

building the Indigenous contemporary dance collection

LEE CHRISTOFIS EXPLAINS WHAT ZORBA THE GREEK, A QUEENSLAND BAUXITE MINE AND A SKATEBOARDING CUPID HAVE TO DO WITH INDIGENOUS CONTEMPORARY DANCE

TWO PICTURES IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY of Australia's collections testify to the enduring role of dance in Australia's Indigenous cultures. Although made 200 years apart and in different parts of the country, these pictures capture the intense focus Indigenous dancers can attain and some remarkable similarities in gestures and movements maintained over so many years. The first picture is an 1813 aquatint of a New South Wales Indigenous group watching an elegant young man dancing in a pastel landscape. The dancer's torso is taut, marked in white. His eyes are circled like a bird's and his lean limbs give the impression he is about to fly. The artist is J.H. Clark, the engraver M. Dubourg. The second picture is a digital action shot taken by Library staff photographer Greg Power during the 2008 National Multicultural Festival at Civic Square in Canberra. Here, in a temporary, utilitarian space, coloured lighting and expectant revellers generate atmosphere. The young man in the foreground is one of the Chooky Dancers, from Elcho Island, who became instant stars when a YouTube video clip 'Zorba Yolngu Style' spread across the globe like wildfire. Their dance, alternately athletic, dazzling and often hilarious, combines traditional Yolngu steps and contemporary moves in an inspired response to a wild disco version of 'Zorba's Dance' from the movie *Zorba the Greek* (1964).

The Clark and Power images are both fine examples of Indigenous dance resources that the Library has made available online, but the image of the Chooky Dancers has an immediate, additional value. It represents a wave of experimentation in contemporary Indigenous dance which began a few years ago. Since 1972 the

principal approach to creating contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance has been to fuse traditional Indigenous dance onto a hybrid form of ballet and twentieth-century modern dance techniques. The Chooky Dancers and others like them have inverted this practice by making traditional dance their starting point, then quarrying material from diverse music styles, such as Bollywood spectacles or Hollywood movies, for inspiration and stylistic embellishment.

The Chooky Dancers' emergence coincided with the Library's decision to expand its Indigenous dance collection. Without a comprehensive published history of this field to draw on, we decided to go back to 1972 and the first contemporary dance classes for Indigenous children and adults in Redfern, Sydney, and to research the training and artistic models that would shape a new, Indigenous dance. Oral history interviews with Carole Johnson and Lucy Jumawan, founding director and principal teacher respectively of what would become the National Aboriginal

OPPOSITE

Jim McFarlane (b. 1955)
Miranda Coney and Albert David in a Study for Stephen Page's Rites 1997
colour print; 42 x 35.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23764028

BELOW LEFT

M. Dubourg (1786–1808)
after J.H. Clark (c. 1770–1863)
The Dance published 1813
hand-coloured aquatint
23.6 x 18.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an8936128

BELOW RIGHT

Greg Power (b. 1974) for the National Library of Australia
Chooky Dancers Performing at the Fringe Festival as Part of the National Multicultural Festival, Civic Square, Canberra, 8 February 2008
digital print
Pictures Collection





ABOVE
Lee Chittick
Portrait of Carole Johnson
Teaching Class, Sydney 1978
gelatin silver print; 30.5 x 41 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an12235646

BELOW
Tim Webster (b. 1965)
Djakapurra Munyarryun in
the Bangarra Dance Theatre
Production Ochres 1995
colour slide
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24965861



Islander Skills Development Association (now NAISDA Dance College), were essential, as were the stories of early graduates and staff. First, however, the Library acquired the NAISDA archive, which includes many papers which Johnson wrote throughout the college's development.

Johnson originally trained in ballet. Destined to become a modern dancer, she came to Australia with the Eleo Pomare Dance Company from New York when Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, founder of Australian Dance Theatre, invited the company to perform at the 1972 Adelaide Festival of Arts. Pomare and his dancers were shocked by what they found in Australia, starting with media images of police trying to remove the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and its protesters from the gardens opposite Old Parliament House in Canberra. Compounding his first impression, Pomare discovered that Chequers Theatre, where his company would perform, was badly run-down. A Brazilian company was already performing there and Pomare argued that putting both black companies in a substandard venue demonstrated 'a colonialist attitude'. Worse followed on opening night when he was shocked to find that there were no Indigenous people in the audience. Pomare pressured the festival organisers to reserve

three rows of seats for Indigenous viewers, which were subsequently filled. When the company went to Sydney, its new Indigenous friends farewelled Pomare and his dancers in style, filling the stage with flowers, presents and rocks wrapped in paper with messages on them. Years later Pomare would recall: 'They just went berserk'. Johnson expressed the view that it was the first time Indigenous people thought of dance and theatre as places for self-expression.

Steeped in the American civil rights movement, Johnson stayed in Sydney to make a new work, *Embassy: The Challenge*, to perform at anti-government protests. It played more than once that year and became a standard for some time. By May, Johnson had set up classes for children and adults in Redfern. She happily recalls excited children running around the street finding others to come. Then, in 1973, the newly elected Whitlam government revamped the Australia Council for the Arts and established a new Aboriginal Arts Board which, in time, would benefit Johnson's ambitious plans. These included setting up the Dance Workshop of the new National Black Theatre with input from Philippines dance artist Lucy Jumawan, a specialist in her own country's indigenous dance traditions. In 1975 Johnson and Indigenous actor Brian Syron, who studied method acting at The Studio in New York, employed teachers to run *Careers in Dance*, the first multi-arts course of its kind. It attracted 28 students—some urban dwellers, others from remote places—and ran for six weeks.

Initially, traditional elders came to teach the *Careers in Dance* students in Sydney and, later, in remote communities. The traditional dancers and teachers provided the unique content that would determine the *Careers in Dance* aesthetic and cultural practices, while ballet, American modern technique and jazz formed the core training program.

It took more than six years of tortuous negotiations for the NAISDA Dance College to become a fully fledged educational institution and to carve out a place as a leader of Indigenous performing-arts training. Its current director, since 2008, is Kim Walker, who began an illustrious career as a leading dancer in Graeme Murphy's Sydney Dance Company, most famously as the skateboarding Cupid in *Daphnis and Chloe* (1980) and the young Indigenous man in the

colonial ballet *Homelands* (1982). Walker joined NAISDA after nine successful years as an independent choreographer and artistic director of the Flying Fruit Fly Circus in Albury Wodonga.

As the number of talented students graduating from NAISDA rose rapidly in the 1980s and work opportunities were scarce, Johnson created two new companies. In 1988 she transferred artistic direction of the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT) to Raymond Blanco, an alumnus who began his career in theatre, film and opera and is now an independent choreographer and the dance course coordinator at NAISDA. (In 1991 AIDT became an independent body, AIDT–The Company, and toured internationally to considerable acclaim until 1998.) In 1989 Johnson formed the much-admired Bangarra Dance Company with Stephen Page as its director, a position he holds to this day. Today, Bangarra is a flagship organisation alongside The Australian Ballet, Sydney Dance Company, West Australian Ballet and Queensland Ballet.

Before beginning the project, we realised that previously collected photographs, ephemera and oral histories mainly represented AIDT and Bangarra. We also knew that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance artists have been working around the country in different ways—in culturally diverse companies, independently, in theatre, in cinema and in education. Others have joined the intercultural companies Marrugeku and Stalker Physical Theatre in Broome, Western Australia, for which Frances Rings, a long-standing Bangarra artist, is a choreographer. Her sister Gina Rings creates for several companies, such as Leigh Warren and Dancers in Adelaide. It became clear that we should engage with these artists too.

Since January 2010 the Library has acquired the archives of NAISDA Dance College and conducted rich oral history interviews with Johnson, Jumawan, Blanco, Walker and Dujon Niue, a songwriter and dance teacher at St Paul Village on Moa Island in the Torres Strait. Niue highlights the importance of sustaining traditional culture with children on Moa while maintaining a freelance career, co-directing productions with singer Christine Anu and choreographer Marilyn Miller. He reflects on the sharp contrast of the insecure freelance life and the luxury of receiving commissions from Comalco at

Weipa, Queensland, and Swarovski Crystal in Innsbruck, Austria, earning in one week what would otherwise take a year to earn.

In Darwin, interviews with David McMicken and Tim Newth, artistic directors of Tracks Dance Company, explore cross-cultural community dance in the Northern Territory. Both men have forged personal and creative relationships with the Walpiri people at Lajamanu, in the north of the Tanami Desert. The company's lavish multi-art form events in Darwin bring together the Lajamanu women with Larvakia dancers and non-Indigenous dancers of many cultures and ages. An intriguing example of Tracks' crosscultural work is *FIERCE*, a fantasia about Olive Pink (1884–1975), an early twentieth-century botanist and Indigenous rights campaigner, who lived many years in the Walpiri community. McMicken recalls the Lajamanu women saying 'Miss Pink was a good woman, she didn't shoot us.'

To contextualise such diverse historical material and production records, we have begun compiling a chronology of this Australian genre and hope to list the many dancers, choreographers and teachers who contributed to it. Meanwhile, volunteer Sandra Macarthur-Onslow has painstakingly compiled a catalogue of every performance she can find in ephemera and news clippings held by the Library and at Ausdance, and the valuable personal collection of Dujon Niue, which he generously presented to the Library in 2010.

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BELOW LEFT
Tim Webster (b. 1965)
Dancer from Munyarryun Family in Laka Bunkul from the Dance Clan Season at the Bangarra Dance Theatre Studios, Sydney, November 1998
colour digital print
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3096223

BELOW RIGHT
Ross Gould (b. 1946)
Sidney Salter from Bangarra Dance Theatre in Fish at the Ausdance Dance Week Launch, Canberra 1998
black-&-white print
30 x 23.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3095456

