THE IMPACT OF ABORIGINAL DANCE ON TWENTIETH CENTURY AUSTRALIAN CHOREOGRAPHY WITH A PRACTICAL AND CREATIVE STUDY

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

London Contemporary Dance School at The Place
University of Kent at Canterbury

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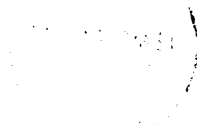

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ABSTRACT

Doctorate of Philosophy
Stephanie Anne Burridge

THE IMPACT OF ABORIGINAL DANCE ON TWENTIETH CENTURY AUSTRALIAN CHOREOGRAPHY WITH A PRACTICAL AND CREATIVE STUDY

The written thesis, combined with the practical and creative study, will encompass:

a) an exploration of the potential for traditionally-based Aboriginal dance to inform and influence choreography,

b) an investigation and analysis of previous Australian choreographic work related to this area,

c) a discussion of choreographic models that suggest how Aboriginal dance, as a resource, may influence and inform personal dance practice and in general, the sphere of dance choreography in Australia.

This study is undertaken by a practicing choreographer working largely from an aesthetic perspective; no attempt is made to present an anthropological study. Respect for the rights of ownership by Aboriginal people of their dances and the contexts in which they are performed is of paramount importance in this study.

Summary of Areas of Investigation:

Preface

A discussion of Aboriginal cultural conventions and a summary of historic, social and political events concerning Aboriginal Australia precedes a survey of the development of non-Aboriginal dance in Australia.

Chapter 1

An exploration of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal dance with reference to dances from a variety of areas, including Arnhem Land and the Central Desert. The parameters outlined in this chapter form the basis of the composition intention of the choreographic project.

Chapter 2

An investigation of the influence of Aboriginal dance and themes on Australian choreographers in relation to the contexts outlined in the Preface.

Chapter 3

The practical and creative study will be presented as a continuum of past experience and development. It outlines methodologies, processes and includes analysis of the performance project in relation to the thesis topic.

Conclusion

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Programme of *Journey ... a rite of passage*

Video tape of the choreographic project *Journey ... a rite of passage*

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The dancers of *Journey ... a rite of passage* gave their talent and artistry to the choreography and I thank Anca Frankenhaeuser, Patrick Harding-Irmer, Bernadette Walong and Kerrie Murphy, Amalia Hordern, Kirsty Hilson, Sandra Inman, Janine Ayers and Kellie Phillips from the Canberra Dance Theatre. Costume designer Kay Johnston, lighting designer Poppy Wenham, artist Robin Wallace-Crabbe and prop maker Bren Weatherstone created the production elements of *Journey ... a rite of passage* and I acknowledge their creative input and endeavours in this project. Dale Baker and Emu Productions video taped and edited *Journey ... a rite of passage.*

My sincere thanks goes to the Board of the Canberra Dance Theatre for producing the season of *Journey ... a rite of passage* and all those who assisted in the management of the production including Russel Cunningham, Charmaine Hallam, Kay Johnston and Debra Raymond.

The stories and characters that appear in *Journey ... a rite of passage* emerge predominantly from my family history and I honour Mavis and Trevor Burridge in Tasmania, and Joseph and Theresa Caruana, originally from Malta, in presenting these narratives.

My special thanks go to Wally Caruana and Michael Caruana for their support throughout the project and I dedicate the thesis to them.

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APPENDIX 1.

1. Programme of *Journey ... a rite of passage*

APPENDIX 2.

2. VHS Video tape of *Journey ... a rite of passage*

PREFACE

Aboriginal dance in Australia continues to evolve and manifest itself in the celebration of events both in remote settlements and in the city. Expressed through a complexity of movement vocabulary, dynamic and spatial variations, indigenous dance is a potentially rich aesthetic resource for creative artists.

The thesis addresses several areas of investigation including a discussion in Chapter 1 of formal elements occurring in traditionally-based Aboriginal dance; space, weight, and time. The use of these compositional elements forms the basis of the methodology in the Practical and Creative Study which aims to create a personal choreographic model informed by the study of aspects of traditionally-based dance. The object of the project is to explore a process that is conceptually based and informed and influenced by an understanding of Aboriginal cultural concerns.

This choreographic model, as outlined in Chapter 3 and realised on video tape in the choreography *Journey ... a rite of passage* will provide both a visual and written assessment of the potential for Aboriginal dance, as a resource, to inform directions specifically in my own dance practice and in the general sphere of dance choreography in Australia. In creating my dance work which acknowledges Aboriginal dance as a motivation and inspiration it is essential to investigate political and cultural issues of concern to indigenous Australians. The thesis raises questions concerning issues of ownership and copyright of dance material, intellectual property rights, appropriation and arrogation.

A study of relevant Aboriginal cultural conventions precedes a summary of important historic, social and political events concerning Aboriginal Australia. This information will provide a framework and context for

choreography which was created during periods of shifting social circumstances for indigenous people. Issues concerning rights to land, artistic integrity and intellectual property are commonly raised in public forums by Aboriginal people but are not unequivocally granted or resolved. A survey of non-indigenous dance performance and choreography provides a historical background to dance in Australia from the early years of European colonisation of the continent to the establishment of the national company, the Australian Ballet. In particular, Chapter 2 explores the influence of Aboriginal dance on professional non-Aboriginal dance choreography in Australia up until the present day and including the performance project, *Journey ... a rite of passage*. Through research and analysis of previous Australian choreography which is informed or influenced by Aboriginal dance, the extent of this impact, whether it proves to be substantial or superficial, can be gauged in relation to the social and political contexts of the day.

Reflection on past choreographic work will provide insights into the impact of Aboriginal culture on Australian choreographers and provide a context for my creative explorations in the choreographic project.

ABORIGINAL CULTURAL CONVENTIONS

Aboriginal Australia may be divided geographically into several main regions where, to a large extent, people maintain a 'traditionally-based' lifestyle; the Aboriginal communities within these regions are generally referred to as 'remote', (remote from the major centres of population), and are closed to outsiders; visitors require entry permits which may be granted at the discretion of the community. In general, these communities are found in Arnhem Land and surrounding areas in the Northern Territory, the Kimberley in the north of Western Australia, North Queensland, the Torres Strait Islands and the Central Desert regions. Aboriginal artists working in towns and city centres, here referred to as urban artists, often find themselves at the crossroads of western art forms and the traditions of

their Aboriginal culture; in dance, this point of contact has yielded a diversity and a number of innovations which are discussed in Chapter 2.

Aboriginal societies are not homogenous. There exists a diversity of languages, dialects, social structures, spiritual belief systems and customs which nonetheless, throughout Australia, share common traits such as the relationship to the land. Equally there exist varying accounts of the genesis. These accounts are now referred to as 'Dreamings' or 'the Dreaming'.[1] Dreamings include the chronicles of the creation of place and people; some Dreamings are localised and relate to a particular site while others travel over vast stretches of countryside in an intricate web which connects often distant clan groups. Individuals and groups own or are responsible for Dreamings and their associated ceremonial activity. The Dreaming itself encompasses all natural and supernatural phenomena and is tangible — it does not refer to a state of dreaming or unreality. The Dreaming is made manifest through revelatory experiences such as in ceremonies associated with initiations, death and mourning. Ritual recalls ancestral narratives, activates spiritual powers and reaffirms the relationships between people, their ancestors and the land. Dance is an integral part of these activities.

In referring to 'traditionally-based' Aboriginal dance in the thesis, it is acknowledged that this occurs in the contemporary sphere and is a continuing tradition. In remote communities dances can be categorised as either 'outside' dances which are those accessible to the entire community and are not considered secret, or 'inside' dances and 'closed' ceremonies that are restricted to those people who have access rights; exclusion is typically applied to uninitiated men and women. The complexity of these categories becomes evident, as the anthropologist Morphy explains, when the dances

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1 The term 'Dreaming', and 'the Dreamtime' has now been adopted by Aboriginal people although it is generally believed to have been first named as such by anthropologists Spencer and Gillen. It was their translation of the Aranda people's word *alcheringa* or *altjiranga*, which described the period when the ancestral beings defined the landscape and the way of life for Aboriginal people was established.

Max Charlesworth, Howard Morphy, Diane Bell, & Kenneth Maddock (eds.), *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An Anthology*, University of Queensland Press, Australia, 1984, p. 9.

occur within a ritual whereby certain phases are open, and others restricted.[2] Styles of dance vary across the continent; however as the aim of this study is not a comprehensive survey of indigenous dance, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 refer to a selection of examples of traditional Aboriginal dances and dance elements.

Training for dance begins when young Aboriginal children simply try to follow adults and then progresses to the learning of important ceremonial dances to which access may be gained at critical points in an individual's life, for example, at initiation. The dances are usually specifically for men or women with each group having their own ceremonies; however, both men and women often dance at the same time although spatially apart and with different steps. Dances are passed on from one generation to the next by elders of the community and through this system, virtuoso dancers may emerge and be encouraged as such — this aspect is discussed further in Chapter 1.

Singing is the main form of music in all regions, while instruments are considered to be accompaniment. The text of the song is paramount and may range in subject matter from describing, in metaphoric form, social organisation, historical events, the cycle of the regeneration of plants and animals, to above all, the power of the Dreaming. The drone pipe, or didjeridu, one of Australia's best known musical instruments, is used in Arnhem Land and north Queensland, while clapsticks are common to most areas, as is hand clapping, to accompany song. By way of contrast, the music of Torres Strait Islanders, who are Melanesian in origin, is melodic, incorporating drums and rattles made from seeds and gourds.

The concept of an audience in Aboriginal ceremony is a question for debate. In one sense, everyone in a community participates and everyone is the audience, even if they are not present. For example, people in particular kinship relationships, especially those in an avoidance relationship, must stay away for parts of a ceremony, even though their presence is essential in

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2 H. Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, p. 48.

others. This concept is elaborated under the heading, 'Notions of Performance' in Chapter 1.

Kinship structures connect people to one another, to groups and to the natural and spiritual phenomena of the universe; they exist as the basis of social and ritual organisation on every level. In Arnhem Land and the Central Desert, for example, the organisation of Aboriginal ceremony is a complex of set procedures which order the community into a series of defined roles among which the roles of 'owners' and 'managers' are fundamental. For example, among patrilineal societies such as the Warlpiri of the Central Desert, the category of *kirda* refers to those who have inherited direct patrilineal rights in, and ownership of, a place, ritual or Dreaming, and that of *kurdungurlu* denotes secondary or matrilineal inheritance where the individual's rights are of a custodial nature.[3] Dance in ritual contexts requires the negotiated interaction of both categories of people who have different roles, obligations and responsibilities in a ceremony. Ownership of dances is akin to ownership of copyright in non-Aboriginal society. A breach of ownership rights, for example, the performance of a dance not approved by the owner/s, is a criminal offence in Aboriginal society. In all Aboriginal communities, dance is part of a continuum and does not occur in isolation.

The Dreaming, the tightly inter–connected clan and kinship structures, and the relationship of Aboriginal people to the land have survived European colonisation. To indigenous Australians, these beliefs are fundamental in negotiating their position in relation to mainstream Australia; as a result there is an increasing public awareness of Aboriginal dance, music and visual arts as they exist today and these are being appreciated alongside current developments in the arts of Europe and America. As a consequence performing artists and musicians tour internationally, and exhibitions of

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3 Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, McPhee Gribble Publishers, Melbourne, Australia, 1983, p. 126.

Aboriginal art appear at major galleries and museums overseas.[4]

A SURVEY OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS ABORIGINES

Colonial perceptions of Aboriginal culture

It is currently estimated that Aboriginal peoples have inhabited Australia for at least 60,000 years[5] and settled the country from the Northern Territory to Tasmania. The British claimed Australia as a colony in 1788, however, there are numerous reports of previous encounters with Aboriginal people documented by expeditions of Dutch, Portuguese and French explorers. These reports range from descriptions of Aboriginal people as specimens of an 'early' form of humanity, comic caricatures in paintings and drawings, to more humane and positive accounts. Captain James Cook wrote of the Aborigines:

> They may appear to some to be the most wretched people on earth: but in reality they are far more happy than we Europeans ... in short, they seem'd to set not value upon anything we gave them nor would they ever part with anything of their own ... it is my opinion that they think themselves provided with all the

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4 Some examples of groups of Aboriginal dancers touring overseas include the North East Arnhem Land and Cape York dancers to New York in 1981; David Gulpilil and the Ramingining Dancers toured to the USA in 1987; Mida Dancers from Western Australia toured to the USA in 1987 and the Nyoongah Dancers toured to France in 1991. Perhaps the best known Aboriginal group of recent years is the band Yothu Yindi, which incorporates Aboriginal dancers in the performance. The band has an international profile and has toured to many countries.

David Horton (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* CD Rom, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies, Canberra, 1994.

5 Although research is continuing and dating methodology evolving, there is firm evidence of people living in Australia during the Pleistocene era. In particular, there are samples of bone beads found in Pleistocene layers of sediment at Devils Lair cave in Western Australia. Perhaps the most significant evidence to date is the discovery of stone artefacts at Malakunanja, south west of Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), Northern Territory, radiocarbon dated to an age of between 50,000 and 60,000 years.

David Horton (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia,* CD Rom, 'Prehistory' section, 1994.

necessaries of Life and they have no superfluities.[6]

During the early years of settlement there was some interest in Aboriginal dance as evidenced in art works and written accounts by colonists, ethnographers and later, missionaries and anthropologists.[7] Examples of prints, sketches, watercolours and oil paintings depicting Aborigines dancing, hunting, collecting food and engaged in traditional daily activities are numerous. Landscape painting failed to express the unique qualities of the new land, typically it reflected a European aesthetic. Art works were also used as a means of communicating government directives to both Aborigines and settlers, for example Governor Arthur's poster of 1828 explaining 'white man's justice'.[8]

Mid–nineteenth century ideology of social Darwinism positioned Europe as the most advanced centre of world culture and the native Australians as the most primitive; however, in Europe there existed a growing interest in 'primitivism'. Australian Aborigines were studied with the rationale of 'salvaging' aspects of a stone–age culture which was dying out and had no chance of survival. The notion that the Australian Aborigine was at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder led to intense interaction predominated by the collecting of artefacts, classification of native plants and animals, and the recording of aspects of traditional life. Comparisons with other Oceanic cultures deemed Aborigines to be 'hard primitives', hunting and gathering with little leisure time for cultural or spiritual pursuits; they were seen to produce material objects that were described as non-decorative, purely

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6 C.M.H. Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, revised illustrated edition, Penguin Books, Australia, 1986, p. 15.

7 Geoffrey Dutton, *White on Black: The Australian Aborigine Portrayed in Art*, MacMillan, in association with the Art Gallery Board of South Australia, 1974, Plates 3, 6, 8, 15 and 21.

8 The poster attempted to explain the consequences for either Aborigines or settlers attacking each other; both would be hung for the same crime.

Julia Clark, *The Aboriginal People of Tasmania*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 1986, p. 41.

functional, and of no artistic merit. The colonists' penchant to collect weapons reinforced the perception that Aboriginal people were preoccupied with the production of functional paraphernalia for survival rather than the creation of paintings, ornaments or similar aesthetic objects. This opinion prevailed although there was ample evidence of artistic activity. In the Hawkesbury and Hunter River regions, near the site of the first European settlement, rock surfaces were being painted up to fifty years after colonisation, for example, and many accounts of corroborees had been described and painted.[9]

The colonies continued to expand while throughout the country Aboriginal people fought to maintain control over their lands. This struggle led to some of the most shameful incidents in Australia's history, for example, in Tasmanian the number of full-blood Aboriginal people declined from approximately five thousand to just two individuals in the space of fifty years.[10] The concerted, bloody campaign to annihilate Aboriginal people occurred throughout the colonies and was coupled with scientific

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9 European artists who depicted Aboriginal dance included John M. Skipper, John Glover, William Blandowski and Eugene von Guérard. During the nineteenth century, Aboriginal artists created drawings which illustrated scenes from Aboriginal daily activities and the interaction of Aboriginal people with the colonists.

Andrew Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, in association with the National Gallery of Australia, 1994, pp. 6–7.

10 The colony of Tasmania was established as a penal settlement in 1806. Unofficial war was waged on the Aborigines by Governor Arthur in 1828 and in 1830 the notorious 'Black Line' was set up. The 'Black Line' was a military operation which involved, at one point, 3,000 civilians. A Government order directed every able-bodied man, whether convict or free settler, to work together to make a human chain across Tasmania to either capture or kill all remaining Aborigines. A boy and an old man were the only captives as most people were able to slip easily through the line. A contemporary estimate put the cost of the expedition at £30,000. The last fifty Tasmanians, it was assumed, were transported to reserves on Bass Strait Islands; many died of disease and maltreatment. The survivors were later removed to a new mission established on the east coast of Tasmania at Oyster Cove. Truganini and Fanny Cochrane-Smith were the last to die on this reserve.

Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin Books, Australia, 1995, pp. 117–119.

investigations which included the recording of language, song and dance.[11] Although documentation was the primary focus, there is evidence of admiration of the skill of Aboriginal dancing; for example, in 1830 there is a description of people dancing at Port Davey in Tasmania:[12]

> In 1830, Captain George Augustus Robinson made drawings of Aboriginal dance including several that were created in response to white settlement in Tasmania; for example, 'the horse dance'.[13] Robinson's commission was to round up the remaining Aborigines from the 'black line' and ship them firstly to a mission on Flinders Island, where most of them died of disease, and finally to the Oyster Bay settlement where two survived, Truganini and singer Fanny Cochrane-Smith.[14]

By 1901 the Immigration Restriction Act was passed in the newly formed Federal Parliament. This document, known as the White Australia Policy, decreed that Australia would benefit from a one hundred percent white population. Both the commonwealth and state governments legislated to implement this bill that specifically aimed at preventing the employment of

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11 Examples of such a study and analyses of the language, morals and daily activities of Aboriginal people, including hunting, games and amusements, are combined with osteological data by H. Ling Roth in his research on the Tasmanian Aborigines.

H. Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, Halifax (England): F. King and Sons Printers & Publishers, Broad Street, 1899, pp. 213–220.

12 Julia Clark, *The Aboriginal People of Tasmania*, 1986, p. 36.

13 George Augustus Robinson (1791–1866) was born in London and emigrated to Tasmania in 1824. He was noted for his well-intended yet devastating effect on the Tasmanian Aborigines while in his position as Protector of Aborigines. His detailed journals and sketches of the Tasmanian Aborigines, and aspects of their culture, remain as the best surviving record of the life of these people.

Geoffrey Dutton, *White on Black: The Australian Aborigine Portrayed in Art*, 1974, p. 35.

14 Fanny Cochrane-Smith was recorded by Horace Watson singing songs of her people in 1899 and 1903.

Julia Clark, *The Aboriginal People of Tasmania*, 1986, p. 39.

non-whites in the public service; for example, the 1901 Commonwealth Posts and Telegraph Act decreed that mail services could only be contracted to whites. Aboriginal people were severely effected by this discrimination. They were ineligible to vote, unable to receive old age pensions and were prevented from sharing accommodation reserved for white workers in shearing sheds and similar labour centres where they frequently worked.[15] This policy cemented the notion of white supremacy and in both political and sociological terms, further marginalised Aboriginal people who lived in virtual isolation on missions and reserves. In many instances, the missions were also 'keepers' of Aboriginal culture during this period allowing Aboriginal people to speak in their own language, sing, dance and continue certain aspects of their traditional life.[16] Missions still operate in parts of Australia today and have left their legacy in many ways; including a special style of line dancing known as 'action dancing' or 'church dancing' performed at gatherings for worship. This involves groups of performers, usually young women, choreographing arm actions to the words of a song while the feet simply follow the rhythm with a small pulse or a sway of the hips.[17] In addition to the church dancing, rock music from both live and recorded performances of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal bands, and televised rock video clips have impinged on the dance improvisations and

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15 John Pilger, *The Secret Country*, Vintage Press, London, 1992, p. 104.

16 Personal conversation with Banduk Marika about the Yirrkala Mission and her opinions about missions in general. Howard Morphy writes about the role of the missions in Arnhem Land in relation to their involvement in the sale of art works:

> Many of these missionaries had a syncretic attitude to their task, seeing the maintenance of Aboriginal culture as necessary to the morale of the population and it's long-term survival.

Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 1991, p. 15.

17 In Ramingining in 1987, dance groups choreographed a number of songs to present in the evenings at outdoor gatherings for Christian worship. I assisted the dancers with their choreography and was interested in the process they incorporated — this involved moving through from the beginning of the song to the end without breaking the song into sections that may change in space, dynamic or theme. Unlike a western approach to choreography where there would typically be the 'workshopping' of several ideas and a selection of appropriate sequences made, the Ramingining dancers would place each new step in sequential order without change.

entertainments that people in communities stage.

Assimilation Policy

In 1937, the Federal Labour Government, led by Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, adopted the 'Assimilation Policy'. This legislation was based on the premise that Aboriginal people were a dying race whose extinction would be softened by the implementation of the policy. It stated that Aborigines of 'mixed' descent were to be educated, 'detribalised' and adopted into the white community and all others were to remain on reserves whether they wished to or not. The taking away of children from Aboriginal parents occurred on a large scale and served to break up families by forced separation. Many of these children are now attempting to locate their families and reconnect to their Aboriginal heritage. The search for personal identity and cultural roots is a theme evident in examples of choreography discussed in Chapter 2 and remains a primary narrative source for urban Aboriginal choreographers, musicians and visual artists.[18]

During the ensuing years there was a period of intense anthropological interest in aspects of Aboriginal culture.[19] This increased level of academic interest, combined with first hand reporting of conditions on the missions

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18 Choreographers Stephen Page and Bernadette Walong, singer/songwriters Kev Carmody and Archie Roach and urban artists Fiona Foley and Richard Bell all exhibit these themes in their work.

19 Donald Thomson, Charles Mountford and Baldwin Spencer were anthropologists who researched and recorded Aboriginal cultural and social practices. The following sources document this research. Mountford and Spencer are of particular relevance to the thesis as their research inspired several choreographers — this is presented in Chapter 2.

Charles P. Mountford, *Brown Men and Red Sand*, Halstead Press, Sydney, 1950.

Charles P. Mountford, *Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expeditions to Arnhem Land: 1 Art, Myth and Symbolism*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, Australia, 1956.

Baldwin Spencer & F.G. Gillen, *Native Tribes of Central Australia*, Dover Publications, New York, 1968.

Donald Thomson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, compiled & introduced by Nicolas Peterson, Curry O'Neil Ross Pty Ltd, Victoria, Australia, 1983.

and reserves, led to an acceleration of government policy to improve the circumstances of Aboriginal people.

This policy was enforced until the 1967 Referendum which for the first time gave Aboriginal people citizenship through being counted in the national census. Since the early days of colonisation, tribes of Aboriginal people, their cultural practices, languages and social structures were decimated and many dances and ceremonies have been lost.

Land rights and self-determination

The first Bark Petition that was presented to Federal Parliament in 1963 argued for the ownership of land.[20] It was accepted by the government as an expression of a spiritual link to the land but not as evidence of ownership of the land under Westminster Law. Of particular significance to the thesis is the fact that Aboriginal people used art to negotiate a relationship with white Australia.

Waves of public protest in support of Aboriginal rights and calling for improvement of their living conditions gathered momentum throughout the sixties and seventies including several important events: for example,

20 The first of three Bark Petitions was presented to the Prime Minister R.G. Menzies and the Federal parliament by the people of Yirrkala in 1963. Among the key issues were that the government approved open-cut mining on Aboriginal land without prior consultation with the Aboriginal owners.

Parliamentarians Kim Beazley (Snr.) and Gordon Bryant visited Yirrkala and were successful in bringing the Bark Petition before the House of Representatives. It was presented in Yolngu (traditional language) and English and signed by 17 leaders of the community. The petition was made of stringy bark, and was painted in ochres with symbolic motifs and included a typed letter outlining grievances.

David Horton (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* CD Rom, 'History' section, 1994.

the 1965 'Freedom Riders',[21] the 1967 Referendum,[22] the 1972 'Tent Embassy',[23] and the 1988 Australian Bicentenary Australia Day protest. Forty thousand people attended the Australia Day march for Freedom, Justice and Hope which made it the largest protest gathering since the Vietnam War. Convoys of Aboriginal people came from all over Australia to celebrate their survival despite the injustices of the past two hundred years. It was a show of nationwide solidarity for Aboriginal people and also an occasion to celebrate the survival of Aboriginal culture in song and dance.

From the mid 1970's government policy in regard to the Aboriginal affairs has been aimed at self-determination.[24] From the beginning of colonisation until the landmark decision of the Mabo case in 1993, which acknowledged

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21 The 'Freedom Riders' began when thirty University of Sydney students, including Aboriginal Charles Perkins, set out to visit towns in Northern New South Wales in order to report on the conditions for Aboriginal people and the extent of racism in country towns. For example, in the northern New South Wales town of Moree Aborigines were not allowed to swim in the same pool with whites; the 'Freedom Riders' ignored this law and swam in the pool as a protest.

David Horton (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* CD Rom, 'History' section, 1994.

22 The government, led by Prime Minister Harold Holt, initiated a national referendum on 27th May 1967 that proposed that the government assume responsibility for Aboriginal people, and count them in the national census — thereby decreeing them, for the first time, Australian citizens.

David Horton (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* CD Rom, 'History' section, 1994.

23 The 'Tent Embassy' was erected on the lawns of Parliament House on 26th January, Australia Day, in 1972. It was called an 'embassy' to highlight the fact that Aboriginal people felt like foreigners in their own country with their rights ignored: they had no freehold title to any part of Australia.

The 'Tent Embassy' was torn down on 23rd July after a violent clash with police, and then twice re-established with a large amount of public support. In 1992 a new 'embassy' was established which included a highly publicised take over of Old Parliament House. The new focus was to establish sovereignty for Aboriginal people.

David Horton (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* CD Rom, 'History' section, 1994.

24 Policies initiated by the Labour Government, led by Gough Whitlam, included the support of decentralisation through the 'Homelands' movement which encouraged Aboriginal people to move back to their traditional lands.

Lorna Lippmann, *Generations of Resistance: The Aboriginal Struggle for Justice*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, Australia, 1981, p. 93–95.

prior ownership of land by Aboriginal people, it was assumed that Australia was *terra nullius* — that the Aborigines had no permanent 'home' bases and therefore they did not, and could not, 'own' the land.[25]

The impact of these events on Australian choreographers is addressed in Chapter 2.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EUROPEAN DANCE FORMS IN AUSTRALIA

Dance in the early years of European settlement

Australia enjoyed a diverse range of dance performances from the early days of colonisation. The discovery of gold in the 1850's in Victoria and New South Wales attracted not only prospectors to Australia, but dancers, musicians and artists from Europe and America. Divertissements in the Romantic tradition, performed by duos or small groups, were frequently staged in theatres throughout the colony, although populations were relatively small.[26]

Since its establishment, the colony of New South Wales had attracted educated men and women, including scientists, naturalists and historians

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25 Eddie Mabo (1937–92) began proceedings on behalf of his family and the people from Murray Island in 1982 to establish traditional ownership of their land; the case became known as the Mabo case. It was settled in the High Court of Australia in 1992; the ruling has far-reaching effects for Aboriginal people in Australia who may now lay legal claim to their traditional lands through the Native Title Act of 1993.

David Horton, (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* CD Rom, 'History' section, 1994.

26 Theatrical performances were staged as early as 1789 in New South Wales. Theatres, built by convicts, were erected on Norfolk Island, in George Street, Sydney (1832), Emu Plains (1825) and Parramatta. The oldest surviving theatre from these early days still in use is the Theatre Royal in Hobart. This was originally called the Royal Victoria Theatre and was opened in 1837 with the dances *Speed the Plough* and *The Child*. The earliest record of a ballet performance in this theatre was on 10th July 1837 with a production of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Katherine Brisbane (ed.), *Entertaining Australia: The Performing Arts as Cultural History*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1991, pp. 11–14.

who were familiar with the best theatrical traditions of Europe and America. Many of the free settlers were on relatively short term postings and journeyed back and forth to England with several of these trips resulting in the commissioning of artists to tour to Australia.[27] The engagement of European artists was part of a trend that has endured and enabled the small population in what was essentially a rough, inhospitable land, to see performances by some of the world's leading choreographers and dancers.

Dance continued into the twentieth century produced and performed by companies made up of visiting artists, family troupes and solo performers.

Establishment of a national ballet company

At the turn of the century, dance performances were supported by enthusiastic audiences. Dance schools staged productions and the stream of visiting artists continued. The following three decades were truly golden years of dance in Australia with tours by the Imperial Russian Ballet in 1913, and the Australian début of Anna Pavlova at His Majesty's Theatre in Melbourne in 1926 which was followed by a second tour in 1929.[28] In 1936

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27 Peter Bolger notes that in Hobart in 1850 there was an average of one ship per week from San Francisco bringing miners, settlers and artists. Similarly, a steady trade from Europe continued, enabling passengers to travel back and forth. Wealth from the gold fields ensured comfortable and relatively sophisticated lifestyles for the successful miners and their families.

P. Bolger, *Hobart Town*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1973, p. 67.

28 Examples of touring companies and soloists in the first three decades of the twentieth century include Anna Pavlova's 1926 tour; a troupe forty two dancers strong, including soloist Robert Helpmann who danced in Sydney during this period; and the 1936 tour of Australia by Colonel de Basil's Monte Carlo Russian Ballet featuring Hélèna Kirsova, Valentina Blinova, Leon Woizikovsky and Igor Yousskevitch as principal dancers.

Robin Grove, 'Balancing acts: ballet in Australia 1930–55', in *Voices: The Quarterly Journal of the National Library of Australia*, Paul Hetherington (ed.), Volume V1, Number 2, Winter 1996, pp. 23–28.

The exhibition, 'Dance People Dance', follows the history of these developments through the inclusion of photographs and drawings of the dancers, and through programmes and posters providing information about the repertoire and the companies.

Michelle Potter (curator), 'Dance People Dance', National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1997.

the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet featuring Hélène Kirsova toured to Australia; the following year Kirsova decided to settle in Sydney while in 1939, Edouard Borovansky and his wife Xenia migrated and opened a dance school in Sydney. Borovansky and Kirsova vied for financial support in order to establish the first Australian professional dance company; this occurred in 1940 when Hélène Kirsova founded the Kirsova Ballet. The company, however, closed shortly afterwards when Kirsova chose to reject financial backing from the powerful J.C. Williamson theatrical entrepreneur organisation. Edouard Borovansky then assumed the role of artistic director of the newly formed Borovansky Australian Ballet, later renamed the Borovansky Ballet, which toured nationally and internationally until 1961.[29]

Many future soloists of the Australian Ballet danced with the Borovansky Ballet; these included Kathleen Gorham, Martin Rubinstein and Laurel Martyn, all of whom continued to make a major contribution to Australian dance performance, choreography and teaching. Borovansky combined the talents of young Australian dancers with experienced international stars in programs featuring innovative choreography and classical repertoire. Some of the visitors who worked with the company included the dancers Margot Fonteyn and Michael Somes in 1957, and choreographer John Cranko, who in 1954 staged the Australian premiere of his famous work, *Pineapple Poll.*

After Borovansky's death in 1959, a new company, the Australian Ballet was founded in 1962 under the artistic direction of Peggy van Praagh. Despite Borovansky's successes, his popularity with audiences, and significant contribution to the development of original choreography, his productions were not included in the repertoire of the new Australian Ballet company. Twenty years later, under the artistic direction of Marilyn Jones, the Australian Ballet staged a tribute season to honour Edouard Borovansky, performing a triple bill of works associated with the Borovansky Ballet.

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29 Borovansky died in 1959, however the company continued with the same name until 1961 with Peggy van Praagh as the artistic director.

Edward H. Pask, *Enter the Colonies Dancing: A History of Dance in Australia 1835–1940*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, Australia, 1979, pp. 172–173.

These were John Cranko's *Pineapple Poll*, Michel Fokine's *Schéhérazade*, and David Lichine's *Graduation Ball*.[30]

In view of this history and post–World War II migration, it was not surprising that Australian dance continued to be developed largely by overseas professional artists who settled and opened schools of dance and established companies. Alongside this, the arts in Australia, until very recently, suffered from what became known as 'the cultural cringe', that is the attitude that only people who had studied, or made their career, overseas were suitable to play a major role in the development of the arts in Australia.[31] In this climate the emphasis was on perfecting overseas techniques and establishing companies that created and performed work that encompassed overseas trends.

Modern dance artists

Modern dance forms were well represented in Australian theatres from the late nineteenth century with visitors performing dances influenced by the leading exponents of new dance forms in Europe and America. For example, the American dancer, Miss Bessie Clayton, performed Loïe Fuller's famous *La Femme de Feu* at the Princess Theatre in Sydney in 1896 complete with

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30 Marilyn Jones was the artistic director of the Australian Ballet from 1979 until 1982. During this time she staged *The Borovansky Tribute* and commissioned three new full length ballets: André Prokovksy's *Anna Karenina* (premiered 26th October 1979), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* by Wells and Ogilvie (premiered 14th October 1981) and *The Three Musketeers*, also choreographed by Prokovsky (premiered 28th November 1982). Marilyn Jones also founded the Dancer's Company, which exists today as an important presence in Australian dance.

Charles Lisner, *The Australian Ballet*, University of Queensland Press, Australia, 1983, p. 50.

31 The term 'the cultural cringe' was first coined by A.A. Phillips in his essay of the same name written in 1958.

A.A. Phillips, 'The Cultural Cringe', in *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788–1972*, G. Serle (ed.), Heinemann, Melbourne, 1973. pp. 57–69.

the lighting illusions created by Fuller.[32]

In the 1930's a wave of exponents of modern dance arrived in Australia. Artists who had trained with Rudolf Laban and danced with Mary Wigman and Kurt Jooss arrived, including Sonia Revid in 1931, Irene Vera Young in 1932 and Norda Mata in 1936.[33] These artists, who gave recitals in individual, expressive styles, essentially introduced Australia to the new modern dance movements led by Isadora Duncan, Ted Shawn, Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham in America, and Loïe Fuller, Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman in Europe. These individuals opened the way for Gertrud Bodenwieser who established the first Australian professional modern dance company.

Initially Laban-trained, she founded the Bodenwieser Group which toured extensively in Europe from 1924 up until 1938; in this year she accepted an invitation to tour her company to Australia. During the period in Europe she created dance works of great potency and developed a rigorous training method which also involved the dancers in a philosophical understanding of the choreography. Ballet critic Arnold Haskell described her technique as, 'halfway between the Wigman method and classical ballet'.[34]

Lightness and optimism characterised much of her choreography which included folk dances from several countries, and movement studies to

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32 Katherine Brisbane (ed.), *Entertaining Australia: The Performing Arts as Cultural History*, 1991, p. 126.

33 Exponents of the 'free' dance style of Isadora Duncan performed in Australia; dancers included Canadian-born Maud Allen, in 1914, and Elizabeth Weiner, a pupil of Isadora Duncan's sister. Weiner stayed in Australia and opened a school in Melbourne in 1939. One of the students who attended this school was Margaret Lasica, who later made an impact on Australian modern dance with her group, the Modern Dance Ensemble.

Edward H. Pask, *Enter the Colonies Dancing: A History of Dance in Australia 1835–1940*, 1979, p. 60.

34 Shona Dunlop MacTavish, *An Ecstasy of Purpose: The Life and Art of Gertrud Bodenwieser*, S.O.S. Print, Sydney, 1987, p. 22.

classical music.[35] Such variety in the repertoire, combined with a diversity of techniques which demonstrated the technical skill and expression of her dancers, contributed significantly to the popularity of Bodenwieser and the wide acceptance of her work. Nevertheless, she is probably best remembered for her dance–drama works that express grim pessimism; for example, *The Demon Machine*.[36] First performed in 1923, this work established her reputation as a leading exponent of 'the new dance'. Reflective of the artistic spirit of freedom and dynamism in the age of the machine, the impact of this work in Europe was immediate. Bodenwieser's choreography combined the excitement of dynamism with a cautionary warning of the potential for destruction and the disintegration of the human spirit through the dominance of technology.

In 1938, Bodenwieser arrived in Australia with her dancers, family and musical director and opened a school in Sydney which still exists today. Choreography from Europe, such as *The Demon Machine*, was already in the repertoire and her performing company retained the diversity that typified her European programmes. The dance–drama focus was retained alongside her interest in the dances of other cultures and dances for freedom of movement. Of particular interest to this study are works choreographed with an Australian theme: these include *Waltzing Matilda* from 1946, and from 1956 both the major work *Central Australian Trilogy*, and the solo *Aboriginal Spear Dance*. Chapter 2 will place the 1956 works in a context of work by other choreographers interested in the exploration of Aboriginal

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35 Examples of these works include *Chinese Sword Dance* (traditional 1941), *Russian Peasant Dance* and *Mexican Village Serenade* (1942) and *Songs of Spain* (1946).

Shona Dunlop MacTavish, *An Ecstasy of Purpose: The Life and Art of Gertrud Bodenwieser*, 1987, p. 171.

36 *The Demon Machine* was choreographed by Gertrud Bodenwieser in 1923. It won a Bronze Medal at the Concourse International de la Danse in Paris in 1932. The *Demon Machine* was the first dance work performed in Australia that acknowledged the progression of industrialisation. The choreography, performed by female dancers, depicted them actually becoming a machine. Bodenwieser died on 10th November 1959, and this work and others were revived by her former students in a tribute performance in 1960.

Alan Brissenden, 'Critical memories', in *Voices: The Quarterly Journal of the National Library of Australia*, Paul Hetherington (ed.), Volume V1, Number 2, Winter 1996, p. 8.

dance.[37]

Another dancer, teacher and choreographer of significance to the development of dance in Australia was the Denishawn-trained Margaret Barr. After one year with the Martha Graham Company as a performer and choreographer, she resigned in order to develop her own choreography in London. Thirteen years later, in 1952, she opened a studio in Sydney and established the Dance Drama Group. With an interest in exploring the genres of dance and drama she initiated a new direction for modern dance in Australia and brought a different philosophy which was sustained by a strong, technical grounding from the Denishawn and Graham schools. Like Bodenwieser, Margaret Barr included revivals of her earlier American and European works, *Hebridean, Bread Line* and *Medieval Suite* in the repertoire of her Australian group; however, she soon embraced the riches of her new country. This led to the commissioning of music from Australian composers for choreography inspired by Australian themes, Australian writers and painters.[38] Major commissions included the choreography of Peter Schaffer's play, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun,* for the Festival of Perth and Adelaide Arts Festival of 1966 and *Judith Wright—Australian Poet* set to a text by the writer. During the following three decades, Margaret Barr developed a new dance language and influenced many students of dance and drama including Asian-born Kai Tai Chan. Chan was to extend these principles in a unique way with the establishment of his dance group, The One Extra Company, in 1976. At this point it is clear that migrants to Australia showed a greater interest in exploring Aboriginal themes in their work than local choreographers — this trend includes the work of Borovansky, Bodenwieser, Barr, Dean and Chan.

Professional dance continued to reflect a heritage in which the European

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37 Jill Sykes, 'Finding an Australian identity in dance', in *Voices: The Quarterly Journal of the National Library of Australia,* Volume V1, Number 2, Winter 1996, p. 42.

38 Margaret Barr, for example, worked with music composed by John Anthill, Roy Agnew and Richard Meale.

Edward H. Pask, *Ballet in Australia: The Second Act 1940–1980,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, Australia, 1982, pp. 72–73.

classical ballet techniques, including the British Royal Academy of Dancing Syllabus, the Italian Cecchetti and Russian Vaganova methods, coexisted and largely formed the basis of training. Contemporary dance movements were led by Margaret Barr, Gertrud Bodenwieser and later by their students, and until recently, those contemporary dance artists who travelled overseas to train.[39] These individuals were to be the key teachers, choreographers and performers who led a new wave of interest in modern dance that was not reliant on classical ballet technique for performance or choreographic vocabulary.

In his book, *Balletomane's Album* the British critic Arnold L. Haskell makes what must be one of the first and rare acknowledgments of Aboriginal culture as something worth examining as a source of artistic inspiration. He accompanied the tour of the Covent Garden Russian Ballet to Australia in 1938 and observed:

> It may be argued that the U.S.A. and Australia are not countries that inspire choreography. To anyone knowing these countries that contention is absurd.
>
> Let us take Australia, which may seem the most unpromising field of all. There is in Australia not only an exceptional love of ballet, but a truly critical appreciation ... There are museums rich in the lore and decorative art of a primitive race to whom dancing is a vital necessity. I do not say that the Aboriginal could suggest or even inspire a ballet, but all art, whether primitive or sophisticated, should be studied by the descendants of Noverre.[40]

Haskell also includes the now famous photograph of an Aboriginal, One

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39 Contemporary dancers who studied overseas include Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, Patrick Harding-Irmer and Jennifer Barry. Their contribution to Australian dance continues to be significant through performing, choreographing and teaching.

40 Arnold L. Haskell, *Balletomane's Album*, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1939, pp. 9–25.

Pound Jimmy Tjungurrayi,[41] in his book alongside that of ballerina Tatiana Riabouchinska with the caption:

> He is a great dancer ... so is she.

Professional dance did not appear to embrace this challenge in the early years, as no evidence exists of interest in Aboriginal culture by the leading choreographers of the day. It was not until Edouard Borovansky created *Terra Australis* for the Borovansky Ballet in 1946 that an Aboriginal theme appeared in the repertoire of a major company.

Recent developments in the dance, visual arts and music of Aboriginal people have promoted a new awareness of and interest in Aboriginal culture. The issues and implications of this movement as they relate to dance will now be addressed.

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41 One Pound Jimmy Tjungurrayi was popularly considered to be a fine specimen of a man in the genre of the 'noble savage'. The image of the near naked 'savage' looking up at an aeroplane flying overhead became an Australian icon appearing on travel posters and brochures and the front cover of Walkabout magazine.

Vivien Johnson, *The Art of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, Gordon and Breach Arts International, Craftsman House, N.S.W.,1994, p. 27.

Chapter 1

AN ANALYSIS OF THE FORMAL ELEMENTS FOUND IN A SELECTION OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN DANCES

> It is about finding the body, dancing and expressing yourself.....

Kathleen Petyarre, a dancer from the Utopia community in the central desert of Australia.[42]

In order to study contemporary dance choreography in relation to traditionally-based Aboriginal dance, this thesis adopts a method of investigation based on a choreographic model which correlates with that of Rudolf Laban. It focuses on the dance motion factors, specifically the use of space, time, and weight combined with observations of the effort (or dynamic) factors that apply to traditionally-based Aboriginal dance.[43] Combined with these elements, this thesis includes observations concerning

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42 Geraldine Green, interview with Kathleen Petyarre, *Sunday Territorian*, (Northern Territory, Australia), 18th August 1996.

43 Rudolf Laban defined motion and effort factors as a means of devising and describing dance:

Motion factors: time, weight, space and flow.
Effort Factors: includes percussive, vibratory, suspended, collapsed, sustained and swinging qualities of movement.

The effort factors, as described by Laban, are relevant to the study of traditionally-based Aboriginal dance in most instances although the terminology given to some of these elements may be rendered inappropriate. For example; the words dab, flick, wring and slash may take on other meanings in another culture. Similarly, Laban's word descriptors of punch, glide and float may serve to be cultural 'predispositions' which may cause confusion if used to describe gesture in an Aboriginal dance. For example, a dancer appearing to 'float' could be misconstrued to be in a metaphysical state whereas in this form of dance it may denote a completely different intention.

Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*, third edition, revised by Lisa Ullmann, MacDonald & Evans, London, 1971.

performance components which pertain to the nature of choreography, the use of narrative, music, elements of staging and notions of the performer and the audience.

Through the study of these elements, which can be applied to the investigation of all dance forms, I propose that Aboriginal dance may be analysed in terms of movement and production elements. Chapter 2 demonstrates that choreographers have sought inspiration from Aboriginal dance and have been influenced by their own observations of Aboriginal movement and narrative. This is a practical account of such a process; it incorporates analyses of Aboriginal dance forms and a performance work to implement and assess choreographic models. The aim of the process is to suggest a method for choreography which is informed and influenced by traditionally-based Aboriginal dance but which does not appropriate dance material, infringe copyright of intellectual property, or presume arrogation of one dance form over another.

As previously stated, the study has been undertaken by a practising choreographer in order to examine the influences of Aboriginal dance on professional choreography in Australia. The complexity and diversity of indigenous dance is acknowledged, and it is not the intention of this thesis to present an anthropological survey.

Introduction

Aboriginal dance offers several areas of investigation. These include the exploration of both function and context of traditional Aboriginal dances that occur in ceremonies in remote communities. Urban Aboriginal choreographers create movement which may be, to some degree, influenced by both traditional Aboriginal dance and the choreography of non-Aboriginal choreographers. Themes in urban works often depict racial interaction and the personal experiences of the choreographer. Both urban Aboriginal dance choreography and the ceremonial dances performed in remote Aboriginal communities exist as part of a dynamic evolution by

which Aboriginal cultural traditions coexist with new forms of expression.

Dance, as an ephemeral art, is a commodity that cannot easily be bought, traded or collected commercially by the outside world, and it is possibly for this reason that there remains a relatively small body of research in this area compared with other aspects of Aboriginal culture. Even the body paint and decoration used in traditional dance wears off, and the ground paintings incorporated in many ceremonies are obliterated through dance. In Aboriginal society, dance is considered a source of power and prestige which serves, through ritual, to mediate between the past and present. Rather than representing the ancestral beings, the dancers reveal them through their embodiment.[44] Knowledge of the ancestral tracks in the Dreaming is important to the understanding of the dances: the prepared dancing grounds, and progressions of the dancers on and around it, are typically orientated on these tracks. Ceremonial dance is not primarily intended for entertainment, although recently, dance festivals have been presented in which Aboriginal people gather to perform their dances for each other.[45] The latter are considered open or 'outside' dances although parts may involve dances that are associated with 'inside' rituals, for example, initiation. The order of the proceedings at these festivals may still incorporate aspects that are common to 'inside' ceremonies; for example, the dancers sit in 'shades', (designated clan-based areas where the dancers sing, paint up and prepare for performance), on either side of the dancing ground. Apart from the ceremonial dances, there are many entertainments

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44 'Revelatory' rites refers to a specific set of rituals associated with ceremonies in which the older people reveal secret dances, songs and designs to younger people in Arnhem Land. It occurs typically during stages of religious rituals including 'Gunapipi', 'Djungguwan', 'Ngulmarrk' and 'Yabudurrwa'.

Ian Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in Aboriginal Religion: Yolngu in N.E. Arnhem Land*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 193.

45 One of the first dance festivals took place near Laura on the Cape York Peninsula. Regular events take place on Groote Eylandt (Northern Territory), in Broome (Western Australia) and perhaps the best known is the Barunga Dance Festival (near Katherine in the Northern Territory).

David Horton (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* CD Rom, 'Culture' section, 1994.

involving dance, mime and drama, that are danced around fires in the evening and are performed by children in play situations, and incorporated into games and activities of their own creation. Dance is an expression of all aspects of life and embodies tradition and change. New dances are created in response to new situations and events, for example, the 'aeroplane dances' that occur from the Kimberley region of Western Australia to Cape York in Queensland.[46]

The following discussion addresses particular qualities and features of dance that are largely generic to the north east Arnhem Land area; comments pertain to my personal observations, research, and the study of films and paintings. Where appropriate, examples from other geographical areas will be included. The study is restricted to the examination of formal elements and does not include analysis of the function of these dances in a ceremonial context.

The term 'inform' will be used when referring to the combination of formal elements as they occur in traditionally-based Aboriginal dance; these include the movement vocabulary, the structural components, the use of space, and the dynamics. 'Influence' will be the term used to refer to the conceptual and overall thematic considerations.

These two strands encompass the focus for the investigation as to the potential for traditionally-based Aboriginal dance to inform and influence choreography and relate to the performance piece of the thesis, *Journey ... a rite of passage.*

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46 An example of one of the 'Aeroplane Dances' was created in response to the discovery of an American bomber plane that crashed in the Gulf of Carpentaria during World War II. The Aboriginal community was involved in searching for survivors from the plane and eventually located the dead bodies of two pilots and one survivor. A dance was devised in which the plane was recreated from spinifex scrub, and props and costumes made denoting the steering wheel of the plane and the wings. Dance steps were choreographed based on the plane flying and then crashing to the ground and the search for survivors re-enacted. This story, and the dance, was recreated twenty-five years after the event in order to document the dance with the original creators.

Aeroplane Dance
SBS Aboriginal Film Unit & Film Australia Production, Sydney, 1993.
Produced and directed by Trevor Graham.

WHAT DO TRADITIONALLY-BASED ABORIGINAL DANCE AND NON-ABORIGINAL DANCE HAVE IN COMMON?

A holistic approach to Aboriginal dance involves the study of dance as part of ritual; nonetheless, observations concerning universal dance elements can be documented. There are several common elements that occur in both traditionally-based Aboriginal dance and non-Aboriginal dance: for example, the body, the space it occupies and the 'truth' it portrays at the moment of performance with its physical, emotional and spiritual impact. Without knowledge of the cultural significance of a dance, interpretation of the thematic and narrative material is intrinsically limited, with only a superficial understanding of these elements possible. Nevertheless, there may be a universality in the perception of 'truth' in performance that has the ability to generate meaning through an understanding of a common human understanding.[47] Aboriginal people living in remote communities recognise a good rendition of a particular dance and consider it most important that the dances of a ceremony are performed well in order to ensure a good outcome. Standards of performance that are universally recognisable include maintaining focus, character, clarity in form and technical prowess in specific movements.

The body

Balance, rhythm, strength, flexibility and dynamics in the effort of movement are implicit in any dance form, as is the physical environment in which it occurs. The power of different parts of the body, and where the seat of the power is generated, is universally important and there are many examples of shifting emphasis in Western professional dance: notably, the

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47 This is a debatable issue, with many researchers, including Dr Drid Williams, arguing that gestures are empirical and culturally specific.

Drid Williams, 'The role of movement in selected symbolic systems', St. Hugh's College, Oxford, 1975, p. 163.

shift from the ethereal lightness of classical ballet, with the upward elevation of the body in space, contrasting with the earthbound gravitational pull, initiated and driven by the centre of the body, that prevails in the dance technique of Martha Graham.

In several Oriental dance forms the mobilising of the hips with the knees slightly bent is important, as this posture allows for a central base from which energy and movement can flow equally upwards or downwards creating a tension of balance. Specifically, many dance and theatre methods of training emphasise the tension of opposites: for example, in Balinese dance opposition is created by following hard movements with soft movements. In Peking Opera, the actor is trained to begin every movement in the opposite direction from its ultimate finishing point. A number of variations in both Oriental and Occidental training systems promote a balance of 'tension' that is different from how the body operates naturally. These balance points are central, and provide the possibility of various points of departure each facilitating complex and aesthetic movement that becomes powerful by the nature of its unnaturalness.[48]

In Aboriginal dance, the joints of the dancer are important not only for judging the dancers' skill, but also in terms of the ability they have as performers in revealing the ancestral beings. The knees are the focus for many styles of dancing for the men: one of the best known comprises the 'shake leg' dances that come from the Cape York Peninsula and are associated with Wanam people.[49] In her thesis, Franca Tamisari comments that in Yolngu language the term *bunggul* (from *bun'kumuk*: kneecap or knee) is referred to only in dancing, for example, in the question *'bunggul djäma nhethu?'* (are you going to dance?). The importance of the knees is further acknowledged as a mark of the young initiates' abilities to learn, not

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48 Eugenio Barba & Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, Routledge, for the Centre for Performance Research, London, 1991, p. 10.

49 This style of dancing is evident in the footage of the film, *Dances at Aurukun*, produced by the Australian Commonwealth Film Unit for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1964, directed by Ian Dunlop.

only the dances, but the ritual responsibility entrusted to them through this learning. Old men watch the knees of the young dancers moving up and down and the good dancers are said to have 'talking knees'.[50] In bark paintings from western Arnhem Land, images of Lightning Spirits are depicted with lines emanating from the elbow and knee joints and attached to circles at the other end: the lines represent streaks of lightning, the circles represent the smooth stones that are made when lightning strikes the ground. Similarly, the joints as points of entry for the infliction of pain are depicted in the sorcery victim painted by Jimmy Midjaw Midjaw with sting ray barbs protruding from the knees and elbows.[51] The metaphoric association of the joints with potential power, or loss of it, is reflected in the Yolngu meaning of the word elbow, *likan,* which can also mean the branch of a tree or a connection that is an abstract association with a link to the ancestors.[52]

In the 1950 version of *Corroboree,* choreographer Rex Reid noted the emphasis on the use of the knees in Aboriginal dance and incorporated it, with second position pliés, in his work. The use of the joints in angular configurations is an important influence on my own choreography. The powerful stamping, generated from the centre of the body, combined with the angularity of body form and intricate hand gestures flow together in a rhythmic pattern — I incorporated this concept in *Dance* for the women in *Journey ... a rite of passage.*

A general observation is that Aboriginal dancers perform with the feet slightly apart, often in the parallel position, with the knees bent and the body contracted so that the shoulders are forward from the hips. This enables both men and women to stamp the ground, run, skip and jump, balance on one leg, move the torso and gesture freely with the arms. Many

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50 Franca Tamisari, 'Dance: the embodiment of power', a thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London University, 1994, p. 25.

51 H. Morphy, *Ancestral Connections,* 1991, p. 310.

52 H. Morphy, *Ancestral Connections,* 1991, p. 310.

of the animal dancers, particularly mimetic bird dancers, require the dancers to freeze in particular positions balanced on one leg: for example, the Brolga dance that occurs in parts of Arnhem Land. This is a spectacular dance that includes high leaps, hops, and held positions with the leg bent in a parallel 'attitude' position behind. Elbows bend and 'flap' like wings and the dancer may interpret many observations of the bird feeding, preening and mating.[53]

Although there are many group dances in which all performers are doing the same movement at the same time, there is room for individual expression, interpretation and improvisation. The dancers do not seem to be concerned about keeping in exact time with each other by using identical movements: this tends to occur however because of the driving musical beat and the literal interpretation of song lyrics. Solo virtuoso dancing is expected in ceremonial dance and such dancers are esteemed, and valued, in the communities.[54]

The body in space

The study of the space and time in which dance occurs incorporates both a physical and a spiritual notion of time and place. These elements become complex in Aboriginal ceremony, and as studies have demonstrated, the structure of the dance and its organisation in the space describe and

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53 Researcher Elphine Allen describes the Brolga dances she has observed from the Rose River region of eastern Arnhem Land. There appear to be a great many variations in the movement that can include large leaps forward and jumps with a back knee lift which occur while simultaneously, the arms circle forward. The accompanying drawings illustrate the dancers in large movements with angular shapes, twist and turns. Allen also describes the transition from fast, circling movements and jumping sequences to sudden stillness. She writes:

> After two or three of these jumps, usually getting progressively higher, they stop quite still for a beat ... as a bird does when it is about to take a step but stops because it thinks it hears something.

Elphine Allen, 'Australian Aboriginal Dance' in *Australian Aboriginal Art*, R.M. Berndt & E.S. Phillips (eds.), Ure Smith, Sydney, 1973, pp. 287–289.

54 See the following section in this chapter titled, 'Music', for further discussion on virtuosity.

reinforce patterns of authority and kinship structures.[55] The use of space is an essential element in all aspects of ceremony, with areas designated for access, food preparation, the performance and the audience. Relationships between the dancers and the singers, the audience and the landscape are specific. Often spatial prohibitions come into play on the completion of a ceremony, for example, funeral rites that require the ceremonial area to be left alone for a significant length of time as it is considered polluted.

The building up of the parts of the story, and the power engendered by combining these components, transports the performers and audience to a spiritual plane of existence that is reinforced by the rarefied space (sacred ground) that the performers and audience occupy. This is spatially reinforced by the ritual separation of dancers, objects and audience from the mundane: this separation can include men from women and children, initiated from uninitiated, 'secret–sacred' objects from 'public–sacred' objects. Aboriginal ceremonies are highly organised, mapped out and are ultimately to do with knowledge and the hierarchy of access to this knowledge.

Within each dance, the patterns made by individuals or groups of dancers on the ground are important, and the clarity of these tracks is considered to be the mark of a good dancer. Invariably they describe, and through dance, relive the journeys, travels and tracks of the ancestors and their direction is predetermined and clearly defined.[56] This 'describing' occurs in an analogous and a metaphysical sense when a series of 'small' and 'big' dancers are combined in ceremony to embody the ancestors. This marking of the space is a concept that has been important in my own choreographic

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55 André Grau, 'Dreaming, dancing, kinship: the study of *yoi*, the dance of the Tiwi of Melville Island and Bathurst Islands, Northern Australia', a thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The Queen's University of Belfast, June 1983, pp. 266–310.

56 Franca Tamisari refers to tracks that evoke the ancestor's characteristic movements, giving the example of foot marks of progressive curves denoting the movement of the shark through the water.

Franca Tamisari, 'Dance: the embodiment of power', 1994, p. 17.

practice for some time[57] and I chose to accentuate it as a feature in the creative project. It is particularly apparent in *Storytelling 2* in *Journey ... a rite of passage* as the women circle the space marking the ground. Other characters mark or make contact with their space throughout the piece — the details of these moments and the choreographic intention is elaborated in Chapter 3 of the thesis.

The personal kinesphere of each dancer operates in a predominantly frontal plane that is only broken by solo virtuoso dancing.[58] Virtuoso dancers demonstrate an extraordinary variety of movement that may twist and turn in many directions; this dancing is usually performed in front of the group of singers as a climax to a 'big' dance. Apart from these variations, much of the movement is based on progressing forward in particular patterns and formations. While the male dancers incorporate high jumps and low, crawling movements into their dances, the women usually maintain their steps on a medium spatial plane that is restricted and contained. I incorporated this spatial configuration in the last section of *Journey ... a rite of passage* where the young women maintain a regular pattern of movement behind the small groups dancing in the front — this occurs in *The spirit within* up until the point where the central dancer breaks free

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57 The 1986 work *Distillations* featured dancer Raymond Blanco playing a young Aboriginal man coming into contact with two white women. His movement vocabulary constantly refers to the earth and incorporated many gestures that touch the earth and gather it up.

Two Tribes, 1988, began with a strip of sand that diagonally divided the stage. As the dance progressed, this line became obliterated and was used symbolically to denote the domination of one group by the other towards the end of the work.

58 The personal space that covers the natural boundaries able to be reached by the limbs of the body when standing still is known as the kinesphere. This personal kinesphere travels with the body and surrounds it as it moves through space. Notions of the kinesphere are further elaborated by Rudolf Laban in the reference below:

> The normal reach of our limbs, when they stretch away from our body without changing stance, determines the natural boundaries of the personal space or 'kinesphere' in which we move. This kinesphere remains constant in relation to the body even when we move away from the original stance; it travels with the body in general space.

Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*, 1971, pp. 38.

from the group. Similar juxtaposition of movement is used to a lesser extent in *Storytelling 2* where the impact of the unity of the group is the focus although individual dancers break away from the group and then return.

The body in time

The time frame of a traditional ceremony is dependant on many factors and varies from region to region and within a ceremony. For example, the length of a Pukumani funeral ceremony on Bathurst Island will depend on the importance of the person who has died, their age and their social status. Pukumani is the name not only of the funeral ceremony that occurs among the Tiwi people on Bathurst and Melville Islands, but also of a special period of mourning involving the kin of the deceased in various taboos and avoidance procedures until Pukumani is lifted.[59]

All ceremonies involve complex procedures that occur over time: this includes particular ceremonial preparations and the conducting of parts of a ceremony that do not necessarily progress in consecutive order. All ceremonies conclude with the arrangements involved in the return to daily life that sometimes incorporates new family relationships, status in the community and living arrangements. In these circumstances the significance of dance as part of life is clearly different from that of theatrical dance performance in the Western theatre.

Once a particular dance sequence is in progress, the rhythm and dynamic of the movement operate in similar ways to that of all dance. The dancer progresses with a sequence of pre-learnt steps that involves stepping, stamping, jumping, moving the torso, gesturing with the arms and legs, all of which include the use of high and low, fast and slow elements.

In ceremony, the use of repetition is important and the context of this is

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59 Jane C. Goodale, 'Tiwi World Views and Values', in *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An Anthology*, Max Charlesworth, Howard Morphy, Diane Bell, & Kenneth Maddock, (eds.), 1984, pp. 373–380.

significant and various. Part of the public aspect of the Djan'kawu ceremony,[60] for example, involves two dancers progressing around the community, stopping at various points, to perform a sequence of movement with the sticks that they carry. These movements embody the narrative of the Djang'kawu sisters who created fresh water holes with their digging sticks as they travelled.

In Arnhem Land the combination of songs and dances *(bunggul)* include 'small' and 'big' dances. Each individual dance may be short and include only one or two movement variations; however, it is the sequence, or cycle of dances together in a particular context that can denote the ritual importance and the extent of the embodiment of ancestral power.

Notions of timing of each dance within the cycle are open to a degree of interpretation by the dancers and singers, and their interaction. Cycles of dances in remote communities may proceed for many days or even months, however, when a *bunggul* is to be performed in the public domain, fixed time restraints come into play and the dance cycle may be adjusted accordingly. An example of such an event is outlined by Margaret Clunies-Ross in her description of the first performance of the Rom exchange ceremony presented outside of Arnhem Land, staged in Canberra in 1982 at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. Due to time restraints, the ceremony that usually extends over several weeks was compressed into a four day cycle. The synopsis of events demonstrates how the song series *(manikay)* from each of the two groups represented, *Djambidj* and *Goyulun*, were sometimes repeated, and the order changed as the ceremony progressed day by day culminating in the handing over of the

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60 This is a post-funeral cleansing ceremony, Dhuni Rurruwuy, part of the Djan'kawu ceremony, a major ritual of Central and Eastern Arnhem Land. The ritual embodies many layers of meaning, the celebration of fertility being a key element.

H. Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 1991, pp. 128–130 and p. 287.

Rom poles and icons to the host group in Canberra.[61]

Comparisons of 'timing' conventions of dance performance in traditional Aboriginal ceremonial dance and Western theatrical performance are complex. Several elements come into play which are various and variable, dependent on particular situations. Clunies-Ross and Wild discuss this complexity with reference to the integration and timing of performance elements in 'formal' and 'elaborate' *bunggul* in Arnhem Land. To conclude, they state:

> To compare disparate performance elements without taking into account the effects of different contexts and types of events on performance elements and their integration may lead to invalid conclusions concerning the character and differentiation of the items analysed.[62]

In the context of this thesis, the prevalence of a percussive dynamic combined with the overall concept of the grouping of short dances to make up a cycle is of particular interest and relevance to the performance piece. In particular, *Dance* features the women performing a suite of dances that concentrate on a percussive dynamic, intricate hand gestures and the

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61 Rom in Canberra was initiated by the Anbarra people from north central Arnhem Land as a gesture of friendship and appreciation of the relationship between the community and staff from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Margaret Clunies-Ross, 'Rom in Canberra', in *ROM: An Aboriginal Ritual of Diplomacy*, Stephen A. Wild (ed.), Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1986, pp. 38–48.

62 'Elaborate' and 'formal' *bunggul* refer to two distinctive styles of dance and characteristic movements for each. Movements involved in the 'elaborate' dances includes:
(a) moving in a circling motion around the dance ground;
(b) forming up in long lines at various points in the dance; and
(c) the exclusion of the high knee lifting leg stamp from the movement vocabulary.

The 'formal' style involves the performers moving towards and away from the musicians, commonly twice, and then on the third progression forward performing a sequence of high knee lifting leg stamps in a tight group in front of the musicians.

Margaret Clunies-Ross & Stephen A. Wild, 'Formal Performance: The relations of music, text and dance in Arnhem Land clan song', in *Ethnomusicology Journal*, May 1984, p. 226.

grouping together of small dances connected by a running step. Chapter 3 discusses the use of this format in detail.

The dynamic of the body

One of the most striking aspects in the performance of traditionally-based Aboriginal dance is the specialised, percussive quality of the movement. This dynamic is achieved through strong centring of the body with the feet driving towards the ground, freeing the torso and enabling the arms to gesture and move in opposition to the lower parts of the body. Both men's and women's dancing I have observed from north east Arnhem Land exhibit this dynamic.[63] This percussive quality extends to both slow and fast moving sequences; it is most complex and virtuosic when the dancer is moving quickly.

Frequently, the virtuosity demonstrated by the senior dancers is due to their ability to perform high leaps and intricate isolations that combine the torso, arm and leg movements in opposition. The dancers can then stop suddenly, freezing in a position that exemplifies the features of a particular animal, for example a bird or a kangaroo. It is rare to see any awkwardness in gesturing or problems of balance; the dancers are able to move easily from fast movements to a balance and are natural in their mimetic interpretations. Dance choreography may include sequences on all parallel spatial levels with the performers capable of long sequences of movement on the ground, continuous jumping, and moving from one level to the other all with the same, percussive dynamic. Although this is physically extremely

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63 I have made three trips to Arnhem Land and have maintained links with the communities of Ramingining and Yirrkala. My first visit in 1987 involved a one month stay teaching at the Ramingining School and it was on this trip that I gained some insight into traditional dance and ceremony and learnt several dances from this community. Three years later, I visited these communities again. Significantly, this trip included a period in Yirrkala when several funeral ceremonies were taking place and I was privileged to attend parts of these and learn about the proceedings from the women participating.

In 1995 I attended the inaugural Aboriginal Dance Conference where I observed dances from many areas — my observations relate to these first-hand experiences and the study of film and video material.

demanding, there does not appear a need either to show or hide this exertion; the dancers perform one dance, pause, often re-group, and go on with the next.

While the men often perform high leaps and travelling sequences, the women's movement is restrained and often repetitive. In this sense, it appears that the female dancers usually combine the 'bound' flow of the lower body, which maintains the rhythm and allows travel through the space in the desired direction, while the torso exhibits 'free flow' allowing the arms to gesture in expressions of what the dance is about. The complex gestures, which are often representational of animals, are brilliantly observed, and exhibit a quality of stylised 'naturalism' in the context of choreography. The placement of the arms to make a gesture, for example, is set, but there is often variation and freedom in the use of the hands. This is quite unlike Oriental dancing, classical ballet, or the Graham technique, in which hand movements are rigidly defined in relation to the movement of the arms and to some extent, the rest of the body. In north east Arnhem Land, many of these 'bound' flow dances are performed by the women, in a 'chorus' type group, at a distance behind the men and to one side of the dancing ground. However, in this region there are dances for women that involve a degree of improvisation incorporating higher knee lift, running sequences and generally larger steps and gestures: an example is the 'spirit bird' dance from Yirrkala.[64]

In defining the dynamic involved in terms of Rudolf Laban's Effort Factors, I would conclude that in Aboriginal traditionally-based dance there is generally an absence of sustained, suspended or collapsed movement dynamics. This would seem probable in a dance genre largely evolved through mimetic observation of the natural world where there is either movement or stillness, the ability to freeze suddenly if observed, and a directness in intention that is instinctive and reactive rather than

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64 I was taught this dance by Banduk Marika from Yirrkala and have seen it performed many times as it appears to be a favourite with the young women. This is the name of this dance given by Marika — it possibly has other names and may be associated with a group of dancers called *mokuy,* which refer to 'trickster' spirits.

emotional.

Beyond the self

The ability of performers to 'lose' their own selves in order to be revealed in a new role or character that they are interpreting is essential to the effectiveness of performance and the efficacy of the ceremony. This transformation occurs in various guises in all performance: in Aboriginal ceremony the degree of it often denotes the separation of dance in the sacred domain, from that of public performance. Transformation, transposition, metamorphosis and representation are all means by which a performer may alter their physical, spiritual and emotional state in the portrayal of natural and supernatural phenomena.[65] The point of departure from the self, the preparations required and the training undertaken to 'perform' varies among cultures and is generally not freely available to outsiders. In Aboriginal ceremony the intrinsic power of dance exists whereby the dancers embody their spiritual ancestors and are said to be 'alive' with the ancestor.

The notion of metamorphosis is an important element of many ancestral narratives. In north east Arnhem Land, ethnographer Ian Keen recounts conversations with senior men that included the word 'turn' or 'turning' to denote the moment of metamorphosis from human form to that of the

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65 These categories are based on my understanding of theatre practice, my own choreographic explorations, and to some extent on the work of anthropologist Franca Tamisari.

Transformation occurs where the dancer enacts a role, character or an animal thereby transforming themselves. This transformation is largely mimetic.

Transposition occurs where the dancer is almost a narrator whereby they remain themselves but conduct the viewer through aspects of the story.

Metamorphosis occurs when it could be said that the performer 'becomes', for example, an ancestral being. This is a powerful and iconic aspect of a dance.

Representation is concerned with analogous referrals, often for a group of dancers, to natural phenomena whereby a stylisation occurs; for example, a group of dancers might move in a spiral formation to represent a snake.

wangarr ancestors.[66] This process appears to be fluid, with the dancers describing their transmutation from men to animals to ancestral beings and back again. The suggestion is that this word and process could:

> denote the relationship between exoteric and esoteric meaning — between 'form' and 'content'.[67]

The notion of ancestral presence in Aboriginal ritual is crucial to the affirmation of the belief system that is relived and regenerated through ceremony. The shared beliefs of the community, and the myths retold through ceremony, enable a spiritual reality at the moment of performance that assumes transposition through dance, and metamorphosis in terms of the natural world. This belief is intensified by numerous performance devices including the designs worn by the dancers and the secrecy surrounding many of the preparations before the dancers emerge into the performance space.

The notion of 'brilliance' is one such attribute that is associated with painting and dancing whereby there is enhanced, or embodied power depending on the degree of the transformational aspects of the dance.[68] In ceremony, painting occurs on the body as well as on sacred objects; the designs range from smearing of body with white clay and ochre to complex motifs and patterns. Typically, these feature representations from both the mother's and father's clan groups and depict tracts of country, totemic animals and ancestral beings. In these designs it is often the use of *rarrk* that

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66 Wangarr is a totemic or supernatural ancestor.

Ian Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in Aboriginal Religion: Yolngu in N.E. Arnhem Land*, 1994, p. 313.

67 Ian Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in Aboriginal Religion: Yolngu in N.E. Arnhem Land*, 1994, p. 45.

68 Franca Tamisari, 'Body, language and dance: exploring the embodiment of power in Yolngu Law', Oxford University seminar (conference paper), 11th February 1994, pp. 2–14.

dazzles the eye and creates a vibration.[69] When the dancers perform, the movement and these designs together embody the ancestor and can be considered dangerous; in this respect the dancers themselves become extremely powerful.

The body painting, preparations and arrangements for the dancing are considered equal in importance to the dance itself — in terms of time, dancers can spend more time preparing than actually dancing.[70] They are accompanied by singing and sometimes the rehearsal of some of the dances to be performed. The special 'shade areas' built specifically for the purpose of painting up, physically separate the dancers from the rest of the community while the singing and storytelling prepares them emotionally, spiritually and physically.

These activities are copied by children in their own 'play' ceremonies where flour and sand are sometimes used to cover the face and body. [71] However, it is not only the learnt behaviour and ritual responsibility that enables the

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69 *Rarrk* is the cross hatching seen in paintings of Arnhem Land. The vibratory effect creates a 'brilliance' similar to the reflection of light on water at particular times of the day. Howard Morphy links this emanation to the power of the ancestral beings, the *Wangarr*, coming 'alive'.

H. Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 1991, p. 194.

70 Anthropologist Charles Mountford recounts:

> To the tribes of Central Australia, the decorating of the ceremonial leaders with human blood and eagle-down and the chanting of the related totemic songs are probably the most important part of the rituals, for whereas the body painting and the chanting take an hour, perhaps even more, the actual dance lasts but a few minutes.

Charles P. Mountford, *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expeditions to Arnhem Land: 1 Art, Myth and Symbolism*, 1956, p. 44.

71 Margaret Karomi recounts the children at Yalata (Central Australia) performing a *Tjitji inma* ceremony that incorporated the important aspects of separation as seen in adult ceremony including the separation of girls and boys, the painting up, the demarcation of the dancing ground and the lighting of separate fires for the boys and girls. Singing accompanied the dancing throughout led by an older boy and various aspects of the myths associated with the *mamu* (devil) were enacted.

R.M Berndt & E.S.Phillips, (eds.), *Australian Aboriginal Art*, 1973, p. 57.

dancers to perform with such power and clarity. The models for the ancestral beings to be embodied in the dances are found in the natural world around them.

Through intense observation of the animals, plant life, and the features of the landscape, this knowledge can be interpreted in dance. In this sense, there is little separation between the dancer's mundane life and everyday activity and the themes and movement danced: the primary separation is spiritual. The role of ceremony is to link the natural and supernatural worlds, the living and the dead. Dances that appear to re-enact everyday occurrences, for example hunting, take on other meanings in ritual. Much of the mimetic-based dance occurring in Aboriginal ceremony is familiar from an early age and is derived directly from the physical environment in which people live.

This connection is a significant difference between Aboriginal and Western dance or theatre. In the latter form, it is common to spend a great deal of time 'getting into character' and, as a performer, attempting to understand the intention of the work in order to interpret a role that is often outside of personal experience. The dancers in *Journey ... a rite of passage* played roles that required research in order for them to interpret the characters through the choreography.

Storytelling 1 ... a convict ... a pioneer required complex performance mastery and was danced by senior performers in both age and skill. This is not dissimilar to the process occurring in remote communities where Aborigines have to learn information at different stages of their life in order to acquire access to certain stories and dances. The most important roles are danced by the senior men.

Concept and choreography

The concept of narrative is diverse in Western contemporary choreography and choreographers approach this area with a variety of philosophical attitudes and creative intentions. This includes full-length classical ballet

narratives, for example *Swan Lake,* Merce Cunningham's work based on chance and the elimination of emotive-based choreography and George Balanchine's description of his work as 'concrete abstraction'.[72]

It could be argued that Aboriginal dance is able to free itself to some extent from literal narrative, in the chronological sense, because everyone knows the story, or parts of the story. The function of the dance is not simply to tell the story, but to reaffirm it as an intrinsic link to the cycle of life, uniting past, future and present, and the living with the dead. Aboriginal dance in ceremony is multi-layered and reaffirms the cycle of nature; this is achieved through mimetic interpretations of natural and supernatural phenomena, metonymic and iconic representations of the ancestors, or parts of the ancestors, and stylisation of natural phenomena. In Aboriginal dance, 'representation' may be used to refer to the extent of revelation of ancestral beings depicted in a dance while 'presentation' refers to the immediacy of what is physically portrayed, in terms of what could be notated as a sequence of movement. These semantic descriptors are useful terms to identify forms of 'representation' and 'presentation' in the themes explored in the dance work, *Journey... a rite of passage* in Chapter 3 of the thesis. For example, the young woman's dance in *The spirit within,* combines the movements inspired from a song about a bird with the notion of flying free and achieving a new status in life through a metaphoric transition, (dancing in the water) and growth.

Margaret Clunies-Ross addresses the subject of narrative in Aboriginal dance in the 1994 Greenmill Conference paper with examples drawn from her work among the Anbarra people of north west Arnhem Land. The

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72 The following text provides further background to the stimulus for choreography with regard to modern dance, classical ballet and the work of Merce Cunningham.

Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics,* Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995, pp. 78–80.

George Balanchine discusses his notion of 'concrete abstraction' in the documentary:

Dance in the twentieth century: Part 2
A series written and directed by Sonia Schoonjenans, A La Sept-Pathe Television, Duran, Ostanko/Souteletexport, Gedeon co-production.

concept that the narrative is assumed in a remote community and that the dance must coexist in the wider, sacred whole, differentiates it from conventional theatrical performance. Clunies-Ross states that:

> mimesis is central to Aboriginal art-forms and narrative is secondary at the point of performance, though it exists in a shared cultural knowledge of the group.[73]

The progression from literal to abstracted forms of narrative may enable dances in different contexts to take on different levels of meaning. For example, there are 'play' dances about hunting a kangaroo that children enact, but there are also dances on this theme that are secret and sacred because they take on another meaning when the context changes.[74]

The development of the story in terms of the whole ceremony and the concept of a cycle, or group of dances occurring in various parts of the ceremony, offered a particular choreographic model. This was examined in *Journey... a rite of passage* which incorporated the layering of imagery — from literal mimetic movement to abstract dance sequences — that explored meaning by considering 'representation' and 'presentation' as a process.

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73 Margaret Clunies-Ross,'Dance and narrative among the Anbarra', in *Dance and the Narrative: The Green Mill Dance Project Papers 1994,* Hilary Trotter (ed.), AUSDANCE on behalf of the Greenmill Dance Project, 1994, p. 83.

74 The 'kangaroo men' are included in the scenario of the *Corroboree* score by John Antill and the ballets created by Rex Reid and Beth Dean that follow the score. In the discussion of *Corroboree* in Chapter 2, I argue that Antill's research for the scenario for both the score and the two ballets was primarily based on the study of Central Australian tribes by Spencer and Gillen, first published in 1899. Drawings throughout his score mirror the photographs of totems that are included in the book. The ceremonies that refer to the significance of the kangaroo men and the kangaroo totem as outlined by Spencer and Gillen substantiate the point made.

Baldwin Spencer & F.G. Gillen, *Native Tribes of Central Australia,* 1968, pp. 198–201.

Music

In describing aspects of the staging of Aboriginal dance it is important to consider that none of the elements occur in isolation and that they are intricately linked and structurally meshed, to the point that in many instances one can lead the other and change back and forth. This enables the expression of power, seniority and social status to come into play throughout the proceedings. Clunies-Ross and Wild refer to this type of interplay between the leading singers and dancers in their conclusion to the study of a *bunggul* in Arnhem Land in which a series of 'cues' passes back and forth. It was noted that some cues were essential to the timing of a sequence of song or dance, while on other occasions, it enabled the completion of one element before proceeding with the next. In the same paper, it was suggested that a certain degree of 'improvisation' is possible within this framework, allowing both the lead virtuoso dancer and the lead singer to perform elaborate, extended solos within the structure of the song cycle.[75]

The progression and importance of sections of the song vary according to the part of the ceremony, and within themselves. Tamisari refers to 'big' and 'small' dances within a ceremony: the 'big' dances are usually performed at the climax of a ceremony and the 'small' dances are like branches, or parts of the ceremony. This is also reflected linguistically where the Yolngu term *ringitji* refers to the place where the ancestor is embodied, as bones in the landscape, and also refers to the body, or the main part, of the song that

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75 'Bunggul' refers to the song and dance performances that occur in an elaborate form in north central and north east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. It is used in a similar context to the word 'corroboree' which originated in New South Wales.

The song cycle, or 'clan songs', from this area is known as *manikay* and encompasses three stages of progression. Each *manikay* has a particular *wangarr* (spirit being) as its subject. The three progressions in the cycle include:
a) the introduction sung in a low pitch;
b) clapsticks and didjeridu accompany the singing — this section ends decisively with a strong note by the instruments, often continuing with a shout or solo voice;
c) a vocal coda, performed solo by a virtuoso singer. This often leads to an interplay between the leading singer and dancer with room for interpretation and improvisation.

Margaret Clunies-Ross & Stephen A. Wild, 'Formal performance: the relations of music, text and dance in Arnhem Land clan song', in *Ethnomusicology Journal*, May 1984, p. 226.

accompanies the 'big' dances.[76]

Another aspect of many Aboriginal dances in remote communities is the sheer enjoyment and enthusiasm the dancers express through dancing. Dancers frequently vocalise animal sounds in mimetic dances, call out to each other, and slap the body in various ways to create percussive sounds. Several dancers include branches of eucalyptus leaves tied around the legs or arms which rustle when the dancers move, while other props are also used to create sounds. The women's dance, *Dance,* in the choreographic project attempted to capture the essence of this exhilaration of moving and dancing together — in rehearsal, the dancers were directed to make sounds and call out to encourage each other during the dance.

Props and elements of staging

In Aboriginal society the inclusion of ground sculptures, paintings and ritual objects are crucial in a ceremony. The impact of dance and ceremony is significantly heightened by the incorporation of these objects, body decorations, and other elements, including fire. Witnessing the procession of painted dancers emerging from the darkness into the firelight is a profound experience and greatly enhances the feeling of being with the ancestral beings in a place (the dance ground) that has become ritually separated from the mundane. Burning branches that are scattered to create a 'fireworks' effect of sound and light are incorporated into many dances from the Central Desert and Arnhem Land.[77] Just as Western theatrical productions incorporate lighting changes, smoke and other effects to transport the audience to a new scene or atmosphere, so Aboriginal ceremony enables the audience to be in the presence of the ancestors by transforming the especially prepared dancing ground into the country across which the ancestors walked and shaped the land, giving birth to all natural

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76 Franca Tamisari, 'Dance: An expression of law, power and knowledge in Arnhem Land', conference paper, Canberra, 1995, pp. 11–16.

77 *Walbiri Fire Ceremony: Ngatjakula.* Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Canberra, 1977. A film directed by Roger Sandall.

and supernatural phenomena. The total effect enhances the embodiment of the ancestral beings much as Jesus Christ is embodied within the rituals and props of Christian masses or services.

Body decorations and props that are carried or worn by the dancers vary from region to region and are constantly evolving. For example, the painted boards carried by the dancers during the *Krill Krill* ceremony in the Kimberley region of Western Australia were initiated in the late 1970's after the artist Rover Thomas was visited in a dream by a female ancestor spirit. The series of dances associated with the *Krill Krill* depicts the devastation caused by Cyclone Tracy in Darwin in 1974 and serves to remind people of their cultural backgrounds and obligations. Rover Thomas talks about this new ceremony;

> That's why we got that corroboree now, biggest culture. I can go anywhere, take this corroboree, Krill Krill, I can go to Perth, from there Melbourne, anywhere, Darwin ... dancing there all over the city.[78]

Dancing boards are common in many areas: for example in Warlpiri women's ceremony when kin relations of *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* sing to each other and present each other with boards depicting motifs from their country.

Many dances involve the carrying of spears, poles, string bags, pieces of string and other props. These have ritual connotations and are usually stored in a keeping place that is unseen by those that do not have access to a particular ceremony or ritual. There are separate men's and women's objects and certain clan groups have responsibility to maintain these objects. One of the most spectacular objects is the Morning Star pole used in eastern Arnhem Land as an important part of *Dhuwa* moiety post-funeral ceremonies. The transition from night to day becomes a metaphor for the

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78 Rover Thomas with Kim Akerman, Mary Macha, Will Christensen & Wally Caruana, *Roads Cross: The Paintings of Rover Thomas*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1994, p. 24.

journey of the soul from the Land of the Living to the Place of the Dead.[79]

Another example of elaborate props made for dancing are the dancing machines and masks in the Torres Strait. Those made by Ken Thaiday from Darnley Island are highly stylised, theatrical hand operated 'dance machines' with moving components that can, for example, depict scenes that move from day to night.[80] Similarly, aeroplane masks and movable painted scenery are carried by the Mowanjum dancers in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.[81] The decorated poles used in *Storytelling 4* follow the concept of magnifying aspects of the production with props which relate to the overall theme. The dancers become 'masked' by working with the poles and theatrically assume the metaphoric significance of the five senses incorporated in the decorations. This is elaborated in Chapter 3 with a discussion on this section of the production.

Surprise, improvisation, free expression, entertainment and innovation are all incorporated in performance, and invention has often been in response to the availability of new materials or technology.

Notions of Performance

Journey ... a rite of passage was staged in a traditional theatre. The performance was not directly affected by considerations concerning the audience, nevertheless, the dancers were expected to give their best to the choreography and it was hoped that the production would be reviewed

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79 The spirits of the dead keep the Morning Star, *(Barnumbirr)*, in a dilly bag and send it out into the sky. The star is attached by a long string that is wound in when dawn breaks. Hence the poles are decorated with feather strings that end in tassels, representing individual stars for each locality of the Dhuwa people.

H.M. Groger-Wurm, *Australian Aboriginal Bark Paintings and their Mythological Interpretation: Volume 1 Eastern Arnhem Land,* Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1973, p. 110.

80 Ken Thaiday, 'Darnley Island' hand held dance machine 1991. Collection of the National Gallery of Australia.

81 R.M.Berndt & E.S.Phillips (eds.), *Australian Aboriginal Art,* 1973, p. 276.

favourably by the critics and audience alike. Aboriginal ceremony includes these expectations and prompts further questions with regard to Western concepts of what a performance entails — these are of interest to conclude this Chapter.

Traditionally, men and women have different roles to play and different dances. In many cases they would only see certain parts of the other's dances. In Cape York, Arnhem Land, and in some Central Australian rituals, women are said to have a supporting role; notable exceptions to this are the dances of the Tiwi on Bathurst Island where there is equal participation and importance attached to both the sexes, although there are stylistic variations.[82] Audiences at ceremonies expect the dancers to dance well, with precision and commitment to the movement.

Several issues for further consideration emerge in relation to performance in traditionally-based Aboriginal dance. The concepts of performers and audience, their relationship and their roles differ from Western style performances. For example, on occasions, the attendance by people in avoidance relationships may be important and such people may still be participating even though they are not allowed to be close to the performance.[83]

Catherine Berndt states that there are no 'professional' dancers, who live by their art alone, in remote communities, however, this statement does not take into account dancers who perform in the public domain, who may be described as professional but not exclusively dance performers. They usually

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82 André Grau writes:

> women dance with parallel knees, with the head slightly bent down with the accent away from the ground, while the men dance with knees slightly turned out, the head straight, with the accent into the ground.

André Grau, 'Dreaming, dancing, kinship: the study of *yoi*, the dance of the Tiwi of Melville Island and Bathurst Islands, Northern Australia', 1983, p. 226.

83 An example of this relationship was my attendance at a funeral ceremony in Yirrkala in 1992. My Aboriginal friend asked me to sit directly in front of her to obscure her from the view of the performers as she had a certain avoidance relationship to the deceased. She explained to me that it was important for her to attend, but she must be careful not to endanger the journey of the spirit of the deceased.

perform in touring groups or dance as solo artists outside of their community, for example, the dancer and actor David Gulpilil.[84] Although it is clear that there are senior singers and dancers, many of whom have performed in groups nationally and overseas, these people have several roles in their community.

There are many issues involved in the staging and production of ceremonies, some of which have been previously outlined. The themes introduced in this chapter can now be examined with reference to the influences of Aboriginal dance on choreography in Australia. Choreographic models that suggest methods by which Aboriginal dance can influence and inform my own dance practice are presented through movement and thematic material in the choreographic project, and in written analyses in Chapter 3.

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84 R.M.Berndt & C.H.Berndt, *The World of the First Australians. Aboriginal Traditional Life: Past and Present*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, p. 386.

Chapter 2

ABORIGINAL DANCE AS AN INFLUENCE ON TWENTIETH CENTURY AUSTRALIAN CHOREOGRAPHY

The creative intention of *Journey ... a rite of passage* was to connect in the choreography the study of formal dance elements occurring in traditionally-based Aboriginal dance and particular conceptual features. This approach has been possible through the combination of research and consideration of Aboriginal people's rights of ownership of their dances. Working largely from an aesthetic perspective the choreography draws on indigenous dance as a resource and inspiration. As a practising choreographer with a body of established work in the contemporary dance theatre genre,[85] the exploration of Aboriginal dance provided a logical extension to my past work which emphasised Australian themes yet expressed these though predominantly American modern dance and European classical ballet techniques. By researching indigenous dance I was able to extend a commitment to Australian themes in my work by developing movement vocabulary informed and influenced by traditionally-based Aboriginal dance.

Since the mid-1940's, Australian choreographers have been interested in indigenous dance, and in the ensuing decades, created dance works that demonstrated a range of influences. Focusing on Aboriginal dance and themes as motivation and inspiration for professional dance choreographers, this chapter documents Australian choreography that has Aboriginal movement and/or thematic material as a primary source of

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85 Examples of previous work with an Australian theme:
Drifters, 1982; *Distillations,*1986; *Apartments Stage 1 and 2,* 1986; *She'll be right ... mate!,* 1987; *Two Tribes,* 1988; *Point of Contact,* 1990.

inspiration.[86] The investigation will include analysis of the choreographers' motivations, creative processes, research and, where appropriate, rehearsal procedure with the dancers. Attitudes and philosophies evident in the choreography are compared to the prevailing political and social policies of the day as outlined in the Preface.

The methodological approach to this chapter includes an evaluation of the conceptual, thematic and structural elements of the composition and the movement vocabulary in relation to the above. The investigation is based on evidence from a variety of source including interviews with the choreographers and dancers, film and written material including press statements, theatre programs and other ephemeral publications. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in Australian choreography with publications and exhibitions that focus on this area.[87]

Introduction

Although there exist numerous depictions of Aboriginal dancing made by artists on the 18th and 19th century expeditions to Australia, performing artists and dancers in the colonies took much longer to develop an interest in the Aboriginal version of their art form.[88] Attitudes and perceptions of Aboriginal culture were largely a reflection of the dominant European

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86 The list is confined to dance works created by professional choreographers in established companies in Australia and does not include the large body of works created for, and by, students at the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association, (NAISDA).

87 The National Library of Australia presented an exhibition on Australian dance curated by Dr. Michelle Potter in May 1997. This included materials from the extensive collection of programmes, posters, and photographs from the collection supplemented by costume pieces and designs from other institutions; for example, Beth Dean's costume for *Corroboree* from the National Museum of Australia.

88 George Augustus Robinson sketched Aboriginal people dancing in Tasmania in 1830: these include 'Eastern Aboriginal people dancing' painted by John Glover 1846 (Collection of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery) and 'The Horse Dance', (Collection of the Mitchell Library, Sydney).

Julia Clark, *The Aboriginal People of Tasmania*, 1986, pp. 37–38.

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cultural trends and social ideals. Even as late as 1936, visiting German modern dancer Norda Mata stated:

> she was quite certain Australia had nothing to offer her, and that she was most anxious to see New Zealand in order to study the Maoris.[89]

In the years immediately following World War II, a number of dance works that were informed and influenced by Aboriginal dance and themes were created. Refugees arriving in Australia in the 1940's not only brought European technical skill to the dance scene, but new visions and interpretations of their new country. It is significant that many of the pioneers in this genre were immigrants who sought to create works based on Australian themes rather than reproducing classical choreography from their countries of origin.

Parallels of the developments occurring in the contemporary visual arts area are of relevance to the discussion on dance as they demonstrate evidence of the influence of Aboriginal symbols, colours and themes on non-indigenous artists.

The first comprehensive exhibition of Aboriginal art, titled *Primitive Art*, took place in 1929 at the National Museum of Victoria. An important aspect of this exhibition was the presence of two Wangkangurru men from the Birdsville region who demonstrated the production of ceremonial dance objects, boomerangs and string.[90] These artists created interest and provoked comment on Aboriginal art in general. Awareness of Aboriginal culture also evolved from accounts of expeditions to remote regions by anthropologists who brought Aboriginal culture to the attention of the wider community

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89 Edward H. Pask, *Ballet in Australia: The Second Act 1940–1980*, 1982, p 62.

90 Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking Press, New York, 1988, p. 167.

through media coverage of their experiences, publications and exhibitions.[91]

The artist Margaret Preston was inspired by what she saw as the 'purity' of expression in Aboriginal art. She travelled to northern and central Australia to view Aboriginal painting and sculpture first-hand and advocated the incorporation of Aboriginal designs as fresh symbols of a new nationalism with no regard for Aboriginal systems of ownership of the designs. She said in 1939:

> In wishing to rid myself of the mannerisms of a country other than my own, I have gone to the art of a people who have never seen or known anything different from themselves...These are the Australian Aborigines and it is only from the art of such people in any land that a national art can spring.[92]

Restricting her palette to red, white, black and yellow she painted the landscape, and particularly the flora of the Australian bush; she also assimilated these designs into patterns for fabric, tea–towels and the like for public use. Her adaptation of key elements in Aboriginal art, for example the use of outlining to create a flat, two-dimensional surface, contributed to the interest in the aesthetics of Aboriginal painting.

During the decades of the 1940's and 1950's, other artists explored Aboriginal imagery and thematic material in their art, including Russell Drysdale. In his depiction of Aboriginal people as part of the Australian landscape, for example in *Mullaloonah Tank*, 1953, Drysdale uses both thematic material

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91 Later in Chapter 2 it becomes evident that this was a motivation for choreographer Beth Dean. C.P. Mountford's expeditions to Central Australia in the 1920's inspired her to travel to Aboriginal communities to study the dancing as research for her 1954 production of *Corroboree*. Twenty years later, Elizabeth Dalman was also inspired by Mountford's research; she created *Sun and Moon* (1968) in response to a myth in Mountford's book, *The Dreamtime Book*.

Ainslie Roberts & Charles P. Mountford, *The Dreamtime Book: Australian Aboriginal Myths*, Rigby, Australia, 1973, p. 48.

92 Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, 1988, p. 168.

and an Aboriginal palette of earth colours.[93] An artist who depicted Aboriginal people in a non-romantic, yet compassionate way, was the Polish Jewish immigrant social-realist artist, Yosl Bergner, whose 1941 work, *Aborigines in Fitzroy,* depicts the suffering of the urban Aborigines seen through the eyes of Bergner's personal experiences of racial persecution.[94]

Until recently, there have been few examples of music inspired by Aboriginal music; however, John Anthill's 1946 score, *Corroboree,* remains a landmark in the history of Australian composition. Currently, Charlie McMahon and his group Gondwanaland, have created music by combining tonally scaled didjeridus and synthesisers, and other composers have fused the didjeridu with classical instrumentation. Despite the developments in the visual arts and the impact of the composition of John Anthill, the influence of Aboriginal culture on non-indigenous dance has remained limited with few examples of major works.

Dance choreography

Philippe Perrottet, artistic director of the Australian Ballet Society, was one of the first to choreograph a work inspired by Aboriginal mythology. *Arckaringa* (1945) was based on an Aboriginal Dreamtime legend and included music commissioned from Gwendolyn Cooper, design by Russell Hooper, and featured Rachel Cameron as the principal dancer. There is little surviving evidence of this work and others by the company, possibly because the Australian Ballet Society was not regarded as a major

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93 Geoffrey Dutton, *White on Black: The Australian Aborigine Portrayed in Art,* 1974, Plate 129.

94 Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art,* Allen Lane, Australia, 1981, p. 168.

professional group and existed for such a short time.[95] The company's commitment to Australian choreographers, dancers, composers, designers and themes was a significant achievement in the history of Australian dance.

Terra Australis, (1946) is regarded as the first major dance work with an Australian theme.[96] The scenario tells of a young woman, 'Australia' who metaphorically represents virgin, unspoilt land. She appears on a higher level of the stage while a dancer, symbolising 'mother earth', performs below; she denotes wisdom, endurance and the eternity of a final resting place. 'Australia' and her Aboriginal lover are disturbed by an 'Explorer' who becomes fascinated by the young woman and the unspoilt nature of the new land. The attraction is mutual, however, a fight ensues and the Aboriginal lover is killed, falling backwards to 'mother earth' who sings a lament for him. The dance concludes with 'Australia' and 'the Explorer' seeking solace in 'mother earth'.[97]

The choreography symbolises the struggle of Aboriginal people against the colonisation of their land and culture. In comparison with other works from this period that present more literal narratives, the metaphoric abstraction of the theme in this work was a conceptual innovation. Like the painter Bergner, Borovansky fled to Australia to begin a new life away from the political events in his homeland. The compassion he achieves in his

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95 The Australian Ballet Society was a Melbourne-based company that existed as a performing group for one year. The company was disbanded due to a lack of funds, however the Australian Ballet Society continued to promote dance and publish a magazine well into the 1950's.

Edward H. Pask, *Ballet in Australia: The Second Act 1940–1980,* 1982, p. 251.

96 The ballet *Terra Australis* premiered on 25th May 1946. Choreography was by Edouard Borovansky, it was based on a story by Tom Rothfield, and the score was commissioned from Esther Rofe. Sets and costumes were designed by Eve Harris.

Frank Salter, *Borovansky: The Man Who Made the Australian Ballet,* Wildcat Press, Sydney, 1980, p. 207.

97 Katherine Brisbane (ed.), *Entertaining Australia: The Performing Arts as Cultural History,* 1991, p. 260.

work is more likely to have come from this source rather than contact with Aboriginal Australia, which he had not experienced. An allegory, achieved through the simplicity of the narrative, is thus effectively created. This is in contrast to some of the choreography from the next decade that attempts to copy, mimic and re-enact aspects of Aboriginal culture as perceived by non-Aboriginal choreographers.

The dance works created under the title *Corroboree,* illustrate different approaches to the use of Aboriginal movement and themes as a resource for choreography with the first version in 1950 and the most recent in 1995. Common to all these versions is the extraordinary score of the same name composed by John Antill, and in order to discover some of the choreographic considerations in the dance works, it is necessary to examine the role of the composer and the score.

At the age of seven, John Antill attended his first 'corroboree' at the La Perouse Aboriginal settlement in Sydney. It included a display of singing and dancing staged for visitors; this left a lasting impression on him.[98] Inspired by the interplay of Aboriginal movement and music from his childhood observations, he drew designs on the musical score of the 'mythical beings' in his imagination that would be the characters in the ballet. Antill realised that these elements were essentially linked and that a coherent production should interweave these elements. This understanding of Aboriginal culture accounts for the obsession Antill had with all the components of the production: he wrote the score for *Corroboree,* outlined a choreographic synopsis, made sketches for the set and costume designs and

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98 This experience inspired a life long interest in Aboriginal culture for Antill and resulted in a considerable body of work that included scores for several ballets, operas, suites of songs and orchestral works.

Beth Dean & Victor Carell, *Gentle Genius: A Life of John Antill,* Akron Press, Sydney, 1987, p. 81.

conducted the orchestra for both the 1950 and 1954 performances.[99] In this sense, he regarded the work as his own creation and commissioned the choreographer and designer to work with him. Antill's own research into Aboriginal music and culture inspired his instrumentation, the progression of each dance scene and the mood required for the choreography. In this sense, Antill was instrumental in the development of the dance choreography for both the 1950 and 1954 versions of the ballet. An extract from Antill's writing in his introduction to the musical score demonstrates his level of involvement;

Characteristic movements:	Most actions swift and jerky
	Grotesque facial expressions
	Swift turnings of the head
	Always a high knee action
	Much hip movement
	Quivering of head, hands and body.[100]

Antill's knowledge and his observations with regard to Aboriginal culture were aesthetically motivated, nevertheless, his fascination for learning more about the culture led to extensive research and detailed notes, in particular, about Aboriginal music that are relevant today. The overall concept of the music for *Corroboree* involved the fusion of Aboriginal and orchestral conventions. Antill wrote that he had endeavoured:

> to preserve within the confines of our present day orchestra, the spirit of our native race through the medium of their expressive ceremonial dances.[101]

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99 Notes from the annotated score of *Corroboree,* and the documentary film, *The Australian Ballet: Corroboree,* collection of the National Library of Australia, 1951.

These drawings are also reproduced in the following biography:
Beth Dean & Victor Carell, *Gentle Genius: A Life of John Antill,* 1987, p. 81.

100 Beth Dean & Victor Carell, *Gentle Genius: A Life of John Antill,* 1987, p. 193.

101 Beth Dean & Victor Carell, *Gentle Genius: A Life of John Antill,* 1987, p. 94.

It is possible to compare the scenario for the initiation ceremony and the accompanying sketches made by John Antill in parts of his score for the ballet, with the photographs in the study of central Australian initiation ceremonies by anthropologists Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen. Antill's illustrations include copies drawn from photographs of 'the ceremony for the water totem', 'the ceremony for the frog totem' and the 'Hakea tree totems'.[102] Although Antill has incorporated dances from three ceremonies described by Spencer and Gillen into the scenario, and changed the order, many details in the narrative of his ballet remain true to the anthropological accounts. The book by Spencer and Gillen reveals details of ceremonial practice and is illustrated in such a manner that it is considered restricted information today.

The first version of *Corroboree* was choreographed by Rex Reid and performed by male and female dancers from the National Ballet Company. Many of the movements chosen incorporated the shaking of the knees in second position plié, leaps with flexed feet, 'kangaroo' squat jumps and the use of angular arm movements parallel to the floor, often with the fingers shaking. All these features are evident in traditional Aboriginal dance styles and may have been observed at La Perouse where at that time 'corroborees' were staged for tourists. The film documentary of the work made in 1951 begins with footage of the Aboriginal rock art sites around La Perouse and Aboriginal dancers; a narrator speaks of their intention to create the atmosphere of a 'real corroboree'. Antill translates this intent into his own composition, *Corroboree,* including Aboriginal names for dance sections in the music, the design, props and examples of steps for the dancers as

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102 Baldwin Spencer & F.G. Gillen, *Native Tribes of Central Australia,* 1968, pp. 307, 345 and 518.

This comparison has also been noted by Dr. Michelle Potter in the exhibition 'Dance People Dance'. Michelle Potter (curator), 'Dance People Dance', 1997.

outlined above.[103]

In the 1950's several choreographers tackled Australian themes, and although there was considerable experimentation in dance choreography, ballet companies usually performed en pointe with a definite classical style. Rex Reid's choreography for *Corroboree* was bold and brave for the time. Aware of his lack of knowledge about Aboriginal culture, Reid consulted with C.P. Mountford and attempted a degree of 'authenticity' by including Aboriginal hunting poses and animal mimicry in his work. Combined with the vision and extensive accompanying notes and drawings by Antill, Reid's work reflected the concept of a processional pageant as outlined scene by scene by the composer. Rex Reid commented with regard to the work,

> ... there's only one way that I can really approach this, that is to take a middle course. I can't pretend to be Aboriginal. I can't have Aboriginals in the production because it just wouldn't work for me. I must take a middle course. In other words, I must take a course of sheer invention.[104]

Reid's choreography was essentially stereotypical and lacked knowledge or

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103 *Corroboree* Symphonic Ballet by John Anthill
1. *Welcome ceremony*
Witchetty Grub men assisted by members of the Emu Totem
2. *Dance to the evening star*
by the Thippa Thippa and Bell Bird people
3. *A rain dance*
by the Frog Totem assisted by the Fish men
4. *The spirit of the wild*
demonstrated by the Snake Totem
5. *Homage to the rising sun*
Kangaroo men
6. *The morning star*
by the Hakea flower Totem
7. *Procession of totems and closing fire ceremony*
in which representatives of the Lace Lizard, Cockatoo, Honey Ant, Wild Cat and Small Fly Totems participate. Much usage of Boomerang, Spear and Fire Stick.

Vincent Plush, 'The story of Corroboree', essay for cover sleeve of CD EMI recording of *Corroboree*, EMI Records Australia Pty. Ltd., 1977, p. 8.

104 Rex Reid interviewed by James Murdoch, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, March 1986.

depth of understanding of a sophisticated, complex culture. In particular, the choreography portrayed Aboriginal ceremony in a simplistic manner that drew criticism in its own time. The writer Colin Simpson wrote of the premiere:

> What came on stage in terms of choreography and costume designs were no more than a gaudy, circus-like travesty of corroboree. Through lack of understanding and plain lack of knowledge, the choreographer completely missed the spirit of the real thing, in a riot of baseless representationalism, full of incongruous and extraneous elements.[105]

Despite criticism of the choreography, the fact that the dancers performed in a totally new way, masked and without a perceived virtuosity, was remarkable and innovative, opening the way for other classical companies to explore new choreographic directions. It was generally agreed that the score was outstanding and that having an Australian work was important and advantageous to the image of the Australian arts overseas.

This was particularly the case with the impending visit of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip in 1954 that prompted government intervention and directives concerning the work; it was deemed that a performance of *Corroboree* was the most appropriate item for the planned Royal Gala. American-born dancer and choreographer Beth Dean was approached to research Aboriginal dance and choreograph a new version of the work.[106]

In the introduction to their book, *Dust for the Dancers*, Beth Dean and her husband Victor Carell recount their motivation for journeying to Australia

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105 Beth Dean & Victor Carell, *Gentle Genius: A Life of John Antill*, 1987, p. 110.

106 A new version of a ballet titled *Corroboree*, performed to the same John Anthill score was commissioned by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust from American Beth Dean; the new ballet opened in 1954 at the Tivoli Theatre, Sydney. Dancers from the Bodenwieser Company performed the work before Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip: the company included Ruth Galene, Aina Reega, Arvids Fibigs and Bruno Harvey, and Beth Dean herself danced the leading role of the young boy initiate.

Edward H. Pask, *Ballet in Australia: The Second Act 1940–1980*, 1982, p. 218.

to learn more about Aboriginal dance. A meeting in New York with the anthropologist C.P. Mountford inspired their interest and gave them an introduction to aspects of Aboriginal dance as it occurred in ceremony. When the opportunity arose to come to Australia in 1946, they began a period of over eight years of study of Aboriginal culture. The commission to create a new version of *Corroboree* to John Antill's score involved travel to northern and central Australia to view Aboriginal dance first hand.[107] Beth Dean sought what she regarded as a more authentic approach to the movement and the narrative, however, like Reid, she retained John Antill's overall concept and scenario. Regarding herself as both a dance choreographer and an anthropologist she set about learning the Aboriginal steps, whether they were for male or female dancers, and reproduced some them 'authentically' in her ballet combined with the vocabulary from contemporary dance and classical ballet forms. The narrative was based on a story of a young boy initiate and scenes evolved incorporating duos, trios and solos rather that the pageant-style presentation of the earlier version. The overall approach was driven by the choreographer's desire to present Aboriginal dancing with integrity and Beth Dean still remains one of a small number of non-Aboriginal choreographers in Australia to observe indigenous dance in a traditional context.

Of the 1954 performance for Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip they wrote:

> The ballet *Corroboree* is a proudly dignified yet sincere humble offering of the fruits of years of earnest endeavour to understand the activating spirit of Aboriginal lore and to translate it into live theatre for all to share.[108]

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107 Beth Dean and Victor Carell wrote:

> To feel this part of their dance culture was the main purpose of our trip into Central and Northern Australia, to see it and feel it — for you can 'feel' dance ... so we have tried to 'catch' this feeling and rescue it from entire oblivion.

Victor Carell & Beth Dean, *Dust for the Dancers*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1955, p. ix Forward.

108 Victor Carell & Beth Dean, *Dust for the Dancers*, 1955, p. 211.

The work was restaged by Beth Dean in 1970 for the Captain Cook Bicentenary at the Gunnamatta Park amphitheatre in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla. John Antill conducted the Sydney Symphony Orchestra for the performance.

In the present political climate it appears that, although Dean learnt the steps from the traditional owners, this approach involved the appropriation of traditional material and would not be sanctioned today. Beth Dean remains passionate in her interest in Aboriginal culture and believes that her efforts to reproduce Aboriginal dance 'authentically' are a means of preserving the dance and bringing it to the attention of a wide audience.[109] The body of research that is published in her books and journals is a lasting legacy of her contributions to this area of performance and the arts in general.[110] As an advocate for indigenous dance she organised, with her husband Victor Carell, the first South Pacific Arts Festival in 1972 which still is held annually. Dean has recently donated her collection of costumes and designs for *Corroboree* to the National Museum of Australia and with the assistance of the Australian Ballet School, is in the process of having her choreography notated.

Choreography that was informed and influenced by Aboriginal dance created by the contemporaries of Reid and Dean continued through the 1950's. Of special interest to this study is a work entitled *Mathinna,* choreographed by ballerina Laurel Martyn and premiered by the Victorian

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109 Telephone interview with Beth Dean, 30th October 1995.

A later personal conversation with Beth Dean revealed that she saw a relationship between the young boy initiates in Aboriginal ceremony and the training of young dancers progressing from student to professional. Dean sought this transition from her dancers when performing her ballet *Corroboree.*

28th April 1997.

110 Beth Dean and Victor Carell also co-authored *Softly, wild drums,* 1958. Publications by Beth Dean include, *South Pacific Dance,* 1978 and *Three dances of Oceania,* 1976

Ballet Guild in 1954.[111]

Queensland born Laurel Martyn trained in London and performed with the Sadler's Wells Opera and Ballet Companies. As a young student in London, she recalled being asked about Australia, and in particular the Aborigines. She responded,

> Aboriginal people had no impact at all on a perfectly normal young woman — I didn't know racism, I didn't know anything! Isn't that a dreadful comment? Seventeen years of my life and I didn't know what an Aboriginal looked like. [112]

Upon returning to Australia she worked on her brother's sheep property in northern New South Wales and developed an interest in cultural identity and what it was to be Australian. A body of work ensued that included several Australian themes including the above mentioned work inspired by the true story of Mathinna, an Aboriginal girl who was adopted by Governor Franklin and his wife, and then returned to live with her people. Caught between two worlds and unable to exist in either, Mathinna turned to alcohol and was discovered, drowned in a puddle, at the age of twenty one.[113]

Martyn's work, set to the music of Esther Rofe, was highly acclaimed. She says of it,

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111 *Mathinna* was choreographed by Laurel Martyn in 1954, to a commissioned score by Esther Rofe, with the costumes and the set designed by Nina Brabant.

Edward H. Pask, *Ballet in Australia: The Second Act 1940–1980,* 1982, p. 167.

112 Laurel Martyn interviewed by Mark Gordon, 9th and 10th May 1989. Esso Performing Arts Collection, National Library of Australia.

113 See Chapter 3 for further information and accompanying performance video of interpretation of this story in *Journey...a rite of passage'.*

I heard it as a play, and decided it could be translated into a ballet story...That, I'd like to try again one day.[114]

This work is thematically important to this study as it is reflective of the motivation in Borovansky's *Terra Australis,* drawing on the compassionate aspects of the narrative rather than relying on the reproduction of particular Aboriginal dance steps. The themes of colonisation, repression and racism are addressed in these pioneering works expressive of the political and social implications of race relations in Australia. Stylistically, the dancers portraying the Aboriginal roles in both Borovansky's and Martyn's works were classical ballerinas performing variations of classical ballet movement vocabulary en pointe.

Contemporary dance choreographers also experimented in this genre. Gertrud Bodenwieser, for example, created two works in 1956, *Trilogy of Central Australian Suite* and *Aboriginal Spear Dance,* which were considered bold and indicative of this Viennese born choreographer's new confidence in tackling 'indigenous' themes.[115] Interest was mainly generated by the superb dancing of soloist Keith Bain in the latter piece, rather than by the works themselves. The choreography was not included in the company repertoire for any length of time and when Bodenwieser died three years later in 1959, these dances, among many others, were never revived.

The desire to create Australian dance works persisted into the next decade

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114 Laurel Martyn interviewed by Mark Gordon, 9th and 10th May 1989. Esso Performing Arts Collection, National Library of Australia.

115 *Trilogy of Central Australian Suite* (1956)
a) 'Solitude'
b) 'Wild chase'
c) 'A child is born'

Aboriginal Spear Dance (1956)
Music by Gheysens
Principal dancer: Keith Bain

Shona Dunlop MacTavish, *An Ecstasy of Purpose: The Life and Art of Gertrud Bodenwieser,* 1987, p. 146.

with themes of pioneers, shearers and outlaws as well as Aboriginal stories included in the repertoire of major companies.[116] In this context, these productions were part of a national endeavour to discover and interpret what was perceived as typically Australian, which often resulted in clichéd caricatures and stereotypes. Nevertheless, the performances of these decades, in particular, the Royal Gala performance of *Corroboree,* contributed to a wave of interest in Aboriginal culture. Visual artists, musicians and choreographers dabbled, often with scant knowledge, into what they considered artistically or theatrically viable aspects of indigenous culture and presented their impressions to the public.

John Antill created other scores which explored 'Aboriginality'. For example, in 1961, the composition *Black Opal* was created for a season by the group Ballet Australia, featuring choreography by Dawn Swane. The scenario of this work, like *Corroboree,* is grounded in a traditional Aboriginal plot about tribal retribution.

> The story revolves around two lovers fleeing tribal vengeance and in the process being struck by the Spirit of Lightning, which results in their turning into the love stone — the black opal.[117]

Further developments in Australian contemporary dance in the 1960's included the establishment in 1963 of the Melbourne-based company Australian Contemporary Dance Theatre by Shirley McKechnie. The

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116 Works in this thematic genre included: *The Black Swan,* 1949, based on the discovery and naming of the Swan River in Western Australia; *The Outlaw,* 1951, based on the bush ranger Ned Kelly; both choreographed by Edouard Borovansky.

Jill Sykes, 'Finding an Australian identity in dance', in *Voices: The Quarterly Journal of the National Library of Australia,* Paul Hetherington (ed.), Volume V1, Number 2, Winter 1996, p. 4.

117 Joel Crotty, 'Ballet in Australia between 1961 and 1962: a microcosm of musical change', in *Brolga: an Australian journal about dance,* Michelle Potter (ed.), December 1994, Number 1, p. 45.

company's repertoire included several works with specifically Australian themes although there was none that had an Aboriginal focus. McKechnie stated in an interview in 1989:

> Now it seems to me , that we never ... looked sufficiently hard at what the Aboriginal culture is doing here, right beside us! We ought to be doing that ... it's the richest and one of the oldest in the world, and we don't value it. If we looked hard enough, we could certainly find inspiration.[118]

Beth Dean continued to create works inspired by Aboriginal culture during this decade including *Kukaitcha,* choreographed in 1968. *Kukaitcha* was performed for the first Cultural Olympics in 1968 by a cast of Australian dancers combining with performers from the Ballet Folklorico de Mexico. She writes about her use of Aboriginal dance steps and themes in the work:

> Nothing sacred was shown, only such steps as would be seen in secular dance were shown, because we gave our word and certainly we feel much too warmly towards the Aboriginal people to hurt them in any way. For they said to us, 'Those sacred steps we can and do use in the secular dancers, but not in the same sequences', so of course we were quite safe to do this.[119]

The work tells the story of a woman seeing a sacred men's object by mistake and having to face death as tribal retribution.[120] It is unlikely that this narrative would be considered appropriate to perform today as it is

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118 Shirley McKechnie interviewed by Mark Gordon, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 1989, p. 50.

119 Beth Dean interviewed by Hazel de Berg, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 1975.

120 The girl in the ballet unintentionally saw a *tjuringa,* a sacred object that is only shown to initiated men.

Mudrooroo, *Aboriginal Mythology,* Aquarian, London, 1994, p. 161.

concerned with a sacred object that should not be openly discussed, let alone portrayed in a public forum.

The above artists created their choreography during the years of the assimilation policy when there was a general belief that Aboriginal people would be assimilated, and their culture would not survive. Borovansky, Martyn and Bodenwieser were all moved by themes of Aboriginal oppression and created their works with compassion for the plight of indigenous Australians. Beth Dean's meticulous study of Aboriginal dance, although reflective of this ethnocentric period, remains an important record of attitudes towards Aboriginal culture during the assimilation period. It offers an aesthetic perspective of Aboriginal dance which is of particular interest to dance scholars and anthropologists.

A new era in Australian dance

Australia in the 1960's and 1970's saw an influx of important contemporary dance choreographers and companies from overseas. In 1963 the Jose Limon Dance Company performed, in Sydney and Melbourne, major works from the repertoire including his masterpiece *The Moor's Pavane,* based on Shakespeare's play *Othello.* The Alvin Ailey Company visited in 1964 and performed *Been Here and Gone, Revelations* and *Blues Suite,* all of which made use of various traditions of black American music including spirituals, gospel songs and the blues. The following year, Les Ballets Africains from the Republic of Guinea performed, among other works, a programme of traditional dances with the bare-breasted female dancers who caused a controversy, particularly in Brisbane, where they were ordered to 'cover up' thus adding to their publicity and ensuring the tour was a great success.[121]

The visits of these companies made an impact on Australian dance; in

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121 Added to this list were several folkloric groups and principal dancers from major European companies touring as soloists.

Edward H. Pask, *Ballet in Australia: The Second Act 1940–1980,* 1982, p. 186.

particular, the performances by the Alvin Ailey Company which inspired a vision of dance for Aboriginal Australians that many Aboriginal people still recall today. Of special relevance to this study was the visit of American choreographer Eleo Pomare and his company that included dancer Carol Johnson. Johnson remained in Australia and, in 1976, became the founding director of the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA).

A significant development of the sixties was the establishment of the Australian Dance Theatre as the first national contemporary dance company. Based in Adelaide, it was founded in 1965 under the joint artistic direction of Elizabeth Dalman and Leslie White.[122] Australian Dance Theatre brought a new approach to contemporary dance to Australian audiences. It created and commissioned new choreography, for example, from Eleo Pomare, including *Limousine for Janice* that premiered in Adelaide in 1972. The company was committed to the use of original music by Australian composers that was often performed live, collaborations with other artists, and providing training opportunities in contemporary dance techniques.

Dalman has a deep interest in and knowledge of Aboriginal culture, gleaned through research, field trips to communities around Darwin and Melville Island, and discussions with Aboriginal people. *Sun and Moon* (1968), which was originally choreographed for the Scapino Ballet in Holland, is an example of a work inspired by Aboriginal culture. With a synopsis based on a myth described in anthropologist C.P. Mountford's *The Dreamtime Book,* the dance tells of the loving partnership of the Sun woman and the Moon man who work together in the sky in an eternal partnership. It is set to music by Peter Sculthorpe. Dalman writes of her inspiration:

... I was fascinated to find a myth that described woman as assertive and active and man as introvert, sensitive and intuitive. It was especially pertinent because Australia at that time

122 Leslie White left the company in 1967.

gave great encouragement to the image of the macho, beer-drinking, sports-loving man.[123]

In 1970 a five part work, *The Oldest Continent – Time Riders* drew inspiration from the point of contact between Aboriginal and Western culture;[124] it was subsequently remounted for Australian Dance Theatre with the title *Creation*. Incorporating a sound and image production that was designed and directed by Polish artist J.S. Ostoja-Kotkowski, *The Oldest Continent – Time Riders* was innovative in its combination of dance, voice, music, light and visual imagery.

The last section of the original ballet, entitled *Corroboree* or *Bush Ritual* (1970), included parts of the John Antill score and was included in the programme of Australian Dance Theatre. This choreography remained in the repertoire of Australian Dance Theatre over a five year period and included the duet, *Being* which is the third section of *Creation;* this has been performed recently as part of the *Four Generations Project.*[125] Dalman remained artistic director of the company until 1975. Australian Dance

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123 Notes supplied by the choreographer to the author titled: Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, *Aboriginal Inspired Works*, Mirramu Creative Arts Centre, 28th February 1996.

124 Elizabeth Dalman's programme notes of this work include:
The Oldest Continent – Time Riders springs from Aboriginal mythology, contemporary writing, modern Australian dance, music by contemporary Australian composers and visual images of many kinds ranging from rock carving 20,000 years old to contemporary works of art and architecture.

> The production is a free expression in terms of modern media of the sudden confrontation experienced during the last two centuries ... this confrontation is expressed through the experience of an Aboriginal who, already partly assimilated by the city and influenced by it, encounters a tribal ancestor who demands of him that he shall decide what his future will be.

Script in this work is written by Tony Morphett and based on the writings of, among others, Professor A.P.Elkin, W. Ramsay Smith, Kenneth Slessor and Judith Wright. The direction of this major work was influenced by several collaborators, including Elizabeth Dalman.

Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, *Aboriginal Inspired Works*, (personal correspondence), 1996.

125 *The Four Generation Project* was directed by Norman Hall and devised by the original cast of Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, Patrick Harding-Irmer, Susan Barling and Gideon Obarzanek. Performed in Sydney at the Performance Space in 1994 and at the Green Mill Dance Festival in 1995.

Theatre gave contemporary dance a national focus by touring extensively within Australia and overseas with a repertoire of predominantly Australian themes and music. Currently based at Mirramu Creative Arts Centre, Dalman continues to choreograph and create dance works that, in particular, reflect her love of the Australian bush.

The Sydney-based Dance Drama Group, directed by Margaret Barr, and the Melbourne-based companies founded in 1963, the Modern Dance Ensemble directed by Margaret Lasica, and the Australian Contemporary Dance Theatre directed by Shirley McKechnie, produced seasons of new choreography that explored Australian themes. The energies of these directors, coupled with the inspiration engendered by the visits of the overseas companies, gave contemporary dance an impetus and confidence that enabled a new generation of creative dance artists to continue from these foundations.

A national indigenous training school

The opening of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance school in 1976, under the title of the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA), was an important event in the recent history of Australian dance. The school enables talented indigenous students to combine the study of traditional dance, contemporary techniques, choreography and related subjects within a five year academic program. NAISDA was established by Carole Johnson, a former dancer with the American Eleo Pomare Company, at the invitation of Aboriginal dancer Euphemia Bostock and the activist, Chicka Dixon, who saw the need for such a school to train indigenous dancers, choreographers and teachers.

Graduates from this course are now at the forefront of contemporary dance in Australia. In the 1980's and 1990's, Australian dance has seen a new wave of nationally recognised indigenous performers and choreographers, including NAISDA graduates Stephen and Russel Page, Raymond Blanco, Kim Walker, Michael Leslie and Bernadette Walong. The emergence of

major indigenous choreographers creating works for primarily non-indigenous audiences has opened the way for the presentation of indigenous issues by indigenous performers in professional companies. For the first time, indigenous choreographers are creating works for non-indigenous companies including the Australian Ballet.[126] Aboriginal teachers visit schools, educational institutions and communities not only to teach traditional dance and indigenous cultural studies, but to advise on curricula and arts related issues.

Since 1976 there has been a large number of choreographic works devised at NAISDA for end of year performances. These tend to be short works performed by students and as such, are not included in the overall survey unless they have been taken into the repertoire of a company, however, some highlights are footnoted below.[127] These developments gave indigenous dancers and choreographers their own artistic voice, but it was not until the 1990's that a significant national profile and recognition for individual indigenous choreographers and performers was achieved.

Meanwhile, other contemporary dance choreographers and companies created work that was inspired and influenced by Aboriginal themes. Kai Tai

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126 Stephen Page choreographed *Alchemy* for the Australian Ballet's triple bill season of new Australian choreography premiered at the Victorian State Theatre, 13th September 1996.

127 Examples of choreography for NAISDA student performances:

The Drunken Duet
Choreographed by Kai Tai Chan; danced and sung by Sylvia Blanco and Richard Talonga (1981)
Review by Gabrielle Dalton *Dance Australia* 1982, Issue 7, p. 41.

Prison Dance — Murder or Suicide
Choreographed by Chris Janides and performed by Raymond Blanco and Richard Talonga (1981)
Review by Gabrielle Dalton *Dance Australia* 1982, Issue 7, p. 41.

Jabiru and Crow
Choreographed by Chris Janides, the Artistic Director of the Sydney based company, Darc Swan, (1982) tells the humorous legend of these birds from Arnhem Land.
Article by Keith Glennon Warrgathulun *Dance Australia* 1983, Issue 11, p. 17.

Choreographers who have created original work for NAISDA include Carole Johnson, Ronnie Arnold, Paul Saliba, Chrissie Koltai, Cheryl Stock, Graeme Watson, Stephen Page, Raymond Sawer, Aku Kadoga and many more.

Chan, who established his group The One Extra Company in 1976, explored social and political issues in dance and theatre. Kai Tai's special interest was the presentation of cross-cultural issues — often provocative and always based on a reality he perceived in an Australian context. Narratives and themes ranged from Shakespeare (*The Shrew* 1986 and *Othello* 1989), to Asian cultural issues (*Ah Q Goes West* 1984, *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* 1987, *People Like Us* and *Dancing Demons* 1991) and Aboriginal issues (*Vanishing Species* 1976, *One Man's Rice* 1982 and *Midday Moon* 1986). This body of work, which combined dance and drama, cross-cultural and cross-media expression and the use of humour remains a unique contribution to Australian dance. The philosophy of presenting the 'primary voice', a process that includes input by performers who have experienced aspects of the themes they are presenting was an innovation in dance at this time. For example, when creating *The Other Side of Silence* (1990) about the Vietnam war for Canberra Dance Theatre, two generations of Vietnamese women were involved in developing their story as part of this work. This approach is of relevance to this study as Kai Tai Chan employed indigenous performers to dance indigenous roles and to contribute to the choreography by giving voice to their own interpretations of the narrative. The importance Kai Tai Chan attached, without compromise, to this philosophy contributed not only to the impact of his company's work but also to the genre of dance theatre and my own ideas about choreography. Specifically, in *Journey ... a rite of passage* the role of the Tasmanian Aboriginal girl, Mathinna was danced by indigenous dancer Bernadette Walong. Chapter 3 discusses her involvement in the production in greater detail; in relation to the discussion, I would consider that this role could only be performed by an indigenous dancer.

Kai Tai Chan's vision for Australian dance includes:

> I believe that what will be unique to Australian cultural identity in dance will come from the contribution of Aboriginal influence. Australian dance artists should try harder to learn and absorb from what is within their own country, than to constantly refer to other Western dance developments as models.[128]

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128 Letter from Kai Tai Chan to the author, March 1996.

The One Extra Company is based in Sydney and continues to perform; however, Kai Tai Chan resigned as the artistic director in 1991.

This survey of dance inspired and influenced by Aboriginal dance includes two works created by Cheryl Stock, the artistic director of Dance North. These works are of interest because the choreographic inspiration is of an abstract nature with the emphasis on atmospheric, non-specific references to themes and locations.

Ochre Dust was choreographed in 1987 and remounted in 1989 with music commissioned from the group Gondwanaland, featuring Charlie McMahon playing tonally prepared didjeridus. The choreography is based on a personal response to Kata Juta National Park (the Olgas in Central Australia). Fascinated by this area, Cheryl Stock visited it three times, photographing the region, absorbing the atmosphere and observing the wind through the spinifex, the windblown sand, the creatures of the area including the thorny devils. Although the intention of her choreography did not include specific references to any local myths or dance movements, authorisation was sought from the local Mutitjulu Community Council to create a dance about the place that is a sacred site for the Pitjantjatjara people. Permission was granted providing that there was to be no copying of dance steps or use of ancestral narratives associated with the area. Stock states that the influences for the choreography was a combination of 'subliminal' factors including absorption of the atmosphere, the movement of the wind and observations of plants and animals. Her comments concerning the reactions to the work are of interest:

> Many people thought it was based on traditional Aboriginal dance, especially when the thorny devil role was danced by an indigenous dancer, Bernadette Walong, in 1989. Aboriginal people and critics enjoyed the work while overseas audiences 'thought it in some way, epitomised Australia'.[129]

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129 Telephone interview with Cheryl Stock, 12th February 1996.

Desert Magic 1990, another work created by Cheryl Stock for Dance North, received a similar response. Although the narrative was a fictional 'legend' commissioned from Nadine Amadio, it was interpreted as an Aboriginal legend featuring a sun god, a lizard and other animals.[130] Aligned to the comments above, Stock was interested in the audience interpretation and response to *Desert Magic* believing that audiences,

> look for Aboriginal imagery if there is a dance about the landscape.[131]

The 1990's began with what may be regarded as an Aboriginal response by Aboriginal artists to their own history. The portentously entitled *Bran Nue Dae* was an Aboriginal musical with a predominantly Aboriginal cast of singers and dancers.[132] At the same time, Aboriginal dancer/choreographer Stephen Page was performing with the high profile, mainstream Sydney Dance Company and was invited to create a work entitled *Mooggrah* for the season, 'The Shakespeare Dances.'[133]

The period with the Sydney Dance Company was not only an invaluable professional experience for Page, it contributed to a profile that enabled him

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130 *Desert Magic* uses features design by John Coburn and music commissioned from Blair Greenburgh. Telephone interview with Cheryl Stock, 12th February 1996.

131 Cheryl Stock, telephone interview, 12th February, 1996.

132 *Bran Nue Dae* was the result of five years collaboration between writer Jimmy Chi and musicians Stephen Pigram and Mick Manolis, and choreographed by Michael Leslie. It was first performed in Broome in 1989 and subsequently underwent some rewriting for the 1990 Perth Festival. The musical created a nationwide interest in Aboriginal performing arts and an international interest in the play itself.

Katherine Brisbane (ed.), *Entertaining Australia: The Performing Arts as Cultural History,* 1991, p. 340.

133 Review by Karen van Ulzen, *Dance Australia* 1991, Issue 55, p. 56.

to develop his own company, Bangarra Dance Theatre. The combination of the choreography of Stephen Page, the original music composed by David Page and the dancing of Russel Page and other top NAISDA graduates has been the basis for his innovative, distinctive choreography. Early work signalled the mix of contemporary dance and indigenous dance. *Praying Mantis Dreaming,* choreographed by Stephen Page in 1992, was a full length work in this genre danced by performers from both remote communities and the city. It is a piece that explores, through the story of a young woman, both urban Aboriginal culture and the need to find Aboriginal roots and spirituality in order to survive in the city. The 'Praying Mantis' spirit is the woman's totem and exists in the work as a presence that guards and protects her. In this work, Page explores the fusion of traditional and contemporary dance forms, however they remain largely separated.[134]

Ochres, choreographed in 1994 by Stephen Page with Bernadette Walong as Associate Director, was a breakthrough in the development of a new style Page refers to as 'fusion'. Based on a narrative embodying the symbolism of the four colours of earth pigments, red, black, yellow and white, the choreography fuses elements of traditionally-based Aboriginal dance movement and contemporary dance. Its use of both urban and traditional Aboriginal dancers, and in particular the recent inclusion of non-Aboriginal performers in the work, is both innovative and controversial.

Fusion

Like the current trends in world music, fusion seeks to make an international dance form which incorporates indigenous dance and contemporary and classical forms to the highest level of professionalism: the work *Ochres,* for the Bangarra Dance Theatre exemplifies this style. In developing such work, Page stresses the importance of contact with a traditional community which can sanction, as well as inspire, movement, and enable the process to evolve.

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134 Review by Andrea Borsay, *Dance Australia* 1992, Issue 61, p. 56.

Since its conception, *Ochres* continues to be performed by Bangarra Dance Theatre nationally and internationally and is possibly the only recent Australian contemporary dance piece that has enjoyed such widespread success. The Aboriginal community of Yirrkala is closely associated with the company, overseeing the development of the choreography where any traditional material is included in the movement vocabulary or overall concept. Bangarra regularly tours to Arnhem Land and other Aboriginal communities around Australia and is acclaimed for work that is widely regarded as a turning point in the history of Australian dance.

Page recently choreographed a new work, *Alchemy*, for the Australian Ballet which is the first choreography for the national company by an Aboriginal choreographer.

The progressive influence of Aboriginal culture upon dance choreography may be divided into four periods; this is generally reflective of a common direction in other contemporary arts practice. A neo-Darwinian view of the world glorified the 'primitive' and romanticised indigenous cultures, emphasising a pre-colonial age of innocence. To some extent, the early works of Borovansky, Laurel Martyn and Rex Reid choreographed in the early 1950's present such a view in their choreography and the use of classical ballet technique and narrative convention exemplify this. Beth Dean sought a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture by learning the dances from the remote communities she visited, and reproduced them, combined with contemporary movement, in her choreography. In the succeeding decades of the 1960's and early 1970's choreographers, including Elizabeth Dalman, incorporated a modern dance aesthetic into their interpretations of Aboriginal themes and narratives. The current post-modern trend in dance throughout the world enables the choreographer to draw on, combine, change and recreate movement vocabulary from a variety of sources. Coexisting with this freedom of expression is greater knowledge, appreciation and respect by artists for the cultural practices and beliefs of indigenous peoples. Kai Tai Chan's choreography from the 1980's to 1991 considered the opinions of indigenous people and included indigenous performers in his dance theatre works.

Cheryl Stock recognised the spiritual significance of sacred sites to Aboriginal people when creating *Ochre Dust,* seeking permission from elders to create a dance work about the Olgas in Central Australia. Stephen Page's choreographic method called 'fusion' is part of this era of post-modernism and, as previously stated, is dependent on the approval of remote communities for permission to include traditional steps or songs. Nevertheless, the choreography is expressionist and includes literal narrative which differs from another post-modern approach which negates the narrative and any emotional impulse for movement.

This survey concludes with the inclusion of a choreography that was created in 1995 and performed by a group of dancers from the Australian Ballet in San Francisco at the 'UNited We Dance Festival'. Entitled *Corroboree,* the work was choreographed by Stanton Welch, resident choreographer for the Australian Ballet, to a section of the 1946 John Antill score by the same name. Although Welch used the title *Corroboree* and the original Antill score, the new ballet focused on the concept of universal passions that he says is reminiscent of 'a pride of lions'.[135] Avoiding Aboriginal references, Welch was inspired by the music, combined with stories from his mother about her early recollections of the first *Corroboree* ballets. Ritualistic, sexual and explosive, the dynamics place it as a dance of the 1990's incorporating a classical vocabulary with the female dancers en pointe.

In a sense this chapter has come full circle with the reappearance of another *Corroboree* as evidence of Australian 'identity' in an overseas forum. This work is yet to be staged in Australia and it is doubtful, in the present political climate, if this will eventuate, particularly if it retains its original title which evokes early ethnographic views of indigenous culture.

In common with the other choreography discussed in this chapter, *Journey ... a rite of passage* draws on indigenous dance as both a resource and an inspiration. The study of formal dance elements occurring in traditionally-based Aboriginal dance and particular conceptual features have

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135 Michelle Potter, 'Making Australian dance: themes and variations' in *Voices : The Quarterly Journal of the National Library of Australia,* Volume V1, Number 2, Winter 1996, p 18.

led to the development of a new personal dance language which underpins the work both technically and structurally. These features will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

A PRACTICAL AND CREATIVE STUDY

Part 1 of this chapter outlines the aims and objectives, the methodology and the process employed in the creation of *Journey...a rite of passage,* the performance project of the thesis. In Part 2, this process is analysed in respect of how traditionally-based Aboriginal dance, as presented earlier in the thesis, informed and influenced each section of the choreography. Part 3 presents conclusions and address the wider implications of this approach to choreography.

PART 1: AIMS AND OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS IN THE CREATION OF THE CHOREOGRAPHY FOR *JOURNEY...A RITE OF PASSAGE,*

Background

As a dance theatre choreographer concerned with the presentation of work about social and political issues, I have previously created two works that specifically address Aboriginal themes and issues.[136]

The first choreography, entitled *Distillations,* was a trio created in 1986 at the Australian and New Zealand Choreographers and Composers Course.[137] It explored an interaction between two young non-Aboriginal women and an Aboriginal man. Danced by Raymond Blanco, who is currently the artistic director of the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre Company, the

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136 *Distillations,* premiere, New Zealand, 1986 and *Two Tribes,* premiere in Canberra, 1988.

137 I was awarded a scholarship by the Australia Council to attend this course in 1986.

movement for the male role drew on his Aboriginal dance training and experiences and contrasted both dynamically and spatially with the women's movements. This was my first work with an Aboriginal dancer and initiated an interest in developing a choreographic approach inspired by Aboriginal dance. The second work, *Two Tribes*, was a full-length piece created for the Canberra Dance Theatre in 1988. This was a narrative-based work that addressed the political and historic issues involved in the celebrations of the 1988 Australian Bicentenary.[138] The dance choreography examined the progression of physical, spiritual and cultural suppression of Aboriginal people since colonisation. In contrast to the previously mentioned work, it did not include Aboriginal dancers. The twelve performers from seven different cultural backgrounds contributed to the work their personal experiences and perceptions of the place of Aboriginal people in Australia.

Besides my choreographic interest in Aboriginal dance, I have made three trips to Arnhem Land where I have maintained links with the communities of Ramingining and Yirrkala. My first visit in 1987 involved a one month stay teaching at the Ramingining School and it was on this trip that I gained some insight into traditional dance and ceremony and learnt several dances from this community. Three years later, I visited these communities again. Significantly, this trip included a period in Yirrkala when several funeral ceremonies were taking place and I was privileged to attend parts of these and learn about the proceedings from the participating women.

Aims and Objectives

Rather than imitate movement or record details of the ritual contexts of the dances, my choreographic aim was confined to the examination of the use of

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138 The 1988 Australian Bicentenary marked the anniversary of two hundred years of white settlement in Australia; for Aboriginal people it marked the day of invasion. The largest protest march since the Vietnam war occurred on Australia Day, 26th January 1988, with groups of Aboriginal people coming from all over Australia. Activities highlighted the current plight of Aboriginal people in Australia and sent a message to the world.

David Horton (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* CD Rom, 'History' section, 1994.

formal dance elements, namely the use of time, weight, space and flow, as they occur in traditionally-based Aboriginal dance. Coupled with this focus was an interest in the use of narrative in Aboriginal dance with regard to sequencing and groupings of dances in order to progress the story. The primary focus was the exploration of these areas in relation to the thesis topic, combined with creating a cohesive dance theatre work.

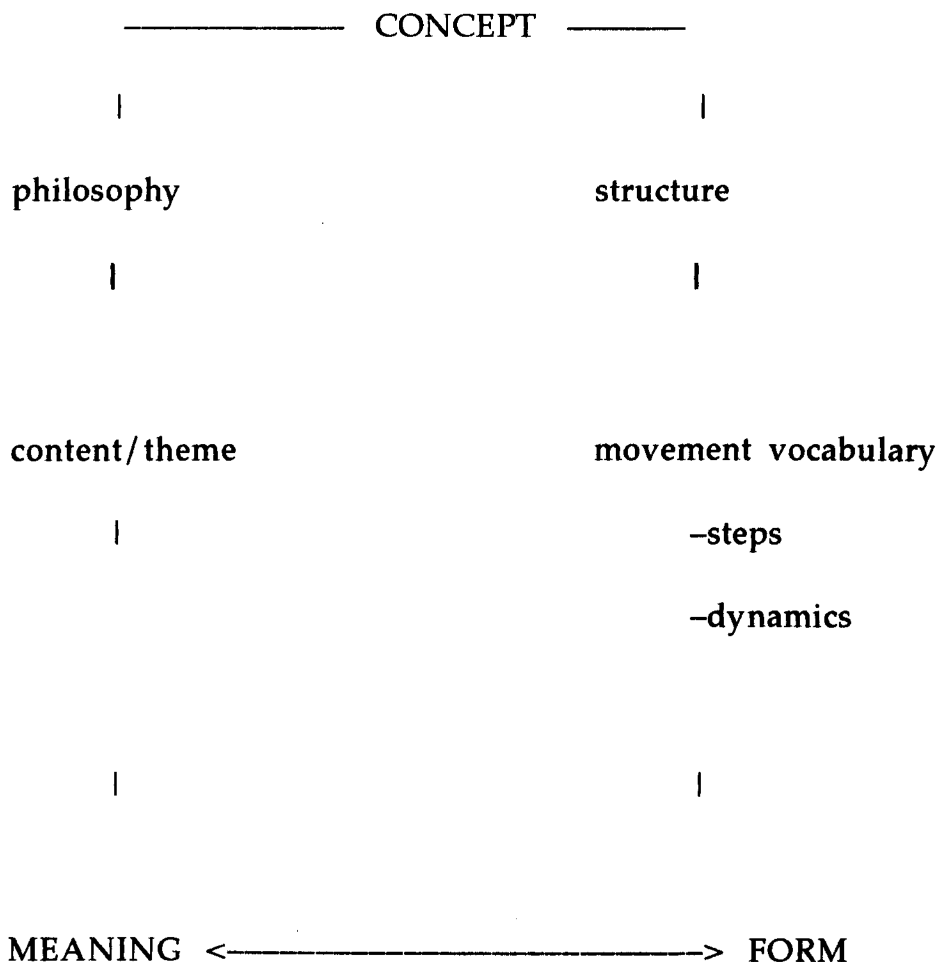
Above all, the choreography aimed to incorporate the study of the above elements in a manner which did not infringe Aboriginal ownership of dances with regard to the use of steps, themes or sentiments. Throughout the process, Aboriginal involvement was important; in particular, the contracting of indigenous dancer Bernadette Walong to perform in the project.

Methodology

The creative process involved an examination, through research and personal observations, of generic movement, effort factors and conceptual considerations occurring in Aboriginal dance, as documented in Chapter 1.

Work on bringing together the two key areas of interest, movement vocabulary and scenario, began simultaneously in the early stages of the development of ideas for the choreographed work. The relationship between these components presented an approach to choreography which had not been fully explored in the works outlined in Chapter 2, in which the narrative was generally the basis for choreography with the incorporation of classical and/or contemporary movement vocabulary. Beth Dean's approach was to use traditional steps which she had learnt from the Aboriginal people, but she did not examine the formal elements of these steps or adapt them in her work. Stephen Page utilises a 'fusion' technique where, in many sections of the choreography, the traditional elements remain intact.

A model for the development of choreography which simultaneously utilises both aspects of the creative process may be represented as follows:



Process

In the process of creating *Journey...a rite of passage,* a structural approach was adopted to develop the general form of the work with each section evolving independently, but with reference to the concepts and generic movement vocabulary absorbed from the study of traditionally-based Aboriginal dance.

In a sense, 'blocks' of movement vocabulary occur in each section and these carry intrinsic information to the audience with common signs or gestures occurring throughout, for example, references to the five senses, touching the ground with the hands and scooping up the earth. These signifiers occur

in each section, effecting the characters of the story in different ways depending on the physical and emotional setting of the scene; they also act as a leitmotif that will be referred to in the text.

Throughout, the focus for creating the movement was reflective of the dynamic dominant in Aboriginal dance combined with a fusion of contemporary dance techniques. An example is evident in *Storytelling 1, a convict ... a pioneer,* where the previously mentioned signifiers combine with strong, Graham-based contracted shapes moving in and out of the floor. The soft curves and flow that occur in the guardian's choreography in *Storytelling 2* are closer to the Cunningham technique, however, there is a deliberate effort to minimise the use of this type of flow as it is the least represented 'motion factor' in Aboriginal dance.[139] In the following discussion concerning the character of Mathinna in the solo in *Storytelling 3* it is noted that the dancers bring their own experience to the choreography, thus imposing a style that brings an element of strength and joy to creating work for performance. By this I include the special training and talents of the dancers portraying the roles as a factor in the overall performance of the movement, hence the choreography is given a particular direction from the performers in this production that would, to some extent, alter with different performers. Generally the movement is structured and controlled, with elements of everyday gesture and naturalism minimised and no option for improvisation. An exception to this focus occurs in the last section where the intention is to deconstruct previous movement vocabulary and juxtapose it with controlled phrasing. Overall, the movement was consciously inspired by the study of the angularity and percussive dynamic of Aboriginal dance.

The thematic concept was to create a 'rite of passage' which took the dancers and the audience on a personal journey of discovery. The narrative includes 'storytelling' sections that feature significant episodes in Australia's history,

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139 This comment refers to the 'motion factors' of time, weight, space and flow identified by Rudolf Laban.

Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement,* 1971, pp. 81–89.
See also the discussion in Chapter 1.

thereby metaphorically representing the journey of a nation. As in all journeys of discovery, there is an implicit change at the end that may involve reflection or be profound. The notion of a rite of passage can be linked to an initiation ceremony in an Aboriginal community whereby there is a preparation, a liminal state, the acquisition of knowledge, and metamorphosis to a changed state of being. It is this idea that inspired the narrative of the work and dictates the progression of scenes within the framework of the scenario.

Specifically, we follow a young woman, led by her guardian, through aspects of her history in which she participates and observes, until at the end of the work, she emerges as a woman with her own identity. The theme is simple, with each story denoting distant and recent histories that represent her ancestry and personal story. In the progression of the theme of self-discovery, other stories could be included or the present ones deleted or performed separately: they are self-contained and complete. However, only in the context of the collection of stories which composes *Journey ... a rite of passage,* is a transition portrayed and achieved. This is illustrated in the above diagram in which the concept is linked to the meaning that is then achieved through the formal elements of the work.

Although the production elements of the finished work were devised by associated artists, they followed specific instructions in terms of their purpose in the piece and the overall concept: these elements are outlined below.

Production and staging

<u>Set</u>

As the work is based on layered imagery, I believed it was important for all the elements of the production and the staging to be layered as well. By placing the configuration of objects of the set in the performing space, a relationship between the action and the environment (set) was created to sustain its own aesthetic integrity in relation to the theme of the work.

The juxtaposition of the natural with the industrialised elements of the set enhances the theme of colonisation and the physical claiming of the landscape through settlement. The acrylic boxes covered with wire mesh denote paddocks; one of barren earth, one of water (a dam), and one of wheat. Similarly, the pool of water at the back of the stage is contained in a metal tray, which signifies a larger body of water created by the light reflecting in ripples on the walls and the floor.[140] The back half of the stage represents the outside, while the front half is the inside of a house. The non-indigenous flora (geraniums) symbolise the migration of people and also colonisation whereby there is a desire to transplant the familiar and create an environment resembling the place left behind in the home country. The bright red flowers, each in an individual pot, denote a meticulously cared for front garden containing alien species that would not normally thrive in the new environment.

The aim of the placement of objects is to create a distance from the confines of a home and garden, to the surrounding fields and finally to the pool of water that represents a river or the ocean. The backdrop is made of light silk, hung loosely and positioned in such a way as to suggest a sail with the wind behind it. The painting by Robin Wallace Crabbe[141] shows a huge figure rising above the water with the words inscribed; 'a light to guide, a rod...' The figure holds a golden sun positioned in such a way as to denote the head. This corresponds to the details of the five senses on the pole masks created by Bren Weatherstone, and together, they represent the creative responses by the associated artists to the theme of the work.

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140 The rippling effect created by light on water is captured in clan designs, as in one of the Rirratjingu clan designs; see for example Mawalan Marika's bark painting *Turtle Dreaming*, c.1963.

W. Caruana, *Aboriginal Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1993, p. 64.

141 Robin Wallace Crabbe is a prominent Australian artist/writer represented in collections of the National Gallery of Australia and other major institutions. At the time of the commission for the backdrop for *Journey ... a rite of passage*, he was the visiting Creative Arts Fellow at the Australian National University.

Costumes

The designer Kay Johnston created costumes that denote character in a generalised manner. This works effectively and enables the women to wear a single, simple dress throughout, with minor variations of costume pieces being added, almost like a prop. For example, in the opening dialogue of *Storytelling 3* the Franklin characters add hats and Mathinna wears a red skirt. Similarly, the women waiting in *Storytelling 2* add a longer skirt, gloves and a hat to give formality to their characters.

Such abstraction minimises the naturalism of elaborate costuming based on literal translations of historic fashions and conventions. It allows for the complexity of roles, stories, time and place and ensures the focus on the movement assisting smooth transitions between scenes. This melding of time, space and place was crucial to the work and the costume and set designs generally accommodated this intention.

Lighting

The lighting design by Poppy Wenham was created to capture the clear, often relentless light of Australia. By using clear, pastel colours to create the light there was an intention to refer to the light in the landscape as expressed by some Australian painters, including Albert Namatjira.[142] The prismatic effect of white light created through the use of colour gave clarity

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142 For many years, Albert Namatjira was Australia's best known Aboriginal artist. Namatjira's landscapes were in the European watercolour tradition but were expressive of his relationship to his ancestral country around Hermannsburg, west of Alice Springs.

J. Hardy, J.V.S. Megaw & R.M. Megaw (eds.), *The Heritage Of Namatjira: The Watercolourists of Central Australia,*William Heinemann Australia, 1992.

In the context of his paintings and the use of light in this production, a quotation from a song by Aboriginal singer/songwriter Archie Roach is pertinent:

> Albert Namatjira painted
> Not so much the things he saw
> But what he felt inside

Djon Mundine, *The Native Born*, unpublished catalogue for the exhibition of the same title, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1996, Forward.

without starkness and a sense of depth and space. This lighting state remained constant for much of the work with contrast occurring in the surrealistic pole dance section, and the water rippling effect used in the last section and for transition purposes.

A consideration with the lighting design was not to impose or predict an emotional or judgemental response from the audience, but to allow each story to simply evolve.

Music

As with the concept of the costume and lighting design, it was important that the work should sustain its own dramatic impact through movement and narrative rather than this being predicted by other elements, including the music. In this respect, music or sound scape that used traditional Aboriginal instruments, specifically clapsticks and didjeridu, was avoided and cohesion was maintained by minimising the compilation of too many different sounds. The 'concrete', new music ensemble 'Bang on a Can' fulfilled these requirements by providing a range of sounds for most of the sections, from atmospheric sound-scapes to rhythmic rock in the last section. The minimalist use of 'open' percussion to begin the piece allowed an atmosphere to build and to some extent, was reflective of the sparse sounds of a clapstick.

Henryk Górecki's Symphony 3 and Nicolas Lens's 'Flamma Flamma' provided dramatic contrast in *Storytelling 2, 3* and 4. In view of the total length these inclusions seemed to be appropriate in order to provide contrast and theatrical interest in the middle sections of the work.

PART 2: TRADITIONALLY-BASED ABORIGINAL DANCE AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION AND INFLUENCE ON THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF *JOURNEY... A RITE OF PASSAGE*

Programme note

Journey ... a rite of passage is about change, growth and understanding of self and country. Episodes of storytelling recall past and recent histories and metaphorically tell of a journey travelled by many Australians. Water connects each story. Water symbolises cleansing and renewal, it defines the landscape and is an agent for change. Sea voyages have been made by the first Australians and recent immigrants including colonists, convicts, pioneers, settlers and refugees.

Shadowplay

As Aboriginal dancers paint up and prepare physically, mentally and spiritually for their ceremonies, so too do dancers performing in Western theatre. On one level, these preparations are reflective and personal, and on another they create group energy. These dual elements are represented by the women grouped around the water in the opening scene of *Journey... a rite of passage.*

The emphasis on washing, cleansing, nurturing and renewal occurs through both the literal and metaphoric actions of the women. For example, the two women watering the geraniums at the side of the stage signify the caring for their immediate surroundings of living things, the nurturing of the land, and the preparation of the ground where the dance will take place. The young woman is prepared for her journey by the older women while her guardian signifies herself in this role by dancing her responsibilities as observer, nurturer, carer and overseer of both the preparation and presentation of the young woman.

Movement is largely confined to the literal aspects of the narrative. This

includes the reality of washing in the water and watering the plants. The abstracted gesturing in the guardian's solo is a prologue that predicts movement passages and themes that occur throughout the work.

At the end of this section, the lifting of the young woman reflects the symbolic separation that occurs in Aboriginal male initiation ceremonies in Arnhem Land. Representing the departure from an existing state into a new one, the lifting denotes the beginning of a journey through the rite of passage ritual procedures and episodes. It is also a metaphor for swallowing and regurgitation that is prevalent in creation imagery about birth and rebirth into new stages of life, for example, in ceremonies related to the Wagilag Sisters ancestors from Arnhem Land.[143] Preceding this moment, the young woman falls between two groups of women who then manipulate her walking upstage; again the image of leaving one status in life and being guided into a new one is encoded in the choreography.

Dance

This dance is a joyful celebration of the women coming together, and offers an opportunity to explore a new movement vocabulary that is influenced by what I have observed and learnt from traditionally-based Aboriginal dance. In particular, the focus is on the incorporation of a percussive dynamic, the angular use of the joints,[144] descriptive mimetic gestures and metonymic whole body movement. The prevailing structure of a group, or a suite, of

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143 Many ceremonies, for men and women, girls and boys, include stages of separation. With reference to initiation, this can include seclusion in a particular area, chasing the neophytes away from their mother's camp, placing them in structures (tunnels, specially constructed huts and so on) and participating in particular ceremonial activities with ritual connotations. In reference to a key element occurring in boys initiation ceremonies associated with the story of the Wagilag Sisters, Hiatt discusses variations of the dominant swallowing and regurgitation theme. It represents the 'rebirth' of the novices into their new adult status embodying a new level of ritual status and physical separation from their mother's camp in order to move to the men's camp.

L.R. Hiatt (ed.), *Australian Aboriginal Mythology*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1975, p. 149.

144 Refer to previous footnotes and discussion of the power of the joints in Chapter 1, 'The Body'.

dances that are connected relates to the format of Aboriginal ceremonial groups of dances where, for example, several animal dances may occur in succession.[145]

In *Dance*, a suite of four dances is joined by simple running steps, skipping and hopping that recur at the beginning of each section. The first dance celebrates the women coming together and introduces the dancers to the audience through depicting them dancing closely together down stage and progressing quickly towards the audience at the end of this section. The second dance of the suite features high jumping, travelling progressions close to the ground, and jumps with turned in toes that 'mark' the ground. These actions denote the physical strength of the women and their ownership of the place where they are dancing. Parallelled with traditional dance, the dancers would kick up the dust and leave their tracks behind them if they performed this section on sand.[146] The third dance, in which the performers dance with their hands on their waist with the elbows bending backwards, could be entitled 'women's business.' Representing the special knowledge that the women share, this dance includes a pause where the women stop with vertically positioned moving fingers denoting a direct link between the earth and the sky, the mundane and the spiritual. The last part of this third dance, where the performers dance with their elbows bending backwards, denotes the women in conversation, joking and telling stories. Again, running is the link to the fourth and final dance in this suite, that is concerned with nurturing and the physical attributes of women symbolised by the touching of parts of the body. This dance leads them back to the water where they refresh themselves and exit, leaving the young woman and her guardian to observe and participate in the following stories

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145 The Rom ceremony I have studied included a suite, or group of dances, constituting a section of a dance cycle; this may include a set of dances on the one song subject.

Stephen A. Wild (ed.), *ROM: An Aboriginal Ritual of Diplomacy*, Canberra, 1986, p. 39.

146 This 'marking' in the space refers to comments by Franca Tamisari concerning the importance, and quality, of the tracks left behind when dancing.

Franca Tamisari, 'Body, language and dance: exploring the embodiment of power in Yolngu Law', 1994, p. 7.

that represent parts of their personal history.

A high-energy, celebratory mood is maintained throughout and a complexity of rhythm and movement prevails. In the context of a 'play dance',[147] the title establishes that this is a dance mainly for enjoyment with no special, deeper, significance.

Storytelling

In the context of Aboriginal ritual where several stories make up a ceremony, these episodes serve a similar function. Each incorporates narrative in a different way and is used to educate the young woman about her ancestors and her history. They relate important episodes in Australia's history, enabling the young woman and the audience to reflect on these in a personal and wider context.

Storytelling 1 a convict ... a pioneer

The intention is for the characters to portray the ancestors of the young woman in a story that is part of her personal history. The scene begins with the transition involving the young woman and her guardian at the water; they observe the entrance of a convict who represents a 'ghost' from the past.

The character expresses the physical, mental and spiritual privations of a convict. A motivation for the development of the convict's movement was

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147 'Play dances' and dances for fun and entertainment occur throughout Aboriginal communities: an example is a 'Fishing Dance' from the Torres Strait involving clapping, hitting the thighs and 'diving' forward motions. The game gets faster and faster until only one dancer remains. I was taught this dance by an Aboriginal friend several years ago.

Chapter 1 also includes a description of a children's ceremony by Margaret Karomi at Yalata, Central Australia.

to incorporate concepts explored by both Judith Lynne Hanna[148] and Franca Tamisari[149] in their work and observations of traditionally-based dance: that is how mimetic, metonymic, stylised, iconic and descriptive movement can denote a complexity of meanings. To some degree, there is difficulty in relating these movement foci to a solo dance and by this experience, I would conclude that a certain amount of juxtaposition of imagery, counterpoint work, and shaping with a group may further clarify the distinct intentions of each phrase of movement.

The solo begins with the hand, a metonym for the suffering of the body, mind and spirit. Although the body progresses away from the audience, the focus is on the hand as it reaches back to them; the hand embodies the story of suffering at this point. As the body walks upstage, the intention is for the arm, through images of thumbscrews and the twisted arm behind the back, to illustrate physical torture and express profound spiritual and mental anguish. Entering a new phase, the body moves forward while the arm remains the signifier of the emotional state; this encompasses a **metonymic representation.** The dance continues and describes work, toil and suffering with specific reference to literal actions such as digging and being flogged. This is the **descriptive representation** that precedes a shift into a **stylistic representation** shown by an image of the whole body being chained physically, mentally and spiritually. The body struggles free from these bonds and reaches for spiritual release in a symbolic gesture where the convict's arms reach up to God while at the same time, he looks down in despair; this is an **iconic representation** of the universal suffering of man. The iconic pose is broken by stepping backwards and slowly hinging to the floor as the eyes lift. The last section involves an image of transformation whereby the spirit leaves the body and the dancer 'floats' in an inhuman, trance-like state, which metaphysically represents a change from the physical to the spiritual: this is the **mimetic representation** of something

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148 Judith Lynne Hanna, *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Non-verbal Communication*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1979, pp. 41–48.

149 Franca Tamisari, 'Dance: the embodiment of power', 1994, pp. 9–11.

that is abstracted from the tangible.

The solo concludes with a return to reality, transcending the layers of suffering, when the convict whistles a song he recollects from his Scottish homeland.

The woman entering portrays a pioneer in a new land. Although her association with the convict sets her in a particular moment in history, her concerns are also contemporary. Themes include making her own place, overcoming her fears and loneliness, asserting her free will and coming to terms with the past. The portrayal of these human qualities are essentially more important than a link to a specific place or moment in history. Similarly, Aboriginal women's ceremonies may include ancestral beings, current participants and also serve to affirm spiritual entitlements for the future.[150]

The pioneer's movements show her marking her space, touching the earth about her, expressing sadness and loneliness. There is an overall feeling of self-possession and control illustrated through the deliberate holding on to the land and the place she is making for herself in a new country. Her innate fear, loneliness and a sense of loss of her feminine needs and desires is expressed through gestures that hold onto her body and then move away, in an abstracted awareness of something that is beyond her control. The hollow hands used throughout as she touches the earth and her own body signify her uncertainty in an alien landscape. Recurring 'signifiers' of touching, holding and reaching to the earth are juxtaposed with movement images that evoke the five senses through covered eyes, touching, tasting and listening.

The relationship that evolves between the convict and the pioneer embodies their personal desires in the face of hardship and privation, and a mutual recognition of the need to overcome fear and adversity in order to survive in a new country. Stylistically, they dance apart using minimal eye contact. Physical contact is often back to back until well into the duet.

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150 Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, 1983, pp. 94–106.

Initially, they are in different physical, social and metaphorical spheres; one is free, the other is not, one can mark out a place, the other's place is restricted and marked out for him. However, both are strangers in a new country and embody a feeling of barrenness and desolation that come from isolation, unfamiliarity and spiritual erosion.

Storytelling 2 women waiting ... a new arrival

The transition into this new story involves the young woman walking past the convict and the pioneer; they remain still, as if frozen in time. She observes them and then continues on her way, thereby introducing a new episode in her story. Set in the present, the scene begins with her preparing to meet a new arrival to the family from another country.

Optimism and joy abound yet there is also a sense of displacement, loss and a jarring of the past with the present. The women entering with the candles and floating them in the water denotes a moment of prayer, or remembrance for distant relatives and friends that may be alive or dead. After placing the candles in the water, the women come together and progress in a circle around the stage. The shuffles on two feet are similar to a step common to women's dances in the central desert of Australia.[151] In this instance, it signifies the leitmotif while the pounding of the ground expresses their grief that is later echoed in gestures of the women pounding their own bodies.

The movement vocabulary relates to some of the concepts present in women's dances from the desert regions of central Australia — in particular the sense of place that is mapped out by the group at the beginning of the

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151 The movement themes in this section refer mainly to women's dances from the central desert region, however common elements occur in other Aboriginal communities around Australia. For example, Tamisari refers to the actions of the dancers in Milingimbi leaving tracks in the sand after dancing in such a way as 'to leave tracks evoking the ancestor's characteristics'.

Franca Tamisari, 'Dance: an expression of law, power and knowledge in Arnhem Land', 1995, p. 17.

dance.[152] Diane Bell describes the dancers marking out the dancing ground with their entrance to the designated area carrying ritual boards. The complexity of the ceremony is summarised in her statement:

> To follow the dancing, one needs to be able to read the symbols it encodes. From the position of the dancers, the role they assume and the body designs they wear, an observer can tell if they are *kirda* or *kurdungurlu*, respectively owners and managers of the ritual. In the patterns of the dancing feet, the women's gestures as they dance, the orientation of the boards, an observer may learn something of the country but details are not available to those unschooled in the dreaming.[153]

Similarly, in *Storytelling 2*, the women's methodical circling and marking of the space that opens the work after the preparations of putting on the hat and gloves evokes a circle of life in which the women share their experiences, grief and hope. Within this circle there is a unity of a shared past that allows for an ebb and flow of individual histories that move in and out of the group, but always return until the end of the piece and the entrance of the new arrival with the suitcase.

The narrative incorporates a group/corps convention, whereby there is an ongoing group activity that each woman will leave to tell a part of her own story. These episodes are brief, and as she returns to the group, they respond with sympathy and understanding. Towards the end of this first section, the women search on the ground for a memento or some trace of the persons

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152 Although this is an important part of ceremonial dancing, at the conclusion of certain ceremonies it is important for the women to obliterate the traces of activity by throwing handfuls of sand into the air. Isobel M. White observes:

> The women are very open as to the love magic effect of many of their ceremonies, but when they perform them for their own enjoyment or to display them to an interested white woman, they use various devices to make sure they are nullified. One device is to throw handfuls of sand into the air at important parts of the ceremony, and another is to smooth away all footsteps of the dancers before leaving the ceremonial ground.

L.R. Hiatt (ed.), *Australian Aboriginal Mythology*, 1975, p. 133.

153 Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, 1983, pp. 126–128.

that they are focusing on in the dance, to comfort them. Finally, they slap their legs and form into a connected group, symbolising spiritual strength in their unity together.

The second part of this story commences when at first the young woman, followed by the group, runs downstage holding out their handkerchiefs as a symbol for new hope. Further gestures of hope are suggestive of attracting attention, in the hope of recognition by a face in the crowd.

The arrival of the visitor, who is also the guardian of the young woman, has a dual purpose. Literally, it describes the reality of the guardian returning to care for the young woman; symbolically it represents the hopes of all the women who are waiting. In relation to conventions that occur in Aboriginal ceremony, the narrative embodies the possibility of an individual dancer assuming, or being 'revealed' in many roles in a cycle of dancers. The past, future and present, the tangible or spiritual, may all be incorporated in a fluid configuration with interchangeable roles. In this context, *Storytelling 3* is a factual narrative but it can also operate as a parable where constancy and hope are rewarded.

Storytelling 3 the story of Mathinna ... a Tasmanian Aborigine

The childlike convention of telling a story and acting it out at the same time is incorporated into this narrative. The dancers gather around the narrator's chair, as if they are eager to listen to a new story. The scene begins with the character of Mathinna, in her red dress, skipping onto the stage as a child, waiting for her story to begin. The characters of Governor Franklin and his wife join the group and the roles are acted out in an almost two dimensional, stylistic pattern reflective of characters drawn on a page in a book. As the scene progresses, the narrator realises the horror of the end of the true story and leaves the 'children' frozen in time at the chair while she continues reading to the audience.

The script is as follows:

(Reader 1)

The story of Mathinna. Mathinna was born in 1835 on Flinders Island. She was adopted by Governor Franklin and his wife in 1841 and was brought up to believe she was a princess.

(Reader 2)

I am a good little girl, I have a pen and ink 'cause I am a good little girl.

I have got a doll and shift and a petticoat ... I have got a red frock.

I have got sore feet and shoes and stockings and am very glad.

(Reader 1)

Lady Franklin wrote to her sister in 1843:

(Reader 3)

'Mathinna's portrait is extremely like, but the figure is too large and tall ... she looks like a girl of twelve but is only seven ... the attitude is exactly hers, and she always wears the dress you see her in ... when she goes out, she wears red stockings and black shoes...'

(Reader 1)

In 1843 the Franklins left the colony and Mathinna ... Desperately lonely and unhappy, torn between two cultures and unable to be accepted by either, she turned to alcohol ... she drowned in a puddle at the age of twenty-one.[154]

As a metaphor for the experiences of many Aboriginal people through the history of colonisation, the dance extends beyond the Mathinna story. This is illustrated by taking off the red dress that was given to her by the colonists and returning to the water to renew herself by symbolically returning to her own cultural roots.

Thematically, the dance is expressive of pride, dignity and the reclaiming of cultural identity through harmony with the land. Choreographically, the process of creating a dance with Bernadette Walong, an indigenous dancer,

154 Julia Clark, *The Aboriginal People of Tasmania*, 1986, p. 45.

was especially interesting because of her feelings about the dance and the audience's perception of it.

The movement vocabulary refers to the previous material of *Dance* where the focus is on angular movement and the use of a percussive dynamic. The previously mentioned 'signifiers' are present, including gestures denoting the relationship of the dancer to the earth. In particular, there is an intention to almost create an 'anthem' for the earth with phrases progressing to the ground, movements and gestures involving touching the earth and generally working at a low level for much of the stepping and extension work in plié. By way of contrast, the jumps are sudden and typify another quality that is prevalent in Aboriginal dance and physically achieved by the dancers; that is the ability to spring high suddenly out of the ground. This quality adds to the percussive dynamic, enabling the rhythm and pace of the dance to build.

Bernadette Walong commented that she felt 'comfortable with the movement' and that it was 'nice to be doing something familiar'.[155] This was in relation to her own choreographic and performance experiences whereby the movement quality and dynamic of the Mathinna solo reflected her personal 'feel' for movement rather than there being a movement or phrase that she had in fact performed before. There are no traditional Aboriginal dance steps in this solo; however, an indigenous dancer of this ability brings special qualities to the choreography and some audience members erroneously interpreted the dance as a fusion of contemporary and traditional movement.

Creating this solo with Bernadette Walong brought together the two streams of influence of Aboriginal dance in the most complete sense. The thematic material of the story of Mathinna enabled her dance to be a compelling metaphor and operate on a number of levels in ways that have been discussed previously, while the movement vocabulary was performed with power and clarity. Added to this was a new factor in the question of how Aboriginal dance may inform and influence choreography: that is the

155 Rehearsal period in Canberra, March 1996.

special qualities an Aboriginal dancer may bring to the choreography through their own training and personal experiences.[156]

Storytelling 4   an urban ritual ... see, hear, smell, touch, feel

The concept of this section came from two areas of interest; the first recalls the multi-layered significance of poles occurring in many Aboriginal ceremonies that are often carried and planted in the ground.[157] The other reflects ceremonial concerns of the senior women in a community who come together to teach and remind the young women of their special knowledge, responsibilities and of the power of the Dreaming.

The group dances together in a highly stylised, almost surreal procession, eventually gathering around the young woman to remind her of all that is around her in life experience and the environment. The images of the senses on the poles symbolise the significance of all thought and action, while the young woman's pole carries a web that denotes the sixth sense.[158] It is intangible, encompassing the power of eternal possibility and options available through imagination and creativity. The almost military marching

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156 See also the discussion in Chapter 2 concerning the methods and approach of choreographer Kai Tai Chan.

157 Ancestral Djan'kawu-related dances include a repeated progression of poles around the community involving banging on the ground and crossing the poles. This represents the travels of the Djang'kawu Sisters as they progressed across the land with their digging sticks with which they created fresh water holes. The area associated with these ancestors is around Ramingining, the Arafura Swamp and up the coast to the mouth of the Glyde River.

H. Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 1991, pp. 71 and 287.

Dhuni Rurruwuy
A film by Ted Whiteaker, October 1994.

158 The image refers to the symbolism of a web, or net being a catcher of souls. This symbol occurs in many cultures but in this context it is reflective of its use in Aboriginal culture. Examples include the web image in George Milpurrurru's painting, *Spider Dreaming*, 1985 in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia.

George Milpurrurru with Gladys Getjpulu, Djon Mundine, Dr Joseph P. Reser & Wally Caruana, *The Art of George Milpurrurru*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1993, p. 21.

and formations in this dance refer to the power the women have through their spiritual knowledge that the young woman is about to learn. The dancers are also foreboding and threatening when they surround the young woman midway through the dance; this represents their power and serves as a reminder to her of the respect she should show to her elders and her community. At this point, the dancers' individual movements around the poles and on the ground denote this power and reinforces it in their own experience as well as evoking it for the young woman. Embodiment by senior dancers is crucial to Aboriginal ritual with the dancers being considered most dangerous and powerful at this time because of their closeness to the ancestors.[159]

This short dance leads to the final scene where the young woman dances alone, signifying her transition to maturity by the end of the work.

The spirit within

The scene begins with the young woman metaphorically representing a bird soaring and flying free. This image is derived from a song from Yirrkala in Arnhem Land about a bird hopping on water and then soaring high.[160] It is incorporated into the opening solo of this section by the dancer's movements showing her alternatively jumping and freezing, with short connecting steps and hand gestures moving like feathers, water ripples and wings. The entry into the water, and the ensuing dance in the water, is symbolic of coming of age and associated imagery, for example, sexual experience, personal power, knowledge and individual freedom. The movement vocabulary reiterates the dancer's steps before entering the water and extends the expression of freedom and joy by playing with the water,

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159 Franca Tamisari, 'Body, language and dance: exploring the embodiment of power in Yolngu Law', 1994, p. 24.

160 This story of the bird was sung to me by Banduk Marika of the Rirratjingu clan from Yirrkala. It is from a song that her father, Mawalan Marika, the prominent ceremonial leader and spokesman for the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land, used to sing which describes the bird hopping and soaring.

bathing in it and throwing it about.

Other women enter, one walking naturally in the role of a sunbather, the others in a stylised manner in order to sit and watch the duo at the water. The dancers who enter with high jumps, the following duet and the trio are joyful, celebrating their participation in the final stages of the rite of passage. Initially, the movement is suggestive of previous themes incorporating angular shapes and a percussive dynamic, however, as the group of women form a line towards the back of the stage it becomes free flowing and a deconstruction of their previous vocabulary begins. The direction and intent here is to refer to current social dance idioms where a group of people dance in their own space, to the same music, with individual expression. Periodically, the women are drawn together in set movements that reflect previous sections of the work with references to parts of the body and the five senses. This action occurs within the spatial structure of a 'chorus line' and is indicative of a convention in Aboriginal women's dances from Arnhem Land where they often dance their own dance at the same time as the men, but are spatially and spiritually separate.

In this work, the two dancers in front of the women's line perform clear, sustained movement, with the intention to create a stylistic contrast by juxtaposing this against the complexity of the movement of the other women. Metaphoric imagery suggests contrasts of the old and the new, maturity and youth, experience and naivety, while the abstracted movement of the group denotes contrasts of simplicity and complexity, bound flow and free flow. As the duo leaves the stage, the women perform a sequence of rippling movements whereby they mimetically and iconically 'become' the water from which the young woman emerges for her final solo. The pace, variety and energy of this rippling symbolises the transfer of power and knowledge to the young woman. When the young woman begins her final solo and dances downstage there is a sense that their task has been completed and they exit, bent over, leaving her alone on stage. In the context of the movement in the discussion above, this solo deconstructs the young woman's previous defined and restrained vocabulary. Emerging from her 'rite of passage' she performs a celebratory dance that has a sense

that it could go on forever as the lights and music fade around her at the end of the work.

PART 3: CONCLUSIONS INCORPORATING THE WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF THE METHODOLOGY AND CREATIVE PROCESS TO CHOREOGRAPHY.

Throughout the research stage of the thesis and during the choreographic process, I have been concerned with the potential for traditionally-based Aboriginal dance and themes to inform and influence contemporary choreography. By focusing on several of the previously stated aesthetic principles and commonalities learnt through personal experience and research, I was able to create movement with this focus. Key elements emerged through all the sections of the choreography. These include the percussive dynamic, angular movement focusing on the joints to initiate and shape phrases, a sense of contact with the earth through gestures on the ground, and an emphasis on the awareness of the senses as the receivers of feeling, knowledge and spirituality.

Spatially, there was an emphasis on the group as the focus from which solos and small group sections came and went. The relationships that evolved in the work, for example between the characters of the convict and the pioneer, not only reflect sensuality between each other, but also in the wider context of their physical and spiritual place in the landscape. This applied to all the 'Storytelling' sections, as well as to the ongoing scenario of the coming of age procedures defined by the young woman and her group. The natural objects, and in particular the water, sustained these themes and relationships through the work from beginning to end. Marking place in space and time was also reinforced by movement sequences that were choreographed with this in mind, many of which would literally leave circles, lines and pathways on the ground if performed on sand. Examples have been cited

previously, with the most sustained passage being the 'women waiting' in *Storytelling 2* where they progress in a circle hopping on two feet for twenty counts. Another choreographic consideration in respect to 'marking' occurs in gestures where a performer is 'outlined' by another performer as if to draw their image in the air. Specifically this occurs in the *Storytelling 1 , a convict. ... a pioneer* duet, and again in *Storytelling 2* when the new arrival introduces herself to the young woman. There is also a deliberate 'marking' of the space above the dancers when they 'draw' pathways above their heads in several group sections, particularly in *Dance.*

As has been discussed previously, in traditional ceremony there are numerous examples of marking the ground with objects, with dance and through sand sculptures.[161] By emphasising natural objects in the set a sense of place and environment was created for the dancers and the audience. The use of the water, both as a symbolic image and as pool where people wash, play, reflect and dance enabled a duality of reality and illusion where the mundane and the spiritual coexisted in the work as they occur in Aboriginal ceremony. As a microcosm, the concept of the set reflected this dualism.

The choreographic process of *Journey ...a rite of passage,* included the premise that in Aboriginal dance, each movement, phrase and choreography has meaning, and indeed, many layers of meaning. This concept underpins dance in many cultures throughout the world and is obviously not new. In the practice of contemporary dance, modernist choreographers have also adopted the concept of the association of movement vocabulary and meaning, initially through Rudolf Laban and the German Expressionists, and in America, Martha Graham. Graham's movement choirs and mass dance works, although extremely individual, were representative of a political, communal approach to dance occurring in America. By presenting moral parables, Graham articulated feminist ideals

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161 Sand sculptures have recently become a feature of Aboriginal art exhibitions both in Australia and overseas: a recent example is the sand sculpture included in 'The Native Born' exhibition, curated by Djon Mundine at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1996.

Djon Mundine, *The Native Born*, 1996, Forward.

and gave women a political voice in the arts of America; the focus was radically different to what Graham considered the bourgeois interests of classical ballet. Works titled *American Document* (1938), and *Letter to the World* (1940), seek an American identity and a place, specifically for women, in this society. Graham's obsession with the expression of meaning through movement encouraged diverse responses from both audiences and her dancers, several of whom found this approach restrictive.

Merce Cunningham observed:

> That was what I really didn't like about working with Martha Graham — the idea that was always being given to you that a particular movement meant something specific. I thought this was nonsense. And, you know I really think Martha felt it too.[162]

In *Journey ...a rite of passage,* I attempted to impose meaning within single movements of this work and in some instances, layers of meaning that came from my study of the conceptual aspects of Aboriginal dance. This is particularly evident in the convict's solo in *Storytelling 1,* where each moment is constructed to illustrate a range of meanings through the use of mimetic, metonymic, iconic, stylised and descriptive movement imagery. The resulting focus enables the dancer to portray naturalistic gesture, symbolic suffering and a metaphysical state of either part of the body or the whole body, in one dance. I had not considered the possibility of creating movement within these frameworks before, and learnt of these constructive tools through my research and observations of traditionally-based Aboriginal dance.

In individual Aboriginal dances, I suggest, there is little separation between form and meaning; rather a structure and order for the performance of each

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162 Cunningham continues in this passage to recount an incident when Martha Graham was uncertain which emotion should be expressed by the dancer in a particular phrase and realised its potential for ambiguity.

Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism / Performing Politics,* 1995, p. 72.

dance exists, which, taken in total, constitutes a whole. It is this concept and structure that are given form in *Journey... a rite of passage.*

The exploration of traditionally–based Aboriginal dance was the focus and inspiration for the choreography in terms of the general storyline, sub–sections of the theme, the movement vocabulary and the formal structures. By focusing on the conceptual and structural elements in the narrative, and by studying generic movement vocabulary I explored new directions in my choreography.

CONCLUSION

In his essay titled, 'Aboriginality: A Lugubrious Game',[163] the Australian painter Juan Davila presents an opinion on two types of appropriation which concern the attitude of an artist towards their experience of interaction with Aboriginal culture. Davila proposes that some artists believe they have an instinctive 'rapport', attempting to 'Aboriginalise' themselves in the creation of their art. Another group accept that there is a unique Aboriginal iconography which can be explored in their work, but they have no desire to become part of this culture. Both strands of this argument are based on the premise that, despite outsider interest in Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal society, while evolving in the contemporary sphere, is self-sustaining. This argument pertains to dance artists who have generally adopted the latter approach to choreography.

Until the 1970's, choreographers who were inspired by Aboriginal dance and themes were urban dwellers whose interest in Aboriginal culture was stimulated primarily through media coverage, books of anthropological expeditions, and exhibitions of Aboriginal art. A notable exception to this trend was the American choreographer Beth Dean, who travelled through northern and central Australia to study Aboriginal traditional dance as a basis for her 1954 work, *Corroboree*. The research in Chapter 1 and the discussion and conclusion of the performance project in Chapter 3 has presented a particular choreographic model which is informed by traditionally-based Aboriginal dance. Chapter 2 investigates the influence of Aboriginal dance and themes on Australian choreography. Evidence suggests that spasmodic waves of interest by individual choreographers working in several companies occurred rather than a sustained impact.

Creative artists repeatedly seek new forms of expression, and throughout

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163 Juan Davila, 'Aboriginality: a lugubrious game', in *What is Appropriation? An Anthology of Critical Writings on Australian Art in the 80's and 90's*, Rex Butler (ed.), IMA & Power Publications, Brisbane, 1996, p. 194.

history have been inspired by the new, the exotic and the unfamiliar. The intentions of the non-indigenous Australian choreographers are various, however, apart from the work of Beth Dean, it has been demonstrated in Chapter 2 that in dance, rather than the duplicating of steps, the choreographers' primary interest was thematic. Choreographers utilised a variety of sources including the Western traditions of classical ballet and American modern dance techniques to create ballets based on their perceptions of aspects of indigenous culture: this is in contrast to the visual arts in which there are several documented cases of breaches of copyright.[164] Dance artists have created, either through subliminal or more direct knowledge, choreographic responses that do not seek to copy. Overall, the purpose of looking to Aboriginal dance as a resource has been to create an aesthetic response without aiming to incorporate traditional steps. Choreographers have opted for a generical approach to Aboriginal dance in their artistic choices. In association with this intention, the extent of appropriation of Aboriginal imagery, intellectual property and cultural practices remains small, relative to the body of work in question.

The Preface outlines key political and social periods for indigenous Australians, and Chapter 2 correlates these events with choreographers interested in addressing aspects of Aboriginal culture in their work. The contemporary political and social milieu clearly influenced the attitudes of choreographers, for example, Beth Dean's approach to the choreography of *Corroboree*. Rather than regarding the reproduction of Aboriginal steps as 'appropriation', Dean viewed her choreography as the means of bringing Aboriginal culture to the public and preserving, through dance choreography, some features of this unique form. Borovansky's personal experience of severance from his own country and culture influenced the compassionate focus of the narrative in *Terra Australis;* similarly, Laurel

164 For example, in 1993, Milpurrurru et. al. and the Public Trustee for the Northern Territory commenced an action in the Federal Court of Australia against Indofurn Pty. Ltd. to prove breach of copyright on behalf of a group of artists.

Michael McMahon, 'The case of the counterfeit carpets', in *Copyrites: Aboriginal Art in the Age of Reproductive Technologies*, Vivien Johnson (ed.), National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association & Macquarie University, 1996, pp. 39–40.

Martyn's work, *Mathinna* uses an empathetic approach to the presentation of an Aboriginal history. Unlike Beth Dean, Borovansky and Martyn incorporated classical ballet conventions in their choreography and these works remain strictly within these traditions. Historically, the ballet has adapted thematic material from other cultures and developed narrative, albeit with some stylistic changes, within the classical genre. Rex Reid's approach to the 1950 version of *Corroboree* reflects such a background and is implicit in his choreography that essentially incorporated classical steps into the dance with several performance innovations. Borovansky, Martyn and to a lesser extent Reid, were concerned with the narrative basis for their choreography within the storytelling traditions of the ballet. In contrast, Beth Dean looked at the duality of narrative and movement vocabulary and sought to combine them coherently in a new form of dance.

Choreographers in the 1960's and 1970's staged Aboriginal narratives with a desire to promote the beauty and power of Aboriginal culture. Nevertheless, indigenous people did not have their own voice in this choreography as either performers or contributors and few of the choreographers had experienced any contact with Aboriginal people. As the self-determination and land rights campaigns gathered momentum in the 1960's and 1970's — non-indigenous choreography expressive of Aboriginal themes and narratives may have contributed to the general consciousness and wave of public support for Aboriginal people.

Works created in the 1980's include those by Aboriginal choreographers graduating from NAISDA, Kai Tai Chan's One Extra Company and works by the author for Canberra Dance Theatre.

Chapter 2 provides a framework in which to place *Journey ... a rite of passage* within the philosophical and aesthetic contexts of other choreographers who have been inspired by Aboriginal dance. A methodology and process for choreography that did not appropriate dance material, infringe copyright of intellectual property, or presume arrogation of one dance form over another was a fundamental aim of the project. By adopting a method of investigation based on a universal choreographic

model (Laban's) which correlated specifically with the use of space, time, and weight combined with observations of the effort (or dynamic) factors I was able to work from an aesthetic perspective. Through research and an involvement with Aboriginal people and communities I gained knowledge and worked with respect for the rights of ownership by Aboriginal people to their dances and the ceremonial and public contexts in which they are performed.

Journey ... a rite of passage was created with a knowledge of Aboriginal cultural practices and political view points. The performance project focused on the structural components, gained through research and observation, and was approached with a concern to develop this research into new material which would be the basis of the choreography. The impact of Aboriginal dance on this work was substantial and encompassed the focus of the choreography, however, this process was intrinsically personal, and is reflective of the pattern of interest in this subject from individual choreographers since the 1940's.

The richness and diversity of current choreography informed and influenced by Aboriginal dance and themes is indicative of future directions limited only by the imagination of the choreographers. In the present political context of self-determination, the question of non-indigenous choreographers and dancers working in this area stimulates debate. At present, the establishment of boundaries and guidelines for such work seems to rely on the integrity, and responsibility, of the choreographer.

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APPENDICES

1. **Program of *Journey ... a rite of passage***
2. **VHS Video tape of *Journey ... a rite of passage***

journey

.... a rite of passage

CANBERRA DANCE THEATRE

Journey is about change, growth and understanding of self and country. Episodes of storytelling recall past and recent histories and metaphorically tell of a journey travelled by many Australians. Water connects each story. Water symbolises cleansing and renewal, it defines the landscape and is an agent for change. Sea voyages have been made by the first Australians and recent immigrants; colonists, convicts, pioneers, settlers and refugees.

SHADOWPLAY

Solo: Kerrie Murphy
Janine Ayers, Kirsty Hilson, Amalia Hordern,
Sandra Inman, Kerrie Murphy and Kellie Phillips

DANCE

Janine Ayers, Amalia Hordern,
Sandra Inman, Kerrie Murphy
and Kellie Phillips

STORYTELLING 1

a convict .... a pioneer
Patrick Harding Irmer and Anca Frankenhaeuser

STORYTELLING 2

women waiting .... a new arrival
Janine Ayers, Kirsty Hilson, Amalia Hordern,
Sandra Inman and Kellie Phillips
Duet: Amalia Hordern and Kerrie Murphy
Music: Henryk Górecki 'Symphony No.3'

STORYTELLING 3

the story of Mathinna .... a Tasmanian Aboriginal
Solo: Bernadette Walong
Music: Nicholas Lens 'Flamma Flamma'

STORYTELLING 4

an urban ritual ... see, hear, smell, touch, feel ...
Janine Ayers, Kirsty Hilson, Amalia Hordern,
Sandra Inman, Kerrie Murphy and Kellie Phillips
Music: Nicholas Lens 'Flamma Flamma'

THE SPIRIT WITHIN

Solo: Amalia Hordern
Patrick Harding Irmer, Anca Frankenhaeuser,
Bernadette Walong,
Janine Ayers, Kirsty Hilson,Sandra Inman,
Kerrie Murphy and Kellie Phillips

PRODUCTION

Choreography and Direction:	**Stephanie Burridge**
Lighting design and production:	**Poppy Wenham**
Costume design and co-ordination:	**Kay Johnston**
Silk Painting:	**Robin Wallace-Crabbe**
Pole masks:	**Bren Weatherstone**
Publicity:	**Emma Dykes**
Video Taping:	**Dale Baker**

THE CHOREOGRAPHER

Stephanie Burridge worked as a freelance dancer, choreographer and teacher overseas before being appointed Artistic Director of the Canberra Dance Theatre in 1978 where she has choreographed over forty works including *Two Tribes*, *Birds of Paradise*, and a re-creation of Jean Cocteau's *Wedding on the Eiffel Tower* and danced in works by Australia's foremost choreographers. Under her direction CDT has performed at arts festivals around Australia and in 1983 in London and at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. In 1986 she was selected for the Australian/New Zealand Choreographic Course in New Zealand under the direction of Graeme Murphy and in 1989 Stephanie's work was profiled on SBS television. Freelance work includes choreography for other dance companies, floor routines for Australia's women Olympic gymnasts, television and theatre choreography including the 1993 production of *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Anything Goes* in 1994 at the Canberra Theatre and teaching dance at Hawker College. Stephanie's contribution to dance has been acknowledged by Canberra Critic's Circle Awards in 1993 and 1994. In 1995 she was invited as the international tutor by the National Congress and Convention on Dance of the Philippines and to work with Ballet Philippine and the Bayanihan Dance Company. She is currently completing a Doctorate of Philosophy in Choreography with the London Contemporary Dance School in association with the University of Kent, in Canterbury, England.

THE DANCERS

Patrick Harding Irmer recently returned to Australia after 17 years with the London Contemporary Dance Theatre where he was a teacher, choreographer, acting artistic director and constant performer. In 1985 he was voted best modern dancer in Britain. Also in that year he graduated with BA Honours in Contemporary Dance from the University of Kent. In 1986 he represented the UK as a solo performer at the International Modern Dance festival in Tokyo and with LCDT has danced all over the world except Australia. Since returning to live in Sydney, Patrick has performed with The One Extra Company in *People Like Us*, *Cat Steps Softly, Blossoms and Wrinkles, Everything But* and most recently *Tent of Miracles*. He performed *Vesali Icones* a forty five minute solo choreographed by Jonathan Taylor for the Melbourne International Festival in 1991, and appeared in *Four Generations* , a work devised by Norman Hall, in Sydney and at the Green Mill Dance Festival in Melbourne in 1995. He has also taught at tertiary dance colleges around Australia. In Canberra, Patrick choreographed *The Other Side of Today* for CDT in 1991 and performed with the company in Stephanie Burridge's *Birds of Paradise*. Most recently he performed in Graeme Murphy's work *Fornicon* which toured nationally and the *Dance Close Up* season directed by Eleo Pomare.

Anoa Frankenhaeuser was born in Finland and studied at the London Contemporary Dance School before joining the 'X-Group', then London Contemporary Dance Theatre in 1973 when she toured extensively in Europe, North America and Asia. For 15 years she performed in works by leading choreographers including Martha Graham, Jerome Robbins, Robert Cohan, Robert North, Anna Sokolov and Siobhan Davies. She also was on various occasions company teacher for technique and repertoire, and in 1987 was appointed Rehearsal Director for the company. Anca graduated with one of the first BA Honours degrees in Contemporary Dance to be awarded by the University of Kent. Since arriving in Australia Anca has worked as a freelance teacher at several dance academies and most recently performed in a work by Norman Hall for the 1994 Independent Dance Collection, and in Kirsty Reilly's *Hall of Mirrors* at the Belvoir St. Theatre's Open House season in September 1995.

Bernadette Walong was born in Oakley, Queensland, and is a graduate of the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association. She first met Stephanie Burridge when she performed in Canberra in the 'Two Up' season featuring NAISDA fourth year students and CDT at Canberra Theatre in 1988. She worked with Dance North in Townsville for four years and has choreographed several works including *Raw Deal*, *Bum this Territory* and *Orchard Road* which toured Vietnam in the repertoire of Dance North. She joined Bangarra Dance Theatre as a guest artist in 1994 in *Ninni*, and later collaborated with Stephen and David Page on *Ochres*. Bernadette was appointed Assistant Artistic Director of Bangarra in 1995 and worked as choreographer, performer and director with the company, touring extensively throughout Europe, America and Asia. She recently returned from teaching and choreographing in Cuba.

Kerrie Murphy was born in Canberra and trained at the Dell Brady Ballet School before completing a BA in Dance at the University of Western Sydney (Nepean). From 1991 to 1994 she performed and taught with CDT appearing in several seasons including *Birds of Paradise*. Kerrie choreographed two works for the company's *Visions* seasons. She travelled to Europe in 1994 training in London, Holland and Germany and returned to Canberra in February.

Amalia Hordern completed her Advanced RAD examination in classical ballet and performed as a soloist with the Dimetriavitch Ballet and the Canberra Opera Company. In 1994 she was invited to join the Canberra Dance Theatre where she performed and choreographed in studio shows and *Vision 6*, community performances including *Carmina Burana* and *Dante's Inferno* for the Canberra Festival; she also performed in *Anything Goes* for Canberra Theatre Trust. Amalia is completing a degree in Medieval History at the ANU and teaches dance for CDT and at the Lisa Clark Ballet School. ***Journey*** is her first major role with CDT.

Kellie Phillips trained in classical ballet and contemporary dance in Canberra. She joined CDT to perform in *Carmina Burana* for Canberra Festival 1995 and appeared with the company in this year's festival production of *Dante's Inferno.* Kellie is in her final year at Phillip College and her potential in dance has recently been noted as she has been awarded a trainee scholarship with the Sydney based company Darc Swan. ***Journey*** is her first production with CDT.

Janine Ayers trained at the Canberra School of Ballet from 1976-85 before joining the Human Veins Dance Theatre where she performed in *Alice Underground*. Janine trained in body shaping and is currently the director of the Muscle and Movement Dance Company. She teaches at the Lisa Clark School of Ballet. ***Journey*** is her first season with CDT — she also appeared with CDT in *Dante 's Inferno* at the Canberra Festival.

Kirsty Hilson graduated from the University of Western Sydney (Nepean) with a BA in Dance and attained a Diploma of Education from Canberra University. She has performed with CDT since 1990 appearing in Birds *of Paradise*, *Visions* seasons where she has also choreographed and community events. She performed in *Anything Goes* for the Canberra Theatre Trust and is the director, choreographer and a performer with the Creole Belles. Kirsty teaches dance at St Claire's College.

Programme for *Journey ... a rite of passage*, performed at Gorman House Arts Centre, March 1996.