

Talking Dance: Dance Ecology Three

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CHOREOGRAPH
INVEST
INSPIRE

CRITICAL



For the third edition of *Talking Dance: Dance Ecologies*, I have been talking to First Nations choreographers and dancers Thomas E.S. Kelly, Taree Sansbury and Katina Olsen. I first spoke to them individually and then interviewed them as a group. Our conversations – like so many others these days – have taken place via Zoom . . .

*Cover Page photo credits:
Thomas E.S. Kelly - Kate Holmes
Katina Olsen - Patrick Cook
Taree Sansbury - Kate Holmes*

Indigenous Independents

Thomas, Taree and Katina have known each other for many years. They are close friends and have collaborated on numerous occasions in a variety of contexts. And yet, their pathways differ considerably, in terms of their professional training and the way they went about establishing themselves as independent dance artists. Thomas and Taree both went to NAISDA (National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association), whereas Katina studied at QUT (Queensland University of Technology). Katina's first job was as a full-time company member with Bangarra Dance Theatre. Thomas and Taree, on the other hand, started out as free-lance dancers, working with a wide range of small to medium companies and independent choreographers. Eventually, all three of them developed a choreographic practice of their own.

To what extent, I ask them, do they think of themselves as an 'ecology' embedded within the larger dance ecosystem? 'Now more so than ever,' replies Taree, pointing to the fact that all three of them are currently based in Queensland. Thomas and Taree, who are also life partners and engaged to be married, relocated from Sydney to the Gold Coast in 2018. Since earlier this year, Katina divides her time between Sydney and Rockhampton

on Darumbal country in Central Queensland, where she grew up. The artists' ecology affiliations, however, go far beyond their geographic proximity, Thomas maintains: 'We've had our relationship span quite a while now.' Katina agrees: 'That's something really beautiful when you work across a few different projects together. You're not only developing a shared working relationship or a shared dance language, but it's personal as well. The two are so intertwined.'

There is a strong sense that the artists are more than just friends and colleagues. They are also allies who inherently trust each other, leaning on each other for advice. Thomas says: 'We've all got the same mindset and the same push. And we also support each other a lot. That's what I love. We don't see each other as competition.' This is especially true when it comes to First Nations-related issues. Taree explains: 'We always talk about First Nations perspectives and how do we advocate for that, in our roles or positions in other places in the industry.' Adds Katina: 'Those conversations are better understood with other First Nations artists within the same situation. Because we want more visibility, and it's not just for us. It's never about just ourselves and the individual. It's about all of us together.'

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Bangarra Dance Theatre

It is fair to say that Thomas, Taree and Katina represent a new generation of independent First Nations choreographers and dancers, forging a career alongside more established dance artists such as Vicki Van Hout, and even Bangarra Dance Theatre, Australia's only First Nations-led major performing arts company.

As is the case for many Indigenous dance artists, Bangarra remains an important reference point for them. Katina says: 'It's great that we have a major contemporary dance company that is First Nations-led, but if there's only one, it doesn't offer many points of difference.' Building an identity as an Indigenous choreographer alongside Bangarra can be a challenge. 'When people outside of the arts ask what I do and I say, I'm a First Nation's choreographer, Bangarra always comes up because they are so visible and so well known.'

Addressing Bangarra's 'monopoly' as a First Nations-led dance company, Taree says: 'There are so many voices that need to be heard. There are so many varied expressions. We just need more basically.' Thomas emphatically agrees. He points to the great diversity among Aboriginal people across Australia: 'There are so many different languages and so many

different movements and stories, and ways of singing songlines. There are 500 different nations in the country!' He for one does not always feel represented by Bangarra's stories and dances: 'I look very much at my own community's practice. That's why my work can look different.'

For a shift to occur in terms of acceptance and appreciation for Indigenous contemporary dance, it is vital for more small to medium companies to spring up, says Thomas. Taree draws a parallel to the First Nations theatre scene: 'There are a few organisations - Ilbjerri [Theatre Company], Yirra Yaakin [Theatre Company] and Moogahlin [Performing Arts Inc] - and they come together and share resources. They have this common focus and common goal to build up theatre in Australia.' There is hope, she says, that something similar can happen for Australian Indigenous dance. 'Here's an example of how it works. We can actually do this.'

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SANDCIRCLE (2018) Thomas E.S. Kelly. Photo courtesy of the artist

Karul Projects

As far as their call for more First Nations-led small to medium dance companies is concerned, Thomas and Taree have certainly put their money where their mouth is. In 2017, they founded performing arts company Karul Projects, with themselves at the helm as co-directors. Since then, they have presented several productions under this name but only recently registered it with ASIC (Australian Securities and Investments Commission). Thomas proudly announces: 'As of the 12th of August, Karul Projects is officially a company. We've been working with an accountant and signed the constitution. We have an ABN and we're shareholders now.'

One of the reasons for founding Karul Projects is rooted in Thomas' experiences with the dance sector immediately after graduating from NAISDA. He auditioned for Bangarra but did not get in. Both Taree and her sister Caleena, with whom he formed a 'clique' while at NAISDA, did not graduate until a year later. This meant he had to fend for himself for a while. Thomas says of that time: 'I was lucky that I had enough support and the determination to keep pushing through. But I totally get why so many people leave dance. Not getting into Bangarra, after being told at NAISDA for four years that that's the pathway, can make you feel you're just not good enough.'

Apart from generating new dance works, one of Karul's main objectives is to create employment opportunities for other dancers. Thomas hopes this will help prevent more of them from 'disappearing': 'I wanted to build a place where people could feel like they were a part of it, part of a family, and part of a community.' As a result, both he and Taree regularly employ young First Nations dancers in their productions. For some of them, it is their first contract out from NAISDA.



There is no doubt that Thomas and Taree have made supporting the 'next generation' of First Nations dancers one of their priorities. Thomas says: 'We share whatever information and knowledge we already have.' As an example, he cites a group of dancers he taught at NAISDA, who subsequently formed the multi-disciplinary collective Lost All Sorts. Thomas pointed them towards PACT where Karul Projects had been a resident company. He suggested they apply for a residency as well. To Thomas' great excitement, they were accepted. 'This is awesome,' he enthuses. 'In two years, maybe there's another large group coming out from NAISDA and they will see Lost All Sorts, and they will see Karul, and they will go, well, we might form the next collective or company. And that's exciting to me to think that we could have potentially helped with that ball rolling.'



*MIS(CONCEIVE) (2016) Thomas E.S. Kelly.
Photo courtesy of the artist*

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Vicki Van Hout

A name that keeps popping up during our conversations is that of Indigenous dance artist Vicki Van Hout. An acclaimed choreographer and dancer in her own right, she has had a major influence on each of the three artists. She taught Thomas and Taree at NAISDA, and later employed all of them in her 2015 Sydney Festival show Long Grass. However, it is her sustained and ongoing mentorship in the early days of the artists' careers that has had a lasting impact. Taree recalls: 'One thing she always said was, you are the guys who should be challenging me in the grant rounds. I want you to build yourselves up so you can be my competition. That made us think differently about ourselves as artists and what we could achieve.'

For Katina, it's Vicki's astuteness and attention to detail that stand out and have been the most beneficial: 'She's not afraid to really challenge us, as a performer in her work, but also as makers. That's what I respect about Vicki. She's encouraging at the same time, but she's going to tell you if something's under par. And that only strengthens us.'

More recently, Vicki has worked as a dramaturg on many of the artists' shows, including Taree's *mi:wi* (2018), and Thomas' *Co_Ex_En* (2019) and *Silence* (2020). She also provided a voice over for last year's development showings of Karul Projects' upcoming show *Sshiftt*. Thomas reveals that he is currently in negotiations with her about doing a live guest spot in the final version of the show in 2021. He says: 'I like that the relationship has continued, and evolved from mentor/mentees to kind of peers.'

The high regard in which Vicki is held by the artists is maybe best encapsulated in the following anecdote: When Thomas was recently asked for a short biography, he was told to list the artists he had worked with alphabetically. Thomas agreed but insisted that Vicki's name would have to be listed first regardless, much to the annoyance of the person he was dealing with. Thomas didn't budge. He says: 'Vicki is always first for me. I probably wouldn't be in the position that I'm in if it wasn't for her. So yeah, she's always first in my bio.'

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*Silence (2020) Thomas E.S. Kelly.
Photo Credit Simon Woods*

Research and Consultation

When asked about the role choreographic research plays in their respective practices, all three artists state that they have had a longstanding relationship with Critical Path. Each of them has participated in numerous workshops by international choreographers. They have also all been involved in research residencies conducted by other choreographers, including Vicki Van Hout and Victoria Hunt. As for the question which Critical Path project has been the most impactful for her development as an artist, Katina mentions the 2017 First Nations Australian Artist Residency, a partnership with Mirramu Creative Arts Centre. During the three-week residency, she began the development of her first solo work *Namu Nunar*. Initially a 10-minute piece, Katina later developed it into a full-length work, premiering at Supercell earlier this year.

As is the case with many Australian Indigenous dance artists, Thomas, Taree and Katina's practices are strongly consultation-led. In fact, consultation processes with community elders and family members make up a significant part of their research. Taree explains: 'When I made *mi:wi*, I had so many conversations, particularly with my own grandmother. There was constant communication between myself and her. And

it still continues today, all these years later. I still ask her questions because we've now established a different type of relationship where I can call on her for cultural advice.'

Thomas points out that 'time' is a significant factor when consulting with elders. The process can't be rushed. The passing on of culturally sensitive information is not a straightforward undertaking. Questions are sometimes met with seemingly unrelated answers. Certain pieces of knowledge only reveal themselves over the course of several conversations, spanning a longer period of time. Patience is key in these cases, says Thomas. 'You don't get what you want, you get what they think you're ready to have.'

The unpredictable nature of First Nations consultation processes can lead to situations where it becomes necessary to renegotiate a project's terms and conditions, agreed on with the funding bodies, Katina says. She recalls an instance where her elders revoked the permission for a story that she had proposed to explore during a funded residency. As a result, she had to amend her original proposal, explaining that she was no longer doing what she said she would: 'Because if I did, it was not going to honour my own protocols and those of the elders that I'm consulting with.' Luckily the variation to the proposal was accepted, Katina adds laughingly.



Namu Nunar (2019) Katina Olsen. Photo credit Cassidy Cloupet

The Future

It is interesting to note that the impact of COVID-19 on the performing arts sector notwithstanding, the three artists could hardly be any busier. At the time of our conversations, Katina is working on the final development of upcoming theatre work *Sunshine Super Girl*, as both performer and movement director. Written and directed by Andrea James, the piece celebrates the life of Australian tennis legend Evonne Goolagong. Thomas and Taree are two weeks out from premiering their latest creation *Silence* at this year's Brisbane Festival. Exploring the silence surrounding the issue of a treaty for Australia's First Nations people, the work is directed by Thomas. Both he and Taree are performing in it, alongside five other dancers.

So, what does the future hold for them? Katina is currently developing a new work *Preparing Ground* in collaboration with Indigenous dance artists Jasmin Sheppard and Marilyn Miller. She also continues to be actively involved with Dance Makers Collective of which she is a founding member. Not surprisingly, Thomas and Taree's vision for the future revolves around Karul Projects. Outlining his plans for the company, Thomas says: 'I always have a dream that we are outputting at least one new work a year, but it doesn't have to be by me. It could be by Taree as well. Down the track, we would probably look at getting Katina in to make a

piece. I've also chatted with people overseas about making work, from New Zealand and Canada.'

Right now, however, Thomas has his sights set on the immediate future, focusing on the upcoming premiere of *Silence*. 'I'm very fortunate with this work. It is much better funded than any of my other shows,' he says. 'I'm not blind to the fact that has happened because BlakDance has come on board as producers, and Merinda [Donnelly, Executive Producer] and Emily [Wells, Producer] are incredible.' And still, Thomas has no illusions what a failure of the work could mean for the future of Karul Projects. 'You know, if we don't kick it out of the park...' he says, letting the sentence trail off. Then, more bluntly, he adds: 'If this work is shit, then who's going to give me that much money again, to make a work?'

He need not have worried. By the time I'm writing this, three weeks have passed. The premier season of *Silence* has been a great success. Each performance sold out and was met with a standing ovation. The reviews have been positive, as has the audience feedback. There is talk about a return season next year. No doubt, the future for Karul Projects is looking bright.