



You are here: | [Home](#) | Culture

Keeping culture strong

05 Oct 2017

Author: Alex Lalak

Photography:

Video:

He's one of the longest standing artistic directors in Australia, but Bangarra Dance Theatre's Stephen Page has nothing but fresh ideas and enthusiasm for the future of Australia's leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts organisation.

Tags

[Culture](#)







Almost three decades in the same job is a long time in anyone's book, but multi-award winning director and choreographer Stephen Page is even more passionate about Bangarra Dance Theatre than ever before.

This year marks his 26th anniversary with Bangarra, one of Australia's leading performing arts organisations, and Page has overseen almost all of the company's 37 works and 25 international tours.

"I really do have the best job in the world," he says.

The key to the company's success – and Page's remarkable stewardship – has been a continual respect, sensitivity and deep connection to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, as well as an ongoing commitment to authentic storytelling through dance.

"We're not an art for art's sake company," says Page. "We carry heritage and cultural values, and we truly can say that we celebrate our heritage in a modern and contemporary way."

The company's annual overseas tours are a crucial part of this celebration, as they allow Page and his team to reach new audiences and share this heritage.



Connecting cultures through dance

But, even more, Page sees these tours as opening the door to cultural exchanges, as opportunities to connect with the First Nations people in other countries and to develop a crucial international dialogue.

He recalls a particularly touching series of experiences when the company toured North America in 2001. Small groups of First Nations people were drawn, through word of mouth, to Bangarra performances across the country and were deeply moved by what they saw, often remaining behind after the curtain came down to meet and interact with the dancers.

“They would just sit in the front row and cry because it inspired them,” says Page.

“I think they were connecting to the spirit of what we were doing and the language was so similar to the cry and call in their own singing. Then they would come and hold little ceremonies for us outside after the performance and we would stand in a circle and share a native drink out of a bowl.”

Bangarra productions resonate just as strongly with audiences in Australia and the company's latest offering, *Bennelong*, has been playing to sold out houses. It is an ambitious work about a poorly understood chapter of Australian history, and it clearly demonstrates how far the company has come over the years.

The work focuses on Woollarawarre Bennelong, a senior man of the Eora, from the Port Jackson area in Sydney. With extraordinary curiosity and diplomacy, Bennelong led his community to survive a clash of cultures, and left a legacy that reverberates through contemporary life.

“We wouldn’t have been able to do Bennelong ten years ago,” says Page. “We needed the experience of the dancers, the language, the glossary of movement that we’ve been able to accumulate and shape after all these years. Bangarra has a very specific physical language today but that is only because of the 37 stories that we have been able to make over the years.”

A story that needed to be told



“The work has really resonated with people,” says Page. “We’ve had to put emotion and spirit and cultural intellect into [the history]. We’ve learned a lot because we didn’t learn about this in history at school and a lot of this was put under a shame cloud.”

The production is just one of many of the projects Bangarra has scheduled in 2017.

In October, the company tours Europe for performances in Bonn and Berlin as part of Australia Now, a year-long program showcasing Australian culture in Germany, and in Copenhagen, with a varied program that includes Spirit, a blend of Bangarra’s best work from over the years. In late November, they’re presenting the triple bill Ones Country – The Spine of Our Stories at Carriageworks in Sydney’s inner west.

Add to this the company’s annual Return to Country performance in the Torres Strait Islands, a regional tour of Frances Rings’ Terrain and the youth program Rekindling, which connects young people with culture through dance, and it is clear Bangarra is not just sustaining itself in a difficult arts climate but actually growing and flourishing, and finding new and inspiring ways to connect with traditional communities.

“Traditional communities love our contemporary expression, and they love it when we learn from them and are inspired by their stories,” Page says. “We theatrically take [the stories] on another totally different contemporary dreaming, and they appreciate that we don’t distil or stagnate the flow of the spirit.”

2017 has been an exceptionally successful year for Bangarra Dance Theatre.

Fulfilling a dream

Yet Page, who grew up in a family of 12 children in Brisbane and credits his parents with instilling in him what he describes as a “beautiful sense of principles and values related to respect and family”, is, as always, looking ahead.

He is full of plans for the future, and dreams of building a cultural bridge between First Nations people in the northern and southern hemispheres based on a shared sense of land and tradition. It's ambitious, ground-breaking stuff on an international scale. But, if anyone can pull it off, it's Page, who clearly isn't planning to stop anytime soon.

“People keep asking me when I'll retire but I'll know when it's time to move on,” he says, with a chuckle. “Right now, I feel like I've just started.”

Find out more about [Bangarra Dance Theatre](#).
