

a review of

Mathinna

by Nicholas Birns

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On the ... es



*Bangarra Dance Theatre
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Elma Kris as Mathinna

Bangarra Dance Theatre was founded by the aboriginal Australian choreographer Stephen Page in 1991. The 17 years of its existence have been virtually coextensive with the massive increase of awareness with respect to Aboriginal issues in Australia, which was accelerated with the historic *Mabo* land-rights court decision in 1992, which held that Australian law must recognize traditional Indigenous custodianship of the land. It is the custom now in Australia for any sort of performance or speech to acknowledge this custodianship at the beginning. The Bangarra Company did so at the beginning of the performance as well; the story *Mathinna* told is the story of why this acknowledgment was necessary in the first place.

Mathinna is the company's first full-fledged theatrical piece, its first attempt to be fully narrative as well as choreographic. This fact is astonishing as the piece works so seamlessly on the levels of discourse, gesture, and sound. It is

an hour and 15 minutes of both ebullience and gravity—two qualities hard to combine in a single work of art. The story is that of Mathinna, an Indigenous Tasmanian woman in the nineteenth century. Tasmania was the one place in Australia where the Aborigines were, it was thought, totally exterminated, where the contention of the European invaders that the Aborigines were ‘the vanishing race’ was made literal. At the beginning, we see an unpeopled landscape, or so it seems, and then realize that the lump crouching at the center right and back of the performance space is a human being. Mathinna unfurls herself and explores her environment. An electric light springs on in the left of the space, and we read it as fire. This exciting transposition, of the artificial for the natural, is a portent of the nimble reshuffling of tropes in Peter England's set that occurs throughout the piece. Stone and wood, a large rock and several intertwining tree branches—stylized twigs—provide the dual elemental support of a world in which Mathinna is at home and experiences with thorough intensity and clarity.

Mathinna is played by Elma Kris, praised by Page for her “maturity.” Mathinna is not portrayed as an innocent naïf but as somebody fully adult and sentient in her own context. Like Vangelina's recent Butoh performance at the Chashama Theater in New York, Kris's maturity in both years and depth make us cognizant that the action is not gratuitous or trivial. The betrayal of Mathinna's trust by the Europeans is, in a sense, even more reprehensible as it is a betrayal of adult trust and not juvenile credulity. Mathinna is attired in bright

red, which contrasts at first with the largely black, white, and dun-colored landscape behind her and then with the sedate blues, browns, and greens of the ballroom gowns worn by the European women after Mathinna is taken into the world of the whites. Jennifer Irwin's costume designs show clothing as another register of the contrast embedded in the land and people. Mathinna stands out both against her original world and the one into which she is thrown, with the difference that this contrast is in the first instance one of celebration, in the second of enforced difference.

The music by David Page, the brother of the choreographer, is stunning, and it is hard to think of two more talented siblings at work in the world of performance today. When Mathinna is in her own world at the beginning, we hear the whistling of wind, the rustling of stones, and the whispering of water. The effect is tranquil, lulling, until periodically the audience is quickened and challenged by chimes or bells that disrupt our absorption into the scene and heighten our attention to the possibility of crisis and rupture that indeed ensues. When Mathinna is brought to the world of the white occupiers, of Governor and Mrs. Franklin (this is the same Franklin who later explored the Arctic; in an earlier stage of his career, he ruled Tasmania for the British), things change. Beautiful strains of pastiche eighteenth-century classical music, written so smoothly they could well be Boccherini or early Haydn, swell in simultaneous contention and complementarity with the elemental nature sounds that started the piece. Gradually, we realize that the melodic mellifluousness of the music is a snare, that it represents danger for Mathinna, that what from a European perspective is the beauty of the music and of the white women's gowns and their stately balletic movements is from the Indigenous perspective aggression, violence, doleful and bitter sorrow. As the audience, we are in the position of not liking the music we thought we liked; the music itself entails a dramatic revelation.

This opens up a fascinating area: the role of well-performed renditions of classical European forms in works oriented around other traditions of performative language. We are used to speaking of the relation between Western forms and subordinated identities as either one of integration or subversion, but what happens in *Mathinna* is somewhere between the two—Stephen Page is at pains to get the choreography right, to showcase finely executed, athletic yet proportionate steps that would not have been out of place in middle-period Balanchine works such as *Agon*, while David Page's



music might well have been commended had it been played at the court of Frederick the Great. But the 'getting it right' is contextualized within a frame where the larger cultural tendencies represented by this excellence are deeply problematic. This is different from the form either being subverted or infused with new content—both modes seen in Jan Lauwers' recent multimedia treatment of Africa. for instance. The forms are brilliantly built up, only to be blown to smithereens by the dramatic action. It is as if they are parts of the set that are painstakingly built, then suddenly exploded—exploded by what happens to Mathinna once she reaches 'civilization.'

Once brought to the Franklin's household, Mathinna earnestly, if awkwardly, tries to imitate the movements and gestures of the whites to become acculturated and assimilated as she is advised she must. She finds, of course, that this has been wasted effort. The same Europeans who condescended to her nomadic lifestyle before now mock her attempt to be like them; she is in a no-win situation, where whether she is like or unlike her colonizers renders her equally unviable. Eventually, mocked and isolated, she takes poison. In this part of the piece, highly distorted images of European furniture—chairs, tables, pianos—surround Mathinna while inchoate scrawling on them display her foredoomed attempts to become literate in and negotiate in the ways of her captors.

It is the great triumph of *Mathinna*—that gestural language manages to convey cultural processes so that a social and anthropological story is told purely by means of movement and sound. So often, we think we need words as the intermediary, that the worlds of society and performance need language as a kind of translation zone. *Mathinna* demonstrates this is not so, and its consummate moment in this respect is when Mathinna tries to imitate the mannerisms of the whites; we see both miming and mimesis, imitation in the situational and theatrical senses. Modes of performance effortlessly image historical and cultural change without trying to conceal how over-determined this change is.

On the night I saw it, *Mathinna* played to an older, largely white audience, which, in Australia as in the U.S., is probably a function of who can afford it, who has the time, and who has the comfort level with buying a ticket and entering a theatre. I worried that the piece would be lost on them, or that, conversely, they would have heard so much rhetoric about reconciliation with the Indigenous people in the media that they would have been jaded and anodyned. The reverse was true. They were profoundly affected, so much so that for several minutes after the piece ended no one in my row even moved; they were transfixed, awed, shaken. The easy gravitation back to the world outside the performance space had to wait a few minutes to occur; Page and his company had demanded, and received, that level of attention and interest. This is a tribute to the seamlessness, the ethereality, even a joy

that came not from the trauma and lament the piece chronicled but from the honesty of its transmission. But there was something more: the sense of being overpowered by art and performance that we associate with Western models of spectatorship from Aristotle and Longinus on had occurred, but on, as it were, the wrong side—if we were utterly taken in by it, we were on the side of Sir John Franklin. The need to dissent from what in conventional terms was most aesthetically moving is what transfixed and stymied the audience, and the production of this dissent is the Bangarra Company's outstanding feat in *Mathinna*.

photography by Stephen Ward

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