



ELLA



© ATOM 2016

A **STUDY GUIDE** BY CASEY LANGSFORD



<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>

ISBN: 978-1-74295-968-9

<http://theeducationshop.com.au>



Synopsis

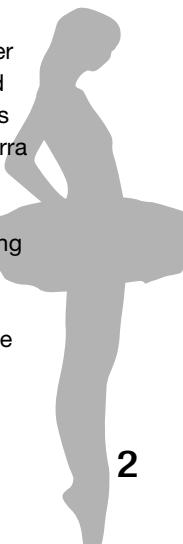
"I often feel like I am dancing between two worlds and struggling to find where I fit in. It's not until I can really blend my two different worlds together that I feel like I can accomplish what I want as a dancer ... to really tell my own story." Ella Havelka

In October 2012, Ella Havelka became the first Indigenous dancer to be invited into The Australian Ballet, an announcement that made news headlines nationwide. However it was a homecoming for Ella, who had always dreamed of joining the company.

Ella is the descendant of the Wiradjuri people from Dubbo in country NSW. The daughter of Janna a single mother, her introduction into the world of dance began with Physical Culture, where she rose to compete at a national level. Then one day Ella watched a video that Janna brought home from the local library of a performance of Swan Lake and ballet called to her - she was hooked. Janna got her into classes at the Dubbo Ballet Studio and with the help of scholarships and handme-down tutus Ella devoted her life to dance. She quickly started winning local Eisteddfods and was soon dancing six days a week.

The Dubbo community was elated when Ella was accepted into The Australian Ballet School in Melbourne at the age of 14, where she honed her craft in an intensely competitive environment. However, upon graduation after four arduous years she was devastated not to be offered a position in The Australian Ballet core company. But this was not the end of her dream. In 2009 Ella joined Bangarra - the prestigious Sydney based Indigenous dance company - where she learnt not only the very different rigors of contemporary dance, but began a powerful and moving journey of self discovery into her Indigenous heritage.

It was not until Bangarra did a joint performance with The Australian Ballet Warumuk - in the dark night in 2012 - that the calling of the ballet was reignited within Ella. In





an historic occasion, The Australian Ballet Artistic Director, David McAllister, invited her to join the core company. Ella accepts this position and becomes the first Indigenous dancer to join The Australian Ballet in its 50 year history.

This feature documentary follows Ella as she faces the challenges of adapting back to being en pointe after four years of barefoot dancing with Bangarra. We see her face the fierce competition for the best positions and roles - she even questions her own role as the first Indigenous dancer in The Australian Ballet. We also go with The Australian Ballet on their highly esteemed 2015 international tour to China where Ella finally gets to dance in Graeme Murphy's enchanting interpretation of Swan Lake in Beijing. Ella's childhood dream has come true.

Woven throughout this inspiring dance story is a touching and heart breaking personal journey back to her roots. We join Ella and Janna on a road trip through her country, traditional Wiradjuri land, where Ella reconnects with her Indigenous culture - learning traditional language, basket weaving with Elders and visiting the gravesites of her ancestors for the first time. She also explores her childhood. Both Ella and Janna give intimate accounts of the circumstances surrounding her birth. For Ella never knew her father even though he lived in the same town. However after his death Ella was given a scrapbook of clippings that he kept of her whole career. She feels now he was always with her.

But ultimately in this film we follow Ella as she finds her own identity by choreographing her own dance. Using a unique blend of Bangarra's contemporary Indigenous style and traditional western ballet Ella finally expresses herself in her own way. Featuring intimate interviews, dynamic dance sequences, and a stunning array of archival material, this moving documentary follows Ella as she explores her cultural identity and offers a rare glimpse into her life as an elite ballet dancer within the largest company in the southern hemisphere.

» CURRICULUM LINKS

The documentary 'Ella' can be linked with the curriculum in multiple ways across multiple year levels.

It clearly connects with the aims of the National Curriculum to address "two distinct needs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education:

"This learning area allows students to appreciate and celebrate the beauty of the world's oldest continuous living cultures"

- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are able to see themselves, their identities and their cultures reflected in the curriculum of each of the learning areas, can fully participate in the curriculum and can build their self-esteem
- that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority is designed for all students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world's oldest continuous living cultures.

The Learning Areas of Health and Physical Education can be connected to this documentary and its Indigenous focus. The National Curriculum states that

This learning area allows students to appreciate and celebrate the beauty of the world's oldest continuous living cultures. Students will be able to explore personal, community and group identities and so build understanding of the differences and commonalities in systems of knowledge and beliefs about Health and Physical Education. There is the capacity for making strong connections between cultures and identities and to engage with and appreciate the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Students can learn about the richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander modes of communication and ways of living and being, and develop appreciation and understanding of uniquely Australian connections between People and Country/Place. They can explore the importance of family and kinship structures for maintaining and promoting health, safety and wellbeing within their community and the wider community.



PRE VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Students can complete the following activities before they view the documentary, 'Ella':

- The broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies encompass a diversity of nations across Australia.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' family and kinship structures are strong and sophisticated.
- The significant contributions of Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the present and past are acknowledged locally, nationally and globally

'Ella' could also be used as a text in English in order to support students' study of literature and literacy. The curriculum states that 'the study of English is central to the learning and development of all young Australians. It helps create confident communicators, imaginative thinkers and informed citizens. It is through the study of English that individuals learn to analyse, understand, communicate and build relationships with others and with the world around them. The study of English helps young people develop the knowledge and skills needed for education, training and the workplace. It helps them become ethical, thoughtful, informed and active members of society and plays an important part in developing the understanding, attitudes and capabilities of those who will take responsibility for Australia's future'.

**** Viewer Note**** As is noted at the start of the documentary: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are warned that the following program may contain images and voices of deceased persons.*

- Find definitions for the following words: identity, belonging, isolation, culture, heritage, disappointment, stereotypes. Use each of these words in a sentence to show its meaning.
- Brainstorm all the different types of dance that you know.
- Discuss as a class why you think all cultures and societies involve some form of dance. How is dance important in rituals and people's lives?
- Working in pairs consider what challenges professional dancers might face in their careers. Are these challenges similar or different to challenges faced by all occupations?
- What do you know about the history of Indigenous Australians? See if you can work as a class to collate all your knowledge in a timeline.
- Can you think of any dreams or aspirations you had growing up? Do you still have the same hopes? Compare your current dreams for the future with your aspirations or dreams from when you were younger.
- How is identity shaped? What factors combine to create who we believe we are? In what ways does your identity change as you grow up?
- Consider your own family. Who are the members of your family that play a role in helping you achieve your dreams? In motivating you to succeed? Or who support you in your endeavours? How do they do this? Do you play this role for anyone, either in your family or within your community (friends, youth groups, sporting clubs)?





VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Students can complete these activities as they watch the documentary, 'Ella':

- Who is Ella Havelka? Fill in a table like the one below as you watch the documentary. Dot points can be used.

Family and Identity	Dancing	Other's Perceptions
Eg. Raised by her mum, Janna.	Began Ballet in Dubbo	She has a long journey ahead of her.

- Note down any questions you have as you watch the documentary. Is there anything you think is left out? What would you like to know more about?

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Students can complete the following learning activities after they have viewed the documentary, 'Ella':

- In ½ page summarise the journey Ella has gone on to become a member of the Australian Ballet Company.
- List the different challenges that Ella faced along her journey. Discuss how she has overcome some of these challenges.
- What were some of the towns and cities mentioned in the documentary? Locate as many of these places on a map (an Australian map, and a map of the world). Using the documentary, your own knowledge and some research if necessary, describe the differences and similarities between these towns and cities.
- How does the physical landscape, places where people grow up and their current location all shape notions of identity?
- Ella talks a lot about the desire to fit in, and a sense of not belonging. In two or more paragraphs describe how and why Ella might feel like an outsider.
- Where does Ella feel like she most belongs?
- What role does family play in Ella's life? What examples of family do we see in the documentary? Explain why you think family is so important in our lives?
- What examples do we see in the documentary of Indigenous history? What examples do we see of Indigenous culture?
- Ella was the first Indigenous Australian accepted to the Australian Ballet Company. This made national news. Why do you think this was the case? What are some challenges Aboriginal people might face that non Indigenous Australia's don't have to worry about?
- What is the Australian Ballet School and the Australian Ballet Company?
- What is 'Bangarra'? How is it different to the Australian Ballet?
- Explain what you think Stephen Page (Artistic Director of Bangarra) meant when he described Ella as being a 'proper white girl' when she arrived at the dance company?
- Where is Arnhem Land? Describe Ella's visit to Arnhem Land with Bangarra. Why do you think this visit was so significant for Ella?





- How is dance a way of storytelling?
- What encouraged Ella to go back to classical ballet? What are the difficulties in dancing 'on pointe'?
- Explain the disappointments Ella experiences. How does she deal with these disappointments? Have you ever had to deal with disappointment?
- Consider the following quote. What does it suggest about disappointment? Do you agree? How has Ella 'explored, dreamt and discovered'?
- "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."
—H. Jackson Brown Jr.,
- What do you think Ella learned as she weaved baskets?
- Ella's father was absent from her life, but kept a scrapbook detailing her achievements. What do you think the impact has been on Ella not having her dad around?
- Describe Ella's trip to China. What was significant about Swan Lake for Ella? Explain the process for getting ready for an overseas tour and how the dancers felt before their first performance?
- Why was Ella creating her own dance? What did this dance reveal about Ella and her story? How has she combined the two styles of dance that she has been part of?

“*Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover*”

- Describe the ending of the documentary. What has Ella learned throughout her journey? How is she using dance to tell her own unique story?
- Do you have any questions you would like to ask Ella? Write out a list of 3-5 questions you could ask her, about her life, career or future.

EXTENSION WORK

Students can complete the following work in preparation or conjunction with assessment tasks.

- Imagine what it is like to attend the Australian Ballet School. Visit their website to research the classes students undertake and the dedication to their art. Imagine you are student of the Australian Ballet School. Write a series of diary entries in which you explore the excitement and enjoyment of dance whilst also highlighting the challenges faced by these young people.
- Spend some time researching Aboriginal languages. Consider the role of language in culture and the lack of knowledge around the many different Indigenous languages. Why is it important for Ella to learn the language of her ancestors? Who plays a role in teaching language? Why have so many Indigenous languages been lost or are at risk of being lost? Present your findings to the class.
- Friends and friendship are a significant theme in ‘Ella’. It seems clear that it is hard to make friends in the tough industry of professional ballet, but Ella has maintained friendships with people from her childhood and people she met at Bangarra. How important is friendship in



shaping a sense of self? How do friends play a role in our lives? In what ways are their roles different to family members? Consider your own friends, what impact have they had in your own life?

- What is the story of Swan Lake? Research this famous ballet and summarise the key elements. What are some other famous ballets?
- Why do you think the Australian Ballet tours to China? What is Panda Diplomacy? Explain this term. How do you think the Australian Ballet's tour is Panda Diplomacy?
- What are the major themes of this documentary? List as many as you can think of and explain what message the director was trying to impart to the audience.
- Describe the way Ella's story was told. What different techniques did the director use to convey meaning and Ella's story? You are going to create a mini digital biography on someone you know. Consider how you will research their story, who you will interview, and how you will present this information. Before you begin

filming or construction of your biography ensure you complete a detailed plan and story board.

- Write an expository essay based on one of the prompts listed below. Remember to follow the structure required in expository writing: a brief introduction, body paragraphs that explore your ideas, and a conclusion that summarises your points. Draw on ideas and evidence from 'Ella'.

- ◆ *Everyone needs to feel a sense of belonging.*
- ◆ *Our identity is influenced by how others view us.*
- ◆ *Everyone struggles with their identity.*
- ◆ *Discovering our identity is a challenging journey*

- Create a brief presentation on the history of China and its connection with dance. What role has dance played in China's history and culture? Has it been shaped by events in the 20th century in particular?





Biography

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/>

<http://www.australianballetschool.com.au/>

<http://bangarra.com.au/>

<http://www.australia.com/en/places/nt/arnhem-land.html>

https://apps.indigenous.gov.au/cultural_protocol.htm

<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/disappointment>

<http://www.vcestudyguides.com/identity-and-belonging-prompts/>



This study guide was produced by **ATOM**. (© ATOM 2016)
ISBN: 978-1-74295-968-9 editor@atom.org.au

To download other study guides,
plus thousands of articles on Film as Text,
Screen Literacy, Multiliteracy and Media Studies,
visit <<http://theeducationshop.com.au>>.

Join ATOM's email broadcast list for invitations to
free screenings, conferences, seminars, etc.

Sign up now at <http://www.metromagazine.com.au/email_list/>.