





Left: Cathedral Square, Sydney. Bottom left: Michelle Silby, Frances Rings and Jacqueline Rose at Cathedral Square, Sydney. Photos: Elise Lockwood; Bottom centre and right: Federation Square, Melbourne. Photos: Sarah Walker.

# Big Dance Australia 2018

2018 signified Australia leading Big Dance for the first time – launching on International Dance Day and opening with a ‘smoking ceremony’ and a sea of thousands of people dancing together – Director, **Michelle Silby** hopes this is just the start

## Passing on the Big Dance baton

Founded in 2006 and led by the Mayor of London, in partnership with People Dancing and a network of leading dance organisations, Big Dance UK culminated in 2016. This after 10 magnificent years, with more than 42,000 dancers participating in 44 countries across the globe participating. Big Dance choreographers had included Rafael Bonachela, Akram Khan and Wayne McGregor CBE.

After having the opportunity to be part of making Big Dance happen in Sydney and New South Wales (NSW) in 2014, I was hooked and there was no holding me back! In 2016 we joined in again, delivering Big Dance in Queensland and the Northern Territory. The latter was held as part of a bigger festival, watched by 18,000 people in Darwin, on Mindel beach at sunset – this is the only time I have had to have a crocodile risk assessment plan!

I believe dance is for everyone and everyone can dance. Big Dance provides fantastic opportunities for people of all ages, cultures and abilities to come together to enjoy and celebrate dance through free workshops and events. Seeing the impact on the lives of all those people

taking part in, and watching, Big Dance made us want to continue.

From our previous engagement the idea came to light that we in Australia would be able to continue with Big Dance and the legacy be passed to us. This eventually took place on the 29 April this year at the Big Dance event in Sydney, Australia witnessed by Jacqueline Rose, former director of Big Dance UK and currently Head of Culture, Greater London Authority, part of the Lord Mayor of London’s office.

“I am so delighted, proud and privileged to mark this historic moment in world dance with the handover of Big Dance to Australia on the 40th birthday of Ausdance,” announced Jacqueline.

“The fact that Big Dance has made such an incredible journey all the way from the UK to the other side of the world is amazing... this is a proud moment us – thank you to everyone’s belief in the power of dance to mobilise communities.”

We opened the event with a smoking ceremony. This is an Aboriginal practice to cleanse the land and the people and was followed by a welcome to the country by Aboriginal Elder Uncle Jimmy and Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. >>



# Big Dance Australia

An incredible performance by singer Christine Anu led to a countdown from 10 into a sea of thousands of people in red, black and white all dancing the Big Dance. It was mesmerising.

## Big Dance, big hopes

So what was Big Dance 2018 trying to achieve? Well, we wanted to:

- Raise participation in and develop an appreciation of dance
- Deliver a dance programme that contributes to social interaction, to enable people to feel a sense of community
- Share Indigenous and non-Indigenous dance and cultures
- Create a short dance work that embodies and shares Australian culture using contemporary practice
- Increase opportunities for physical activity through dance and contribute to people's health and wellbeing.

## The choreography

Big Dance Australia 2018 was created by acclaimed indigenous freelance choreographer and Head of Creative Studies at NAISDA Dance College Frances Rings and Unit Manager for Contemporary Dance and Physical Theatre at NAISDA Dance College, New-Zealand born Craig Bary. An original score was written by composer and musician Huey Benjamin. The choreography is a five-minute, contemporary indigenous routine that anyone can learn.

In the months leading up to Big Dance, Ausdance Victoria, Ausdance New South Wales, Ausdance Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Tracks Dance Company in Northern Territory looked to motivate individual and groups to learn the Big Dance in a series of free dance workshops. People could also learn from online routines, which were guided and taught by developing artists studying at National Aboriginal Islander Skills Dance College (NAISDA).

Online tutorials were created with versions to suit different capabilities, including standing and seated. A guide with suggestions on adapting the choreography for different abilities



Federation Square, Melbourne. Photo: Sarah Walker.

was also developed by Ausdance Vic in partnership with Deakin University's AllPlay Dance programme.

We ran workshops for arts leaders and funders to get them from behind the desk and actively engaged in the arts they work so hard to support. We held many 'teach the teachers' workshops for artists and teachers to learn the choreography, who in turn then taught their students and broader communities. This was a chance to dance, learn, enjoy and share.

The theme was 'unity' and the routine was divided into three different sequences, represented by different colours symbolising the indigenous people, the non-indigenous people and the spiritual heart of Australia (the land, bloodline and lineage), which is the connection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Participants were allocated a colour at the workshops or they could choose which sequence to be part of if learning from the online tutorials.

Frances explains that many Australians have a shared connection to this land: "We are lucky to live in an incredible country that still emits ancient energy and incredible living culture.

"This year's Big Dance choreography represents our bloodlines, our culture and everyone coming together as we acknowledge the red earth as our spiritual centre. Big Dance will connect everyone

through movement and bring people together to share their stories and experiences with pride and from any dance form."

The key Australian Big Dance 2018 events were hosted in Sydney and Victoria – in Federation Square, Melbourne, in Castlemaine and Lilydale, as well as locations throughout Australia in the Northern Territory and the ACT. Later it will take place in Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania.

The major supporter of Big Dance across Victoria is VicHealth and we delivered over 100 free

workshops and four Big Dance events. There are several more to follow in Victoria alone throughout the year.

Jerril Rechter, CEO VicHealth, explains: "Dancing is a wonderful way for people to get their hearts pumping and meet their 30 minutes of daily physical activity, while also having fun and meeting new people. VicHealth is proud to have helped bring Big Dance to Victoria and we were thrilled to see Victorians to kick up their heels and join the fun on International Dance Day."

We hope many more people will learn and dance the Big Dance throughout 2018-19. Then bring on 2020 and let the search for the next choreographer begin!

## Info

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**Michelle Silby is Executive Director Ausdance Vic and Ausdance NSW. Big Dance Australia is led and produced by Ausdance NSW and Ausdance Vic, with state event partners Ausdance ACT and Tracks Dance Company. Big Dance 2018 is supported by major supporter VicHealth; NAISDA, the Australia Council for the Arts, City of Sydney, Yarra Ranges Council and the Regional Centre for Culture programme, plus 40 venue partners giving their space in-kind.**