BENNELONG

STUDY GUIDE

Bangarra DANCE THEATRE
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Beau Dean Riley Smith in rehearsal for Bennelong
Photo: Tiffany Parker
Introduction

*Bangalong* is a dance theatre production that explores the story of Woollarawarre Bennelong (*Bennilong, Baneelon*) (c1764-1813), a Wangul man of the Eora nation who lived in the Port Jackson area at the time of the British first settlement. Today, Bennelong is one of the most celebrated and mythologised Aboriginal individuals from the days of early settlement. His wide notoriety is remarkable - not only for the stories about his interactions and relationships with the British, but for the amount of primary source material that refers to him in notebooks and diaries of several first fleet officers, as well as Governor Arthur Phillip himself.

Bennelong’s story has been told and re-told many times over by historians, novelists and screenwriters, and his image has been depicted by artists from early times to the present in paintings, drawings and other media. Numerous geographical locations around Australia are named in his honour. Perhaps the most well-known ‘place’ name is Bennelong Point, where the iconic Sydney Opera House stands.

Many of Australia’s businesses and institutions also bear his name including financial services companies, law firms, and publishing companies, as well as a federal electorate and an award-winning restaurant.

Bangarra Dance Theatre’s unique telling of Bennelong’s story is imagined through the perspective of Bennelong himself as well as other Aboriginal people of the time. The work explores his personal character, his conflicts, his relationships, his community, and his standing within that community.

Bangarra’s production of *Bennelong* is not a historical recount, nor is it a literal translation of events. The work looks between the lines and layers of the narrative that has gathered around this one man, and beyond the common perceptions that have prevailed in regard to Bennelong the man and his unique place in our post-colonial history.

We are mindful that we look back to Bennelong’s time through the filter of our contemporary consciousness - what we know now is always superimposed over what we read about First Contact times and how we imagine the reality of those times.

We hope to ignite audiences’ imaginations and focus their thoughts on the enormous impact brought to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through European settlement.

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**Australian Curriculum links - SUMMARY**

On page 14 to 19, you will find information regarding specific curriculum references (The Australian Curriculum) for the Learning Areas of *English, Humanities and Social Sciences and the Arts*.

*Bennelong* is especially relevant to:

- Cross-curricula priority; *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*.
- General Capabilities; *Critical and Creative Thinking* and *Intercultural Understanding*.

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**For full production program:**  
[https://bangarra.box.com/s/05c935i1pn5tc4d24a4kke2cah603x10](https://bangarra.box.com/s/05c935i1pn5tc4d24a4kke2cah603x10)
Background

When examining the life and times of Wollarawarre Bennelong there is a great deal of primary resource material available, mostly within preserved notebooks of First Fleet officers, personal letters found in collections and various published articles dating from the 1790s. There are also a number images of Bennelong created by artists of the time, including James Neagle, Joseph Lysett and the infamous Port Jackson painter.

Published writings include; Lieutenant Watkin Tench’s (1758–1833) books about the events of the first settlement including; A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay: With an Account of New South Wales, its Productions, Inhabitants &c (London, 1789) (republished in 1961 as Sydney’s First Four Years); Collins, David, An Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson in New South Wales (London, 1793); Hunter, John, An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island (London, 1793). Bennelong features significantly in these reports, along with several other prominent Aboriginal people of the time, Colebee, Bungaree, Arabanoo, Pemelwuy, Barangaroo, Gnung-a Gnung-a and Bidgee Bidgee.

While Bennelong’s story has been extensively researched and written about by historians, accounts of his life have also been heavily infused with legend and conjecture with some describing Bennelong as a rascal and opportunist, and others viewing him as a victim of exploitation who lost a great deal more than he gained through his dealings with Governor Arthur Phillip and the British colonists.

Eleanor Dark’s 1949 classic work of historical fiction, The Timeless Land, presents a deeply considered perspective about European settlement, focusing on Bennelong’s personal ‘story within the story’. Dark’s seminal novel was applauded by historians as bringing the Indigenous voice to the history of Australian colonisation, illustrating the Aboriginal point of view regarding the impact of, and response to, the disruptions that were occurring so rapidly. Dark was later commissioned to write Bennelong’s entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

Bennelong was born around 1764, a member of the Wangal people who occupied the land stretching from Goat Island along the southern shore of the Parramatta River up to Parramatta itself. In 1789, Governor Arthur Phillip received orders from King George III to make every possible effort to build a dialogue with the Aboriginal people. It is perhaps not surprising that no Aboriginal people had proactively sought to enter the British camp, so on 25 November, Lieutenant William Bradley and a small troop of British military went to Manly Cove and captured two Aboriginal men – Colebee, a Gadigal man, and Bennelong.

Colebee escaped about three weeks later but Bennelong remained for a period of five months, learning the ways of the Europeans and ingratiating himself to the household of the Governor Phillip. It was in May 1790, that Bennelong took it upon himself to return to his people, and to his life as a traditional man. This was not the end of his association with the white settlers – far from it. He retained his contact with Arthur Phillip in particular. One day Bennelong invited Phillip to share a meal of whale at a beach in Manly Cove. During the course of this interaction another man – Maurogagan – took up a spear and threw it at Phillip. The spear
struck Phillip in the shoulder and the event was recorded in the journals of the officers. Whether the incident was a ‘set up’ or not is open to conjecture, however Bennelong’s actions after this event showed his character as wanting to keep a peace between the groups - however tenuous that peace would be.

In 1792, Bennelong accompanied Governor Arthur Phillip to London, making him the first Aboriginal person (along with his tribal partner Yemmerrawanne) to travel to England. Phillip was returning to Britain after his period of time in Sydney establishing the settlement. There is little information available as to what Bennelong lived through during his three years in England. Legend has it that Bennelong met with King George III in May 1793, however there is little information about the context of the meeting or how it occurred.

Regardless of the subtle inconsistencies and variations in historiographical practice and source material, there is no doubt that Bennelong’s story is important as well as unique, and while the actual events are fascinating and remarkable, it is the emotional, social, and cultural disruptions felt by Bennelong and his community that are at the heart of this production.

Please refer to page 10 for further reading and resources regarding Bennelong and the people and events related to his story.
Creating Bennelong

The creative team for Bennelong started their creative process with a number of questions to consider. What do we know about Bennelong? Where does reality and mythology intersect? How can we imagine Bennelong as an individual, and as a man of his community? And how can we imagine the behaviours and responses of those men who were charged with executing the objectives of late 18th century European colonization?

The team set about exploring these questions, testing their ideas, creating shape and texture to those ideas, and gradually allowing the ‘spirit’ of the work to emerge.

With so much historical material about Bennelong available, the creative team became more interested in the history that was not written. How could they look at aspects of Bennelong’s life that have not been recorded? How could they explore what has been written into mythology, challenge elements of that, and present it in a way that would inspire the audience to work on their own ideas and perspectives about Bennelong and the times of First Contact?

The creative team sourced a large number of images (mostly from visual artists who came to Australia on the First Fleet) and created a visual landscape to display in the studio (see image below) to assist the choreographer and the dancers ignite ideas that would inspire and guide the creative journey.

While the chronological history and the recorded events were very present in the early stages, the creative team and the dancers wanted to look past the known history, through the list of events, to find a story that lived on the ground – to get a sense of Bennelong’s world – his Country, and his place among his People. They wanted to know who Bennelong was as a living, breathing person – not just as an historical figure.

As the process developed, many aspects of the story became ever more fascinating and the aim to create meaning beyond the commonly known narrative became more of an imperative.

Thinking about the number ‘1788’, was an example of this. This is just a number, but a number to which great significance has been attributed, a marker by which Australian history has pivoted. Yet this is a western calendar concept, and the coming of Europeans to this land to explore and take what they felt was their right to take was part of a much bigger picture that takes in concepts of power, sovereignty, and human and cultural rights.

Another question was, ‘Who are the contemporary Bennelongs?’ and where does that lead us when thinking about colonisation issues then, and contemporary Indigenous issues of today.
“The remarkable story of Woollarawarre Bennelong is one that resonates deeply. he was a traditional man who was, against his initial will, shown a European way of life, and became an intermediary between his clan and the colonialists. It was a duality that cost him dearly on both sides. Never quite belonging to his new tribe, and earning suspicion from the old, Bennelong paid the price of first contact by being exiled from both communities.”

Stephen Page, Choreographer.

“When Stephen and I had our first meeting, he told me he was interested in creating a work that only honoured the amazing story of the man himself and those around him. But also, one that spoke to the past and the present. A work that was both narrative and yet; operatic one moment and intimate the next.”

Steve Francis, Composer

As dramaturg on Bennelong, I it has been my role to funnel both information and inspiration into Stephen’s already vital flow of unique insights and creative energy. Stephen’s genius as a theatre maker is to understand and acknowledge and draw from the historical record, but as with so many Bangarra productions, to use it as a point of departure from which to take off into his own experience and that of his remarkable dancers. To ask questions about the frustrations, joys, compromises, griefs and survival dimensions of contemporary life for First Nations people.”

Alana Valentine, Dramaturg

“As a tradition man, Bennelong’s life changed forever through the arrival of the First Fleet, he faced challenges that no aboriginal Man had encountered before. For me, his legacy and spirit are ever present on this Country and I hope the design for Bennelong begins to reflect these ideas; sacred, contemporary and strong.”

Jake Nash, Set Designer.

“Bangarra costumes are designed knowing they will be layered with ochre night a night – they transform into living, moving works of art. Every dancer is so individual that their costumes can look completely different to how they started. I love this process as I’m inspired by texture and fabrics and seeing them evolve throughout the season, and it means each costume tells its own story.

Jennifer Irwin, Costume Designer.

Bennelong may be a far better known figure that Patyegarang, but it’s amazing how much we don’t know about him. Yet he played such a central role in the first relations between black and white people in the country. Once again, its left to Bangarra to so what they do so well-imaginatively fill I the gaps in their unique style of dance theatre.

Nick Schlieper, Lighting Designer
Performing *Bennelong*

The production of Bennelong is crafted as seventeen sections that are woven together as a complete production. Each section offers ideas about the time of first contact and the impact and emotional bearings that colonisation brought to the Aboriginal people, while focusing on the story of one man – Woollarawarre Bennelong.

The sections are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SACRED</td>
<td>Respecting the space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIRTH OF BENNELONG</td>
<td>The birth of the man with five names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WANGAL</td>
<td><em>Eora</em> nation people, living off the land on their Country, hunting and gathering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATIVE VACCINATE</td>
<td>Intuition tells the clan unsettling spirits are coming and they must vaccinate and protect themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLEET</td>
<td>The arrival, of which sets a course of destruction for the next two centuries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBSERVATION SMELL</td>
<td>First Contact, with both cultures observing mind, body and spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REWIND 1788</td>
<td>Spirit of the Land and Knowledge, consciously reflecting the spirit of Bennelong, the land and the people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAIT</td>
<td>Governor Phillip sends for the capture of Bennelong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESPONDING</td>
<td>First archetype of assimilation through the wearing of colonial clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONSLAUGHT</td>
<td>Small pox wipes out a whole clan; Bennelong survives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESISTANCE</td>
<td>Signs of resistance through the energy of Pemulwuy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REJECTION</td>
<td>Spearing of Governor Phillip at Manly Cove in a man’s initiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPIRIT OF BARANGAROO</td>
<td>One of Bennelong’s wives Barangaroo dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CROWN</td>
<td>Bennelong and Yemmerawanye travel to London with Governor Phillip and are feted as a triumph of assimilation; Yemmerawanye dies in London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REPATRIATION</td>
<td>The ongoing battle for our bones and spirits to be returned from London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIVES</td>
<td>Bennelong returns from London and does not belong in either world; the five strong female energies that influenced his life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1813/PEOPLE OF THE LAND</td>
<td>The year Bennelong dies questioning what he has left, and mourning his own spirit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pre-show activities

Explore the list of discussion points on page 11 and the images/illustrations on pages 12 and 13. Choose one or two talking points and/or an image or two and initiate discussion either as a class or in small focus groups.

Suggested themes/readings have been provided in relation to; First Contact, colonisation, cultural identities, traditional practices, Indigenous perspectives.

You may wish to incorporate contemporary social-cultural perspectives, geo-political points in time and/or issues of human rights and sovereignty as they are regarded today, for example:

- Are there continuing tensions between western capitalist society (economic, cultural, social, political) and levels of awareness and respect for First Nation communities and their culture? If so, how are these tensions manifested?

Build the discussion to incorporate a range of perspectives and encourage students to investigate the importance of being aware of the stories within the stories, and how history is often a contested practice that requires thorough research as well as a level of objectivity and sensitivity.

Some broad theme questions might be:

- How can we investigate and re-investigate our history from multiple perspectives?
- What are some ways Indigenous issues that stem from our particular colonial past, are resonating in our society today?

A further reading list has been provided to support the above activities on page 10.

Post-show activities

After attending the performance, there are a number of ways for students to process what they have experienced.

- Reflecting on what they already knew about Bennelong and other Indigenous people who experienced First Contact and the actions of the British, how did Bennelong depict colonisation scenarios in the late 18th century?
- Write a critical analysis of the work.
- Respond to the work though illustration / story board / collage or other visual art making.
- Take one scene and identify and describe the elements of dance, music and design.
Further resources & links

ONLINE

Finding Bennelong. Comprehensive and culturally respectful website delivering multi-layered interpretation and education through videos, historic artworks and extensive research including links to primary sources. Produced by Art of Multimedia (Sydney) for the City of Ryde Council in consultation with Aboriginal community members and commissioned historians.
http://findingbennelong.com/

http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bennelong-1769

EORA: Mapping Aboriginal Sydney: 1770 to 1850. State Library of New South Wales. E-Resource (includes information, maps, original images)

Barani: Sydney’s Aboriginal history. City of Sydney.
Histories of people, places and events in the City of Sydney local government area that are associated with the histories of Sydney’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

My Place for Teachers: Australia in the 1790s; Bennelong. Australian Children’s’ Television Foundation, 2011.

BOOKS & JOURNALS: non-fiction


BOOKS: fiction

Dark, Eleanor. The Timeless Land, first published by Collins (London, Sydney) and MacMillen (UK), 1941.

For young readers;

MUSIC / SONG

1788 When the Sky Fell Down, Breakaway Publishing. Song album

Discussion starting points

No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal group and its homeland. Our word ‘home’, warm and suggestive though it be, does not match the Aboriginal word that may mean ‘camp’ ‘spirit centre’ and much else all in one. Our word ‘land’ is too spare and meagre. We can now scarcely use it except with economic overtones unless we happen to be poets.


**THEMES:** INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES, LANGUAGE, PLACE, IDENTITY, OWNERSHIP.

No more woomera, no more Boomerang
No more playabout, no more the old ways.
Children of nature we were then, No clocks hurrying crowds to toil.
Now I am civilised and work in the white way,
Now I have a dress, now I have shoes;
’Isn’t she lucky to have a good job!’
Better when I had only a dillybag.
Better when I had nothing but happiness.

From the poem by Oodgeroo Noonuccal. ‘Then and Now’, 1970.

**THEMES:** INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES, CULTURAL STUDIES, AUSTRALIAN POETRY, VALUES, PRE AND POST-COLONIAL HISTORY.

All his life he had been tormented by these two allegiances – to the old tribal life, governed by its ancient Law … and to some adventurousness of the blood and spirit which ardently sought and welcomed change. He looked at his friends resentfully, dimly aware that the quality in himself which they applauded when it expressed itself in the making of corroborees was the same which they mistrusted when it drew him irresistibly into the new exciting life of the white invaders”.


**THEMES:** INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES, PRE AND POST-COLONIAL AUSTRALIAN HISTORY, AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE.

“Sir, I am very well. I hope you are very well. I live at the governor’s. I have every day dinner there. I have not my wife; another black man took her away. We have had muzzy doings; he speared me in the back, but I better now; his name is Carroway. All my friends alive and well. Not me go to England no more. I am at home now. I hope Mrs Philips is very well. You nurse me madam when I sick. You very good madam; thank you madam, and hope you remember me madam, not forget. I know you very well madam. Madam I want stockings, thank you madam. Send me two pair of stockings. You my good madam. Thank you Madam. Sir, you give my duty to Lard Sidney. Thank you very good my lord, very good. Hope very well all Family, very well. Sir send me you please some handkerchiefs of pocket. You please Sir send me some shoes. Two pair you please. Bannelong”.

29 August 1796. To a Mr Phillips (Steward to Lord Sidney). No record exists of Lord Sidney nor a steward called Mr Phillips. Historians speculate the letter written by Bennelong to Governor Arthur Phillip.

**THEMES:** INDIGENOUS PERSEPTIVES, AUSTRALIAN HISTORY, VALUES, LANGUAGE.
Visual stimulus

**Above:** 1798 Engraving depiction of Bennelong. Artist: Neagle, James, 1760 – 1822. Bennelong dressed in style of English gentleman, frock coat, ruffled short. Background shows traditional hunting items; spears, shields and the head of a Woomera. The engraving was produced in Britain after Bennelong had returned to Australia.


Reproduced courtesy of National Library of Australia.

**Left:** “Native name Ben-nel-long, as pointed when angry after Botany Bay Colebee was wounded”.

Artist: Port Jackson Painter.
Created: 1790 or 1797.
Dimensions: 20.3 x 17.3cm
Reference: Watling Drawing – no. 41

This image is part of the Watling collection and is housed at the Natural History Museum in London.

**The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London ©**
Above: “Aborigines spearing fish, others diving for crayfish, a party seated beside a fire cooking fish”.

Artist: Lycett, Joseph, approximately 1775-1828.
Created: 1817

Reproduced courtesy of National Library of Australia.
YEAR 7

... History (Humanities and Social Sciences)

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

- Students build on and consolidate their understanding of historical inquiry from previous years in depth, using a range of sources for the study of the ancient past (ACDSEH001)
- The range of sources that can be used in an historical investigation, including archaeological and written sources (ACDSEH029)
- The nature of sources for ancient Australia and what they reveal about Australia’s past in the ancient period, such as the use of resources (ACDSEH031)
- The importance of conserving the remains of the ancient past, including the heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACDSEH148)

HISTORICAL SKILLS

- Sequence historical events, developments and periods (ACHHS205)
- Identify a range of questions about the past to inform a historical inquiry (ACHHS207)
- Identify the origin and purpose of primary and secondary sources (ACHHS209)
- Locate, compare, select and use information from a range of sources as evidence (ACHHS210)
- Draw conclusions about the usefulness of sources (ACHHS211)

...The Arts

DANCE CONTENT
• Analyse how choreographers use elements of dance and production elements to communicate intent (ACADAR018)

• Identify and connect specific features and purposes of dance from contemporary and past times to explore viewpoints and enrich their dance-making, starting with dance in Australia and including dance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACADAR019)

--- The Arts

MUSIC CONTENT
• Analyse composers’ use of the elements of music and stylistic features when listening to and interpreting music (ACAMUR097)

• Identify and connect specific features and purposes of music from different eras to explore viewpoints and enrich their music making, starting with Australian music including music of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
YEAR 8

...English

LITERATURE
- Explore the ways that ideas and viewpoints in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups (ACELT1626)
- Explore the interconnectedness of Country/Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors (ACELT1806)

RESPONDING TO LITERATURE
- Share, reflect on, clarify and evaluate opinions and arguments about aspects of literary texts (ACELT1627)

...The Arts

DANCE CONTENT
- Analyse how choreographers use elements of dance and production elements to communicate intent (ACADAR018)
- Identify and connect specific features and purposes of dance from contemporary and past times to explore viewpoints and enrich their dance-making, starting with dance in Australia and including dance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACADAR019)

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- Analyse composers’ use of the elements of music and stylistic features when listening to and interpreting music (ACAMUR097)
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YEAR 9

... English

LITERATURE
- Interpret and compare how representations of people and culture in literary texts are drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1633)
- Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts (ACELT1635)

CREATING TEXTS
- Create imaginative, informative and persuasive texts that present a point of view and advance or illustrate arguments, including texts that integrate visual, print and/or audio features (ACELY1746)

... History

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING
- The nature and extent of the movement of peoples in the period (slaves, convicts and settlers) (ACOKFH015)
- The extent of European imperial expansion and different responses, including in the Asian region (ACOKFH017)

MOVEMENT OF PEOPLES (1750 – 1901)
- Experiences of slaves, convicts and free settlers upon departure, their journey abroad, and their reactions on arrival, including the Australian experience (ACDSEH083)
- The short and long-term impacts of the movement of peoples during this period (ACDSEH085)

MAKING A NATION
- The extension of settlement, including the effects of contact (intended and unintended) between European settlers in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACDSEH020)

... The Arts

DANCE CONTENT
• Analyse a range of dance from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their dance making, starting with dance from Australia and including dance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider dance in international contexts (ACADAR026)

MUSIC CONTENT

• Analyse a range of music from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their music making, starting with Australian music, including music of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider music in international contexts (ACAMUR105)
YEAR 10

... English

LANGUAGE
- Evaluate the impact on audiences of different choices in the representation of still and moving images (ACELA1572)

LITERATURE AND CONTEXT
- Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1639)
- Analyse and explain how text structures, language features and visual features of texts and the context in which texts are experienced may influence audience response (ACELT1641)

INTERPRETING, ANALYSING, EVALUATING
- Identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences (ACELY1752)

... The Arts

DANCE CONTENT
- Analyse a range of dance from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their dance making, starting with dance from Australia and including dance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider dance in international contexts (ACADAR026)

MUSIC CONTENT
- Analyse a range of music from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their music making, starting with Australian music, including music of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider music in international contexts (ACAMUR105)