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DIFFERENT INFLECTIONS – INTERCULTURAL DANCE IN AUSTRALIA
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*I love a sunburnt country
a land of sweeping plains
of ragged mountain ranges
of droughts
and flooding rains
I love her far horizons
I love her jewel-sea
her beauty and her terror
the wide brown land for me*

(My Country, Dorothea MacKellar 1904)

I. Imaging Australia and who we are

Australia has often been defined by its landscape – actual, romanticized, imagined – iconic images and experiences taken up by artists in a myriad of ways, encapsulated early last century by Dorothea Mackellar’s 1904 poem *My Country* and most recently by Baz Luhrmann’s film *Australia*. The verse above used to be recited by every school child from the 1940s to the 1970s; it was a mantra expressing pride that this was our unique, beautiful and dramatic country. And yet, apart from the 40,000 year old imprint of the Indigenous population, we are an immigrant people from somewhere else. For many, our adopted landscape is unfamiliar and foreign.

1) *terra nullius* and the Indigenous presence

Australia’s fractured, contested history is as contingent as its landscape imaginings. The only island continent in the world, Australia was ‘discovered’ by British explorers, led by Captain James Cook, in

1788. The British declared the country *terra nullius*, meaning 'land belonging to nobody'. Despite the fact that the Aborigines had lived here for at least 40,000 years the British, on arrival, said the land was empty. The British colonised the land with their prisoners, 'undesirables' and later 'free settlers', and set about either exterminating or 'assimilating' the Aboriginal populations, displacing them from their homelands (source?). Only in 1967 (check year) were Aborigines given the right to vote in a landslide referendum where over 90% of the people, through a national referendum, showed that they wished to begin to right the wrongs of the past. However, it was not until February 2008 that the Australian Government formally apologised to our first inhabitants for the suffering caused by colonial regimes and inhuman policies.

2) A land of immigrants and hybrid cultures

The overwhelming Anglo-Irish composition of the Australian population began to radically alter in the 1940s after World War 2 when European immigrants flocked to Australia in search of a more secure and better life. Once our shameful 'White Australia Policy' was abolished in ??, migrants of other ethnicities made Australia their home, many escaping from a war-torn Asia in the mid-70s. The most recent government census at June 2000 shows that the Australian population reached 19.2 million, of which 4.5 million (24 percent) had been born overseas (source). The opening up to Asia changed immigration patterns; typically half of Australia's immigrants come from Asia, with five percent of the Australian population born in Asia or first-generation Australians with Asian parents. The Asian population of Australia is projected to reach 10% by 2020, whilst the estimated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia as at 30 June 2001 was 458,500, or 2.4% of the total Australian population.

Two thirds of us live in the capital cities along the coastline, predominantly on the Eastern seaboard, but the red desert centre and the 'bush' or 'outback', along with the more accessible beach, are ever-present in our psyche. Whilst the landscape is a constant, in the present context, national identity by definition is necessarily hybrid and in continual flux, with a powerful resurgence of Aboriginal demands for land, recognition and cultural respect.

This paper examines, from the 1970s to the present, inter/intra cultural practices of four Australian dance companies and their choreographer/directors, and how they inflect images of Australia. Each artist brings perspectives from their particular hybridized cultural and ethnic backgrounds as well as their formative dance experiences, bringing into question the very nature of an 'Australian' culture. Noh (2007) suggests that cultural hybridity, as a postcolonial condition, foregrounds intercultural mixtures based on Bhaba's notion (1994) of an 'in-betweeness', thus refuting previous Eurocentric essentialist ideas about culture. This paper illustrates how such cultural hybridity informs the work of the artists discussed: Kai-Tai Chan, Stephen Page, Tony Yap and the key creators of Polytoxic. It also explores how their practices embrace notions of landscape in its physical, metaphorical and spiritual dimensions, as well as revealing nuanced and differentiated perspectives of what might constitute our multiple Australian identities.

II. Kai Tai Chan: there is always space for 'one extra'

Kai Tai Chan, who founded the One Extra Company in 1976, pioneered intercultural dance theatre in Australia with an innovative, accessible and challenging output from the mid seventies to the mid nineties; works described by critics as always being different, provocative and challenging our notions of what it is to be Australian. Kai Tai is a Chinese Malay born in Penang who came to Australia to study architecture and stayed to create a significant body of work in which different cultural frameworks became lenses through which to explore stories of ordinary lives and experiences, revealing complexities of the human condition and larger social-political issues. Often through quirky humour and compassion, he turned accepted norms on their head, presenting alternative Australian identities that reflect our multicultural make-up.

1) Formative influences

As the eldest son in a family of 12 children, Kai Tai's childhood was 'pervaded by Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim rituals, celebrations and observances' (Lester, 1998, p.8). His initial dance influences were Chinese acrobatics, folk traditions and more formal dance styles of cultural groups within Penang. These early informal dance experiences were enriched when he came to Australia to study architecture in 1963

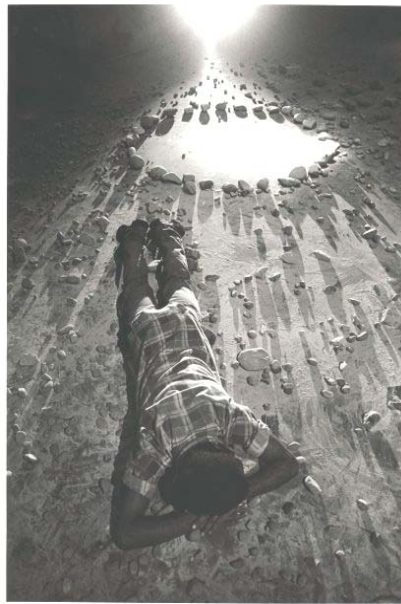
in Sydney and began also studying with dance pioneer Margaret Barr whose European background in expressionist dance begat socio-political dance theatre productions from the late 60s. Kai Tai learnt improvisation, staging and a range of dance skills from Margaret Barr and soon began choreographing.

From 1973-1976 he lived in London where he immersed himself in as many types and genres of dance and theatre as he could find; dancing, choreographing and forming a company called 'another dance group'. His work was noticed by London critics who saw a potentially new and unique choreographic voice emerging. Subsequently, he was awarded a choreographic residency at London Contemporary Dance Theatre in 1975, which also provided invaluable opportunities to take class and observe the processes of master choreographers. Visa problems forced him to return to Australia where he began his seminal work with the newly formed One Extra Company (see Lester, 1999, regarding the London years).

2) Creative approaches in the work of One Extra Company

One Extra Company's name derived from the fact that there was always room for 'one extra – person, idea, process' (Chan, in Lester, 2000, p.101). As Artistic Director from 1976 until 1991, Kai Tai (as he was always known) worked through a highly effective collaborative process employing whatever styles, artists, approaches best suited the story he wished to tell or the issues he wished to explore. Feedback and discussion with other artists, company members and audience were also an essential part of this working process.

Kai Tai was committed to a notion of performance rather than a particular style or genre. Settings were often more like installations than stage sets, reflecting his architectural background. He paid great attention to the spatio-temporal connections between performers on stage as well as the dynamics between the action of the performers and their constructed environment. The environment was considered an organic and changing entity (Lester, 2000, pp.104-105) as illustrated in the image below from his seminal work *Midday Moon* (1984).



National Library of Australia

nlc.pic-vn3261988-v

Richard Talonga in Kai Tai Chan's *Midday Moon*. Photo: Regis Lansac.

Through his eclectic approach, according to long term associate Garry Lester (2000, p. 137), Kai Tai strove 'to break the hegemony of technique and understand and appreciate that dance is social production: an expression of aspects of our relationship to each other as human beings'. His purpose was to communicate to his audience what he believed to be "essential truths", 'which often lie beneath what seem to be banal experiences' (Lester, 2000, p 91). As a superb story-teller, whether through abstract

movement, text, theatrical gestures and/or highly articulate dance, Kai Tai ensured that the form always served the content and was totally integral to it. He had a great deal to say about the contemporary realities of living in an increasingly ethnically diverse Australia; revealing the extraordinary in the ordinary, through a diverse and surprising body of work encompassing a poetic mosaic of evocative images and memorable characters.

Lester (2000: 220) describes his work in terms of tensions within 'the dynamic interplay of opposite forces which compete: the yin and yang, the Dionysian and Apollonian impulses, which strive for a potent and energetic interaction and authority and are never resolved in a formulaic way'. Despite the complexity of this balance of opposites, Kai Tai believed in accessibility, and so whilst his works were always innovative and often exposed uncomfortable truths, they were invariably mediated with humour. Encapsulating this interplay, critic Pamela Carsaniga (1991, p. 31) spoke of Kai Tai's 'provocative ingenuity' and 'his blend of inspired imagination, quirky humour and insight into the human condition' as well as his work displaying 'a heightened awareness of Australia's multicultural reality'. Or as critic Neli Jillet (1983, p. 17) remarked in his review of *Jacaranda Blue*, which was an exploration of aging gay men: 'Kai Tai Chan never forgets that humour and tenderness are important parts of existence.'

3) Questions of Identity

As a diasporic Asian Australian, Kai Tai was highly sensitized to the inherent contradictions around Australian identity, portraying through his dance theatre alternative and ever shifting notions of what it might mean to be an Australian. As part of this contested territory, he also explored 'the spiritual links that still bind immigrants to their homeland' (quoted in Lester, 2000, p. 148). However, he did not wish to only draw on his own Asian sensibilities as Lester (2000, p. 218) points out when he remarks that it is 'a commonly held mistake that the overarching nature of the work has been from an Asian perspective. That is only part of the praxis, it contains the multiple perspectives that constitute his identity and the identities of the members of his group'.

In choosing to work with Asian, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, black American and white Caucasian performers Kai Tai proposed identity as a hybrid, constructed, dialogic relationship. In June 1995 (in Lester, 2000, p.212) he stated:

I feel all my cross-cultural works have tried to bridge and share understandings between cultures. They are not inward looking and are accessible. I tried to blend these cultural understandings in new ways, creating new forms and sometimes just making social comments from my own cultural perspective. It is not the 'side by side' cultural diversity of multiculturalism which never engages in dialogues across cultural borders.'

Whilst highlighting and celebrating differences, the commonalities of living in Australia including the power of the landscape, are also a strong feature of Kai Tai's work. In *People Like Us* (1991), whilst cooking a typical Penang meal (not the ubiquitous Aussie barbecue), he turns to the audience and remarks 'I'm an Australian. When I go away I miss the bush' (in Lester, 2000, p.121-122). Perhaps this ironic scene is an example of dance critic Jill Syke's 1987 description of his work as 'talking about one culture in the language of another'.

For not only does Kai Tai Chan investigate cultural viewpoints of Australians from ethnic minorities, he also expands the imaging of Australia for majority cultures, as evidenced by the following comment by respected choreographer and teacher Keith Bain with reference to *Midday Moon*. When interviewed about Kai Tai Chan for Dance Australia (2000, p. 5), he said: 'In very personal terms, its multicultural perspectives gave me a new perception of the country I live in and the art form I love.'

The complex paradox that makes up the life and work of this seminal intercultural artist is best described by Kai Tai who describes himself as:

'a migrant from a non-English speaking background, Asian and gay, who has great empathy with other minorities including different races such as Aborigines, and different cultural expressions manifest through dance and explorations across different art forms.... my work is about Australia and its search for a national cultural identity and not a ghetto mentality'(in Lester, 2000, p. 119).

III. An Indigenous perspective – Stephen Page and Bangarra Dance Theatre

Kai Tai Chan's belief in the fundamental importance of Aboriginal dance saw him give unwavering support to the first generation of contemporary urban Aboriginal dancers through employing them on a regular basis and encouraging them to pursue their own careers. Stephen Page, generally regarded as the first internationally recognized Aboriginal choreographer, has paid tribute to this first generation nurtured by Kai Tai, such as Sylvia Blanco and Richard Talonga, claiming that 'they did the hard work and laid the seed for the Bangarra of today' (2004, p. 13).

1) Urban Aboriginality and dance

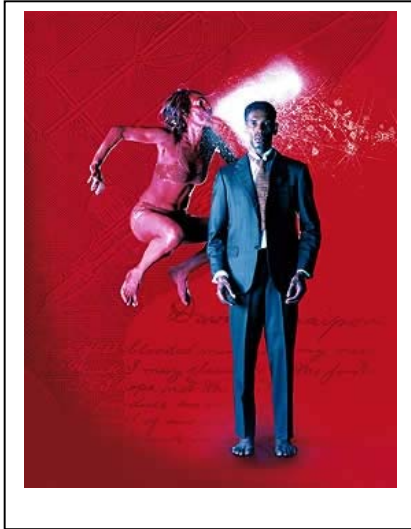
Whilst Kai Tai's formative influences included immersion in the cultural heritage of his country of origin, Stephen Page, was brought up in an urban environment with little exposure to his Indigenous cultural traditions. However, like Kai Tai he came from a large family; one of 11 children in a poor, urban working class family. In terms of social and cultural identity he reported that 'my childhood was just about surviving' (in Potter, 1997, p. 93) and as a youth he sometimes felt 'a sense of not belonging anywhere' (1998). However, he speaks fondly of his close-knit family living in an environment with 'a lot of humour and love and great communication ...we just created our own sort of urban tribe living' (in Potter, 1997, p. 93). Although he is a descendant of the Nunukul people and also the Munaldjali clan of the Yugambeh tribe in south-Eastern Queensland, his family had no experience of traditional living or knowledge of language. Money was scarce but ideas and imagination were plentiful and home was a place where story-telling and 'a diversity of music and rhythms always floated through the house' (Potter, 1973, p. 94).

Page trained as a dancer at NAISDA (National Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre), graduating in 1983 after which he joined Sydney Dance Company as a contemporary dancer. These years of constant performing and touring gave him a thorough grounding in professional mainstream dance. In 1989 he was appointed Artistic Director for NAISDA's program *Kayn Walu*, and in 1991 he was appointed Artistic Director of Bangarra Dance Theatre, a position he still holds. In 1997 Page received an Australian Dance Award for Outstanding Choreographic Achievement, and three years later he and Bangarra Dance Theatre were instrumental in the cultural and opening evenings staged for the 2000 Olympic Games. Subsequently, his appointment as Artistic Director of the 2004 Adelaide Festival made him the first Indigenous director of a major international arts festival, a directorship that was unique according to Michael Fitzgerald (2004, p. 58), in that it introduced 'the protocols he developed at Bangarra for bringing traditional art practices into the contemporary world'.

2) Kinship and connection to land

It was through his dance training at NAISDA (National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development) that Stephen connected with his traditional and spiritual roots. These ongoing connections have been instrumental for his work and the development of Bangarra Dance Theatre. Kinship structures and deep spiritual connection to the land and the ancestral spirits which shaped it, underpin the Aboriginal world view known as 'The Dreaming'. This belief is fundamental to Aboriginal people and how they negotiate their way in colonial and post-colonial Australia. The dreaming stories are crucial to Aboriginal culture and the function of Aboriginal dance is to tell these stories and re-affirm them 'as an intrinsic cycle to the cycle of life: uniting past, future and present, and the living with the dead' (Burridge, 2002, p. 78). Without clan and spiritual and physical connection to their land, Aborigines experience a sense of deep loss and lack of identity.

Adopted into the families of Bunduk Marik and Djakapurra Munyaryun of the Yolgnu people as an adult, Page states that 'developing kinship ties with traditional clans is a privilege and a big responsibility for me... these kinship ties are my link to our Indigenous heritage and the strong connection with this land' (2004, p.12). Page emphasizes the importance of kinship in Aboriginal culture affirming that dance 'is part of a huge artistic kinship' (in Cassity, 2002, p.24). In connecting with his traditional heritage Page describes his 'dance spirit being awakened by dancing in the red soil of the Yirrikala stomping ground'. Despite his urban lifestyle he talks of his creative process 'evolv[ing] from the landscape and the environment', and providing 'an internal feel which helps the focus of the dance – an animalistic feel mixed in with all my contemporary dance knowledge.' (1998)



3) **Bangarra Dance Theatre: forging a contemporary Indigenous identity**

Image: *Clan* 2001, Photo Bangarra Dance Theatre.

These experiences and deeply held beliefs have been embedded into the philosophy of Bangarra Dance Theatre by Stephen Page, along with his two brothers; composer and musical director David Page and the late Russell Page, Bangarra's leading dancer and Stephen's choreographic muse. Although Carole Johnson was founding Artistic Director of the company in 1989, it was Stephen Page who forged its unique identity from 1991 to the present. A central aim of Bangarra is to build a bridge between urban and traditional Aboriginal culture. Burrige (2002, p. 78) refers to Bangarra as 'an urban kinship family' which 'through its operating philosophy reflects the spirituality, connection with country, and the earth. It also demonstrates respect for individuality combined with collaborative energy'.

According to Fitzgerald (2004, p.58) the company has also 'pushed the idea of Aboriginal art as a medium in which different cultures can converse'. Page himself states that:

Bangarra's existence has been about networking all the different clans of elders and their stories, bringing the heritage to cities where a lot of urban Aborigines have lost contact with their customs. We're like the new elders for the next generation, so there's a wonderful thing of cultivating a philosophy about Bangarra and the importance of it culturally.... We're not just a dance troupe; we're more of a cultural foundation. We embrace dance to express the stories'.
(Page, in Cassity, 2002, p. 24).

In forging this bridge between the two worlds of Indigenous contemporaneity and traditional values, the pivotal contribution of traditional performer (singer and dancer) and cultural consultant Djakapurra Munyarryun cannot be over emphasised. Page (1998) refers to Djakapurra as 'our spirit dance man' who is 'instrumental in guiding the sense of traditional integrity through the works'. New York critic Deborah Jowitt (2001, p. 51) describes him as 'a guide to the scenes of initiation and spirit travel' in viewing the work of Bangarra.



Image: Djakapurra Munyarryun, *Skin*, 2000. Photo, Bangarra Dance Theatre

With this guidance, Page (2004, p. 13), in collaboration with Djakapurra, melds Aboriginal ideas and motifs with those of urban culture, choosing dance theatre as the closest artistic medium to the traditional cultural forms which are always sung, danced and painted. Weiss (2002, p. 90) sees this engagement as a site of research where 'the traditions of Aboriginal people's are the culturally coded space(s) in which Page's cultural consultant Djakapurra Munyarryun actively performs research'. In a similar vein Page refers to Bangarra as a resource and 'a house for Indigenous professional artists' (in Potter 1997, p. 101). Together with Page these artists have created a unique contemporary intracultural dance style which is a sensual blend of contemporary dance and the 'groundedness' of traditional dance.

As Jowitt (2001, p. 51) expresses it: The choreography incorporates traditional stamping patterns and animal mimicry...the dancers may spin and kick, but they never quite seem to be doing “modern dance””. Another important element is narrative and the centrality of what Weiss (2002, p. 96) terms a ‘polyvalent space’ in which ‘Aboriginal cosmologies are given story space within a modern framework of present time. A new tale is woven.’ But these are not only stories from the past in a new setting. Page tells dreaming stories of the present – the social struggles of contemporary Indigenous people. In addition, Page wants these stories to reach beyond Indigenous peoples. As he says: ‘I’m always trying to tell a good story universally, through the Indigenous identity’ (2004, p. 14).

In Australia, Aboriginal artists in a myriad of ways are inextricably linked to Indigenous politics, whether or not they make this choice; particularly when their work is a deliberate intercultural mix of Western and Aboriginal styles, forms and concepts. Page acknowledges and embraces this reality stating that the work of the company ‘offers a poetic, theatrical, visual experience [that] is very much part of the artistic political campaign’ (2004, p. 15). The work of Bangarra is seen by many as an important part of the national agenda for reconciliation. Page also hopes that through his work ‘it is possible for audiences to share the spirituality of the land and the significance of that experience’ (2004, p.13) and thus progress reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. As Magowan (2000) asserts: ‘Indigenous dance should be examined as an expressive, active, and ongoing performative dialogue with the nation’.

4) *Rites: a unique intercultural experiment*

A landmark work is Stephen Page’s *Rites*, a major collaboration between The Australian Ballet and Bangarra Dance Theatre, which is a bold intercultural experiment between European and Indigenous cultures, integrating diverse working processes and dance techniques. In 1996 Stephen Page was commissioned to create a work *Alchemy* on The Australian Ballet, the nation’s flagship classical ballet. The success of this led to the next step of Bangarra Dance Theatre and The Australian Ballet joining forces in 1997 to produce *Rites*, a new version of *Rite of Spring*, choreographed by Page. This was the first time that Aboriginal trained contemporary dancers and Western ballet dancers worked on the same stage to make a quintessentially Australian dance work. Despite the differences in culture and training, Potter (2001) reports that the dancers ‘appeared to relish the cultural challenges that the collaboration presented to them’.

Rites ‘centred on a conceptual, choreographic and visual examination of landscape’ in 6 parts: Awakening, Earth, Wind, Fire, Water and Dreaming, ‘to present an exploration of the natural forces that determine Australia’s ancient landscape, and to capture the spiritual essence of those forces’ (Potter, 2001). In program notes for the opening season of *Rites*, Page wrote: ‘I hope this work challenges some of the current preconceptions about Indigenous peoples and propels us all along the path of reconciliation’.

Touring internationally, *Rites* was remounted in 2008 for a tour to Europe and the USA. Whilst considered a landmark work in Australia’s dance history, the 2008 version was met with mixed reactions in Europe, as reported by Deborah Jones (2008, p.32) in *The Australian*. Olivier Le Floc’h in Paris wrote that ‘the mix of genres was a marvel and rarely had one seen so savage and sensual a *Rite of Spring*, so in tune with the forces of nature.’ English critic Clement Crisp found that the Australian Ballet dancers ‘skilfully assimilated into this celebration of the earth and its secrets’. However, English critic Isme Brown described the work as ‘cliched’ with ‘no intensity or communal purpose’ and ‘idle primitivist posturing’. Jenny Gilbert of *The Independent* in the UK claimed that ‘depressingly, what *Rites* boils down to is a 40,000 year culture theme park.’ Such dismissive reviewing by some of the English critics begs the question of an ongoing and misplaced cultural superiority towards the dance of their former colony of ‘*terra nullius*’.

Whatever the subjective views expressed by national and international critics, there is no doubt as to the significance of such experiments of contemporary Indigenous dance representations. Magowan (2000) believes ‘we have a responsibility in the way that we come to view Indigenous dance, not only as a theatre of life but as a declaration of support for the intercultural state of the nation.’ Similarly Kai Tai Chan, describing his vision for Australian dance predicted:

what will be unique to Australian cultural identity in dance will come from the contribution of Aboriginal influence. Australian artists should try harder to learn and absorb from within their own country, than to constantly refer to other Western dance developments as models' (in Burridge, 2002, p. 83).

Whatever flaws others may see in *Rites*, this coming together of our two national companies – Indigenous and non-indigenous - is to be celebrated.

IV. Tony Yap and Malaysian Trance Dance

1) Developing an alternative practice

Spiritual connections of a very different nature than those of the Indigenous connection to land of Bangarra Dance Theatre, feature strongly in the practice of Tony Yap. Like Kai Tai Chan, Tony is another Chinese Malay Australian. He grew up in Melaka (Malacca), where shamanistic practices were a natural part of his childhood experiences. For Tony the landscape he evokes in his work in Australia is an inner one strongly informed by the trance dance practiced in his hometown, known as the *sen-siao* ("spirit cloud") tradition, dating back to the Hsuan-ho reign (119-26 AD) of Northern Sung dynasty (Yap, in Flynn and Humphrey, 2006, p.2). Similar to the eclectic influences which shaped Kai Tai's philosophy and beliefs, this tradition is also a hybrid form, but manifest through a specific spirit-medium practice where shamans mediate between the gods and the people. Yap describes these 'magico-religious rites' as combining strands of Chinese traditions such as Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, 'woven and interwoven' with 'other local Malay religious elements' (in Flynn and Humphrey, 2006, p.2).

Another similarity with Kai Tai is that Tony came to Australia to study a visual creative form, not architecture, but graphic art. An interest in performance art and physical theatre has led him, over the last 20 years, to forge a unique space in the Australian dance and theatre scene. Since founding *Mixed Company* in 1993 (now *Tony Yap Company*), he has explored an individual dance theatre language informed by psycho-physical research, shamanistic trance dance as described above, Butoh and other Asian cultural forms, voice and visual design. In describing his practice, he has adopted the term 'transmigration' to explain the process of extracting his childhood experiences into a contemporary practice through his embodied cultural history. Tony describes his process thus (ibid, pp.1-2):

My aim is to capture the grammar of these shamanistic practices that, through reflection and practice, will lead to the creation of new choreographic work that would add to and diversify the theatrical and dance languages people perform here. My aim is also to transpose a language out of its original Malaysian religious context and put it into a 'post-modern' and Australian context.

2) A personal creative journey

Unlike Stephen Page and Kai Tai Chan, Tony Yap situates his work in a context that is metaphysical rather than socio-political. More in the nature of an individual, intimate creative journey, his intense and focused solo performances evoke the body as a site which reveals an 'integrity of inner landscape', according to Fuks and Cunningham (2006) in relation to his work *Ether*, a collaborative site specific work which created a spiraling 'virtual temple' from thirteen kilometres of rope by Japanese Australian sculptor Naomi Ota. This work was central to the multi site project *Accented Body*, produced and directed by the author. Hunter (2006, p. 10) describes how the powerful presence of 'Yap's trance-like body, swirled within the terrace auditorium and took flight into the night sky', whilst Ridgway (2006, p. 55) speaks of *Ether* as an 'intricate, very absorbing piece based on Malaysian trance dance.... with its integration of site, music and dance.'



Image: Tony Yap in *Ether*. Photo: Ian Hutson

Australian theatre director, Aubrey Mellor (2005) has said of Yap's practice that, 'Tony is now engaging richly with a living expression of the connection between spirit and body.....a remarkable achievement as it is always artistically controlled by Tony's refined aesthetic

to see the freedom he finds within these structures is the closest I have come in Australia to seeing a Noh Master at work.'

3) Sharing the journey

Despite their personal nature, Tony Yap's works speak to Australian and other international audiences in a way which places spiritually based contemporary practices, if not in the mainstream, at least in the experimental programming of international festivals and collaborations. Primarily a solo performer whose intercultural hybridity influences both his content and his style, he has developed ongoing collaborations with Asian diasporic as well as Anglo Australian cross-cultural visual and sound artists. In addition to his work in Australia, Tony has undertaken a number of intercultural collaborations in Asia, such as Vietnam, Korea, Indonesia and Malaysia (where he created a joint work with Rivergrass Dance Theatre for the Malaysian Dance Festival in 2005).

At the time of writing he is working on the triptych *Buddha Body 1-3* which will be comprise three separate aspects based around the concept of a virtual temple (first explored in the *Accented Body* project). Yap writes on his website (<http://www.tonyyapdance.com/repertoires.html>) that the *Buddha Body Series*

will draw on issues of trance, migration and identity as well as the language of emptiness' and 'fulfilment' in spirituality.... creating a poem of what still reigns true and mythic in a complex era of metanarratives.... to cumulate into a cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural production; adding discourse to and diversify theatrical-dance languages employed in Australia.

Whilst Tony is concerned with intercultural practice within and about Australia, his work is moving towards an interrogation of how inter and intra cultural relationships are negotiated in a global setting in continual flux. His interests and practice are increasingly about perceptions of hybrid national and ethnic identities such as himself and his collaborating artists in a so-called borderless world.

4. Polytoxic – critiquing the exotic through humour

1) Imaging the Pacific

In contrast, the newest company to emerge on the intercultural Australian stage is *Polytoxic*, whose work reflects a Pacific rather than Asian inflection. *Polytoxic*, an independent Brisbane-based dance company was founded in 2000 by Lisa Fa'alafi and Efeso Fa'anana (both of Samoan descent) and joined by Leah Shelton in 2002 (of Anglo-Saxon descent). Its aim is to critique the exoticism and cultural kitsch that often accompanies representations of the Pacific islands, with a madcap humour and a pastiche of street dance, cabaret and contemporary techniques, blended with traditional Polynesian gestures and vocabulary. A parallel aim is to provide audiences with insights into the traditions and history of Samoa from the perspective of the artists as contemporary Australians (www.polytoxiclovesyou.com). As well as working in stage settings, the company performs at corporate events, children's performances, gallery openings, fashion launches, and in commercial films. The key members, who also have a strong focus on community cultural development, are viewed as ambassadors for a new generation of artists working interculturally.

2) Intercultural goes cabaret

Their first full length work *Teuila Postcards* employs comedy, satire, contemporary dance-theatre and Polynesian-inspired dance to offer audiences 'a tongue-in-cheek look at the oppression and evolution of an island' (Shelton, 2008). This accessible, versatile and popular work shares the perspective between 'the local' and 'the tourist', using contemporary cultural viewpoints (www.polytoxiclovesyou.com). Abstracted references to the traditional are seen throughout Polytoxic's choreography and are particularly evident in the attention to detailing in the movements of the hands and feet, overlaid with a contemporary vocabulary. Traditional motifs are also often appropriated, such as using traditional 'salus' (brooms) in an entirely non-traditional way. Sometimes, but not always, staged in a theatre Polytoxic's works are highly theatrical, larger than life and employ street styles and humour to provide a contemporary cabaret feel, attracting predominantly young audiences, particularly Samoan Australian teenagers and their families.



Image: Lisa Fa'alafi, Efeso Fa'anana, Leah Shelton in *Teuila Postcards*

An often hilarious take on hyper-real images of dreamed-of travel destinations, Polytoxic provides 'a well-crafted critique of the fantasy, fusing traditional Polynesian and contemporary dance theatre in a very funny and totally engaging take on all things culturally kitsch and colonial' through 'a non-linear travelogue narrative' (Hunter, 2006). In the words of one of its key members Leah Shelton (2008), the work of the company provides an insight into 'the realities beyond the postcard grin'. As a new, emerging company with a style and approach based in popular culture, the long-term sustainability of Polytoxic on the intercultural dance scene is yet to be determined.

VI. Changing landscapes and familiar terrain

An examination spanning three decades of inter/intra cultural practices through these four Australian companies reveals stylistic, generational and philosophical differences but with a commonality of variously inflected notions of landscape, spirituality, identity and notions of hybridity. Whilst both One Extra Company and Bangarra Dance Theatre have produced a substantial body of work over two decades, Tony Yap Company and Polytoxic are working in a very different environment. From the mid 90s there was a move to funding support based around 'independent artists' and ad hoc group projects rather than the more costly full-time companies with their ongoing infrastructure and artists' on costs, such as superannuation and holiday pay. Whilst One Extra sadly no longer exists, Bangarra as a national flagship company is relatively secure. The modus operandi of Tony Yap and Polytoxic are necessarily very different with other work (such as Tony Yap's graphic design income) often subsidizing these professional artists' practice, in between sporadic and unpredictable project grants. For this reason they are more flexible, mobile and, although they may be less visible and produce less new work, their contribution is niche but significant.

For all four companies the setting – involving media, text, music and rich visual environments - is an integral part of the choreography, as is the strength of narrative, though manifest very differently with each company. The hybridity of forms and movement languages to embrace the intercultural nature of the work is also a commonality, as is a sense of the spiritual – be it foregrounded, subliminal or buried in humour. Whilst there are many artists in Australia undertaking intercultural collaborations, these artists and their companies were chosen not to be 'representative', but as case studies emphasizing that the practices, approaches and backgrounds of our dance artists are as diverse as the vast, unique landscape we share.

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ABSTRACT

Australia has often been defined by its landscape – actual, romanticized, imagined – iconic images and experiences taken up by artists in a myriad of ways. And yet, apart from the 40,000 year old imprint of the Indigenous population, we are an immigrant people from somewhere else. This paper examines inter/intra cultural practices of four Australian dance companies and their directors, and how they inflect images of Australia in different ways. Each artist brings perspectives from their particular hybridized cultural and ethnic backgrounds as well as their formative dance experiences. In their practices, notions of landscape embrace physical, metaphorical and spiritual dimensions.

Kai Tai Chan, who founded the One Extra Company in 1976, pioneered accessible and confronting intercultural dance theatre in Australia from the 1970s to the 1990s, challenging our notions of what it is to be Australian. A Chinese Malay who came to Australia to study architecture, he stayed to create a significant body of work in which different cultural frameworks became lenses through which to explore stories of ordinary lives and experiences, revealing complexities of the human condition and larger social-political issues.

Whilst Kai Tai's formative influences included immersion in the cultural heritage of his country of origin, Stephen Page, an Indigenous Australian, was brought up in an urban environment with little exposure to Indigenous cultural traditions. It was through his dance training at NAISDA (National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development) that he connected with his traditional and spiritual roots. These ongoing connections have been instrumental in his development of Bangarra Dance Theatre, founded in 1989, which has become a bridge between two worlds of Indigenous contemporaneity and traditional values - with the pivotal contribution of traditional performer and cultural consultant Djakapurra Munyarryun. A landmark work, *Rites*, a major collaboration between The Australian Ballet and Bangarra Dance Theatre, is a bold intercultural experiment between European and Indigenous cultures.

Spiritual connections of a different nature feature strongly in the practice of another Chinese Malay Australian, Tony Yap. Here the landscape is an inner one influenced by a form of Malaysian trance dance known as the *sen-siao* ("spirit cloud") tradition. Yap has forged a unique space in the Australian dance and theatre scene, exploring a movement language informed by psycho-physical research, Asian shamanistic trance dance, Butoh, voice and visual design. Whilst primarily a solo performer, his practice includes collaborations with Asian diasporic as well as Anglo Australian cross-cultural visual and sound artists. His work is situated in a metaphysical rather than socio-political context.

In contrast, the newest company to emerge on the intercultural Australian stage is *Polytoxic*, reflecting a Pacific rather than Asian inflection. Key members, Fa'alafi and Efeso Fa'anana (both of Samoan descent) and Leah Shelton (of Anglo-Saxon descent), aim to critique the exoticism and cultural kitsch that often accompanies representations of the Pacific islands, with a pastiche of street dance, cabaret and contemporary techniques, blended with traditional Polynesian vocabulary. A parallel aim is to provide audiences with insights into the traditions and history of Samoa from the perspective of the artists as contemporary Australians.

This examination, spanning three decades of inter/intra cultural practices, reveals stylistic, generational and philosophical differences with a commonality of variously inflected notions of landscape, spirituality and identity.