

## The final page

*A brilliant visionary. A complicated legacy. Bangarra Dance Theatre artistic director Stephen Page is finally ready to hand over the reins.*



*Stephen Page with his successor at Bangarra, Frances Rings.*

By Jane Albert  
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It was October 1989 when a cocky young dancer-choreographer named Stephen Page first stepped foot in a small grungy studio near Sydney's Central Station. It was being leased by Bangarra, a newly formed Indigenous dance theatre group that consisted of a handful of dance graduates who were bursting to share their stories and culture on the world stage.

Before they achieved world domination, however, they needed money and had begun making a living performing for schools. In walked Page, a young firebrand, descendant of the Nunukul people and the Munaldjali clan of southeast Queensland and a former Sydney Dance Company dancer. He began choreographing on nine dancers, quickly devising a short black social piece to a Warumpi Band song.

More than three decades later Page is putting the finishing touches on his latest work, *Wudjang: Not the Past*. Only this time it is a co-production with Bangarra, Sydney

Theatre Company and Sydney Festival involving 26 dancers, actors and musicians, and Page is artistic director of Bangarra, now an internationally celebrated, broadly respected contemporary dance company.

It will also mark Page's last work as artistic director, as the 56-year-old announces he will step away from the company he has led since 1991, handing the reins to his artistic associate and Bangarra dancer turned choreographer Frances Rings in early 2023.

The self-assured young revolutionary is gone, and in his place is a battle-wary, reflective man, albeit one who is proud of the extraordinary legacy he leaves.

"All I've ever known is Bangarra," Page tells *The Australian*. "But during the pandemic I think we all got to reset, look at ourselves and our direction, the values of self. I realised the value of the company, its sustainability, and I'm quite proud of that. But I was exhausted. I also felt like I began to own my own trauma, that I could accept that moving forward now, and celebrate the great fond memories and stories. It's a new decade and having Fran here I knew the company was going to be OK."



*Stephen Page with new Bangarra dancers in 2003.*

While Page's decision to retire from the company he has led for more than three decades is not a surprise, it is hard to imagine Bangarra without him. But it's time. It's time for Page's Bangarra family to move into its fourth decade with a new leader, a safe pair of hands in Rings, a respected Kokatha woman from South Australia. It's time for Page to spend time with his own family, stepdaughter Tamika Walker, actor-dancer son Hunter Page-Lochard and Page-Lochard's wife Laura Thomas, and granddaughter

Mila. It's time for Page to find his own identity and path forward without the safety net of this feted company. And finally, it's time for him to heal.

For Page, and Bangarra, the past 30 years have included unimaginable highs: sharing the culture of Indigenous Australia from the stages of New York, London and Paris; bringing together 1000 First Nations performers from across Australia to perform alongside Bangarra at the Sydney Olympic Games opening ceremony in 2000 before a global television audience of 3.7 billion; and, perhaps most significantly, collaborating with countless remote and urban Indigenous communities to bring stories to life through Bangarra's unique contemporary dance language, told first through productions on our cities' main stages but always returning to be performed for those communities themselves, often on a local basketball court or improvised outdoor stage.

There have been devastating lows also, including the sudden and tragic deaths of two of Bangarra's founding members: Page's younger brother, dancer and muse Russell (2002), and older brother David, the dance company's composer and musical director (2016). Both were fiercely loved by the Bangarra family and their loss is felt sharply still.



*Russell, Stephen and David Page in 2001.*

There have been challenging times: Page has spoken often about the delicate balancing act of existing with a foot in each world, black and white, traditional and urban, managing an Indigenous dance company that is expected to fit into the non-Indigenous mainstream, attempting to keep both sides happy and inevitably falling short.

There was his obsessive drive to keep leading, creating and maintaining the company's momentum in the wake of his brothers' deaths, rather than allowing the company and himself time to grieve; and the sudden departure on a couple of occasions of groups of

disaffected senior dancers, departures Page today concedes was in part because of his own lack of leadership.

Taking time out from choreographing *Wudjang*, Page is in a philosophical, candid mood, reflecting on the three decades since that ambitious 25-year-old was appointed artistic director, brothers Russell and David joining not long after. While it is a hard ask to nominate highlights, Page is quick to emphasise how deeply satisfying it has been helping to build the company's body of 40 creative works that take in dance, film, collaborations and events.

"Every story, every production is a highlight because of the depth of process involved," he says. "Working with community and families, reviving language and getting fed this knowledge that inspires (our shows), I was always excited by that, by how different clans – urban or traditional – trusted us, then seeing their story told in this contemporary ceremonial way."

Page is proud of the achievements of Bangarra alumni: Djakapurra Munyarryun, who ventured from his remote community of Dhalinybuy for the first time to take part in the Olympic Games opening ceremony opposite a young Nikki Webster and who now is an internationally regarded songman, musician and cultural consultant; independent choreographer and filmmaker Deborah Brown; and Patrick Thaiday, who has run Bangarra's youth program *Rekindling* since 2013.

Page also cites the professional opportunities he was offered, taking Bangarra along for the ride: the 1997 co-production *Rites* with the Australian Ballet, remounted in New York in 1999; or the award-winning 2015 feature film *Spear* that Page directed with the dancers that premiered at the Toronto Film Festival.

Page's tight-knit Queensland family inevitably has had to fit in around the edges: concreter and landscaper father Roy; mother Doreen, who worked in a cannery and biscuit family; and their 11 other children, including David and Russell. Page remains close with his siblings – Roy and Doreen died in 2010 and 2018, while brother Phillip suffered a fatal epileptic seizure aged 25 – but when Russell and then David died Page dealt with his grief the only way he knew how. He created new works, pouring himself with a near-frenzy of creativity into numerous shows.

The recent lockdowns resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic have forced him to stop, given him space to think, and brought up some difficult home truths.

"I realised that when Russie passed I had no sense of what I wanted to do. That first passage of grieving, those seven years afterwards, was quite intense. But I had to be this leader so I fell into the character of that and created *Bush* to occupy my mind," he says. "You have this responsibility to carry stories, and you're a professional company in the mainstream, and you're a major (arts organisation), and you're a First Nations major. But deep down inside I was obviously struggling. And it was the same when David died."





*Bangarra Dance Theatre's Bennelong.*

It is worth noting that *Bennelong*, Page's 2017 work about the life of Wangal man Woollarawarre Bennelong that debuted the year after David's death, was a phenomenal success, a noticeable step up in artistry and theatricality. It earned three Helpmann Awards for best new choreography, best new dance production and best new Australian work. From a box-office perspective it was the most successful in the company's history. *Dark Emu* (choreographed with Daniel Riley and Yolande Brown) and *30 Years of Sixty-Five Thousand* followed, all well-received *Abbo*, award-winning works. And all helped Page put one foot in front of the other.

But he acknowledges now the dancers needed more from him. "My big regret is I felt like I let myself down, I let the company down when I just kept creating and pushing through when I was grieving. They wanted more guidance and I couldn't help them. I love being optimistic and sharing stories but I didn't have the light on inside. I was exhausted ... probably very angry, so that's what they were getting. I think they would have been really disappointed with that type of leadership. And we probably all had to heal, they were going through it as well."

Several senior dancers left at the end of 2018, just as they had in 2003. "I've started to see the patterns that happened," Page says. "It would have affected everybody and I totally take responsibility for that. Do I have the answers? No, I don't, and I probably won't for a while, but I'm starting to get a clear view on accepting the process and speaking about it."

Lawyer, academic, filmmaker and author Larissa Behrendt first met the Page brothers when they were teens, before going on to join the Bangarra board in 2008, promoted

to board chairwoman in 2010 for four years. She describes Page as a “cultural visionary”.

“Stephen had a grand vision for Bangarra, to take the art form to an elite, world-class level. He drove that vision of excellence and brought a lot of people with him along the way,” she says.

“The company is his legacy; the body of work he’s brought alive that now has a life of its own is his legacy, and the people who have come through, the dancers and choreographers who are now taking what they’ve learnt and going to other places are a big part of that legacy.

“He’s given so much of himself, so gracefully. It’s hard for people on the outside to see what a toll that takes. It’s been an enormous contribution to public life, to Australia’s cultural life and to the world, not just to Indigenous culture. He really has earned his time in the sun.”

Rings has known Page and his brothers since their days at inner-Sydney Indigenous training college Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre (now NAISDA). She has seen the sacrifices Page has made in dedicating himself to the company and has deep respect for him. “When you’re in that space of leadership, the sacrifices you make in your personal and family life are incredible. He’s a Queenslander and has devoted his life to being in Sydney and leading Bangarra, he hasn’t had time with his own family. When you’re in those positions of leadership you carry a lot.”

Rings says she hopes to continue Page’s legacy rather than make any great changes.

“Stephen believes in our art form’s ability to not only tell our stories but also create change, really shift the narrative on what Indigenous Australia is about, who we are as people,” she says. “What I inherit is this incredible legacy from Stephen. How I carry that forward is to continue to lead with integrity and be guided by the cultural values Stephen has inherently put into this company, continue our cultural relationship with community and elders, and be able to shape a new cycle of creative expression that explores and reflects our dynamic and rich experience.”

Is Page scared of a life that doesn’t involve Bangarra? “I think anyone would be scared if they’d been in the job this long,” he says. “But as an optimistic character I look at my granddaughter, at what Hunter is doing, I have another granddaughter due (in) April and the medicine of immediate family has given me comfort and grounded me.”

He is looking forward to getting stuck into the film and theatre production company he and Hunter co-founded, Djali House Productions. “Hunter has been waiting for me, he’s carried a lot of my trauma and I’ve always made sure he’s OK. We’re just really good mates, very honest with each other.”

Page is grateful to be finishing with Wudjang, a work that revives the Mibinyah language of his father’s country using music David had composed before his death.

“It’s almost like David has controlled this whole experience,” he says. “I’m feeling I can be really truthful to who I am, and that’s all part of the letting go. The fact I’m

supported by a story from my own backyard is the perfect way to transition out of here. It will give me the comfort and strength to move forward but also to know the resilience of Bangarra will be healthy, led by this beautiful black Kokatha woman. Fran will shift and shape a whole different perspective, and that's what I would expect. She knows and I know there's a strong spirit here, and that's purely based on the myriad stories that have been shared. Because with stories come people and with people come relationships. And that's something we're very proud of."

*Wudjang: Not the Past* premieres as part of the Sydney Festival on January 14 before touring to Hobart and Adelaide.