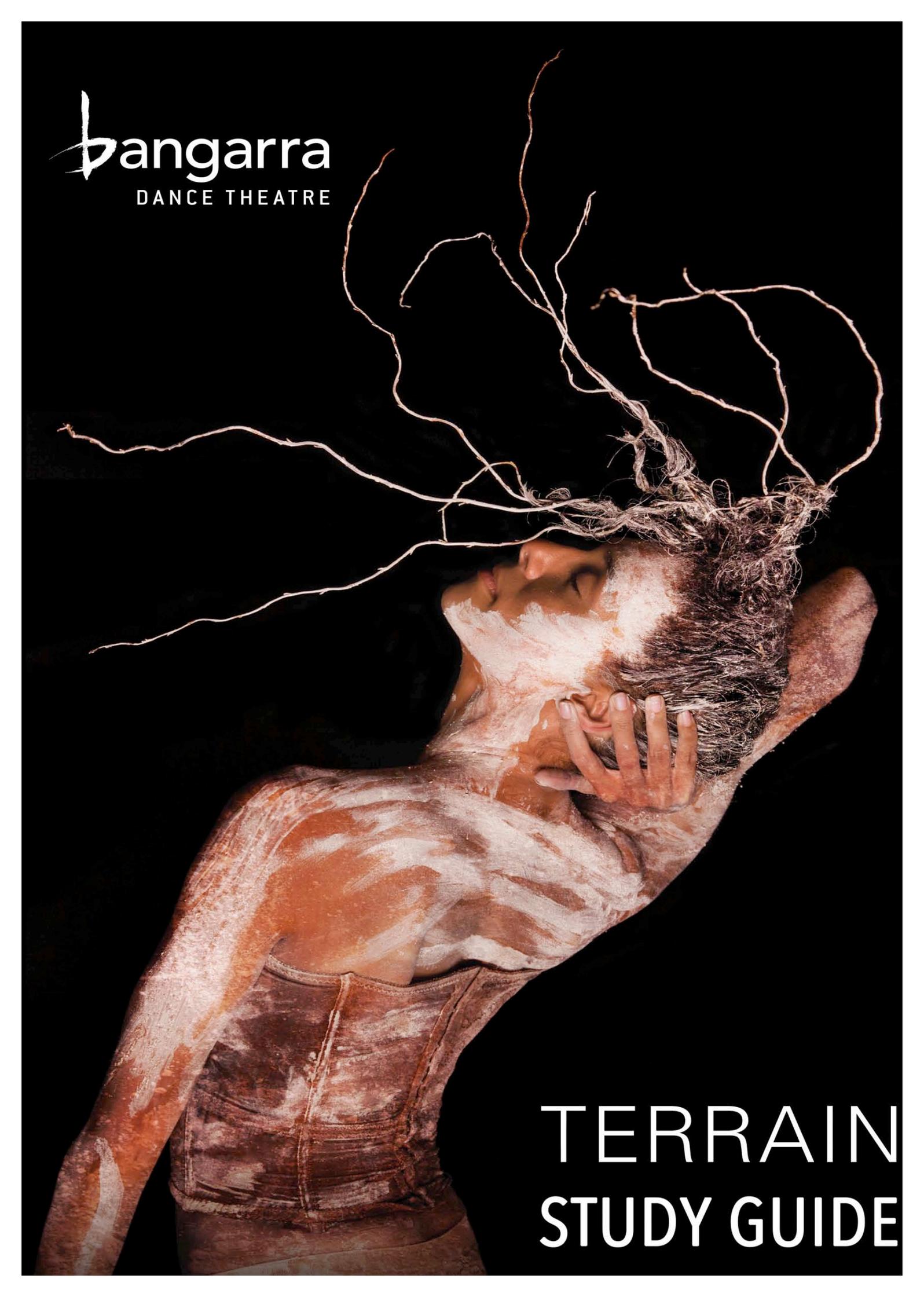


bangarra
DANCE THEATRE

A photograph of a person from the chest up, wearing a dark, textured vest. Their skin is covered in intricate, layered body paint in shades of white, tan, and brown. Their hair is a dense, tangled mass of light-colored, fibrous roots or twigs that extend upwards and outwards against a black background. The person's eyes are closed, and their hand is resting near their ear.

**TERRAIN
STUDY GUIDE**

WHAT IS IN THIS STUDY GUIDE?

This study guide provides contextual background and information about Bangarra Dance Theatre's 2012 production *Terrain* by Frances Rings.

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Part 1: Background

About Bangarra

Bangarra is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation and one of Australia's leading performing arts companies, widely acclaimed nationally and around the world for its powerful dancing, distinctive theatrical voice and utterly unique soundscapes, music and design.

Recognised for distinctive theatre productions that combine the spirituality of traditional culture with contemporary forms of storytelling through dance, Bangarra was founded in 1989 by American dancer and choreographer, Carole Johnson. Since 1991, Bangarra has been led by Artistic Director and choreographer Stephen Page.

The company is based at Walsh Bay in Sydney and presents performance seasons in Australian capital cities, regional towns and remote areas. Bangarra has also taken its productions to many places around the world including Europe, Asia and USA.

Bangarra creates a foundation for the care and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural life. Through its performance seasons and touring of dance theatre productions, Bangarra provides the opportunity for all people of all cultural backgrounds to be able to share knowledge about and have a contemporary experience of the world's oldest living culture. Bangarra has nurtured the careers of hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait professional artists, including dancers, choreographers, composers and designers. In over two decades, Bangarra has produced over thirty original works in repertoire. Bangarra has also collaborated on the creation of new productions with other Australian performing arts companies such as The Australian Ballet and the Sydney Theatre Company.

Bangarra's dancers and collaborating artists come from all over Australia, including the major groups in relation to location, for example: Torres Strait Islanders, Queensland (Murri), New South Wales (Koori), Victoria (Koorie), South Australia (Anangu), Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (Yolngu), Coast and Midwest Western Australia (Yamatji), Southern Western Australia (Nyoongar), Central Western Australia (Wangai) and Tasmania (Palawah). Some of the dancers are graduates of NAISDA Dance College (NSW), while others received their training at the Aboriginal College of Performing Arts (Qld), and others are graduates of dance courses delivered by universities around Australia.

For more information about Bangarra and its productions go to:

www.bangarra.com.au

For specific Australian National Curriculum resources go to Bangarra Education Resources page:

www.bangarra.com.au/education

Cultural inheritance and transference of knowledge

Story telling in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life is the means by which cultural systems, values and identity are preserved and transferred. Telling stories through song, music and dance, in order to connect people to land, and teach them about their culture and the traditions of their ancestors is the way knowledge is passed from generation to generation. Knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander totemic systems, the histories of peoples, clans and tribal associations, language, land and concepts and connections of kinship, are maintained through stories.

Many of Bangarra's productions are based on or include stories of the Dreaming, which are allegorical of the contemporary existence and the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture and people. Expressing and maintaining culture through contemporary interpretations and rich theatrical realisations enables the world of Australian Indigenous culture to be shared with the full diversity of today's audiences.

The Dreaming

Indigenous spirituality exists in the concept of the 'Dreaming'. The Dreaming connects Indigenous people to the past, creates relevance to the present and guides them for the future. Dreaming stories can illustrate the phenomena of creation, transformation, natural forces and life principles. They are specifically related to landforms, place, creatures and communities. The ancestral beings that populate the stories form the spiritual essence of the stories. Bangarra's portrayal of Dreaming stories, through the contemporary dance theatre form requires a diligent process of connecting and building a relationship with the traditional owners of those stories so that the integrity and authenticity is respected.

Observance of protocols and consultation

For all its productions, the Bangarra creative teams research and explore the stories of Indigenous culture in close consultation and collaboration with the traditional owners of those stories, before embarking on the process of creating the production. Each year Bangarra spends time in specific Indigenous communities, meeting with elders and traditional owners and living with the people of that community - learning about the stories that connect the people, the land, the language and the creatures of the land. Everyone who works at Bangarra feels very strongly about their role in the company's work.

Experiencing dance in a theatrical context

It is important to note that dance theatre works are essentially the creation of artistic invention to express a broad range of ideas and thoughts. While some information is provided in the program notes of each production, the viewer is free to interpret the work according to their individual perspectives, emotional responses and level of experience in the viewing of performing arts. Repeated viewing of the work, along with the cumulative process of learning about the themes, source material, cross referencing of the range of subject matter and creative processes involved in the making of the work, contributes to personal and critical responses to the work. Bangarra invites its audiences to share, learn and appreciate the critical importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in order to understand their own relationship with the culture and the people of Australia's first nation.

Story telling through dance theatre is one of the most powerful means to communicate cultural, social and political issues. Dance is a very visceral and effective way to give a story life and story telling is the mainframe of cultural life for Indigenous Australians.

Part 2: *Terrain*

Terrain is Bangarra Dance Theatre's twentieth production and is the first full-length work for the company by choreographer and Bangarra artist-in-residence, Frances Rings.

... Landscape is at the core of our existence and is a fundamental connection between us and the natural world. The power of that connection is immeasurable. It cleanses, it heals, it awakens and it renews. It gives us perspective. It reminds us of something beyond ourselves and it frees us. But more importantly when we are surrounded by nature we begin to understand our place and how we are a very, very small part of a much larger, much bigger picture.

... Terrain is where spirit and place meet.

Frances Rings, Choreographer, *Terrain*, 2012

Introduction to *Terrain*

Terrain is an homage to country, inspired by the power of natural forces and the vulnerability of ecosystems within a landscape that has existed and evolved over many millennia – a landscape from where human beings draw life and express meaning to that life.

Terrain illustrates the fundamental connection between people and land - how we treat our land, how we understand its spirit, and how we regard its future. *Terrain* presents the vastness and the diversity of a landscape like no other. It's about the power of natural forces and the vulnerability of ecosystems that have existed and evolved as long as the Earth itself – a landscape from where human beings draw life and express meaning to that life. *Terrain* looks at the area of Australia known as Lake Eyre. Lake Eyre is a great salt lake of tectonic origin situated in the remote north west of South Australia. As a closed inland drainage basin with an area of 1,140,000 km², the Lake Eyre basin is one of the largest areas of internal drainage in the world. It has a vastness and diversity like no other landscape in the world. To the Aboriginal people of this land it is known as *Kati Thanda*.

Kati Thanda (Lake Eyre) is the home of the Arabunna people who have lived in this area for many thousands of years, maintaining a deep connection to the area through their cultural inheritance. In *Kati Thanda*, days are measured by the length of shadows, or when the afternoon clouds roll in; months are measured by the level of salt crust on the surface of the lake; and years are measured by the rise and fall of waters that sweep through ancient river systems, transforming the desert and bringing new life.

The Arabunna people

The Arabunna people have existed and maintained deep connection with the Lake Eyre basin for thousands of years and recently won land rights for Lake Eyre and its surrounds. Their understanding of the landscape, and all the variances of its ever-changing behaviour enables the Arabunna to read the landscape, know its purpose and be able to share with us, stories of how *Kati Thanda* survives and thrives through its very dramatic natural cycles of flood, drought and everything in between. Even more importantly, this knowledge serves to maintain the cultural life that has existed for tens of thousands of years of Indigenous relationship to the terrain of central Australia.

Terrain - a production by Bangarra Dance Theatre

Terrain is presented as nine interconnected sections or 'states of experiencing' the area known as Lake Eyre. The audience is guided through Lake Eyre's cultural and environmental relevance, as well as the choreographer's thoughts about the concept of 'place' and the emotional experience that 'place' has for Aboriginal people. For example:

- How Aboriginal people feel and acknowledge connection to 'place'.
- How we experience the emotion and the power of an untouched landscape.
- How we sense our responsibility to a landscape.
- How we hear and share the stories that emanate through the traditional dreaming of the Arabunna.

The nine sections are:

RED BRICK

Looking beyond urbanscape to hear an ancestral Calling to Country.



SHIELDS

Reflecting on the struggle for Land Rights and Recognition that continues to affect Indigenous people today.



REBORN

Land is passed down through the lineage along with knowledge and customs.



SPINIFEX

Inspired by the trees in and around Lake Eyre that resemble the gatherings of spirit women waiting, suspended in time.



SALT

Beyond the white salt vastness lies an abstract landscape that resonates an ancient power.



SCAR

The impact of man's actions scars and disrupts the delicate balance between man and environment.



LANDFORM

Through each evolution, the land regenerates and heals, awakening the cultural ties that connect people to place.



REFLECT

Traversing the horizon to glimpse the sacred realm where earth and sky meet.



DELUGE

Waters begin their journey towards Lake Eyre bringing with it transformation and ensuring the life cycle continues.



Part 3: Creating *Terrain*

Research and preparation

Prior to working with the dancers in the studio, Frances Rings (choreographer), Jacob Nash (set designer) and David Page (composer) travelled to Lake Eyre to spend time on country. Here they were introduced to Arabunda elder Reginald Dodd, who led the artists onto his country and shared his knowledge about the land, the resources and why it is so important to preserve the Lake region for future generations. The artists experienced the landforms, the colours, the air, the animal life – but most importantly the spiritual presence of ancestors and the stories that embed the land with story and cultural meaning. As cultural consultant for *Terrain*, Uncle Reg is critically important to the development and presentation of the work. He guides and supports the artists, making sure their interpretations reflect his own sense of responsibility to country.

In Rings words, *“Being with Uncle Reg on his country and hearing his stories made me think deeply about Indigenous people like myself who live in urban areas and our relationship to country. I realised that although the location may be different the connection is the same. We have a profoundly visceral understanding of country that goes beyond brick walls, concrete and an urbanised lifestyle”*.

The journey of discovery and the creative process involved in the making of *Terrain* are closely linked, not in a literal sense, but more in the way of emotional responses and processing of ideas.

Choreography

Once the initial period of research and discussion is well developed, the choreographer will start to work with the dancers and together they will explore the movement language that will tell the story in a way that is evocative and captivating. The whole creative team (choreographer, composer, designers, dancers) collaborates closely throughout the creative process to enable the dance to reflect the overall focus of the choreographer’s ideas.

As the choreography starts to take shape and the work becomes more structured, the choreographer works with the rehearsal director and dancers to refine the more nuanced elements of the choreography. Getting the right dynamic into a movement, perfecting the technical aspects, building the relationships between the performers – all of these aspects need to be worked on and consolidated.

The music and design elements need to be ‘in synch’ with the development of the choreography. As all the creative processes come together the director/choreographer has to hold onto the essence of the story, the concepts they want to illustrate and communicate, and the way they wish to do this.

Dance technique and performance skills

Using their dance technique skills, the dancers work collaboratively to blend and refine the movements to provide clarity, texture and consistency in execution before settling on a final version of the choreography. The rehearsal director is present throughout this process in order to be able to guide the dancers in the rehearsal process, so that the key qualities and details of the choreography, as set by the choreographer, are retained and remembered as they progress from section to section. When the production moves closer to its premiere date, the rehearsal director will work with the dancers to make sure the dancers will perform the work to the highest standard possible. Also during this stage, the technical elements of the costume, set and lighting design start to be incorporated.

Production processes

In the week of the premiere, the dancers, rehearsal director, creative team and production crew move from Bangarra's studios to the theatre where they spend a day or two rigging the set, positioning and programming the lighting, checking the sound levels and making necessary adjustments to the choreography to fit the space of the stage. This is called the 'bump-in' and the production crew is largely responsible for coordinating this stage of the process. Until the night of the premiere no one has actually seen the finished production. This can be quite stressful but is also extremely exciting.

Extending the life of a dance theatre work

During the lengthy process of creating a new Bangarra production, ideas will change and surprising shifts in the original plans will occur. This is not unusual and probably one of the most exciting things about making a new work. Importantly, the things that do not change are the traditional elements – cultural information must always remain respected and intact. As the dance is performed over time, these stories are passed down from one dancer to another as different dancers are taught the choreography and perform the roles.

The Creative Team

Full *Terrain* program, including full biographical information and program notes from the creative team can be found at: <http://bangarra.com.au/performance/terrain>

Choreographer – Frances Rings

Adelaide-born Frances Rings is a descendant of the Kokatha Tribe and is also of German descent. Frances joined Bangarra Dance Theatre in 1993 after graduating from NAISDA Dance College. *Terrain* marks Frances' sixth choreographic work for the company, following the success of her work *Artefact* (2010), *x300* (2007), *Unaipon* (2004), *Bush* - co choreographer with Stephen Page (2003) and *Rations* (as part of *Walkabout* 2002) and *Sheoak* (as part of *Lore* 2015)

On *Terrain*:

I believe country reveals to us the natural laws that govern our existence and that as people, no matter what our background, we all have an innate longing to sink our feet into the sand, for our hands to splash water and to connect with the natural world.

Composer – David Page

David Page is a descendant of the Nunukul people and the Munaldjali clan of the Yugambeh tribe from southeast Queensland. David was born in Brisbane and studied saxophone, voice, composition and song at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music (CASM) at Adelaide University. David has composed music for Bangarra's major works: *Praying Mantis Dreaming* (1992), *Ochres* (1995), *Ninni* (1996), *Fish* (1997), *Skin* (2000), *Corroboree* (2001), *Bush* (2003), *Unaipon/Clan* (2004), *Boomerang* (2005), *X300* (2007) and *Mathinna* (2008), *of earth and sky* (2010), *Belong* (2011), *Warramuk - in the dark night* (2012) *Terrain* (2012) *Blak* (2013) *Dance Clan 3* (2013) *Patyegarang* (2014) and *Lore* (2015). David is also an actor and the recipient of many awards including four Deadly awards and the inaugural Sidney Myer Indigenous Artist Award in 2000.

On *Terrain*:

Lake Eyre is a place of heritage, mystery, threat and natural beauty and has given me, and the creative team the opportunity to explore the vastness of spirit, colour and sound.

Set designer – Jacob Nash

Jacob is a Murri man who grew up in Brisbane. He graduated from the NIDA Design Course in 2005. He designed *of earth & sky* for Bangarra in 2010 (winning a Greenroom Award for Best Design in Dance), *Belong* (2011), *Warumuk - in the dark night* (2012) *Terrain* (2012) *Blak* (2013) *Dance Clan 3* (2013) *Patyegarang* (2014) and *Lore* (2015).

On Terrain:

The challenge as the set designer of TERRAIN was to create a design that was not obvious, almost unknown; to create a language that was truthful to the place and the stories that Frances was telling. We wanted to achieve a 'world' that is always alive like the lake itself – always within a cycle that will never stop, it is an everlasting continuum.

Costume designer – Jennifer Irwin

Jennifer Irwin's career spans 30 years designing and constructing costumes for drama, opera, film, and in particular for dance & ballet. Her designs for Bangarra include *Ochres* (1995), *Fish* (1997), *Skin* (2000), *Corroboree* (2001), *Walkabout* (2002), *Bush* (2003), *Uniapon* (2004), *X300* (2007), *True Stories* (2007), *Mathinna* (2008), *Fire: A Retrospective* (2009), *Terrain* (2012), *Dance Clan 3* (2013), *Patyegarang* (2013) and *Lore* (2015).

On Terrain:

Being inspired by so many beautiful images of Lake Eyre I was captured by its surrealism and vastness. I focused on the textural elements of the materials I was working with, abstracting the narrative – the continual changing of the landscape; the cracked salt lake and earth that has avoided human influence.

Lighting designer – Karen Norris

Karen Norris has worked extensively as a lighting designer for dance, theatre and music in Australia and Europe. Her lighting designs for Bangarra include *Skin* (2000), *Terrain* (2012) and *Lore* (2015).

On Terrain:

On a site visit to Lake Eyre, I was confronted by a vast, immense landscape – places in the middle of nowhere – this pink encrusted jewel: Lake Eyre. Apart from being awesomely emotive in its history – present and past – it was bathed in this undulating, fragmented light.

Part 4: Additional references

Online

Series of 'behind the scenes' and the 'making of' *Terrain* film clips by Bangarra.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL946F6294A987D0DC>

Comprehensive information developed specifically for students and produced by the Lake Eyre Basin Ministerial Forum (Dept of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities and the Queensland, South Australian and Northern Territory governments).

Covers environmental, economical, geological information and indigenous interests including native title claims.

<http://www.lakeeyrebasin.gov.au/resources/student-and-teacher-resources>

For information about **Lake Eyre**: geology, geography, fauna, origins and mythology.

http://austhrutime.com/lake_eyre.htm#The_Lake

For information and short film clips about the **Arabunna people**

<http://www.arabunnatours.com.au>

Examples from an **exhibition of images** by Murray Fredericks

Lake Eyre: a reflection in the outback

Australian Geographic

<http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/journal/Lake-Eyre-reflection-in-the-outback.htm>

Summary information about the Lake Eyre Basin

<http://www.lakeeyrebasin.gov.au>

Book

Lake Eyre: A journey through the heart of the continent

Paul Lockyer

ABC Books, 2012

Film

Salt (JERRYCAN Films)

Producer/director – Michael Angus

<http://www.saltdoco.com/index.htm>

Additional Education Resources

Online Bangarra has a suite of Education Resources suitable for Years 3 to 10 that are aligned with the new Australian Curriculum – The Arts. This online library of free resources can be accessed from the Bangarra website, and includes filmed excerpts, background information and class activities based on selected Bangarra repertoire. The resources aim to provide teachers and students with rich content for the teaching of the Arts curriculum well as cross curricula learning areas related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Online resources have been available from August 2013, and many teachers in primary and secondary schools around Australia have been accessing the material and building into their lesson plans, resulting in some wonderful learning outcomes.

DVDs

Also available for purchase on DVD are the works *Mathinna* (2008) and *Patyegarang* (2014) which include extended interviews with the choreographers. Study Guides for the works on DVD are downloadable from Bangarra website.