

A warrior makes all the

A shy girl who left the islands is now a passionate mentor to younger dancers.

DANCE VALERIE LAWSON

ELMA KRIS was 16 when she discovered her family secret. The couple she called Uncle Ben and Aunt Lizzie were her parents, her cousin Ricky was her brother and two schoolmates were her sisters.

Her biological parents gave Kris away when she was very young and relatives raised her on Thursday Island.

Adoptions like these were common among Torres Strait Island families but traditions did not ease the pain of Kris's discovery.

Kris's biological dad, a bit tipsy after a Christmas visit to her home, told her the truth. "He asked me to go down the street to catch the bus. He put his arm round my shoulder and as we were walking, he said, 'Do you know who I am?'"

"I said, 'Yes, you're my Uncle Ben' and he said, 'No, I'm your father.'

"I said, 'Don't say that, my dad is sitting up there, watching us walking down; you can't be my father.'

"Then he said, 'You have sisters and a brother.' He mentioned my sisters' names,

Lily and Phyllis. It clicked with me. I knew these girls, they went to the same high school as I did.

"I said, 'No, they can't be my sisters. They are too beautiful to be my sisters ... You are confusing me now.'

"So, anyway, we got the bus and he mentioned Aunt Lizzie's name and said, 'That's your mother.' And I went, 'No.'"

Kris, 36, is telling this story at the harbourside studios of Bangarra Dance Company, where she has worked for more than a decade. When I arrive, she seems to be meditating as she gazes over the water. I expect to talk to a contemplative woman but from the first question about her childhood, it is clear that Kris goes at life full tilt.

Stephen Page, Bangarra's artistic director, thinks "she has warrior blood injected. She was always determined."

When Kris joined Bangarra, he says, "we hit it off straight away. She had accepted her upbringing and was using dance as a medicine and a cleansing, to heal herself."

This year, she is the lead in Page's *Mathinna*, a one-hour dance work based on the life of a stolen Aboriginal child named Mary. At the age of four, she was adopted by the governor of Van Diemen's Land, Sir John Franklin and his wife, who changed her name to Mathinna. Four years later, in 1843, the governor and his family were recalled to Britain and had no further use for the little girl, then eight. She was sent to a school for orphans as her own parents had died. Mathinna remained there until she was 16. She died, drunk and alone, aged 21.

The role of Mathinna is "a big thing Stephen's given me", says Kris. "I said [to him] I will try not to doubt myself."

Kris describes herself as the shyest girl at high school, timid in her dance-college years but always seeking to be "a challenger".

She grew up in the home of Epesaio Kris and his wife, Puiui, and their daughter, Daisy.

Asked why her biological parents, Ben Songoro and Elizabeth Daniel, gave her away, Kris replies: "I've no idea. I've always wanted to ask her [Elizabeth] but she never wanted to tell me."

'Oh my God, for class we had to wear a leotard. Coming from the island, we always covered up.'

Elma Kris

In her high school years, Kris was forbidden to go to Queensland on excursions, as travel to the mainland would mean acquiring an ID. The couple who raised her "didn't want me to see my birth certificate", she says.

As her only good subject at school was art, her teacher encouraged her to study visual arts in Cairns.

"I had never been down south," she says, but "Mum didn't want to let me come. She was protective of me. She let Daisy go away and she came back with a parcel [meaning a

baby], so she thought I would come back with a parcel too, another baby."

But Kris won the argument, enrolling at Cairns TAFE in 1993. Needing formal identification, she saw her birth certificate, with her family name – Songoro – for the first time. She studied for a year and taught art classes but she was drawn to her first love, dance.

As a child, she loved to watch performances by the Australian Ballet on television. "I thought, 'Wow!' I just got up and mimicked them. My mum was watching me and my mum would say, 'What are you making?' I said, 'I'm just watching,' and she said, 'It's just rubbish dance.'"

A chance conversation in a nightclub in Cairns brought her back to the artform. Kris was chatting to the dancer Albert David, who suggested she take up dancing. He told her about the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association college in Sydney, where she enrolled in 1994.

"I wanted to learn more about my culture ... At home, Mum only spoke broken English in front of us. Only when something was happening on Thursday, a party or a wedding, that's when they started communicating in their language, telling stories at a gathering. Whenever I saw that and listened, she would say, 'Don't listen to big people talking, go and make tea.'"

Kris found Sydney "so cold. I was freezing, my feet were numb. It was so fast compared with Cairns. Where does this bus go? Where does it stop? I was always on the phone to Mum. She said, 'Look after yourself, my girl.' I tried to encourage myself to be strong."

She thought she was studying at the college to understand Torres Strait Islands culture and was shocked to discover that she