



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

Recommended for years 3 and 4

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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.<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 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 costumes 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, practising 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 3 & 4***

#### **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?

- Have the students experienced moving their body both individually and with others; showing awareness of their body in space and in relation to objects around them?
- Do they have an awareness of position and understand the difference between different parts of their body, moving in different directions, levels, shapes and pathways?
- Can they move with another person and explore moving around, side-by-side and in front and behind?
- Do the children understand that movements can be used to explore and improvise dance ideas for example gliding like a bird, jumping in the mud?
- Do they realise that it is possible to interpret meanings from watching dance and that when part of an audience it is important to concentrate on experiencing the dance by watching and listening?

Pose questions to expand their knowledge of the ideas the dance is based on.

- What kind of animal is a brolga?
- Can you find out its name in an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language? What is the name and where is this language spoken?
- What does this bird look like?
- Have you ever seen a bird with long legs?
- Does this bird have a nest? What does the nest look like?

Bangarra is a company of Aboriginal and Torres Strait dancers based in Sydney. The dancers are from all different parts of Australia. Pose questions that expand students' knowledge about where and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people live. 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 which represent spirits.

- Where do the brolga live?
- Where is Arnhem Land? Who does the land there belong to?
- Who are the dancers of Bangarra? Where do they come from?

##### ***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?
- Where do the first group of dancers come from?
- 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?
- What does the mound behind the dancers look like?
- Where do the dancers go 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 girl?
- Why do you think the girl is on her own?
- How can you tell she is different?
- What do you think she is doing?
- 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?

Collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions about brolgas, 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?
- What shape do the five dancers make around the girl?
- Towards which direction is the big group of dancers facing?
- What do you think the dancers' arms represent when they are long? What do you think they represent when they are bent at the elbows?

Non-movement aspects

- Why are the stage lights blue?
- There is a lot of dust on the stage. What do you think it is? What do you think it represents?
- The composer has described the music as a soundscape. Which sounds can you hear? Which are manmade (by musical instruments) and which are natural?
- What is a didgeridoo?

### 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?
- Think of a bird perched on a tree branch. Copy the way it might look around to see other birds. Use your shoulders and arms to show that a bird's wings are folded at their sides. Use your toes and ankles to show how a bird might cling onto a branch.
- Think of a bird with a long neck. Using all your body, explore looking up, around and down on the ground. Now just use your arm to show the same ideas.
- Think of a bird with long legs. How does it move when it is in a hurry? How might it move when it is moving slowly?

Transfer and apply information in one setting to enrich another.

- Explore floor pathways. Follow a leader who 'draws' a line on the floor with their travelling pathway. Walk in curved pathways then in straight pathways.
- Meet then part with a partner or a group.
- Form a circle around an object or a person, move around, towards or away from the centre of the circle.

Make dance sequences.

- Explore different ways of moving in a group: running, galloping, sliding and crawling.
- Watch another animal which moves in groups (fish, kangaroo, ant). What formation does this group make?
- Choose pathways (curved, straight, changing direction) to travel.
- Use some sounds to accompany the movement. Do some sounds suit the different ways of moving more than others?
- Move from small groups to large groups then back to moving as an individual or pair.

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

- Experiment with making shapes with different parts of your body. Try making round, elongated, symmetrical and asymmetrical shapes.
- Choose your four favourite shapes. Taking turns with a partner, make one of your shapes, then repeat it while your partner copies you.
- Do the same with your partner's first shape. Keep doing this for all of your shapes. Repeat this sequence of eight shapes with your partner.

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

- Make and record a series of sounds to use as a sound track for dance. Does this soundtrack alter the way you move?

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

- Try moving with increasing speed or slowing down. Does it look more natural (like a group of animals) to move exactly at the same time or at slightly different times?
- Do certain pathways or formations remind you of flight or gathering around a waterhole?
- What are some of the things that a chosen animal may do?

## Bangarra Dance Theatre Education Resource

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Communicate ideas through art works.

- Combine a sequence based on travelling, one of the sequences using a specific formation and a sequence of different shapes. Choose the order in which you will 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 shapes? Did they see a story?

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?
- What did some of the shapes you chose remind you of?
- How did the dance begin and how did it end?
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