



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## BLACK RHYTHM\*

Roslyn Watson likes to stand out from the crowd. Which is almost unavoidable when you're the only Aboriginal dancer on stage with the Queensland Ballet Company.

But being black in the very white, very competitive world of Australian ballet was not always an advantage. It has never been easy.

Roslyn has just started a five-week tour of the State, teaching dance to Aboriginal and white children in remote northern and far western outposts. Before she left she said: "I started late because we were handicapped financially. I had to really struggle." When she said: "I think I'm a very determined person," you knew she was not kidding. And when she said: "I am the first Aboriginal person to become a professional ballet dancer," you understood the pride in her voice.

Born in Brisbane 24 years ago, she arrived third in a family of six children. Perhaps she inherited some of that determination from her parents. "Mum and dad both worked to put us all through school," she said. "They were right behind us." And there was every encouragement when she started learning ballet at the age of 12. "But I wouldn't have been able to continue my dancing if I hadn't got a study grant."

That was in 1970 - she was 15 years old and Kathleen Gorham's School of Dancing in Melbourne was a long way from the suburban Brisbane ballet classes. At first it was a disaster - she was not measuring up - and the crunch came when she had to return to Brisbane for a wedding. "Miss Gorham said when you get on the bus to Brisbane don't bloody bother coming back," said Roslyn.

She can laugh about it now, because she did go back, and amazed them all on the first day in the studio with a perfect execution of the splits. "Miss Gorham nearly died," she said. "She just couldn't believe it. "Those splits were the big thing - that was the turning point." From then on things began to flow more smoothly.

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There was two years' training with the Australian Ballet School, acceptance by the Dance Company of New South Wales and a year in New York with Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Back in Australia, she worked for a while at Kathleen Gorham's before joining the Queensland Ballet Company in 1975. The annual teaching tours around Queensland were a highlight of the job, she said. "I look forward to the trip so much each year. It's very hard work going back to the basics and communicating them to the children. But they give back so much. It brings them into closer contact with the opportunities children in the city have."

Working with Aboriginal children was especially rewarding. "Aboriginal children are born with this beautiful sense of rhythm," she said. Perhaps it came from the time when dance was an inherent part of tribal life. "They were a lot closer to the earth then, and a lot happier," she said. "Dance is just a natural expression of happiness."

Roslyn used to be "very angry" about the position of Aborigines in Australian society. "Through dancing, I've achieved an inner sense of security," she said. "I try to look at the positive side of things." But she still feels the situation is a "delicate balance." "For every step forward there are another two steps backward," she said. "I'm afraid there are a lot of people in this country who begrudge anything and everything. They can't stand the thought of giving anything to us. I feel like a mirror sometimes, just reflecting a bit of light and hope back to the children who are starting. What I ultimately want to see is that we all have the chance to live our own lives."

The immediate goal in Roslyn Watson's own life is to work overseas, possibly next year. "I'd like to dance the whole range of classical ballet," she said. Later on, when her performing career is over, she wants to continue teaching in Australia, and perhaps start her own Aboriginal dance company. "I'd start with little children," she said. "It would take about 10 years to set up the nucleus of a company."

She could not imagine completely giving up the world of dance. "As far back as I can remember it's the only thing in my life I've ever wanted to do," she said. "I don't really have another life. I mean - that's it."

*(Since the above article was published, Roslyn has joined the Australian Dance Theatre - see cover photograph).*