

Ashley Musick

Tamayo

Dance in World Cultures

16 April 2017

Storytelling in Dance

From traditional forms of dance such as the social dances of African communities to popular Broadway musicals that grace international stages, dance is an art form based in storytelling. Though it is a language that communicates without words, through the power of movement and emotional expression dance is able to connect to audiences and convey significant cultural values, messages, and beliefs. Storytelling is ingrained in many cultures as a means of passing on tradition, culture, history, and beliefs of specific communities or groups of people (Traynor), and as such, is not only a way of preserving culture, but also serves as a way to connect generations.

Kathak dance, for example, is a classical Indian dance that originated from travelling bards of North India known as Kathakars, or storytellers, who wandered the land communicating legends and stories by means of music, dance, and songs. Kathakars communicate stories through rhythmic foot movements, hand gestures, facial expressions, eye work, rhythmic words, twirls, small bells the dancer ties around their ankles, and music, in addition to incorporating narrative history in the form of legends from ancient mythology and great Indian epics (Traynor). There are three distinct schools (called gharanas) or specific forms of this genre that differ in the amount of emphasis placed on footwork or acting are the Jaipur gharana, the Benaras gharana, and the Lucknow gharana

("Kathak"). Kathak dance is currently one of the six classical forms of Indian dance, and is traditionally performed by an adult solo dancer of any gender because of the difficulty in learning the nuances of the dance (Traynor).

This genre of dance developed during the Bhakti movement, the trend of theistic devotion that evolved into medieval Hinduism, and as such follows and incorporates both Hindu and Muslim tradition. "Text-based analysis indicates Kathak as an ancient Indian classical dance form that presumably originated in Banaras or Varanasi and then spread its wings in Jaipur, Lucknow and many other regions of north and northwest India"

("Kathak"). However, colonial rule in the 18th and 19th centuries led to a highly critical attitude towards Kathak dance from Christian missionaries and British officials, leading to an anti-dance movement launched by the Europeans in 1892 to stop such stories and legends from being spread. The Indian community, however, worked hard to ensure that Kathak dance as an art form would not die out, continuing to teach the practice and even expanding the training to allow boys to participate as well. This determination led to a revival and reclaiming of Indian culture and tradition in the 20th century, with the goal of resurrecting the very essence of the nation itself ("Kathak"). Nowadays, Kathak dance is still taught around the globe, taught in studios and performed by dance companies internationally.

The use of dance to tell stories and preserve culture is an ancient tradition that is still incredibly relevant in our society today. Though the dance styles and genres differ, and many have largely been combined and modernized to form new dance styles, techniques, and movements, we can see storytelling through dance in nearly every medium of popular

culture today. Be it the newest dance move spread through YouTube and music videos, a classical ballet performance, a Broadway show, an impromptu flash mob, or a choreographed number on TV or in film, dance is constantly being used as a medium for communication, expression, and connection not only among individuals, but also society as a whole. It's impossible not to tell a story when dancing – each movement is an expression of the individual, the choreographer, the influences of both the local and global community or society, and the desire to connect with an audience. Dance itself is a story, and as such, it is no wonder that it is so often used to communicate and connect with individuals, societies, and cultures throughout the world.

While searching for inspiration for this project, I found that every dance form I examined had been used at one time or another to tell a similar story. Be it the refusal of the Indian community to let Kathak dance be forgotten, the implementation of classical ballet in the courts of France as a political tool, or the plot of the musical (and film) *Footloose*, dance is constantly being used as an agent for change, and as such, can be seen as a form of revolution in itself. We see the theme of dance as revolution used again and again in popular culture – *Hairspray*, *Footloose*, *Newsies*, *Step Up*, it was even the title of a once wildly popular video game called *Dance Dance Revolution* – but this is nothing new.

Like the history of Kathak dance, most dance forms have been used throughout history as a form of rebellion, protest, and a means of bringing about change in addition to preserving and reviving tradition and culture. Dance has survived by preserving these traditional styles and cultures, but has also changed and grown within itself to create new forms such as contemporary, jazz, modern, tap, and many other dance forms we are

familiar with today. We see the racial and class struggles shown through the plot of *Hairspray* – a musical whose main plot centers around protesting the racial and socioeconomic boundaries that prevented different races from dancing together on television – communicated and overcome through their love of dance. The plot of *Footloose* centers around a town where dancing is forbidden, where the kids in the town use dance as an outlet and a rebellion against the unfair rules imposed upon them by their community. *Newsies* expresses discontent with the treatment of lower classes through emotional and inspiring musical numbers, all of which encompass and employ the use of – you guessed it – dance. *High School Musical*, a Disney channel film that is still widely popular, used dance to communicate cultural values such as rebelling against the status quo, supporting others, and not being afraid to start something new.

These are all recent examples of the theme of rebellion in dance, but dance itself has always been revolutionary. From the persistence of slaves who refused to forget the traditional dances of their homeland, often dancing in secret or in outright defiance of their white masters, to dancers like Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham who revolutionized the dance world with the introduction of modern dance styles, dance as an art form is constantly changing, expanding, and evolving in a never ending quest to push the boundaries of society and the limits of human expression.

Personally, as a creative writing major and dance minor who has been dancing since I was three years old, it is impossible for me not to connect dance and storytelling. I find stories in everything I see and do – from the way someone dresses to their interests to their eye color, there is a reason and a story behind every detail in life, and dance is no different.

Being primarily a ballerina, I have been asked countless times if I ever get bored doing the same movements or variations over and over. But in all honesty, I never do, because, as music and dance writer Johnny Nevin puts it, “Because of the myriad of moments and textures that a dance can be made out of, it’s like a new story everytime it’s told.” In my mind, he couldn’t be more right – you can never do the same movement twice, just as two different people can never perform a step the same way. Dance is never static – every movement is always changing, stretching, pulling, working to be better, stronger, faster, longer, harder. Even the simplest of movements is infinitely complicated because of how differently the movement can be performed based on how the dancer chooses to think about or perform it. This is what I tried to communicate in my essences.

For my spiritual essence, I used gestures to illustrate taking inspiration from the world around me and drawing it into myself in order to represent how one’s emotion, energy, and passion can derive from the world around you in order to help you feel connected, grounded, and open to change. For intellectual, I chose controlled, specific hand movements that mimic opening a book to represent the importance of mindset and focus in dance; as much as passion and drive are important when dancing, it is just as necessary to learn how to use control and mental willpower to hone one’s skills in order to reach your full potential. This also directly relates to storytelling, for without the discipline and control required to maintain the physical movement while allowing the mind to transcend the body in order to visualize and tell the story behind the movement, dance would be nothing more than pure athleticism and not the expressive art form we know it as today. For physical, I used touch to recognize the power and capability of the physical body, and

reached towards the ground to signify the physical limitations and rules that we are constantly rebelling against and manipulating to our advantage. Physical limitations can prove to be a challenge, but we are also physical creatures, and it is through touch and sense that we are able to interpret and understand the world around us, as well as the story it is trying to tell us. And finally, for my social essence, I chose to clasp my hands before extending them outwards from my chest in order to symbolize connection.

Throughout this paper I have argued that dance is rebellion, dance is revolution, dance is storytelling. But what all of those things have in common is that they are a means of connecting us to each other, a way of sharing cultures and values and beliefs between communities and individuals alike. Both dance and storytelling are social mediums at their core, for though each could exist without an audience, half of the experience would be missing. I believe that each of these things – revolution, change, connection, culture, dance, storytelling – are inextricably intertwined, and that above all else, these are the elements (dare I say, the essences) of what it means to be human.

We are dancers, we are storytellers, we are revolutionaries – we are human. Each of these things is inseparable from the others, and are essential aspects of humanity and our struggle to understand ourselves, each other, and the world around us. From Kathak dance to musicals to ever-changing social dance trends, dance is our history, our future, and the story we all strive to tell – the story of humanity.

Bibliography

"Indian Kathak Dance." *YouTube*. YouTube, 19 Sept. 2007. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

"Kathak Dance | Vidya Patel | TEDxBrum." *YouTube*. YouTube, 05 July 2016. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

"Kathak, One of the Main Forms of Classical Dance-Drama of India." *Dance - History, Costume & Exponents*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Apr. 2017.

Nevin, Johnny. "A Light in the Dark: Telling a Story in Dance." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 01 Mar. 2013. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

Traynor, Sean. "Storytelling through the Kathak and Hula Dances." *Amazing Kids Magazine RSS*. Amazing Kids Magazine, Feb. 2013. Web. 25 Apr. 2017.