'migration' to and from school. Draw all of the corners you turn, steps you climb, and roads you cross. Provide symbols for different sections of your trip. Eg: for walking up steps, riding a bike, catching a bus. Choose a movement to represent each of these symbols. Use these movements and map to travel around the space.
- Explore different dynamics as you vary your movements.

Make dance sequences

- Select your favourite parts of your dance map 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.
- Make soundscapes to accompany the movement. Use contrasting sounds to support the use of energy in particular sections of the dance.

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

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

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

- Try taking turns performing each of your action's levels and body part's sequences - A then B.
- Join both sequences so that they flow from one to the other. A joined onto B.
- Try contrasting your sequences by performing them both at the same time.
- Perform both of your dance map sequences at the same time. A and B. What happens when you overlap?
- 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 their art works

- Combine several different dance map sequences in the one space. Choose different or the same destinations. Reverse this process to return to your starting points. PSC
- Is there a story in the dance?

## Bangarra Dance Theatre Education Resource

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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? PSC

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?
- What movements could you learn, and use in a dance, based on gathering food and other cultural practices?

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