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Artists of The Australian Ballet & Bangarra Dance Theatre performing in *Rites*, 1999  
Photography: Branco Gaica

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## The cultural twist

Western classical ballet has always been infused with elements of other cultures. As such, is this collaboration between Indigenous dancers and a Western classical dance company just a natural progression from developments that began centuries ago? Valerie Lawson writes that an authentic fusion between two cultures of dance is still in its infancy.

Bangarra and ballet. At first glance, the only thing they have in common is the letter B.

Every gesture, every level, every line, seems a world apart. Flexed feet, pointed feet. Airborne, grounded. Angled, pulled straight. Floor as resting place, floor as springboard.

But have a closer look, and the two worlds connect as closely as they veer apart.

Ballet began as social dance, with courtiers telling mythological tales in dance and song. Slowly, the art form evolved from amateurs dancing in vast Italian courtrooms to professionals who had learned a codified technique dancing on French stages.

As he told the writer Michelle Potter, “classical wasn’t my best style. But... I just worked. I worked very hard. I moved from the house of identity into the house of discipline” – from what is known by the heart, to what is learned by the body.

The transition for Page marked a central turning point in Australian dance history. Until then, Aboriginal dance seen on Australian and international stages was merely pastiche, despite the obvious sincerity of the white choreographers, among them Rex Reid and Beth Dean who in the 1950s, choreographed a ballet to John Antill’s musical suite, *Corroborree*.

The Czech, Edouard Borovansky, had declined an offer to make a ballet based on Antill’s score but he had introduced Aboriginal images into his ballet *Terra Australis*.

Decades later, another Czech, Jiří Kylián studied Aboriginal dance before making his work *Stamping Ground*. Earnest students now debate whether Kylián copied Aboriginal dance – in which case it would be “theft” – or whether he just referred to it.

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Corroborees, social celebrations, and spiritual occasions also tell mythological stories through dance and song; but came very recently to theatrical settings to be performed by professionals who are trained in many dance techniques.

Bangarra’s dancers rely partly on classical ballet technique for stamina, stretch, elevation and line. In *Ochres*, a huge dance hit for Bangarra’s Stephen Page a decade ago, the women move smoothly from animalistic ripples on the floor and lizard-like head movements to balletic positions, and then incorporate a third element: the contraction and release of the torso from the vocabulary of contemporary dance.

This mixture reflects Page’s origins and training, from his upbringing in urban Brisbane, with ballroom dancing-loving parents, to his training at the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association, to his move to the Sydney Dance Company where he learned ballet and contemporary dance.

None of these 20th century choreographers would see their works as appropriation, any more than 19th century ballet choreographers would regard their divertissements as anything but a true reflection of national dance styles and costumes, from the cute kilts of *La Sylphide*, to the Spanish ruffles of *Don Quixote*, to the kimonos of Lev Ivanov’s *The Mikado’s Daughter*, to the Indian glamour of *La Bayadère*, the Polish and Spanish character dance of dubious authenticity in Petipa’s *Swan Lake*, to Arthur Saint Léon’s Hungarian, Polish and Spanish steps in *Coppélia*.

In the 20th century Anna Pavlova copied national dances from Japan to India; while in the United States, Ruth St Denis interpreted Indian dance (*Rhoda*, *The Incense* and *The Cobras*); while Isadora Duncan looked to Greece for inspiration; and George Balanchine and Agnes de Mille idealised American dance styles – among them square dancing, vaudeville, and the Rockettes.

They were sincere, but in today’s climate, and in the words of the dance historian Lyn Garafola, such dances can sometimes be seen as “little more than national stereotypes dressed in sanitised piquancy.”

But a parallel force was at work in the mid 20th century, one that led to the development of a more authentic fusion of indigenous dance with contemporary dance, and later, with ballet. It began in the mid 1950s, when Arthur Mitchell, an African American, was chosen by George Balanchine to dance with the New York City Ballet.

“The myth was,” he said “that because you were black, you could not do classical dance. I proved that to be wrong.” His acceptance into the NYCB came before civil rights in the United States and about the same time as Raven Wilkinson, a dancer with the American-based Monte Carlo Ballet Russe was forced to leave the company, told by one of the executives “you will never dance ballerina roles. Why don’t you go off and do negro dancing?”

But the times, as Bob Dylan was soon to write, were a’changing. In 1958, a group of young black modern dancers first performed as the Alvin Ailey Dance Co, and their 1960 work, *Revelations*, based on the tradition of spirituals, brought the company international fame.

Instead of being confined to vaudeville and musicals, African American dancers could now express themselves through contemporary dance and ballet in their own stories. In the case of the choreographer, Tailey Beatty, that expression took on a political edge, with some of his works showing the tensions of black city ghettos. Beatty also choreographed for Boston Ballet and Sweden’s Cullberg Ballet, carving out a career that has parallels with Stephen Page.

Meanwhile Arthur Mitchell, who described himself later as a “political activist through dance”, decided to give children in Harlem the chance to dance, co-founding the School of Dance Theatre of Harlem.

In 1971, when the Dance Theatre of Harlem was formed, Balanchine asked Mitchell to co-choreograph *Concerto for Jazz Band and Orchestra*. This marked the first collaboration of a black contemporary dance company with a classical ballet company. Twenty five years later, Stephen Page was asked to collaborate with The Australian Ballet in a work danced to Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. The result was *Rites*. The two Bs had blended at last.