

# GED\_S01E06\_The\_Good\_Enough\_Dad\_stephen\_page\_2311 15\_MID23-25\_FINAL.mp3

**Anonymous Female Voice:** [00:00:02] A LiSTNR Production.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:00:04] This podcast was recorded on the ancient lands of the Gadigal peoples of the Eora nation in Australia. I wish to acknowledge the rich and continuing culture, and especially pay respect to the elders past, present and emerging, and to acknowledge and pay respect to any First Nations people from anywhere in the world who may come to hear this podcast. We hope that we may all come to walk with gentle feet, strong minds and compassionate hearts in this global village.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:00:36] No dad wants to be a lousy dad. Aiming to be a good dad is great. But you know what? Being a good enough dad is so much more important. I'm Maggie Dent, parenting educator and author and champion of boys and men. And this is The Good Enough Dad where I chat with committed, caring, sometimes confused, and often funny dads about all the ways they've discovered to be good enough at this parenting gig.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:01:05] My Good Enough Dad today is Stephen Page.

**AUDIO:** [00:01:13] MUSIC

**Maggie Dent:** [00:01:13] That beautiful music you're listening to now is from a new Bangarra production, "Warru journey of the Small Turtle". It's the Bangarra Dance Theatre's first production for children and is a co-creation between Stephen and his son, actor Hunter Page-Lochard. Stephen is an award winning choreographer who had been at the helm of Bangarra Dance Company for three decades when he stepped down as artistic director last year. It seems fitting that the next phase of Stephen's creative life starts with his son, as his first started with his brothers Russell and David with the founding of Bangarra when he was only 24 years old. Stephen hails from the Yugambeh nation of south east Queensland. He also has a stepdaughter, Tamika Walker, and two grandkids, Mila and Ivara. [00:02:00] Hi Stephen, welcome to The Good Enough Dad.

**Stephen Page:** [00:02:03] Hello. How are you?

**Maggie Dent:** [00:02:06] Was Waru inspired by this next chapter in your life Stephen and that of being a grandfather?

**Stephen Page:** [00:02:12] Uh, well, back down at the wharf after it being renovated, we have a studio there, and we thought we should start putting some other stories of forms on. And that's when the children's idea came up. But, you know, Hunter, stirred him up and he was working on Playschool at the time. And. Yeah. So yes, Waru is inspired by working with Hunter, my love of children's stories and creation stories and and I'm even more in love with it now with my two beautiful granddaughters.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:02:45] You grew up the ninth of 12 children in a place called Mount Gravatt in Brisbane. Can you paint a picture of your childhood for those who were listening?

**Stephen Page:** [00:02:53] I'll probably be really brief because I tend to... It's such a vivid childhood. My mother and father were living in Beau desert, which is a town outside of west of Brisbane. And it's where all the, all the Mununjali clan lived and Mununjali is one of the five clans of the Yugambeh nation. It's the smallest one, actually. And mum and dad lived in the fringe, obviously in townships, mob being displaced and then put on the fringe. And dad built their little shed. And so they had most o,f they had three girls, a boy, three girls. And when David was born in 1961, I think by the time he was one, mum had to leave because my oldest brother, Philip, had epilepsy and he needed medical help and attention and the resources there, and I think it was a doctor's suggestion in Beaudesert. And she left dad because he wouldn't leave being on country, my father, he lived on country all his life. So [00:04:00] she end up moving to Mount Gravatt, which is sort of like the, it was like the the Bronx in South Brisbane. It was a newly house commission. So working class, lot of big families. I think the Ludgates up the road, had 17 children. So I don't know. They must have just put all these big families in one long street, Canterbury Street, and

**Maggie Dent:** [00:04:21] It must have been pretty good neighbourhood play?

**Stephen Page:** [00:04:23] Yes. Well, and you know, in those days, all those types of working class, sort of all those house commissions were all a certain type of build, you know, so freestanding. We were on a hill. We had an old, um, what do they call those thunderbox.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:04:38] Thunderbox toilets.

**Stephen Page:** [00:04:39] Yeah. And I think when she first moved there, they used to have the hot boiler down the backyard. And our job was to bring up the hot water for the bathtub, where I would be last with my two younger brothers to have a wash. And it was terrible sunlight, mucky water. But anyway, crazy. It was like one, two, three, four bedrooms. And as you left the family, you got you stepped up to go into the bigger room, you know. So I think I only had that for a year, I think, because then I left home at 16.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:05:11] There was a lot of singing and dancing, and.

**Stephen Page:** [00:05:14] My dad eventually moved down, back down. I was born in 65, so we moved in 61. My father would come down from being working on country. He was, you know, he was an electric linesman. He was timber cutter. He was a jack of all trades. He was an amazing craftsman my father. He would come down and always music, always kitchen performances. Our excitement was our father taking us on a Sunday afternoon before sunset to the tip to the dump. And he would wait till everyone had left and he would take us and he would just, he found this old television. And then he was just such a handyman. And he we got our first television. And so from that came all our [00:06:00] love of musicals and Elvis Presley musicals. And my mum, she loved the old 30s and 40s movies. And yeah, so she was brought up on, you know, lots of musicals as well. So we sort of had that. And then we had dad's family come down, and that was the guitar coming out and country and western singing, and we had. So we were always hosting sort of gatherings. And I think it's because we were the only ones that had moved out of being in Beaudesert, and we were one of the first to move into the city, sort of all, you know, the suburbs of the city. Mum would always lock us up. And so to keep ourselves occupied, we would always let our imagination go crazy. And if it wasn't performing, then David was creating something in the backyard and we were all participants.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:06:47] I love it. So do you think that's your happiest memories, those performance things where everything happened? Or was there something else that you can remember as being really happy?

**Stephen Page:** [00:06:56] No, look, besides all that, you know, we struggle. My mum struggled and my dad struggled and my father struggled the most. You know, from a little boy, I mean, he was hid when he watched his sisters being taken away and. So my father had a very traumatic upbringing. So for him to move to this city and then he got a job in the city and he was an amazing landscaper and a concreter. And, you know, I used to watch my father like he would come home and he would never get promoted in his job. I think his white mates who were working with would go and get a loan in the mid 70s to, to buy a house, and he wanted to buy the house. And you know, I remember him going to Saint Vincent de Paul got a suit and he dressed up and I remember he come home one afternoon and they wouldn't give him the loan. So he, he, him being an Aboriginal man, oddly enough, as a young boy was something I really connected with, observing him. And I don't know if that's what the pay off is in my young adult life. And being a creator [00:08:00] with my sort of my passive activism, really in my work. Yeah, so the I was quite conscious, you know, when I went to the first primary school because it was a new suburb, I was the fairest of the kids, so I would be pulled out of line and my other brothers were darker, and they would have to go and get the nurse checks and stuff like that.

**Stephen Page:** [00:08:22] So I would cry to be in my brothers line. So my childhood was quite vivid around those social experiences. But then all the fun of performing and David dressing up as us in drag when we were five, and I think I played Diana Ross when my love of drag started, I suppose. And. Yeah. And then my sisters, you know, they all were leaving home at 13, leaving school at 12 and 13 or not even completing school. And they used to walk early in the morning over the story bridge down to the pineapple factory. My mother and father had an amazing work ethic. You know, so the older girls had it hard. So there was lots of wonderful chaos in our house. And there'd be some fights too. But but, you know, that's the time. And that's your fate card you're given and you're brought up with this family. But I'll tell you, the one that keeps us all grounded is just our love of laughter and humour and the, you know, just the strong bond we had together.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:09:32] Your dad lived through the Stolen Generations. How do you think that might have impacted the way he was a dad?

**Stephen Page:** [00:09:39] Exactly. Like he, i mean, my mum met my dad when she was 18. They were both working at the pineapple factory. I know it sounds like a film, a story. And my mother, her father, my grandfather was an English Irishman, and he was a lieutenant in the in the Navy. And he [00:10:00] met my grandmother Martha, and she was a Noonuccal woman, saltwater woman. And so she, she wasn't brought up with, you know, she didn't have much resource living on Minjerribah and Stradbroke and different upbringing met him and he, you know, he was sort of middle class and had had houses and stuff. So she was brought up not very connected. And he didn't celebrate my grandmother's identity around then, and it was safer for them to say that they were Indian. Can you believe this? So yeah, really different temperaments of identity journeys for my mother and father. And so when she met my father, her mother and father died when she was 15. So she was brought up by her older brothers and they were very black skinned. And our mum was one of the fairest of the family. And they looked after her. But. So when she met dad, he was a bushman, you know, he was a Mununjali man from the bush. And he had a rope around his khaki pants, a white singlet. He was dark, tall and handsome and strong. And she saw him down in the conveyor belt and he asked her out to the dance. And the odd thing was, she thought he meant to meet her at Cloudland, but he was talking about the boat shed under the bridge because segregation, that's where all the blacks met. And so they never met for that date. She was waiting at one place.

**Stephen Page:** [00:11:30] And so it's a true picture, a sort of picture of that sort of made me think of that. So going back to my father, you know, mum, they married straight away because she was I think they were only together for like eight months. And then she fell pregnant and then it was like 18 and she had Gerry at 19, and Geraldine Joyce, my mother was, you know, she had Russell at 38 and the doctor said no more. That was 12 children and she had two miscarriages. And David [00:12:00] was a twin. So he we lost him, but so we would have had 15 in the family or something. But anyway, so I think for my father, with the way he was brought up, moving off country, this immediate growth of kids and family, and he had an old Bedford. And so the only times I can remember strongly with my father, because he was working so much, was him taking us

back on country, and we'd go fishing and he'd take us back on Yugambeh country and we'd all pile in the back of the the Bedford truck. And it was always like a Sunday morning and we'd go for the day. And that gave mum time, because she used to love cooking and she'd make a great roast mum. And so we always knew we were coming home from swimming in the fresh water, and we'd smell that roast coming on the back of the truck up to the house. So yeah, with my father's struggling, you know, I'm much more aware of that now. Obviously, when I became a father and then obviously my my joy of reflecting back now being a grandfather.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:13:03] Do you think the fact he worked so hard would have been also to help keep his family together and okay do you think?

**Stephen Page:** [00:13:09] Yeah but also he worked from a very young age from like 11 years old, 12. And he was abused. My father, you know, he was abused by workers physically. And yeah, he had it hard my father. But he was always he always used to say, you know, he's a battler. And his principles and his values, he carried everything internally too. And I think that's because of coming from that, you know, generational trauma from his mother. They had eight kids. He was the youngest. And Granny Polo had him when she was 53. So he was the youngest of eight. And mum had eight children in her family as well. And she was one of the youngest. So he was a bit of a change of life baby, my dad, and he didn't have his father around, so he was brought up by women and his [00:14:00] three older sisters. And it's funny because I was brought up predominantly by strong black women, you know, so yeah. And he used to drink my father and that was part of the culture. Concreting, you start at five, you finish at three, you go to the pub till seven and you're home. You smell of grog, you're covered in concrete. You get up again at four. And that was their life. I remember through all my, my time of, say, primary school, 1970. So it would have been all the way up till 81. And I remember he worked very hard and, and I think he and what he the complexities that he carried.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:14:44] Do you remember the moment you became a dad, Stephen?

**Stephen Page:** [00:14:48] Yeah, I do.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:14:48] Come on, tell me about it.

**Stephen Page:** [00:14:50] Hunter's mother, Cynthia Lockhart. She was a soloist with Balanchine's George Balanchine in New York City Ballet. And she has French, Caribbean, Haitian, American heritage. I met her because one of the dancers in the company, Kim Walker. They went out and then they got married. She came out, he met her in New York when he was on tour with Sydney Dance, and they came out and then Cynthia and I, we just became really close. We just got on, and I was always fascinated by her experience and stories. And I was working with Graham Murphy when I was at Sydney Dance Company, and they had divorced and yeah, and we just ended up going out after all of that. And she had a child, too. Kim Tamika, who became my stepdaughter. Hunter was a '93 baby, and that was the first years of First Nations. That was the International Year of Indigenous Peoples. And I remember that year quite strongly because a lot of things happened. It was the Paul Keating time and Bangarra, I was two years in as artistic director, so everything was happening for me. I think it was 27.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:15:59] Do you remember seeing [00:16:00]

**Stephen Page:** [00:16:00] 27, 28, 27 I think I was.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:16:03] That little baby boy?

**Stephen Page:** [00:16:04] Oh, Hunter, you want to know? We choreographed his birth. We were at the Royal Alfred. I remember this vividly. It was the 4th of July, which is odd. His year of the Indigenous people. His mother's from America. It was an American Independence Day. And I was just like, oh my God. It's like this character, he was meant to be a character. You know, we only had a mattress on a floor with because it was a midwife's room, and she had a little lamp on the small little table. And as it was getting darker because it was winter and it got dark really early. And I remember Cynthia. She wanted me to hold her. The midwife told her to stand if she was going through contractions. And being a dancer as she is, she just stripped off and she wanted me to hold her under her arms. And I stood up against the wall and then she turned around and I literally had her under the armpits. She was facing me, pressing into me, and literally she just held all her weight on my shoulder to release the weight from her legs. And her water broke and we fell on the floor on the on the mattress.

**Stephen Page:** [00:17:16] It was like a dance, and she literally gave birth to Hunter laying on top of me. And the crazy thing is, she wanted me to push her pelvic. And the midwife was saying, and then all of a sudden Hunter came out, and then the midwife pulled him over her back. And I can remember I was hopelessly trying to cut the cord, and he looked at me, and he was. She had a lot of fluid water. Sabine well her nickname's, Sabine. So if I go from Cynthia to Sabine. Yeah. It's okay. Yeah. And then the midwife, a couple of seconds, Sabine was like, is he okay? Because he was quite blue looking, and then she just put her little finger in his mouth to put some air in there. And then just like a, like [00:18:00] a duck, he just I can remember the skin changed and he just spat out all this water. And then he slowly opened his eyes and looked at me. And that was it for me. Really?

**Maggie Dent:** [00:18:11] Wow.

**Stephen Page:** [00:18:11] And I thought that was a very dramatic entrance.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:18:15] Born to dance, wasn't he?

**Stephen Page:** [00:18:17] It was dance. Like his mother jumped on me and I thought I was doing Dirty Dancing, the sequel, and. I thought I was Patrick Swayze. I was, like, laying on the ground. And instead of doing the river lift, we did the lift on the mattress. Yeah. Crazy. Wow.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:18:32] That's a beautiful, beautiful memory.

**Stephen Page:** [00:18:34] Tamika was there, too. Oh, little four year old on the ground. And she said, I can see him. Oh she was he's coming. She was had the best view. She was our commentator. And she was telling her mother to push and press, and she she was going mad at me, telling me to help. Help, Stephen, help!

**Maggie Dent:** [00:18:52] Don't you love it?



**Maggie Dent:** [00:18:59] Consciously or unconsciously. Is there anything from the way your dad had been a father that you might have chosen to bring forward as you became a dad?

**Stephen Page:** [00:19:09] My brother Russell had two kids by then, and he had kids quite young. He was 21. My brother Michael had two girls by then and then my sisters, they all had children. My sister was pregnant with Darren, older sister, when mum was pregnant with Russell, and my sister had Darren two months before. My mum had Russell so that Darren was a well, Russell was an uncle even before he came out. So and that's why I talk about the women in the family. And I know you're asking about my father, I was just reflecting parenting really. And when Hunter was born, I thought the novelty would wear off really quick because there's so many kids in the family, you know? But I do remember my father seeing Hunter, [00:20:00] and I think that moment was very vivid for me. I think going home and the boys and and being with my father and, you know, and Hunter's um. Yeah, Hunter is a lot blacker than me, so I think I think my father was looking at me like. And, you know, and Cynthia, you know, Sabine was from, you know, she was from the Caribbean. So my dad just thought she was absolutely gorgeous. And so he was in love with Sabine. We had a nice little bond. And Hunter had a beautiful bond with my father.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:20:31] I just want to say that I've met lots of dads who have consciously taken the way they father from the way their mother mothered.

**Stephen Page:** [00:20:40] Yeah.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:20:40] So when you're saying, I've got these strong women around that I've probably modeled some of my choices as a father on them as well that's that's actually more common than many men believe.

**Stephen Page:** [00:20:51] Yeah. And I think it's the, the organic way of being brought up. Like I was cooking spaghetti for my brothers because everyone was at work, because that's the way it was. And you'd live on a terrible canned spaghetti mix with my own version, and I was cooking that at 5 or 6 years old. So I was feeding my two younger brothers. So you always, you know, as I said...

**Maggie Dent:** [00:21:14] In a carer role.

**Stephen Page:** [00:21:15] Well, carer role, I think it's that maternal caring role. And we always had to clean up and wash up and mop, and I would have to walk a kilometre to the shops for mum. And so I was doing a lot of that at a young age. I would miss doing all the things with dad. That's when he would just take us on country and we'd have our own little contemporary men's business, you know, but that maternal influence was very strong.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:21:39] And I've seen in my travels as well that children can look after children. I mean, I had a, you know, we were in our family we had families.

**Stephen Page:** [00:21:47] Those days, you just.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:21:49] It was survival,

**Stephen Page:** [00:21:50] The fear and survival. You know, we would be home at midnight and my mum would do the night shift and my father would have to go back on country. And the girls were teenagers and they [00:22:00] were sort of out and, you know, you were bathing your younger brothers. And yeah, it's just extraordinary. And these days you will. You'll have someone knocking at the door and taking the kids away from you. But it's just big families and it is survival.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:22:16] Yeah. Big families will tell you that they were all caring for for their younger siblings because there's just not enough time.

**Stephen Page:** [00:22:22] And that family bond just becomes more innate. It builds a fragility. That's what it builds.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:22:27] Don't you think? It builds a strength as well? It does build a strength.

**Stephen Page:** [00:22:30] But what I'm saying the fragility of care, because you sort of know how you were brought up, you know, that your older sisters had it harder. I was always grateful. And always aware, you know, like that my mother would have had

probably today, she probably would have been diagnosed with, you know, high level of mental health and depression, you know, and my mother never drank or smoked. Oh, my lord, I would have drank if I had 12 kids. I mean, you know, it's crazy. Like, she just she was a survivor, you know, they didn't grow up with resources and infrastructure. And I think as you got to the teenager in our family, you were quickly hurrying, trying to get out of the house. I think my sisters just married the first man they saw. I'm sure they probably hate me for saying that, but they they left home at quite young and they they had children quite young.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:23:29] You followed your creative drive to Sydney and lived a distance from Hunter for many years. So how do you stay connected while you are so busy with looking after Bangarra?

**Stephen Page:** [00:23:39] Unfortunately, yeah, I Hunter must have been five, 4 or 5. So I separated from the family when he was about five. I remember I had to tell him too. He was five and we sat at the back of the yard. Because I think I lost my temper. I [00:24:00] was never physical with Sabine, but I did get frustrated because she was older than me and also I was, i had a big responsibility with the company and I remember this day I got really angry and I was yelling in the back room, just yelling. Because I was tired and I couldn't articulate my frustration, and we were falling out of love with each other. And Bangarra was just, you know. It peaked at 95. It became a major organisation '97. I was flying overseas, coming back, directing and closing opening ceremonies Olympics in 2000. We had just created four works my brothers and I. We were all, you know, we were all trying to keep this contemporary tribe of a dance company alive. And one thing I respect about Sabine was that she she knew that I had a distinctive job as a creator, but what's beautiful about our relationship with Sabine is that we were very decent.

**Stephen Page:** [00:25:07] We knew straight away it wasn't about us. It was about the children.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:25:11] That's it.

**Stephen Page:** [00:25:12] And even I had a second house. He had a room. We co-parent. Even if I wasn't there a lot, I would try to, any of my savings. I, you know, got her

a new car for the first time and you know like just helped. I was able to help financially support. I mean, I wasn't getting a lot. And also, you know, I've got my other brothers back at home and sisters and, you know, you have mob on your payroll and the aunts don't pay well. So, you know, it's funny because soon as I left Bangarra at the end of last year, they all stopped talking to me. No they didn't. But you know, when you're parenting also you're also an uncle. And you're a brother and you're a constant, those skills of parenting are all part of sacred leadership within a clan and kinship [00:26:00] systems, you know. And that's what my father had. And. Those values and principles, I think were very strong in all of us.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:26:12] And that would have driven you as Hunter got towards puberty and adolescence?

**Stephen Page:** [00:26:15] Well, I moved in. We ended up renting a four bedroom house when Hunter. Sabine was working. Her career was growing, and also there was about three friends who were all single mums. And they all helped each other. And I really admired that. And I actually thought it was something that I connected with. oh they used to give me a hard time.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:26:41] Really? I find that hard to believe.

**Stephen Page:** [00:26:42] I'd come over and they go, oh, Bangarra eh? You'd been out there? And where did you go? You know, and they'd stir me up all the time. And the beautiful thing is, with me having older sisters, I used to stir them up as well, and they would just laugh. But what I loved was their support for each other. The women, you know, went away to work. Hunter was having one word responses to his mother, and she was getting frustrated. And so we ended up getting a bigger house. And then, you know, obviously, Sabine and I were in separate rooms and he just loved it. He just, and Tamika loved it as well. I mean, she was just finished high school. Yeah, he... We just sort of bonded. I think it was like two years we lived together at that time.

**Stephen Page:** [00:27:22] But also, Hunter, the way I could see Hunter a lot when he was little was I put him into theatre and he was on stage. He was on stage at six years old. So the beautiful thing, Sabine would let him come on tour. She loved him being around work, and she was a dancer professionally, so she loved the arts, rehearsal

room environment, and Hunter would sit in the room. And his little eyes, and he would watch me create, and he'd look at me and I'd be telling stories to an ensemble clan of dancers and, and then all the traditional mob who would entrust Bangarra with their stories would come from off country, [00:28:00] and they'd come in, and then they would adopt Hunter, and then they'd give him Umanu. They give him a language name from Yungulu people, or the Saibai or Miriam Torres Strait, like he was just around this rich sense of culture. And Sabine loved that because she knew how important that was to me. And so he was able to share that with me. And that's sort of, he got all those experiences, you know, and I would take him on tour most of the time and from when he was really little. So, um.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:28:33] But that traditional part of culture, too, of men guiding their boys towards manhood. How lovely that you had a whole dance company as well as your brothers.

**Stephen Page:** [00:28:44] My brothers and David and Russell were good with him, and he went through hard times. Hunter with me, losing my brothers, and he was very close to and uh, but he, you know, we went through that together. And just watching him now as a father, it's extraordinary.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:29:02] I may be wrong, Stephen, but essentially, you kind of became a bit of the father figure for Bangarra, so really like all those young dancers are probably like looking up at you as what do you reckon? Is that kind of how it was or was it a joint thing?

**Stephen Page:** [00:29:17] Look, I struggled a bit because I had to. When Russell passed, I really struggled and I sort of just dived into work and Dave and I got a lot closer. And because also we were, we were caring for cultural stories through dance. And so therefore, we weren't just like an art for art's sake commercial dance company.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:29:40] Way more.

**Stephen Page:** [00:29:41] So what we inherit, the care and responsibility as a part of that is leadership and parenting. You know, I would fall over. I was very vulnerable and I'd be honest about my mistakes. I think that what has taught me the skill of clanship

and collaborating, because I would always [00:30:00] communicate with the dancers and tell them what I was feeling and why I would make decisions. I would always let the artists and those cultural leaders of the company, even though we were in a mainstream, I would always want them to own the leadership with me and, I mean, I know it's cliché to say, trust me. You just had to be vulnerable and honest. Especially working in this fragility and this culture of the contemporary and tradition and maintaining that integrity.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:30:32] I think also, the only way you can go to that vulnerability is that they feel they belong. And building that, that's what I'm kind of saying because the company is, it is such a powerful space when you, you know, you do these things for a period of time.

**Stephen Page:** [00:30:48] Yeah. My father had those like, I remember getting, learning a lot that from my father and being on country. And he would tell us that we had to listen to country and when we were around, and we would always make sure that we had respect for our elders. And if we saw relatives or uncles or aunties, it wouldn't have forced upon us. But we were taught that very young. And Hunter saw that at a very young age, so he'd always pay respect, see if anyone wanted anything, look after the elders around him. And so there was something we were always brought up with.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:31:19] I still think you're like the father figure. I still think that's that space. I mean, 30 years is kind of because you're the creative director, then you've got to bring that out from people. So I just I think you need to say yes. Maggie.

**Stephen Page:** [00:31:34] Okay. Maggie.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:31:35] I think you're trying to fob me off. I can hear that.

**Stephen Page:** [00:31:38] I wasn't good after David passed, though.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:31:40] Yeah. No. And that was a really difficult time. You said that Hunter featured, and even in Hunter's words, he said it was a journey you did together.

**Stephen Page:** [00:31:48] Yeah

**Maggie Dent:** [00:31:49] Yeah. And that's, that's a beautiful thing to say with two men. So you've mentioned Russell and he died in 2002. And then, David in 2016, and both [00:32:00] of them had been with you every step of Bangarra. And we know that grief can be such a beast and a struggle. How did you do that and hold Bangarra together? Any idea?

**Stephen Page:** [00:32:11] I'm able to reflect that a lot more now. Since I stepped out from Bangarra at the end of last year. It's a little bit more triggered now, and vivid because I have gotten off a day to day humbug routine. I call it the Aboriginal sushi train like I just sort of got off it. So I've had a lot of time in this last five months especially and great, you know, beautiful, reflective memories. Packing up my office, I was able to think I had to pack up David's music studio and just finding little things and little cards from an opening night or, you know, so there's this beautiful reflecting back. We do become denial when grief. And I have a big family, and I was pretty much responsible for their burial and sending them over into the beautiful spirit world. And so I had to put up this front. Really. Also, I was wild and I was angry and, and you have these questions, and then you blame yourself. And then you, was it too much being in this public mainstream view and the work you did? We had young families. We had a very wonderful, dysfunctional family back home where there was more and more populated, and kids and grandkids, you know, and your parents are getting older. And anyway, yeah, you do become denial, in denial. But it's only till now that I've been able to look at it all and go, you know what? Those are the things I've learned. Those are the things I've observed. I'm just so lucky to have a clan, my family, my immediate family around me. And obviously Hunter's been extraordinary through [00:34:00] this time.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:34:02] And the gift of two beautiful grandchildren.

**Stephen Page:** [00:34:03] And also art is a medicine, you know, like. And when I say in denial, I mean. People thought I was hiding behind. Creation experiences or throwing myself into creativity. But I found it cleansing and healing. And it's because what, when we tell stories, like I said before, like we're reclaiming our traditions and we're putting them into this contemporary vessel today. And we started with a blank canvas. Bangarra grew out of a kitchen, and there's no other First Nations full time performing arts company in the world. And we didn't know that till like, you know, probably through

early 2000, we were travelling to, you know, huge tours of Canada and connecting with First Nations Canadians and going to Six Nations reservation and uprooting mob from a reservation, bringing them to a mainstream theatre in Canada, putting them in a theatre and showing them a contemporary ceremony. They don't have that there. And they're sitting in the front row crying. And so you have these connections and the Inuit mob in the northern parts and Greenland and the Maori mob and the Pacifica mob, and you just all these similar cultures where art is a huge part of their, their life, you know. And so I had a great job like, and I still have a great job being a storyteller.

**Stephen Page:** [00:35:35] And I tell you that my job and my creative skills and spirit was probably what saved me through the journey of my brothers both passing.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:35:48] Exactly. I'm an authorised celebrant and I've done over 300 funerals. Yeah, including an Aboriginal elder funeral in the ceremony and the the things that go in amongst it. The [00:36:00] song, the rituals, it supports us on the journey. Not all of it. But it definitely takes us on a journey.

**Stephen Page:** [00:36:06] And it's interesting a lot of, you know, especially over the last two decades, a lot of displaced, urbanised clans who are breathing life back into rekindling language, rekindling cultural practices and the death ceremonies. Life cycles practices are one of the major ones because a lot of them aren't natural deaths and a lot of them are traumatised, you know? And so we do find our way where we bring our cultural and our sense of healing to those services. Yeah.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:36:38] Do you think your experience as, you know, as an indigenous and an Aboriginal man shaped you as a dad in any particular way? Or is it just being a dad regardless of culture?

**Stephen Page:** [00:36:51] It's interesting. I'm really fascinated by gender power in tradition and cultures. Now, I shouldn't say power because I just don't think that English word is the right spirit of how leadership is changing in communities. And I heard a beautiful story about, there's a young traditional women's language that is dying out. And I was fascinated to know it was only language for women. And there's a spiritual power or resilient power in that. Whereas this sort of male energy of leadership and the way that you lead. Is such a testosterone or sort of this external way of doing things? I



don't know, I've always felt more grounded in the sort of maternal leadership. And I've always been brought up around women. So it's interesting. I've been watching Hunter now father. Generations of fathers now. [00:38:00] And and I think that's because we, we are going through this humanity change of who we are as, as a gender. I know there's a lot of stories that sit in our First Nations traditions that are based around these confine constructs of gender forms. And I really find it fascinating. And I wonder, as a man, if you're, I just think your your life experiences and your journey as a human and you're in this vessel of a label of a man, that the way you measure your experiences, if you're brought up predominantly in a maternal environment, I really do feel like you have this sort of brackish of values.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:38:51] I was doing a tour in western New South Wales at one point and yarning with some Aboriginal elder women, and one of them said, oh, she's quite happy. She's, you know, 70s. But none of the boys in her whole extended family can get a tattoo without checking with grandma. And I thought, wow, that that sort of says, right, you've just got to get someone's approval that they really value and respect, and also still a tiny bit scared of.

**Stephen Page:** [00:39:21] And also my experiences with traditions on male and female leadership and parenting and customs and practices right up until the end of the 90s, I viewed this co-parenting in tradition, where men and women's business is the right humane ingredients and portions of what makes a strong human and it's not really based on male or female or gender sort of power. You know, you watch the women prepare young men's business boys [00:40:00] by a three hour ritual body painting. Where they the silence of them sitting in the lap of a cross-legged mother. With their head on their on their lap. While she paints the face and the body and the women paint the body to prepare him for manhood. So he does a spiritual connection dance and he's sung by the song man. So there's this whole process of this initiation, which people go, oh, that's ritual or that's sacred, and you sort of go, it's life. It's just another way of tradition. Anyway, the point I'm making is the female, the mother energy, the maternal strength is the the core for that boy to become a young man. So I'm just glad I got the good old humane fate card to live this life in my First Nations backyard.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:41:11] So we all muck up as parents. It's only human. Can you share maybe a dad fail moment or a grandpa or a poppy fail moment you've had that make you realise you're human?

**Stephen Page:** [00:41:24] Yes, I have a really dry sense of humour and a wit. And Mila is four. Unfortunately, she's already a dancer and a singer. And ...

**Maggie Dent:** [00:41:35] What do you mean, unfortunately?

**Stephen Page:** [00:41:37] I keep telling her there's no money in the arts, but it's never been about the money. It's been about creating. And she's, she's got the good dose. If she spends too much time with me. And if I go home and the next couple of days some crazy things she'll say to her father or she'll, you know, I'll play silly [00:42:00] characters to Mila, and I might talk gibberish to her, or I make up my own words and he'll ring me and say, dad, she cracked me up. What have you been telling her? And, and like, I just put her into this imaginary crazy storytelling world.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:42:21] It can't be a problem.

**Stephen Page:** [00:42:22] No, she loves it. She loves it. And if I say something like, hey, don't muck around like that, or, you know, talk silly to her, she'll go, hey, don't muck around like that. Like she, because they're just sponges, you know, they mimic. And she has the best sense of humour. And she's very funny. She's a funny girl. And then Elvira's just as, she's just as funny. They're just really gorgeous little.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:42:46] I don't think that's muck ups.

**Stephen Page:** [00:42:47] Oh that's not muck up.

**Stephen Page:** [00:42:49] Oh no no, I mean, yeah, like. I just have such a I don't know, it's just you just surrender your energy with them and and then and that gives me more admiration for how Hunter's connecting with the girls.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:43:06] We all worry. We worry about our kids and now Hunter as a dad. You'll probably worry about his beautiful girls. But what are you? What are your deep concerns about? You know, Hunter and and the girls as we go forward.

**Stephen Page:** [00:43:21] Oh, look, I think it's all our concerns, especially for the girls. What sort of generation they're going to live in, the challenges that they're going to face. You know? Hunter's 30. He was born in 1993. You know, he was married at 25. Laura, his partner, is a Welsh, amazing Welsh woman. He was about my age when I had him, when he had Mila. He's working in this creative arts world at the moment where acting jobs come and go. And, you know, that's why he started to do a writer's course. And, you know, obviously he's a producer and he's a director too, and he's trying to, he took my money and got an ABN and started up a company. And I was like, wait [00:44:00] a minute, I don't want to do that yet. But I watch him with the girls and I watch him with Mila, and I think it's just, you know, like you just want the best for them and you just want them to be happy. But they're very honest in their relationship and they learn from each other. Laura and Hunter Mila's mum, and they just got this really instinct, active love of co-parenting and working together. Now look, that might fall out in years. I don't think it will. There's just something strong about them and also just the girls like him and I always talking about the world that girls are going to live in, you know. And so Hunter knows that the balance of this crazy digital social world we live in, the mental health concern. I think that's one of his biggest and my biggest concerns. You know, Hunter struggles, you know, and I think, you know, we can talk about mental health much more openly and with acceptance. And so we're much more aware of that. And then we always do say every now and again I wonder how these girls are going to, you know, what sort of world they will be living in.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:44:58] You've won so many accolades and awards over the years with Bangarra, but what's your what do you reckon is your biggest?

**Stephen Page:** [00:45:04] That's good because I've got no work today. It's just. Yeah.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:45:07] What was your biggest win as a parent or a stepparent? What do you reckon? You know what? Are you quite happy to tick off that. Yeah I did that well.

**Stephen Page:** [00:45:16] God. That's crazy. It's funny because I, the thing that I would say I ticked off well would probably be just sustaining for that length of time, a First Nations mainstream theatre company. And leading that and learning from that. And the amazing clan relationships like I feel like the process for me, getting there in a story or my process for five weeks, creating a work before it has a western system process of an [00:46:00] opening night and a closing night like I felt the 33 works I did for Bangarra, they were all part of one big long serpent process.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:46:10] And that Hunter's been a big part of the serpent process?

**Stephen Page:** [00:46:13] Hunter has, he's been in everything. He you know, he told me he's been in the industry for for 24 years and he's 30, you know.

**Stephen Page:** [00:46:23] He's 30 and he was on stage at six. You know, he did *Clever Man*. He's pretty regular on the ABC drama. You know he's in the *Newsreader* at the moment. And I think his energy and his connection with me and, and as a son, as a friend, as my young man. Like he's watched me go through this. So I think with those accolades that you say, I think they're really just that sort of, you know, mainstream notch to acknowledge this true process that I do within the company. And yeah, that's the thing I'm most proud of. And and to pass that message tick on to Francis Rings now like who's who's grown out of the company.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:47:08] What is the one thing you'd like them to learn from you as the father figure?

**Stephen Page:** [00:47:13] Just to be true to themselves. Yeah. And always just be hungry to look, learn and listen.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:47:20] If you could wind back time, Stephen, and go back to before you became a dad and a stepdad almost at the same time, and you could give yourself some advice, you know, from a 58 year old wise man back to that younger man who's just become a dad. What what advice would you give yourself?

**Stephen Page:** [00:47:41] Probably just to give more time. I wish I would have gave more time when the kids were younger. Of my time and probably many more the

immediate home time I think that home time is really important. I watch Hunter and he's like, oh yeah, I'm up every morning at 630. Because [00:48:00] some little young woman at four year old has wants to tell me about her dream, and just watching him like, organise his weekends and activities with the girls, I would do it. And it was sort of birthdays and Christmases and stuff and being there, but I think, I don't know if it's advice, but I just wish I would have learned how to be more present.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:48:24] It is one of the biggest challenges dads tell me that pull to provide and support and grow their own capacity. You know, it all happens at about the same time that you have little ones. And it's that, how we talk about the work life balance. It's not a balancing act because no one can get it right anyway. But it is one of those regrets that how can you?

**Stephen Page:** [00:48:44] But that's the Western system construct

**Maggie Dent:** [00:48:46] It is the western system.

**Stephen Page:** [00:48:47] Of of system and how it's evolved. It's interesting watching a lot of those values back on country in their sort of kinship structures, you know, and hunting time with women and kid boys, time with men and then the father will take the both the boys and the girls, too. There's a sense of always being around in the energy.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:49:06] Someone's there.

**Stephen Page:** [00:49:07] Yeah yeah yeah yeah. And that's the only advice I would would be more about learning how to, to to balance that a bit more.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:49:17] Yeah. And to know it matters.

**Stephen Page:** [00:49:19] Yeah. And it's more vivid now. It's more potent now when I get to watch it through Hunter's lens. Yeah.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:49:26] Two special granddaughters who've got more time with you because now you're looking.

**Stephen Page:** [00:49:31] Well I felt bad, I was supposed to go over yesterday, and I usually go over the weekends, and I had to apologise yesterday, and I thought, oh, no, I don't want to start doing that. Like, I mightn't live for long and I should be spending every time with them.those.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:49:42] But those girls will just let you know how much you disappointed them. Trust me, that's how girls can do that.

**Stephen Page:** [00:49:49] It's good to hand them back, though. At the end of the day.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:49:53] Yeah, I wouldn't have said it out loud, but Stephen, can I thank you for your time?

**Stephen Page:** [00:49:59] Oh, thank you, and sorry [00:50:00] for my long winded answers.Yeah.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:50:02] You're a storyteller. That's what you're supposed to do.

**Stephen Page:** [00:50:06] Thank you for having me, Maggie.

**Maggie Dent:** [00:50:09] Stephen Page, former artistic director of the Bangarra Dance company. Wow. Stephen had so much wisdom in amongst his story. So let's grab a few quick points to add to The Good Enough Dad Checklist. Firstly, it's not always dads who can influence how we become a father or who has the greatest impact. Being raised by women, strong women, as Stephen said, can make you an incredible dad. Secondly, there is more than one way to be a man and a father, and you've got to work out how to do you, no matter what your influences are, whether theyre culture, as for Stephen, religion, environment, whatever it may be, you just don't have to be a cardboard cutout of Bandit to be a good enough dad. And thirdly, if you missed out being that present dad because you were doing that juggle between the work and being home, and you kind of have a few regrets, you can get that chance again when you become a grandfather. Be like Stephen and lap it up and enjoy the grandees or look forward to that experience. If you're not one yet. I'm Maggie Dent. This is The Good Enough Dad. Follow us on the LiSTNR app or wherever you get your podcasts.