



Darung Muru

dance pathways

Inaugural NSW Aboriginal Dance Forum

Report and Recommendations



ausdance
nsw

Forum: Wednesday 18th May – Thursday 19th May 2011 | Sydney Opera House Boardroom

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1. Background

NSW was recently identified as an Aboriginal contemporary dance 'hot spot'¹, and a large number of emerging and mid-career Aboriginal dance artists and choreographers reside and practise in NSW, alongside Bangarra Dance Theatre and the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA). Recent national arts research also indicates NSW and Queensland has a significantly higher level of attendance at Indigenous dance performances, compared to Victoria and South Australia.²

Opportunities for this market sector have been identified in the 2010 Australia Council report, *More than bums on seats: Australian participation in the arts*. Key policy directions in this area have also been set out in the NSW Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy 2010. Ausdance NSW has responded to this with a significant new focus on the NSW Aboriginal Dance sector for 2012-14, beginning with its presentation of Darung Muru *dance pathways* in alignment with Direction One: Artists of the NSW Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy.³

2. Project Objectives

The objectives of Darung Muru *dance pathways* project were set as being to:

1. Provide an opportunity for NSW Aboriginal dance artists to voice critical issues they are facing in their practice;
2. Identify priority issues for NSW Aboriginal dance artists;
3. Establish a snapshot of existing Aboriginal dance activity in NSW;
4. Develop clear priority recommendations from forum outcomes; and
5. Prepare the final report and submission to Arts NSW at the completion of the forum.

¹ *More than bums on seats: Australian participation in the arts*. Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, 2010, page 53.

² *More than bums on seats: Australian participation in the arts*. Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, 2010, page 53.

³ See NSW Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy 2010, *Communities NSW, Action 1.3.2*, page 8.

3. Consultation & Research

Consultation with the NSW Aboriginal dance sector was undertaken to scope the sector and to gather data for the Steering Committee to determine priorities for the Forum. This consultation took the form of both an electronic survey, completed by 31 respondents as well as follow up telephone conversations with individual participants (see Appendix 3).

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The results of the consultation revealed that the NSW Aboriginal dance sector is comprised of: graduating students from NAISDA, emerging artists in their first 5 years of practice, mid-career and established NSW Aboriginal dance artists and companies. Artists are practising in contemporary dance, community dance, cultural dance, hip hop and street dance. The sector encompasses; independent artists, dance custodians, choreographers, teachers in schools, tertiary institutions and dancers in government-funded and non-government companies. NSW Aboriginal dance artists are practising in the Sydney CBD, Western Sydney and Regional NSW, in both the arts and tourism sectors (see Appendix 3).





4. Forum Priorities

A Steering Committee (see Appendix 1), representing the NSW Aboriginal dance sector, was established to determine the priority forum topics for discussion at the Forum and the 16 representative delegates. Analysis of the results of the consultation phase produced the following priority issues facing NSW Aboriginal Dance artists:

Place and Space

addressing issues of artistic and cultural exchange, scholarships, mentoring and appropriate rehearsal space.

Culture in Practice

including understanding and recognition of appropriate protocols that informs the creation of dance works and the creative process.

Distance and Access

outreach programs and the development of regional incubators.

Sustainability of the Work

employment, career pathways, access to producers, touring and festivals.

Funding

different models and sources to include Arts NSW, Australia Council for the Arts, Regional Arts, Tourism, local government, non-government sources.

5. Forum Report

Darung Muru *dance pathways* took place on Wednesday, 18th May and Thursday, 19th May 2011 in the Board Room of the Sydney Opera House. Following a reception for relevant stakeholders held on the previous afternoon the Forum took place on Thursday, 19th May. A list of Forum participants and observers is contained in Appendix 2.

The Forum was divided into three sections:

Part I — Introduction and Context

Part II — Addressing the Priority Areas

Part III — Recommendations

5.1 Introduction & Context

“We need to give [the next generation] the skills they need to move us forward as a nation of people.”

Senior dance artist Michael Leslie, originally from NSW, opened the Forum and asserted it is critical that attention is focused on the progression from training to emerging artist to professional artist. The forum participants introduced themselves and raised the issues of most concern to them in their own practice. This was then contextualised by briefings on Ausdance NSW's commitment to supporting Indigenous dance artists, as well as on the findings from the survey and consultations undertaken prior to the Forum.



Left: Frances Rings. Right: Michael Leslie
Photographer: Mervyn G. Bishop



5.2 Addressing Priority Areas

The identified priority areas were extensively discussed in this part of the Forum.

5.2.1 Place and Space — addressing issues of artistic and cultural exchange, scholarships, mentoring and appropriate rehearsal space.

“It’s all about the future now; it’s all about the children.”

Many of the delegates work with children and young people and view this as a critical part of their cultural and artistic work. It is neither an “add-on”, nor divorced from, professional work they undertake and ways must also be found to support this area of their cultural practice.

Recent changes to the national school curriculum should open up opportunities to work across government ministries and better support this sector’s commitment to children and young people.

“You get over it a bit, [rehearsing] in the kitchen.”

“When you get a space it’s like halle-fucking-lujah.”

Access to suitable and affordable space for class, creative development and rehearsal was identified a chronic problem for NSW Aboriginal dance artists.

An ideal space would be accessible, including being close to public transport, and providing accommodation for regional practitioners. It would have: two or three spaces, including a large one; a professional dance floor; an outdoor ceremonial ground; computers; sound engineering and lighting; workshop for builds, props and costumes; performance space; capacity for school groups; office space.

A “hub” like this might offer: business courses, networking opportunities; collaborations; a place to sit down with elders; mentoring (in new technical skills such as lighting, but also for younger practitioners); classes to maintain skills. A “mother hub” could develop an active artistic and cultural exchange programme with local hubs in regional areas which would function as “incubators” for their particular communities, artists and needs.

The possibility of partnering with an arts organisation or council to explore possible venue options was discussed. The Aboriginal Dance Theatre Redfern was identified as an underused, geographically suitable and potentially appropriate venue.

5.2.2 Culture in Practice — including understanding and recognition of appropriate protocols that informs the creation of dance works and the creative process.

“People say culture is dead in NSW, they’re talking shit.”

Participants felt strongly that Aboriginal dance that was “culturally NSW” was under-recognised and expressed a strong desire for local stories and dance to be actively promoted (especially through schools and in training institutions) and more visible. It is significant that these artists self-identify as Aboriginal, rather than Indigenous. Although both major national Indigenous dance institutions (Bangarra and NAISDA) are located in NSW, their focus is not on dance that is culturally based in NSW.

Appropriate cultural protocols need to be more widely understood — taught in schools, but also understood and applied consistently by other official organisations (like funding bodies and local government) and individuals.

Contemporary urban dance practitioners (who tend to be located within Sydney) are also keen to develop more links with, and experience of, members of regional communities and especially the traditions of cultural dance which are maintained there.

“Two things bring the split LaPe community together: footy and Koori dance.”

*“One kid [was] suspended for 120 days last year.
Got him into dance — and now he’s a candidate for School Captain.”*

Engagement in dance builds self-esteem and gives pride to participants in community and cultural contexts and this is considered a very important aspect of NSW Aboriginal dance. Dance “get[s] rid of the shame factor”. It has a special role to play with young people, and especially troubled young people.



“We are asked a lot of questions, but we have to ask a lot of questions too: we’re accountable.”

NSW Aboriginal dance artists well understand the particular demands, expectations and responsibilities that are placed upon them in relation to their communities, as artists, and as Aboriginal people and it is always within this context that they make their work, engage with young people and encounter the broader community.

5.2.3 Distance and Access — outreach programs and the development of regional incubators.

“You try to do anything but football [in regional NSW], you’re going to get laughed at.”

Conventional attitudes to dance in regional areas are slowly beginning to change as it becomes clear that “song and dance reinforce positive social fibres in [local] communities” — and as the footballers take up dance! Concentrations of Aboriginal people in particular regions will make possible the development of regional incubator hubs.

Any major Aboriginal dance initiative or hub established in Sydney would need to be easily accessible by public transport from outer areas in Western Sydney, the Blue Mountains, the Central and South Coasts, but would also need to provide affordable accommodation to enable participation by regional dance practitioners and hubs.

5.2.4 Sustainability of the work — employment, career pathways, access to producers, touring and festivals.

“Hardest thing when I left NAISDA: who to go to and where to go for artistic support.”

“I didn’t get into Bangarra, but there isn’t anything else. There’s nothing else to challenge Bangarra.”

Career pathways are poorly defined and supported. While a very small number of NAISDA graduates might go on to work for Bangarra (almost none have worked for other non-Indigenous companies), the majority become



freelance independent artists with few or no support structures and little stability from which to build an on-going practice: “running from job to job prevents excellence”. Freelance artists may also not have the financial resources to continue to do class (contemporary and ballet, as well as traditional) regularly, and thus maintain and develop their skills and contacts. Some go on to form their own companies, but this is often with children or young people as dancers and/or in community contexts.

“I did [hospitality] for too many years when I was in NAISDA. If I’m going to stand on my feet all day, I want to be dancing.”

“If you want to remain a dance artist, finding consistent work is very challenging.”

“A lot of people can get a lot of work in remote communities in other states. But there’s no work for us in NSW.”

Employment opportunities in NSW are perceived as limited, erratic (“NAIDOC week, the phone is running hot.”), self-generated or in teaching (at NAISDA, in schools and communities).

“Do you get paid for rehearsals? –No!”

An expectation that dancers (unlike actors) will not be paid for rehearsal, even when being hired to present a performance in a corporate setting, needs to be countered with clearer standard remuneration protocols across the sector.

“I want to make work that stands up with Lucy Guerin and Gideon!”

Freelance Aboriginal dance artists working in contemporary dance (and not in community or cultural dance) can



find it especially challenging to create and sustain a practice that competes in the mainstream for production, presentation, touring and other opportunities.

5.2.5 Funding — different models and sources to include Arts NSW, Australia Council for the Arts, Regional Arts, Tourism, local government, non-government sources.

“I want someone to write my grants for me!”

Questions of accessibility and equity arise if funding application processes by their nature may exclude dance practitioners who, for example, are young, have weaker literacy skills, or are regionally-based. Alternative means of presenting projects (eg by video) could be explored, as could developing greater flexibility in funding programmes and categories (eg to encourage collaborations between contemporary and traditional practice, and which link back to communities). More awareness of the variety of funding possibilities, and sources of assistance to write, administer and acquit applications across the sector would be beneficial.

“If people at NAISDA are taught business skills then they could begin their own businesses when they graduate: there’s more than enough work for everyone.”

Business skills may empower artists in managing their own arts practice, but can also lead to other opportunities which may support or supplement their dance practice. Some practitioners are diversifying into the production of other cultural material — artworks, bush tucker etc — and are drawing on business and government schemes which specifically support Indigenous businesses.

“We need to steer away from relying on funding all the time; we’re setting up our kids to fail.”

Some artists are making the deliberate choice to eschew public funding, relying instead on their traditional dance and finding paid engagements among the corporate, tourism and other sectors.



Artist Vicki Van Hout in Residence with Marion Abboud at Blacktown Arts Centre 2011
Photographer : Marion Abboud

5.3 Recommendations

The Forum delegates formulated and approved a range of short-, medium- and long-term recommendations for the Aboriginal dance sector in NSW. They unanimously approved Ausdance NSW as an appropriate partner to assist in realising these recommendations. They envisaged some of the significant outcomes of the successful implementation of these recommendations for the sector as being:

An increase in visibility for NSW Aboriginal dance

Capacity- and opportunity-building across the sector

A more financially viable and sustainable sector

More role models for emerging, mid-career and established Aboriginal dance artists.

5.3.1 Short-term recommendations [within 12-18 months]

- Investigate the suitability of Aboriginal Dance Theatre Redfern as the location for a proposed Sydney-based Aboriginal dance hub, to offer regular classes, rehearsal space and other support for NSW Aboriginal dance artists, including residential opportunities for regionally-based artists.
- Appoint a NSW Aboriginal Manager, through Ausdance, to develop and establish a broad-ranging and ongoing programme to support the NSW Aboriginal dance sector. This key position would, among other things:
 - be supported by an Advisory Board representing the areas of regional, contemporary, traditional, education and corporate
 - conduct focus groups with each of the NSW Aboriginal dance sectors.
 - develop and build networks, and consult face-to-face with Aboriginal dance artists based in regional NSW. Value could be added by offering, at the same time, practical training opportunities, such as workshops in grant-writing or choreographic workshops.
 - organise weekly classes and a series of choreographic workshops in Sydney
- Construct a website, hosted through Ausdance, to:
 - facilitate communication in the sector;
 - showcase artists and their work;
 - include a directory function for potential employers to locate artists
- Continue annual meetings of the Aboriginal Dance Forum for the purposes of networking, collaboration and building the sector.

5.3.2 Medium-term recommendations [within three years]

- Establish and produce a pilot project for proposed state-wide regional incubators. The pilot programme would include a three day forum and festival encompassing performances, classes and workshops, and a careers “expo”.

5.3.3 Long-term recommendations [within five years]

- Fully operational “mother” hub, based in Sydney, and a network of regional incubators.
- Two NSW Aboriginal dance companies with a “brother/sister” relationship established — one contemporary and one traditionally-focussed.

Ausdance NSW has proposed ways in which to realise a number of these recommendations as part of their 2012-14 triennial application for funding to Arts NSW.



6. Appendices

Appendix 1.

Steering Committee members

Liza-Mare Syron (Chair)

Aboriginal Cultural Development Officer
Capacity and Development, Arts NSW

Johanna Clancy

Contemporary Aboriginal Dancer/Dance Teacher

Rayma Johnson

Contemporary Aboriginal Dancer/Dance Teacher

Cecil McLeod

Song man, dancer, Doonooch Dancers
Founder and leading Song man, Yuin Ghudjargah Dance Company

Cathy Murdoch

Director
Ausdance NSW

Lily Shearer

General Manager
Gadigal Information Service

Peta Strachan

Contemporary Aboriginal Dancer and Choreographer



Appendix 2.

Forum participants

Eric Avery, Independent Dancer

Tim Bishop, Independent Dancer

Becky Chatfield, Independent/Wollemi Dancers

Johanna Clancy,
Contemporary Aboriginal Dancer/Dance Teacher

Juanita Duncan, Independent Dancer

Tammi Jarrett, Independent Dancer

Kerry Johnson, Independent Dancer

Rayma Johnson, Independent Dancer

Katie Leslie, Independent/mentor

Cecil McLeod, Doonooch Dancers,
Ghudjargah Dancers

Calita Murray,
Community Dance Practitioner/Educator

Matthew Priestly, Boggabilla Central School

Peta Strachan, Independent Dancer/Jannawi
Dancers

Marc Sutherland, Gomeroi Dance Company

Vicki Van Hout,
Independent Choreographer/Director

Sharon Winsor, Managing Director,
Thulli Dreaming Dancers

Forum observers

Sandy Collins, Lee Maverick Enterprises
(Project Management Consultant)

Jasmine Gulash, Lee Maverick Enterprises
(Project Management Consultant)

Cathy Murdoch, Director, Ausdance NSW

Lily Shearer, General Manager,
Gadigal Information Services.

Liza-Mare Syron, Arts NSW and
Chair of Steering Committee

Forum Facilitator

Michael Campbell

Forum Scribe

Laura Ginters

Appendix 3.

Results of Consultation

To a request a summary of the consultation results
contact director@dance.net.au

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Inaugural NSW Aboriginal Dance Forum
Report and Recommendations

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