

Talented dancers embody culture

DANCE

True Stories
Bangarra Dance Theatre
His Majesty's Theatre
Review: Tim Balfour

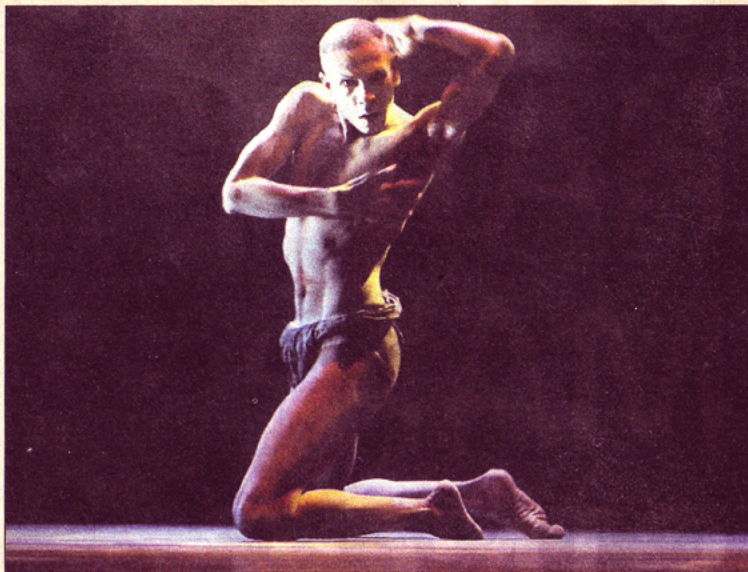
It's been quite a while since Bangarra Dance Theatre graced a Perth stage, and the excitement was palpable as an expectant, chattering audience gathered at His Majesty's Theatre. The double bill was well received and proved to be a refreshing evening of dance and vital cultural reflection.

After a brief, personal introduction from indigenous arts leader Richard Walley, the evening's dance program commenced with Elma Kris' full-length Torres Strait Islander work *Emeret Lu* (very old things).

Inspired by her former teacher's handbook of the same name — which details traditional Torres Strait Island Material Culture — Kris' *Emeret Lu* features traditional Murray Island dances that celebrate rain, wind, hunting, desire and pleasure.

Wearing traditional feather "dhari" headdresses, leaves, clay body paint and other body adornments, the dancers moved in and around set designer Genevieve Dugard's skeletal bamboo tunnel structure.

Highly polished renditions of traditional Murray Island dances were performed with confidence and precision — not a foot out of place. Likewise, Steve Francis' sound design was



Light and shade: A Bangarra dancer commands the stage. Picture: Robert Duncan

an inspirational mix of traditional music, chanting and infectious, contemporary beats.

This unaffected company of dancers looked well rehearsed, and the group sections were tight and synchronised. Good use of eye contact also gave the work an added level of engagement and intimacy. The combined wave-like lyricism displayed during one of the women's group sequences was particularly moving.

A Murray Island descendant, guest artist Smilar Sinak's commanding presence and intensity of performance was matched only by this heavy-set man's amazing cat-like agility.

Jasmin Sheppard and Waangenga Blanco performed their powerful and emotive duet beautifully, each languid

movement melting into the next.

Choreographically speaking, *Emeret Lu* isn't complex, yet it is a beguiling and, at times, seductive work. It's a great example of what dance companies can achieve when they adhere to some basic principles.

Francis Rings' *X300* is a dark, contemporary portrayal of the 1950s British nuclear tests at Maralinga and the devastating effects they had on local indigenous populations.

Moods and sense of place are cleverly defined throughout. Abstract sculptural configurations constructed out of dancers' bodies expand and contract like an amorphous symbiotic form. In another moment, we see colourfully garbed dancers enjoying dance crazes of the era.

At other times, moments of apparent normalcy and joy are juxtaposed with hidden misery and despair, such as Sidney Saltner's powerful performance during the Guinea Pig sequence.

David Page's sound design — comprising a collage of chilling radio broadcasts, indigenous voices and electronic music — adds portentous menace to the work, as does Glenn Hughes' lighting design.

At one point, Hughes uses inverted bouquets of needle-like shafts of green light to bathe a quartet of dancers coated from head-to-toe in white clay. Aside from giving strong performances, the quartet of dancers again demonstrated how strikingly effective synchronicity can be.

A sequence involving radiation suits equipped with headlamps combined with innovative choreography also made for some interesting theatre.

Patrick Thaiday, one of the standout performers of the evening, gave an affecting performance during the Black Mist solo.

Dugard's set for *X300* is simple yet effective. Her mica-like backdrop in one scene looks like crystallised bark and leaves, presumably depicting the effects of the nuclear blast, which was reported to have turned sand into glass ("bomb glaze").

A trio involving Saltner, Tara Gower and Jhunoy-Borja again showed off the diversity and high technical standard of this talented company.

Given the quality of these two works and the quality of the dancers, it's little wonder that director Stephen Page feels confident about Bangarra's future beyond his retirement.