



Getting Together

The Bangarra Dance Theatre and the Australian Ballet

Michelle Potter examines Stephen Page's *Rites* and the groundbreaking partnership between two very different dance companies

Igor Stravinsky completed his monumental ballet score *The Rite of Spring* in 1913. Vaslav Nijinsky created a scandal—'Paris's most cherished theatrical riot', one American commentator wrote recently—with his choreography to it for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris in the same year. Both the press and audiences argued vehemently about the merits of the production. The furor was so great at the premiere that this original version of the ballet was performed only six times after the opening night. Since then the Stravinsky score has

been used by many distinguished choreographers from around the globe including Léonide Massine, Maurice Béjart, Kenneth MacMillan, Glen Tetley and Pina Bausch—Russian, French, English, American and German respectively. Australia's Stephen Page, director since 1991 of Bangarra Dance Theatre, added his name to this celebrated list when, in 1997, he created his own distinctive version for the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts. Page gave his work the name *Rites* and it was an historic collaborative venture between his own company and the Australian Ballet. In an unprecedented move, Page choreographed *Rites* on dancers from both companies.

Page, with strong paternal kinship ties to the Yugambeh tribe of south-eastern Queensland, grew up in an urban environment in Brisbane where, with his 11 siblings, his future career

Tim Webster (b.1965)
Bangarra dancer Albert David and Australian Ballet dancer Miranda Coney, State Theatre, Victorian Arts Centre 1997
colour photograph; 16 x 20 cm
Pictorial Collection P2098/32

in the theatre was nurtured in concerts in the kitchen of the family home, even at times on the laundry roof. 'A diversity of music and rhythms was always floating through the house,' he says. His formal dance training was at NAISDA College, a tertiary training institution in Sydney whose aim is to provide opportunities for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to explore, express and present the identity of Australia's indigenous cultures through dance and theatre performances. After Page's graduation from NAISDA, where he had choreographed his first major work, *Warumpi Warumpi*, for a choreographic workshop in 1984, a job with Graeme Murphy's Sydney



Dance Company followed in 1986. In what now seems like a moment of fate, one of the works in which Page performed during his time with Sydney Dance Company was Murphy's *Poppy*, a piece that looked at the life of that French gentleman of many artistic talents, Jean Cocteau. *Poppy* included one scene that focused on the backstage dramas surrounding the opening of the Stravinsky/Nijinsky *Rite of Spring*. On that opening night the noise from the audience was so disruptive that none of the dancers could hear the music. Choreographer Nijinsky was forced to stand in the wings stamping, shouting and counting for them. Page was cast in this role in *Poppy*.

Page first worked with the Australian Ballet in 1996. For a triple bill of works by Australian choreographers, Page created *Alchemy*. Unlike *Rites*, a two-company collaborative venture, *Alchemy* was made solely on the dancers of the Australian Ballet. It was a piece that Page called 'a metaphor for mankind's propensity to quest for gold versus our need to respect the spiritual essence of nature'. Conceptually Page linked the four parts of *Alchemy*, 'Mercury', 'Salt', 'Lead' and 'Gold', to the landscape and this link was expressed in both

the choreography and the music. The score was specially composed by David Page, one of the siblings who had performed in those early family concerts. Both choreographer and composer tried to make manifest their attitudes towards the depletion of the landscape through mining and the need to respect the landscape as a source of spiritual energy.

Rites also centred on a conceptual, choreographic and visual examination of landscape. Page aimed in the work's six parts, 'Awakening', 'Earth', 'Wind', 'Fire', 'Water' and 'Dreaming', to present an exploration of the natural forces that determine Australia's ancient landscape, and to capture the spiritual essence of those forces. In its final form, however, the new dance work did not create a scandal as Nijinsky's interpretation of the Stravinsky score had done. Nijinsky's choreography shattered every received notion about dance. It was anti-balletic. It was modernist. It was aggressively anti-establishment in every conceivable way. Page's *Rites* on the other hand was relatively comfortable choreography. It was an easy mix of the various contemporary dance vocabularies that Page had studied in the course of his career, juxtaposed against references

Tim Webster (b.1965)

Australian Ballet dancers: (left to right) Lynette Wills, Paula Baird, Vicki Attard, Helene Shields, (at rear) Miranda Coney and Lucinda Dunn. Rites rehearsals, Australian Ballet Studios 1997
colour photograph; 16 x 20 cm
Pictorial Collection P2098/31

to indigenous dance. Indigenous references occurred especially in the sequences for the charismatic indigenous performer Djakapurra Munyarryun, who is also Bangarra's cultural consultant and the source of the company's traditional knowledge. Nevertheless, *Rites* was challenging in its own way. What it did do was bring together dancers from two disparate companies, dancers with decidedly different traditions and ways of working, and to give those dancers opportunities to work outside their usual environment.

The National Library of Australia recently bought a collection of photographs documenting the rehearsal period for *Rites*. These photographs, shot in the studios of the Australian Ballet in Melbourne by freelance photographer Tim Webster, document a range of activities, endeavours and emotions. They are not promotional photographs and thus give a candid view of the creative



process. Page himself appears in a variety of moods: reflective, energised, powerful, light-hearted, creative. Djakapurra Munyarryun is an imposing presence in every

photograph in which he appears: strong, solidly built, inspirational and exuding authority. Bangarra dancer Albert David epitomises the solitude of the performer and the essence of

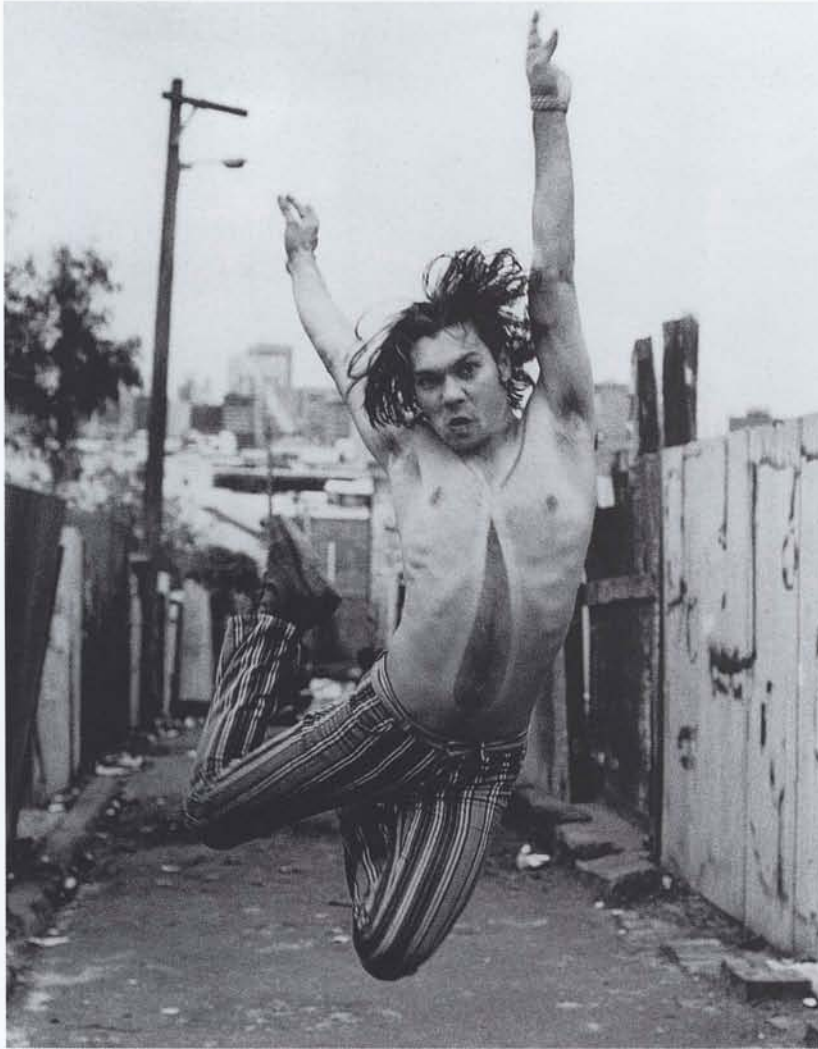
(left) Tim Webster (b.1965)
Australian Ballet dancer Timothy Harbour with Bangarra dancer Francis Rings. Rites rehearsals, Australian Ballet Studios 1997
 colour photograph; 16 x 20 cm
 Pictorial Collection P2098/16

(below) Tim Webster (b.1965)
Bangarra dancers: (from left, facing camera) Albert David, Gina Rings, Marilyn Miller, Djakapurra Munyarryun and (front right) Russell Page. Rites rehearsals, Australian Ballet Studios 1997
 colour photograph; 16 x 20 cm
 Pictorial Collection P2098/17

this collaboration as he stretches on the barre in a decidedly balletic pose. The dancers test themselves physically, trying group poses and lifts that push the human body into unexpected shapes and positions. Many of them share moments of humour. Images of Australian Ballet principal dancers Miranda Coney and Steven Heathcote and Australian Ballet soloist Tim Harbour are especially appealing for the commitment to the creative process that they portray.

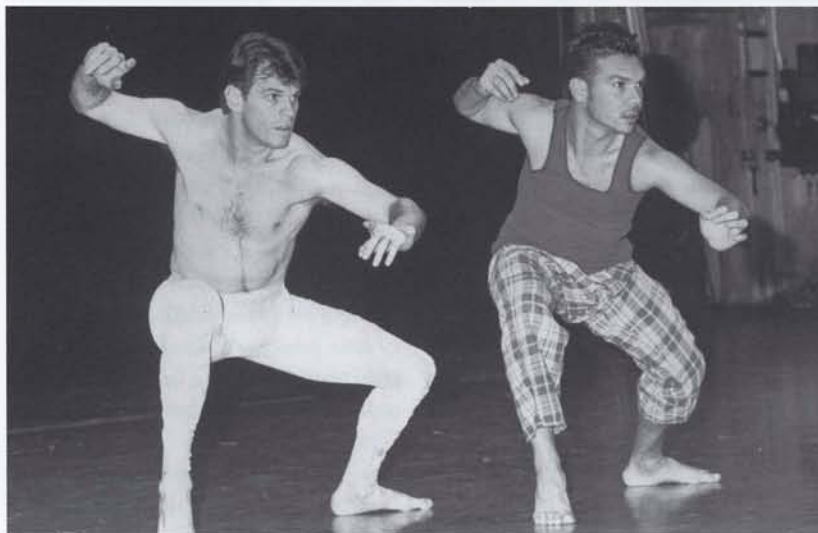
Some of the Webster photographs were taken at costume calls and at a dress rehearsal and show the impressive visual elements that were part of the *Rites* commission: the costumes by Jennifer Irwin, sometimes body-hugging, sometimes loosely draped over the body, sometimes a combination of both; the striking lighting design by Mark Howett that played across the stage floor and on the backcloth; and the powerful images of the landscape created by Peter England's set. Page is also active at the dress rehearsal, setting spacing on the stage, organising and adding detail.

In program notes for the opening season of *Rites*, Page wrote: 'I hope this work challenges some of the current preconceptions about indigenous peoples and propels us all along the path of reconciliation.' The Webster photos indicate in particular that the dancers who performed in *Rites*, with their vastly different traditions and backgrounds, found little difficulty in working together and, in fact, appeared to relish the cultural challenges that the collaboration presented to them.



(left) Angela Lynkushka (b.1947)
Portrait of Stephen Page 1993
 gelatin silver photograph on fibre-based
 paper; 50.5 x 41.7 cm
 Pictorial Collection P691

(below) Tim Webster (b.1965)
*Steven Heathcote and Stephen Page
 rehearsing 'Salt' for Alchemy* 1996
 gelatin silver photograph; 15.2 x 23 cm
 Pictorial Collection P1786



Olympics, landmark works for Bangarra were the company's first full-length work *Praying Mantis Dreaming* (1992); an appearance in *Black River* (1993), a feature film directed by Kevin Lucas; *Ochres* (1994) a work choreographed by Page in collaboration with Bernadette Walong that drew its inspiration from the essential ochre colours of yellow, red, black and white; and *Fish* (1997), a celebration of three watery worlds that Page named 'Swamps', 'Traps' and 'Reef', later adapted for television in 1998, representing Page's directing debut in the film medium. These works, along with Page's various other creations and his recent appointment as artistic director of the 2004 Adelaide Festival, continue to mark him as a major figure in endeavours to bring indigenous art to public attention—and, in particular, to create art that melds a traditional Aboriginal past with an urban Aboriginal present. *Rites*, however, remains Page's major cross-company, cross-cultural collaboration to date and one that is vividly captured in Tim Webster's photographs.

In addition to photographic material documenting Page's activities, other material relating to his career and to the development of Bangarra Dance Theatre in the National Library's collections includes the Bangarra web site archived as part of the PANDORA project and an oral history interview (TRC 3397) recorded with Page in 1996.

They are photos that document both the risks and the inspirational moments that characterise the creation of any work of art.

Page is now 35 years old and he and his company have a string of credits to their name. Perhaps the best known are Page's and Bangarra's involvement in the handover of the Olympic flag to the Sydney Olympic

Games Organising Committee in Atlanta in 1996, and their subsequent participation in both the opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games and the Olympic Arts Festival that preceded the sporting events. At the Olympic Arts Festival, Page premiered *Skin*, his examination of kinship ties across Aboriginal communities. Prior to the

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