

# Australian stories

Celebrating its 50th anniversary, The Australian Ballet teamed with Bangarra Dance Theatre this year to take two distinctly Australian programs to New York. **Mitch Brook** asks them how dance contributes to our society.



Photography by Georges Antoni

**Sport is essential** to Australian culture. It's a social focal point that brings Australians together to support their chosen teams and admire the skill and athleticism involved in being the best. Australians also hold their athletes in high regard, as we saw throughout the London Olympics.

Just as highly respected and integral to our culture is dance. While it's not as rough-and-tumble as footy, dance requires an equally high, if not higher, standard of athleticism and honed skill as elite sports. Dancers train from childhood, chasing the dream of becoming a principal in a major company.

Leanne Stojmenov did just that, becoming a principal artist in The Australian Ballet. "My favourite part of my career in ballet is just being able to do what I've dreamed of doing since I was a little girl – doing all those big ballets, and being a part of the company, especially during the 50th anniversary," she says.

To achieve this level in her profession, Leanne has put in countless hours of training, ravelling up her whole life in the culture and practice of ballet. "You have to do what feels natural and what you feel is best for the performance," she says. "The audience is watching you – on your own or in the bigger moments in the ballet."

For Cameron Hunter, who joined the company in 2011, it's the rush he gets from performing that brings elation. "It's a feeling, it's the adrenaline that I crave," he says.

"Before I go on stage I have a minute or two of absolute panic. I have to keep moving; if someone told me to stand still, I'd find it really hard. In an odd way that's what I crave; it's that adrenaline, that pushing yourself. It feels really special but at the same time there's this absolute panic."

As a fan of Formula 1 racing, Cameron can see a resemblance between these seemingly disparate 'sports'.

"Other than the fact that we wear ballet flats and pointe shoes and they drive multimillion dollar carbon fibre cars, there are actually a lot of similarities," he suggests. "Both F1 drivers and ballet dancers are in the public eye. F1 drivers are young and ambitious; they have to be driven and are very sure about what they want. I think in the ballet world you have to be the same." 🌀





**Previous page (left to right):** Kevin Jackson, Madeleine Eastoe, Robyn Hendricks and Andrew Killian of The Australian Ballet. **Clockwise from this page:** Madeleine Eastoe; David McAllister, artistic director of The Australian Ballet; Leanne Stojmenov, principal artist in The Australian Ballet.

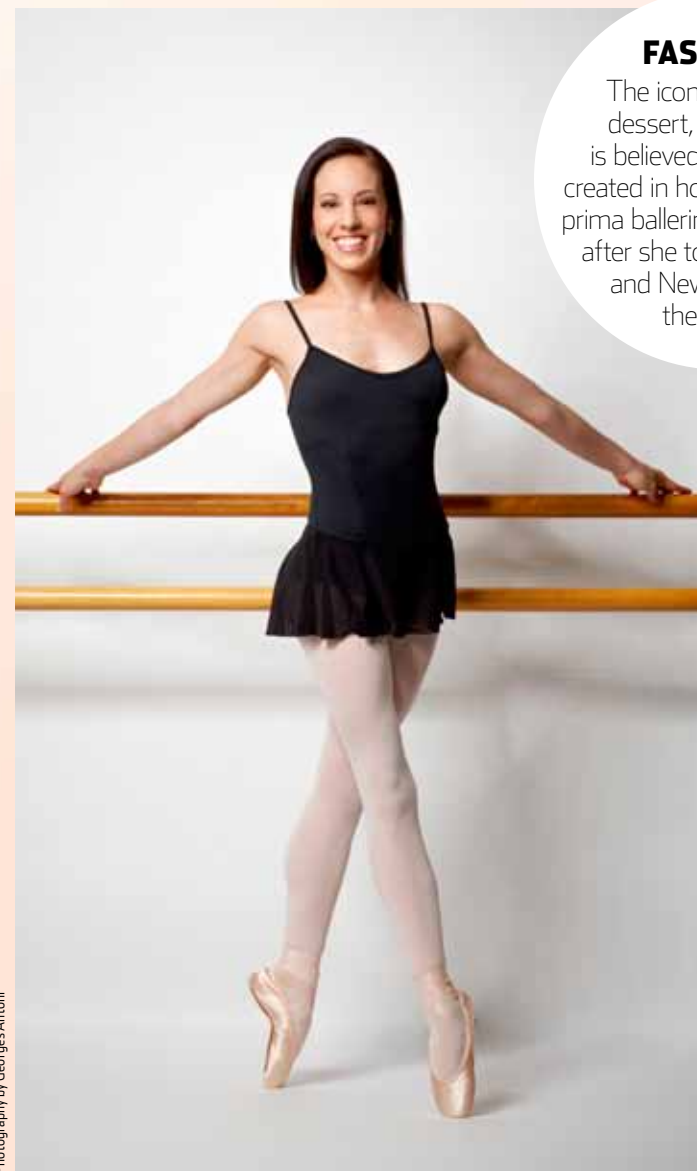
Both Cameron and Leanne were among the group of Australian dancers who recently went to New York to present two programs of performances that represent dance in Australia.

The first was Graeme Murphy's *Swan Lake*, a classic that was re-imagined by The Australian Ballet and had already met with critical acclaim. The second was a contemporary program titled *Infinity*, a mixed bill containing three works: *Luminous*, a ballet production combined with multimedia; *Dyad 1929*, Wayne McGregor's original radical work; and *Warumuk – In the Dark Night*, a collaboration with Bangarra Dance Theatre, Australia's Indigenous dance group.

As this was The Australian Ballet's first appearance in New York in 13 years, the program was designed to showcase the skill of these Australian dance companies and channel Australian stories and history to an international audience.

#### FAST FACT

The iconic Australian dessert, the pavlova, is believed to have been created in honour of Russian prima ballerina Anna Pavlova after she toured Australia and New Zealand in the 1930s.



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"We're doing creative and unique work as well as the traditional work that may be expected of a ballet company," says David McAllister, artistic director of The Australian Ballet. "Interestingly, this year there have been a number of cultural exports to the US: Circus Oz is going to New York in November; Sydney Theatre Company's production of *Uncle Vanya* played at the Lincoln Center Festival in July; and Sydney Dance Company was in New York earlier this year."

Australia is a young nation when it comes to cultural pillars such as ballet and contemporary dance. While countries such as England, France and Russia have a long and proud ballet heritage, Australia's interest wasn't really sparked until the 1930s, when Colonel Wassily de Basil's Ballets Russes toured.

Seeing dance as a way to tell stories and relay history, choreographer Frances Rings, artist in residence at Bangarra Dance Theatre, says, "I really view dance and the arts as a form of communication and awareness and something that bonds people and generations and cultures. It's a ground where we can meet to share stories and knowledge."

This is particularly relevant for the Indigenous culture to which Frances belongs. "Dance is something we're very comfortable with and something that for thousands of years has been used to record and tell our stories."

Bangarra Dance Theatre makes use of contemporary dance techniques to tell age-old stories, thus bringing intrinsic Indigenous cultural knowledge to new audiences in a new way. 🌟