Bangarra Dance Theatre – Terrain – Melbourne
By Jordan Beth Vincent on July 5, 2012 in Reviews · 0 Comments

Deborah Brown and Leonard Mickelo in Terrain.
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Bangarra Dance Theatre, Australia’s only fully professional indigenous dance company, would not be the success story it is today without artistic director Stephen Page. Page, a Helpmann Award winner, has created numerous works on the company since he became artistic director in 1991. However, in recent years we have seen an influx of new choreographers creating Bangarra works, including Frances Rings, Daniel Riley McKinley and Elma Kris. Each of these dancer-turned-choreographers (McKinley and Kris continue to dance with the company) can trace their roots to different indigenous communities throughout Australia and the Torres Strait.

Rings is a choreographer on the rise, creating works for Leigh Warren and Dancers, the West Australian Ballet and Tasdance. Like much of Page’s choreography, Rings’ work employs an episodic structure. Each of the nine vignettes in Terrain is inspired by Lake Eyre, an inland sea located roughly 700 kilometers north of Adelaide in South Australia. Lake Eyre is one of the world’s natural wonders, constantly changing and known for the crust of salt that gathers on its shores.

But the Lake is also the focus of an ongoing indigenous land rights and recognition struggle—political issues highlighted within the framework of the dance.

Terrain begins with a Calling to Country in Red Brick. The men are coated in white ochre; dust sloughs off skin with every movement. As the section progresses into Shields, the Men’s Ensemble wield what look like giant white seed pods. Against a white stage, and with their bodies powdered, this section is particularly effective. However, I found myself missing the stage presence of recently retired dancer Patrick Thaiday; some of the men looked young, unable to fully embody the movement with the kind of maturity that older members Waangenga Blanco or Jhuny-Boy Borja demonstrate.

As the solo female in Reborn, Yolande Brown passes sand from hand to hand—a representation of the passage of time and the way in which stories are handed down through the generations. She is supported in lifts by three male dancers, like the future standing on the shoulders of the past.

This stacking of bodies is a recognisable feature of Rings’ choreography, just as it is a crucial aspect in much of Bangarra’s previous work. Dancers form large groupings that move as one, shifting and crumbling into solos and duets. Individual dancers are propped up along the moving mass, always reaching and longing to move forward and faster, but held back by the dynamic of the group. This directional pull—forward and back—is a metaphor for the struggles to reconcile Lake Eyre’s history as a sacred space with its contemporary uses.

Rings’ work is also quite technical and detailed, with complex patterns traced by air-born feet, undulating torsos, and swirling arm movements. Casting low to the floor, the dancers skim around like bugs on the surface of water. Deborah
Brown, Ella Havelka and Jasmin Sheppard deliver amazing performances at different points in the work.

Photographed from above, Lake Eyre’s threads of water look like veins and capillaries—blood-lines that remember the pathways for future water to swell. Jacob Nash’s set designs reflect the shifting of the landscape through different seasons with a series of changing backdrops. For Scar, a vignette that reflects on the destruction of this natural habitat, the backdrop looks like a black heart against a sea of blood.

Costume designer Jennifer Irwin has worked with Bangarra for twenty-one years, and her distinct style has become a part of the company’s identity. Sculptural, layered and textured—Irwin’s shapes create iridescent shells or flowing mantles around the moving bodies. Though elements of costumes may look heavy (take for example, a bolero studded with triangles of plastic to resemble salt crystals) they are cut back to reveal the bodies beneath.

As he did for Waramuk— in the dark night (a collaboration between Bangarra and the Australian Ballet earlier this year) composer David Page uses orchestrations, synthesiser and voice for Terrain’s score. It feels sentimental, and strangely dated, rather than timeless. Like Irwin, Page has spent more than two decades collaborating with Bangarra and his sound is crucial to the identity of this company. However, as more dancers move into the realm of choreography and the company continues to mature, it would be nice to hear from new indigenous musicians and designers to provide an insight into the diverse choreographic talent shining on the Bangarra stage.

Despite the moments of absolute, breath-taking beauty, there is something ultimately overworked about Terrain. The combination of a saturation of white light, Nash’s set design, the sheer amount of movement that Rings has
harnessed and Page's busy music overpowers the detail, rendering this work less successful than her previous work for Bangarra, 2010's Artefact.


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