

STEPHEN PAGE KEYNOTE ADDRESS APAM 2012

Art as medicine

Thank you for this opportunity to address APAM. As a Nunukul man and Munaldjali clan member of the Yugambeh nation, I would like to acknowledge the custodians of this place - the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plains, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Adelaide has played an important part in my professional life: my brother David studied here at CASM - the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music, and I was artistic director of the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 2004, the same year the University of SA awarded me an honorary doctorate.

I've flown in from Melbourne today after the opening of my new work *Warumuk – in the dark night* for The Australian Ballet so the last few weeks have been intensive and creatively challenging.

Congratulations to all involved in APAM for having brought together such a big mob of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and producers – the biggest on record so the week ahead should be rich with stories and songs, and alive with ideas generated by our people coming together.

Gathering places and stomping grounds are important sites for Indigenous communities to practice culture, so for the performing arts community in Australia together with our international peers, APAM is our stomping ground.

My topic – *Art as medicine* reflects my experience as an Indigenous artist in the 21st century so I'd like to share some of my experiences and perceptions, and also pose some questions that I hope will provoke a healthy discussion about Australian identity and culture.

If there's any way for people to glimpse the true spirit of our myriad cultures, it would be through the arts. *Art is a medicine*; it can heal us, unite us, strengthen us, challenge us and inspire us, it feeds our bodies and our imaginations.

We see ourselves through art and learn about our community, and our place within it. Discovering who we are - writing our own verse in a songline that has been carried through the ages - gives us a sense of belonging. And the knowledge of where we come from empowers each and every one of us.

The theatre is a perfect environment for merging the past with the present in a timeless space, where every element – from costumes and sets to lighting – is symbolic and infused with meaning.

Choreography and theatrical direction are a conduit to the unseen; to how our people view the world – part physical, part spiritual. Australia is a sentient land that lives and breathes, from when our ancestors walked this country to today.

It's a shame that modern Australia has not embraced the medicine of Indigenous storytelling as part of its cultural immune system. Storytelling, whether in music, literature, visual arts or the work of companies like Bangarra, is the most accessible



and engaging way to connect to Indigenous Australia, to reconcile the conscience *and* consciousness of the wider community.

So, what are the challenges in reflecting the lives of our people, Australia's first peoples, through art?

The world is familiar, or at least becoming increasingly interested, in our visual art, with artists undertaking residencies around the world, international sales to private collectors, curated exhibitions, and taking centre stage at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

And now, in Paris - the 'heart' of European culture - Aboriginal art and culture is enshrined in the extraordinary Musée du quai Branly.

Let's take our lead from the wonderful Yolngu artist and educator – the healer Gulumbu Yunupingu - who reminded her audience in Paris that we all stand on the same ground and look up to the same stars.

Or perhaps local Ngarrindjeri artist Yvonne Koolmatrie - whose weavings, that healed the pain of personal tragedy, also struck a chord with audiences at the Venice Biennale. *Art is medicine*.

The growing maturity of our audience is fertile territory for the performing arts, and in our experience of taking Bangarra's productions to the world, the response is universally enthusiastic, with audiences eager to learn, to sense a connection to the ancient cultures of this country.

It is heartening that audiences here and overseas are slowly awakening to concepts of Indigenous art beyond a kind of cultural jingo-ism - whether it's the yidaki (didgeridoo) busking at Circular Quay or quasi-cultural 'sound bites' for commercial advertising.

I've been extensively quoted bemoaning the fact that people expect Bangarra to produce these stereotyped dances, songs and images.

Springing from a living culture, it's critical for our performing arts to be viewed as deeply connected to countless generations of continuous cultural practice, but also as an expression of contemporary identity.

A recent work for Bangarra, literally called *ID*, reflected the diverse experiences of young Indigenous people rekindling their knowledge and personal experience of their Aboriginal heritage.

Seems like I've been exploring the question of identity for my whole career, who we are and where we belong? I feel like asking sometimes, 'I know who I am, but do you?'

For me growing up it was always a problem that I was far too fair skinned to be immediately labelled Aboriginal, and yet that's what I was! This set me on a personal journey to find the opportunity and the freedom to express what it means to me to be Aboriginal and to tell that story in a way that resonates with people everywhere.



I have learnt that the issues we face are universal, and we are strongly connected to a world black perspective. In my choreography I look to portray the everyday aspects and to add to the social immune system through each work.

As Indigenous people living in the 21st century, we all carry the pain of social dysfunction, and this blanket of anger and guilt can shadow our lives, but through our individual agency and collective artistic efforts we can meet these challenges and be proud - passing the legacy of our cultural heritage and vision of hope onto the next generation.

Art is medicine and creativity is a catalyst for change, for renewal, for what is otherwise unimaginable.

A profound challenge for Bangarra is that communities around the country entrust us with their stories and let us be the modern day caretakers down south. There are protocols that we carry into our work from traditional culture, and the chief responsibility is to maintain its integrity as we take it to the mainstream.

Over the past two decades we have been fortunate to forge deep relationships with numerous Indigenous families, in particular with the Munyarryun, Yunupingu and Marika clans of North East Arnhem Land.

Bangarra, as a contemporary urban tribe, is privileged to have earned the right to be the torchbearers, entrusted to respect and honour culture and take it to the world.

The inspiration for *Brolga* the first section of *Corroboree* came from my experience with Djakapurra Munyarryun at a beautiful brolga feeding ground in NE Arnhem Land. This work was about transformation, the symbiotic relationship between humans and animals which become one in our world.

It was also influenced by the images of the evolution of primeval slime to *homo sapien* in the Fat Boy Slim music video *Right Here Right Now*. This work, like so much of Bangarra's repertoire, is a fusion of contemporary and traditional culture.

Over the last few weeks working with a mix of Bangarra and Australian Ballet dancers, I have witnessed the magical synergy of knowledge and understanding between these distinct cultural traditions.

I am proud that my new work for The Australian Ballet *Warumuk – in the dark night* will also travel to New York in June, a city that's a melting pot of all nations and cultures. And, in doing so, what will it say about Australia, about our national identity and our maturity as a nation? You can feel the energy between these two companies as they create a story that is unquestionably and uniquely Australian.

Constantly I'll go to an opening night of Bangarra and realise it's predominantly a white audience, and I question this all the time. Who am I making this work for? And I think, you just have to learn to be a professional schizophrenic. You've got to learn to live in both worlds and I think that is what keeps driving me as well.

I think we can learn something from the way that much Yolngu art celebrates the meeting of the freshwater and the saltwater, two 'same but different' entities that come together to create something new - while retaining their intrinsic values.

This is better 'medicine' than tens of thousands of words.

Everything I do is inherently political whether I like it or not. Still today, the performing arts present a new frontier for black and white Australians.

The Indigenous performing arts of 2012 and beyond are part of a political journey starting from invasion through to our elders during the 1960s championing social change.

In 1963 the Aboriginal Theatre formed under the auspice of the Elizabethan Theatre Trust to perform traditional songs and dances in a western concert format, essentially as entertainment that provided a visual connection to the traditional Aboriginal world. This type of performance underlined the divisions between black and white Australia.

The philosophy of the self-determination movement was encapsulated by the emergent black theatre scene of the 70s, led by charismatic leaders and cultural activists such as Brian Syron, Bob Maza, Justine Saunders and Chicka Dixon.

All the key Indigenous cultural advances of the past two decades, from the establishment of Bangarra and theatre groups such as Kooemba Jdarra, Ilbjerri and Yirra Yaakin to the Indigenous units set up at the ABC, SBS and Screen Australia and our own Imparja and NITV stations, have risen from their work and we are all indebted to them.

Also during this period we saw the Australia Council for the Arts established with a 1973 Act of Parliament. The new Aboriginal Arts Board within the Council, comprised of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, was charged with 'reversing the 200 years of neglect and exploitation, replacing it with a comprehensive program of development based on respect and encouragement.'

Clearly this was a long-term agenda, but in the short term the Board assisted plays like Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers*, *The Keepers* by Jack Davis and *The Cakeman* by Bobbie Merritt, three theatre companies were set up and a film was scripted and directed by a young talented actor from Arnhem Land, David Gulpiil. Forty-five projects were funded in the first year ranging from literature, visual arts, music, exhibitions, theatre and dance.

This policy led to 'professionalism' within the sector, and with it the reality of coming to terms with the marketable features of Aboriginal art. This is a double-edged sword – the benefits of saleable art versus the sacredness of traditional culture. But without the government subsidy, contemporary Indigenous art would not have the same visibility it does today.

These initiatives have sparked an outpouring across all art forms from films such as *Ten Canoes*, *Beneath Clouds*, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, *Samson & Delilah*, *I Am Here*, *Mad Bastards* and *Toomelah* to the stage with *Bran Nue Dae* (now also a film) *Wrong Skin*, *Napartji Napartji*, *Namatjira*, and this year's *I am Eora*.

Whether it's in the visual arts, or film, or dance, or drama, there has been a strong trend of black visionaries taking the lead, telling stories from our perspective and reclaiming our cultural territory. Look at the success of the Message Sticks film



festival directed by Rachel Perkins and Darren Dale, and the filmmakers Warwick Thornton and Ivan Sen at Cannes.

Australians are becoming more aware of Indigenous culture, wanting to understand it and also claim it as a part of their own heritage. As a country, we've come some way from the 1967 referendum that gave our people the rights of citizens. Prior to that, just 45 years ago – in my lifetime - we were counted as flora and fauna.

I have been very fortunate to have the support and resources of Bangarra for my artistic work, but where is the full time drama company and the full time music company – when will we see that? Indigenous performing arts runs on a project basis – is that good enough?

In 1972 Carole Johnson, a black American dancer and member of the New York based Eleo Pomare Dance Company toured to Australia. She was quick to recognise the racial tail of European colonial possession spearing an Indigenous dispossession that caused a loss of cultural voice in the broader social and political landscape.

We are the beneficiaries of Carole Johnson's decision to stay and work with the young Aboriginal people in learning their traditional songs and dance. She knew that dance was fundamental to the cultural life of all Indigenous peoples, both traditional and contemporary. Within the colonial context it was dance that could be an effective medium for education, creative expression and healing.

Thus began NAISDA (the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association) and eventually Bangarra Dance Theatre was born in 1989.

People say to me 'why are all you black artists so obsessed with telling Aboriginal stories?' But you can't have a history like ours and not want to engage with it.

Art is a political act and it's a powerful way to tell our stories and by sharing them create a mutual understanding.

It's important that black artists go out into the mainstream like me directing the Adelaide Festival and Wayne Blair in *True West*, Ursula Yovich in *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, and Leah Purcell in *Lantana*.

It's okay for white people to set up companies and tell Indigenous stories, but is it okay for a blackfella taking on a mainstream company to tell only black stories for the next three years?

Who dictates to us what we can and can't do? Is it a hangover from assimilation days, from government policies? Do the arts have more freedom, more of a voice?

It's okay for European directors to take over our state cultural institutions. We've had foreigners running ballet companies, symphony orchestras bringing the world to Australia.

Do they understand the integrity of the process of telling one's own story? Would it ground everyone to tell their own story about where they come from before they try to tell the stories of others?



Western directors are working with Indigenous consultants but that sings a different creative spirit from when there is an Indigenous director. The power of Indigenous perception is more honest, more true – it closes the gap of cultural consciousness.

I'm keen for Bangarra to embrace worlds outside of our own, ideas from multicultural Australia, from around the globe. Hand-in-hand with the old stories and issues is a new paradigm in story telling, expanding the narrative about the Stolen Generations or social dysfunction or community life, to take in the breadth of our contemporary realities.

There's a group of Indigenous artists in the contemporary world who understand and foster cultural kinship. They're a whole generation of artists who have been able to translate the traditional into the mainstream and create visual and performance works that are inspiring.

Just some of the ones who have come through are Hetti Perkins, Djon Mundine, Ningali Lawford, Wesley Enoch, and Mundawuy Yunupingu. I'm part of that clan and draw tremendous strength from that kinship.

As our artists today reveal, there's a rich vein of black storytelling across the arts spectrum and with it a sense of finally breaking free of the restrictions that characterised the assimilation era, the whitewashing of our culture. Let's celebrate modern Indigenous identities, which are certainly shaped by trauma, but also tradition - by hardship as well as by hope.

Politics are pivotal to my creative journey, they weave in and out of it - and so the work of Bangarra is affected by the socio-political climate. It is not really a conscious choice of position, but a question of being inspired by and responding to my surrounds. Bangarra is a creative political leader, because Indigenous culture connects art and politics, and at Bangarra this finds expression through the medium of modern dance.

Our dancers are grounded by their experiences working with Indigenous communities, whether they're in the central desert or in the Sydney CBD. Some young people don't want to 'do culture' anymore – they're into pop, they're into drugs and they're bored.

We go there as teachers, and we go to bridge the gap between them and the elders so that they see this young, sassy, urban company who are proud of culture. We can hip-hop but can also go hunting with the boys and weaving with the girls. It inspires the young fellas to understand the elasticity of the Dreaming and its infinite potential for creative interpretation. This grassroots activity keeps Bangarra strong and feeds our inner cause and purpose.

I've always entered the creative process with stories and themes even when my intention is to produce abstract dance theatre. *Skin* took me into a dramatic form, working closely with Wayne Blair to write dialogue to extend the story-telling coming out of the movement and music.

In my recent work *ID* as part of Bangarra's *Belong* program, the section titled *Discriminate* also uses dramatic form to portray the distress of Aboriginal deaths in



custody. No words are needed as the prevailing image and the strength of the performance speaks for itself.

Bloodland - showing at the Adelaide Festival in two weeks and produced by Sydney Theatre Company - forms an important milestone for Bangarra. Based on the traditional and recent experiences of the Yolngu in North East Arnhem Land and spoken mostly in Yolngu language, *Bloodland* tells an Indigenous story, is performed by Aboriginal artists and has been playing an important role in inviting mainstream audiences to inhabit this other world for an hour - a world that is literally in our own backyard.

What is the role of theatre if not to transport us to another time and place to experience things we could not otherwise?

My close relationships with Djakapurra Munyarryun and Kathy Balngayngu Marika sit at the heart of my creative processes with Bangarra. They honour me as an adopted member of their Yolngu families, as does the Yunupingu family. Through these connections, and our own backgrounds, we are blessed to have access to the world's oldest living culture.

Our story for *Bloodland* is about two families living in remote communities and the frustrations of being in two different worlds in the 21st century. They cling to their traditional cultural heritage whilst engaging with the benefits of western society. But with the poisons of alcohol and drugs, economic disadvantage, social dysfunction, these families face many contradictions and dilemmas.

It is these challenges we are trying to express as well as their efforts to protect their health, access to education, maintenance of language and all the things they hold dear. Add to this situation the role of government dollars, 'sit-down' money, mining deals, royalties and racism - it's a potent mix of ideas, experiences and revelations.

I think often about the two worlds; having a foot in each. Everyone wants that sense of hope, of balance and common ground. Talking with Kathy Marika and on my travels back to Arnhem Land, I am keenly aware of the tension between maintaining culture and embracing the modern.

The young people think culture is old fashioned because the modern media is so appealing, so seductive. Technology and consumer products represent the new poisons for the younger generation. It's like they overdose on the 'lollies of materialism' if a balance of interest in the cultural side of life is not woven into their experience. Social and cultural harmony relies on leaders and communities helping them find that balance.

Then there's the middle generation, who've been burnt out by having a foot in both worlds and have become exhausted, literally. That exhaustion comes from trying to find the right balance. These challenges are universal, but for the Yolngu community what I see is the importance of language and cultural customs. They conduct ceremonies but mostly for funerals or 'sorry business'. The ceremonial purpose isn't always commemoration of the passing of an elder's life as ceremony is increasingly for young men and women who have taken their own lives.



Communities have to cope with trauma and sorrow on a regular basis. Death was always part of the cultural kinship cycle as the old passed down customs to the next generations. There was a purpose and symbolism in celebrating new life from old.

Bloodland portrays those frustrations on stage by using the medium of dance, music and dramatic traditional text. So many Aboriginal people no longer have that connection with their language - that's the inherent challenge of *Bloodland* for both the performers and our audience – a significant proportion of the show is expressed in Yolngu, offering a strong link to this ancient culture.

This is a modern story that helps rekindle and re-educate, and challenge all of us as artists in performance as well as learning about a thriving, continuing Aboriginal culture. It's not a piece that sets out to educate white Australians; it doesn't involve talk in language followed by an English translation. I want people to use their imaginations.

Language is the key to community life and cultural practice: the telling of stories, the sharing of history, personal interaction. The preservation of languages and the maintenance of the outstations or homelands of Aboriginal Australia are critical to the survival of our culture. The outstations provide a place for traditional ceremony, customs and cultural practices. With recent changes in Australian Government policy, we have become concerned about the prospect of maintaining their traditional homelands.

The land shapes the people, the people shape the language, the language shapes the songs, and the songs will then determine the dance - and the spirit flows through it all.

The link of land and culture for Indigenous peoples is something that's accepted but often misunderstood. Our land is the mother earth and it's the source of spiritual strength. The spirit of the land runs deep and for me it's a central source of inspiration for my work. It's not until you come into intense contact with our traditions and feel the essence of the land for yourself that it makes much sense. Like being in the central desert and watching the elders bathe in the earth, like the earth is their water.

For Bangarra's program this year, Frances Rings will choreograph a new work *Terrain* inspired by the timeless wonder and spiritual resonance of Lake Eyre. The physical transformation of place – from desert to deluge - becomes a metaphor of our lives as Indigenous people. It's like we wear the landscape as a second skin.

With each new work, we take time to visit communities, to sit with the elders and share ideas of how their customs, stories, songs and dances can inspire the contemporary story-telling in our dance theatre works. Elders travel from their communities to Bangarra's studios and work with our performers and artists during the rehearsal process as part of this cultural exchange.

To complete the cycle, Bangarra makes a commitment to take our works back to country, to spend time with the community, conducting workshops and performing, out of respect for having their permission to include traditional elements in our contemporary theatrical experiences.



Through Bangarra's relationships with the communities of North East Arnhem Land, the central desert and the Torres Strait Islands, we hope to help rekindle interest in, and encourage all Australians to engage with, our cultural heritage.

I see our work as part of an Aboriginal art movement that doesn't shy away from the social issues that confront our communities. We portray the abuse of alcohol, drugs, and domestic violence, the Stolen Children. Bangarra has made works on these issues but we do it through the medium of physicality and spirit.

By using the mediums of traditional music and all those cinematic soundscapes created by my brother, composer, David Page, we're tapping into specific art forms to create the one spiritual message. I've been allowed to listen and have been trusted and respected enough to also be listened to.

I feel and live that responsibility – it's enough for one person's energy in this lifetime.
Art is my medicine.

Thank you for listening and, in closing, I just want again to offer my respects for the Kurna people and the beautiful Aunty Josie, my darling Heart.

Thank you.