

From the studio to the stage: How NAISDA is shaping future creative and cultural leaders

THOMAS E.S. Kelly's journey in dance began with an instinctive pull toward storytelling through movement. An artistic calling deeply rooted in his Minjungbal, Wiradjuri and Ni-Vanuatu heritage. As an 18 year old, that impulse led him to NAISDA, Australia's leading training organisation specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in dance and the performing arts. It became the training ground where Thomas' artistic voice was nurtured, developed and ultimately transformed into a lifelong career. It was also where he met his wife, fellow NAISDA graduate artist, Taree Sansbury a proud Kaurna, Narungga and Ngarrindjeri woman.

During his four years of NAISDA training, Thomas was immersed in NAISDA's rich environment of technical dance skills, culture and creative storytelling. "I was empowered to work hard," he says. "I didn't know what I was doing before NAISDA, but I gained so much insight into the arts industry and into myself." His time at NAISDA didn't just shape him into a performer, it laid the foundation for him to become a storyteller, a choreographer and eventually an artistic leader.

This formative experience was

more than just education; it was about identity. "NAISDA is so important because it helps students learn who they are, what they want to say and how they want to say it. And then it gives you the tools to say it," Thomas explained.

Today, Thomas is the Artistic Director of Karul Projects. He founded the independent First Nations dance company in 2017 along with his wife Taree who is Associate Artistic Director. Based on Minjungbal Country, South Queensland, Karul leads with cultural strength and a unique choreographic voice. Karul, meaning "everything" in the Minjungbal language, is a name that reflects the company's mission to do everything it can to increase First Nations' voice, visibility and stories.

Now, recently returning to where it all began as NAISDA Artists-in-Residence with Taree, Thomas describes it as a full-circle moment. "It's exciting and humbling," he says. "To return and give back to the place that gave me so much, it's very special." During the two-week residency, Thomas and Taree spark inspiration for a new generation of students, offering professional insight, creative innovation and

cultural leadership.

"NAISDA will be 50 years old next year and I am a part of that community. I am a part of that legacy and continuity. That drove me to push boundaries and helped me believe in myself."

Thomas's artistic journey reached new heights last year when he was awarded the prestigious Sidney Myer Creative Fellowship, a recognition that honours outstanding talent and exceptional leadership in the arts. The Fellowship is not just a personal accolade; it's an acknowledgment of the broader impact Thomas is making through his work.

"Receiving the Fellowship is a huge privilege," he says. "It gives me space to think big, create bold and dream further. It takes a lot of the financial pressure off and that means I can just concentrate on the art. But I carry NAISDA with me in everything I do. It's part of my DNA now."

During his time as Artist in Residence, Thomas focused on one of NAISDA's greatest strengths: building confidence as a foundation for excellence and innovation.

"I see myself in these students," he reflects. "I know the

fear of not feeling good enough or worrying whether you belong in the industry. I came to NAISDA with cultural dance and football skills. That was it. That's all I had. But I had an open mind. That's why it's important they see people like me who've walked this path and are still dancing."

Thomas's residency included teaching movement, sharing repertoire, mentoring and collaborating on creative development. It's all about creating safe spaces where students can experiment, fail, grow and soar. "They're not just learning dance," he explains. "They're learning who they are and what they have to offer."

This approach is driven by NAISDA's training and holistic support team which creates a place where students thrive physically and emotionally. Thomas understands that becoming a successful dancer means building skill sets, getting physically fit and emotionally strong, understanding the demands on your body, how to let it recover, how to fuel it, learning techniques and what you do and don't like. They're all the foundations of confidence

Thomas' journey with NAISDA reflects the meaningful change

that his four years of arts education provided. From an uncertain school leaver to standing confidently at the forefront of Australia's arts landscape – and he's only just getting started.

Thomas is committed to giving back by mentoring the next generation. He offers emerging artists real-world experience through Karul's professional productions. He passes on the same sense of pride, connection to culture and discipline that shaped his own NAISDA training and were foundational in launching his career.

Whether on stage, in studio, or leading from the front, Thomas E.S. Kelly continues to choreograph a strong and exciting future. His long-standing connection to NAISDA is a proof of what's possible.

NAISDA is currently accepting online applications for 2026 enrolments and Thomas has one piece of important advice. "If you're thinking about enrolling, don't hesitate. Come to NAISDA. Learn your culture, your history, your movement, your voice. You don't have to be the best dancer, but I promise you, this place will change your life. It changed mine."



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NAISDA is a Registered Training Organisation (RTO CODE 5639) and invites applications from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 16+ years for 1098NAT Certificate III in Dance Practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 11051NAT Certificate IV in Dance Practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 11052NAT Diploma of Professional Dance Performance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and 10841NAT Advanced Diploma of Professional Dance Performance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

