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## Should you travel on *The Road to the Stamping Ground* ?

*In today's world of cultural appropriation concerns, Jirí Kylián's 1980s work Stamping Ground, inspired by Australia's Aboriginal dancers, brings up new questions*

by Lauren Etter

In the documentary film *Road to the Stamping Ground*, renowned choreographer and former Artistic Director of Netherlands Dance Theater Jirí Kylián shares how the culture and dances of the Aboriginal people of Australia influenced his work. In 1980, Kylián traveled to Australia to witness one of the largest gatherings of many Aboriginal tribes, organized by the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation. Watching the way in which they live and dance, Kylián was struck with how dance is so interwoven into the fabric of the Aboriginal culture.

Kylián was not the first, nor will he be the last, white choreographer to be curious about and moved by the dances native to distant lands and their people. Europeans, as colonizers, have looked at such cultures as novelties to be examined, acquired, and capitalized on. In some ways this 1982 film a dated example of a white European dance artist gathering inspiration from another culture's sacred traditions and rituals, and it brings up many current concepts of cultural fusion, sharing, and appropriation.

Today, most of us are still getting educated about how to undo this colonizer mindset and to appreciate that all people are as profoundly human as we are. As one of the foremost Western concert dance choreographers of his time, Kylián's acknowledgement that Aboriginal dances are integral to their history, identity, and philosophy was significant. His respect for their culture emerges as he proclaims his idea is not to "weakly imitate," or in essence to steal from them, but instead to create a unique movement vocabulary inspired by their dances.<sup>1</sup> Documentation of his open acknowledgement of this inspiration and crediting the Aboriginal people is also important.

While Kylián demonstrates a deep appreciation for the Aboriginal dances and traditions he witnessed, he is still a white man capitalizing on their existence. Is this acceptable because he is an artist? Or because he is transforming another culture's traditions and property into something new? How do the Aborigine people feel about his work? In the film, Kylián discusses the Aborigine land and culture being destroyed "not by evil thoughts of white people, but because of a different mentality." It is this very mentality that allows Kylián and others like him to travel abroad in search of some muse to study.

Kylián has referred to himself as a "citizen of the world." He was Czech-born in Prague while Communism still ruled, trained in England, worked in Germany and later in Holland, and has been forced to grapple with issues of nationalism and the idea of borders, which he explores in much of his work. Kylián's intent to use his art as a way to explore human exchange comes from a respectful desire to understand what gives one a cultural identity. Kylián spoke about his experience in Australia in an interview with Alistair Spalding for the *Financial Times* in 2009.

I asked this old man, "Why do you dance?" And he said, "Oh, it's because my father taught me and because I have to teach my son." I was stunned. He saw himself as part of a chain, and with one hand he holds his father and with the other, his son—it's a constant stream of creating and teaching and passing on

knowledge. It's the only truly living culture that I know because the culture is evident only when they perform it, when they tell the stories, when they do their dances, because nothing is written."<sup>2</sup>

For Kylián, researching what shapes one's cultural identity is central to artmaking. Rather than present what he observed in Australia as "findings," he attempts to learn from those who know their identity so certainly. The accounts of dancers that have worked for and with him support his egalitarian and research-based approach to his work, using cross-generational dancers in projects, pairing movement and sound in unconventional ways, and encouraging the personality of his dancers to shape his work.<sup>3</sup>

This film, which sheds light on the making of the Aboriginal-influenced dance, *Stamping Ground*, exemplifies a career that explores the terrain of human exchange through dance. It is essential viewing for any young dancer, not only because of Kylián's prestige and influential innovations, which have contributed to the shaping of contemporary concert dance, but as a tribute to the deeply rooted history of dance in a world that is much, much bigger than just marley floors, ballet barres, and mirrors.

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