



Box seat view of a gift to the country

Behind the scenes of Bangarra’s Yuldea

GRAHAM ERBACHER

The large, open space is grey and black with mirrors on the walls, and on the north end, high-up glass panels reveal a bolt of blue sky. Sydney Harbour is tantalisingly within reach but to gaze on it would be a distraction because this is a cocoon of creativity, a work-room for 17 of Australia’s finest dancers and the artistic team of Bangarra Dance Theatre.

I am on a behind-the-scenes tour offered by Bangarra at its Walsh Bay Arts Precinct home, in association with Cultural Attractions of Australia, which organises VIP-style access (at, sometimes, commensurate prices) to arts and sports “icons”. Imagine appearing on stage with Opera Australia or exploring restricted areas of the MCG.

Today we will meet Bangarra’s artistic director, Frances Rings, who took over from Stephen Page, head of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance company for 32 years, and watch a rehearsal of her first work, Yuldea. It has been performed in Sydney, Canberra, Adelaide and Brisbane, and now the company is preparing for Melbourne and Bendigo.

Rings sits with a small team, poised to take notes, as the dancers, full of humour but with a focused intensity, go through a scene. Their athleticism, a combination of elegance and power, is exhilarating and their camaraderie compelling.

I have been fortunate to see Yuldea performed during its Opera House season and appreciated the theatrical brilliance of the sets designed by Elizabeth Gadsby and costumes by Jennifer Irwin, but the performers, in dance and gym wear, shine through in this pared-back rehearsal. Tours offered during Bangarra’s traditional June-July Sydney season feature a performance rather than rehearsal.

I’m no dance expert, but The Australian’s critic Deborah Jones said of Yuldea: “The dance-making is thrilling ... Bangarra has never shied away from a big idea and it’s clear Rings isn’t taking a backwards step, doing it her way as the company goes through its own cycle of renewal.”

Rings calls Yuldea “a gift for my country”. She is from the Wirangu and Mirning tribes of far west South Australia and also has Ger-



man heritage. Home is the Port Augusta-Ceduna area on the edge of the Nullarbor, where Yuldea is set.

Rings says Yoodil Kapi is the traditional name for a permanent waterhole on the lands of the Kokatha people, a centre of ceremony, kinship and trade.

But it was forever changed by the arrival of white settlers and building of the trans-Australian railway in the early 1900s, and atomic testing at Maralinga in the 1950s-60s. She says dance allows her to share stories of these events in collaboration with local people. The 60-minute piece is carried by the evocative music of Leon Rodgers with contributions from electronic music duo Electric Fields.

Our Bangarra experience starts with a welcome to country and smoking ceremony by elder Matthew Doyle, who has worked as cultural consultant and songman with Bangarra over the years. He is also elder-in-residence at NIDA (Uncle Matt) and explains the significance of these ceremonies, reminding us that we all have a special attachment to the place of our birth.

JUST ADD...

Dubbagullee, Cattle Point, Limeburners Point and Bennelong Point. The peninsula on which the Sydney Opera House was built has had a variety of names before and after the arrival of Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet on the lands of the Gadigal people. Today’s architectural and cultural gem, which replaced sheds for trams, was opened 50 years ago and provides a much more exciting ticket to ride. The Opera House has been celebrating its golden anniversary with performances and a livestream series of historic productions. Yuldea, Bangarra Dance Theatre’s contribution, streams from October 21 to early November. sydneyoperahouse.com

With the rise of Indigenous tourism, distinguished academic Marcia Langton, an anthropologist and geographer, published Welcome to Country in 2018, which was a must-have travel guide for anyone setting out on the great Australian adventure. Updated in a second edition in 2021, the handbook is informative about Indigenous history and culture, and an entertaining read. It comes with suggestions about what to see and when to go, with a directory, organised by state and territory, of national parks, museums, galleries, festivals and tourism experiences. Be prepared: it’s a fairly hefty volume with lots to pack in about a history spanning 60,000 years. hardiegrant.com

We also visit the costume department, where silk dresses worn on stage in the scene just rehearsed have been re-dyed.

Plastic tubs with content markers such as “emu feathers” are ready for the road, where costumier Jen says she stands prepared with but a sewing machine and iron.

A bucket of cold water for tired feet and a physiotherapist are among other backstage essentials.

We re-enter sunlight and embrace dazzling harbour views from Wharf 4-5, west of the bridge, where tasty canapes using bush tucker ingredients are waiting.

They are served by Indigenous chef Matthew Atkins and his mother Joanne, the pair behind Plate Events caterers. Also on offer, a refreshing passionfruit mocktail and green ant gin. The experience has been box seat. Welcome to Gadigal country indeed.

Graham Erbacher was a guest of Cultural Attractions of Australia and Bangarra. culturalattractionsofaustralia.com bangarra.com.au



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