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Spring 2020

### Dance: The Universal Language of Storytellers

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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“Dance-the Universal Language of Storytellers”**

written by

**Meagan A. Woodard**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

April 27, 2020

## **Dance-the Universal Language of Storytellers**

Language can be a barrier as we try to communicate with one another, but people from countries all over the world for centuries have utilized dance to tell stories and pass down traditions. Dance could essentially be utilized much more in the modern world as we become more connected with technology. As we become connected through technology, we are still disconnected in language. Dance is a universal language that can be used to tell stories and share ideas. It can break language barriers and open the door for communication across cultures.

### **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

I grew up as a dancer, with my training beginning at the age of four years old in ballet, tap, and jazz. I then began training in the Vaganova method of ballet. The Vaganova method refers to both the technique and training system created by Russian dancer and teacher Agrippina Vaganova. After working with my church on several musical productions as a dancer, a woman by the name of Maria reached out to my mother and I. She invited my mother and I to travel to Dallas, Texas once a week for dance rehearsals and auditions partnered with Christ for the Nations.

As a young girl I remember my concept of dance being broadened as I learned fan, streamer, and tambourine dances. I was working with men and women from all over the North Texas area. The thing that stood out to me the most and inspires me to this day was when dancers flew in from around the world to join us the last few weeks of rehearsal. Dancers flew in from Japan, Singapore, and Mexico. Most of the dancers who flew in did not speak English. Yet, I was amazed that they were doing the same dances I was. They were telling the same story alongside me at a conference for Christ for the Nations. It was a life-changing experience for me, an elementary school aged child, to dance alongside people from different nations and tongues and communicate

one unified message through dance to a giant auditorium of people. I have never forgotten this experience.

My freshman year I came to Ouachita Baptist University and I enrolled in an honors course, Sacred Spaces. The class was devoted to learning about people groups, religions, and what made a place sacred. The class culminated into a group project where you defended why a place was sacred. It was because of my group's decision to study and defend a place sacred to the Aboriginal people that my passion for dance being a universal language was reignited. At the end of our presentation I called for audience participation-class members would be given a character from the dreamtime story we had discussed to dance/act out for the rest of the class to guess. It was amazing to watch my class members dance and act almost exactly as the Aboriginal people I had studied doing the same. The class was able to call out exactly what each person was, such as a crane.

## DEFINING DANCE

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines dance as, "the movement of the body in a rhythmic way, usually to music and within a given space, for the purpose of expressing an idea or emotion, releasing energy, or simply taking delight in the movement itself." Merriam Webster defines dance as, "an act or instance of moving one's body rhythmically usually to music : an act or instance of dancing, a series of rhythmic and patterned bodily movements usually performed to music, a social gathering for dancing, a piece of music by which dancing may be guided, and the art of dancing." The trouble in defining dance, however, is that it takes many forms, from improvisational to formal to social to theatrical. Dance can be further defined by function, distinguishing it from other patterned movement, and intent. Dance has functioned as an important part of religious rituals. Dance can aid the worshipper and spectator alike in transcending. (Mackrell)

## Dance defined by function

With the many forms it can be defined by, dance can be defined by its different functions as well. Religious, the military, and the social are all functions of dance. Almost all cultures, at some point, have had, or still have, dances that play an important part in religious rituals. There are dances where performers and spectators work themselves into a trance to transcend and receive the powers of the gods. Indian temple dancers (like that of bharatanatyam that I discuss later) can be found enacting the stories of the gods to worship them. Even some early Christians included dance in their prayer services. (Mackrell)

Military marches and drilling procedures of today can be seen as descendants of tribal war and hunting dances that have been fundamental to many cultures. Weapons and fighting movements were used in war dances throughout history to train and prepare soldiers on both the emotional and spiritual levels for battle. This can be seen in certain Maori haka and the Aboriginal dances I discuss later. Hunting tribes even performed dances dressed as their prey and imitated their movements. Using sympathetic magic, the hunters acquired the skills of the animal and gained the power to overtake it. (Mackrell)

Dance also functions in a social role in all cultures. Dance can be for celebration, courtship, recreation, or entertainment. Courtship dances function in a social role as dancers essentially peacock for one another and engage in socially acceptable physical contact. These traditional dances often have motifs of fertility and mime(d) sexual intercourse. Peacocking and engaging in socially acceptable physical content can be seen in night clubs, at high school dances, and college parties today. Dancing at these places or events today may even imply a desire for further romantic relations. Dance has most likely been important to courtship and social gatherings longer than it has been important to recreation and entertainment. (Mackrell)

Several scholars believe that, once, dance was an essential part of everyday life. It was a part of both everyday activities and religious rituals. It is when social and

economic structures became more complex that we saw dance become a source of pleasure and separate from the important needs for survival. There were classes or castes that now had “leisure” time. With tribal societies becoming more complex, many ritual forms, including these dances, lost their significance and turned into folk dances for recreation. The folk dances still included motifs from the religious, work, and hunting dances. All these dances, no matter the point in time, still aided in social unification. Also, dance has been a way to display political and social strength or identity. (Mackrell)

### Different from other patterned movement

Throughout all these forms, however, stylization and formal organization are when dance becomes dance and not just movement. Formal organization is determined of course by aesthetics or function. To some extent this may be choreography. There are activities, such as sports and animal behaviour, that involve patterned movement but are not dance. These activities are not classified as dance because they are not driven by aesthetic pleasure, self-expression, and entertainment. (Mackrell)

### Dance defined by intent

Intent is perhaps the most important element in distinguishing dance from patterned movement. There are many natural occurrences that are more entertaining and aesthetically pleasing than a five-year old’s dance recital. However, bees buzzing about and birds circling one another can only be referred to as dance as an analogy. These animals involuntarily participate in these actions in order to survive. These animals’ acts do not intend to provide entertainment, be aesthetically pleasing, or be a means of self-expression. I argue that in order for a dance to be called a literal dance the dancer must be able to distinguish it as a dance or intend for it to be one. (Mackrell)

## EXAMPLES OF DANCE TO COMMUNICATE

### ABORIGINAL DANCE

The Aboriginal people are indigenous people of Australia. Hundreds of years ago Aboriginals occupied all of Australia. Today, only a few groups remain on traditional land. One of these groups, the Gagudju, is said to be the longest unbroken culture the world has ever known. The Aboriginal people believe that man, animals, plants, and the earth are one,

**“They are all manifestations of a single life force. To maintain their mystical union with nature, the people say, they must look after the country. They do this through their art and many others subtle ways.”**(Australia's Aborigines)



Kurangara Dancers

A ceremonial meeting of Australian Aboriginals is called a Corroboree. At Corroborees people interact with the Dreamtime through music, costume, and dance. (Aboriginal Ceremonies) The Dreamtime or Dreaming is a part of most Aboriginal cultures. The Dreaming refers to the beginning of time at creation when supernatural deities, ancestors, or heroes created the world as Aborigines know it. They do not believe that the supernatural beings created the Earth, but they did give it its form, substance, and context. During the Dreamtime, these supernatural beings are said to have created the geographic features of the land such as mountains, caves, and waterways. These beings are also believed to be responsible for awakening humans' internal and external awareness and teaching humans rituals and customs. The Dreamtime can be understood as having taken place in the past, but it is also understood to be eternal and continuing to exist with current time. Through sacred rituals, the essential purpose of Aboriginal dance, Aborigines can enter the Dreamtime and "experience acts of primordial creativity". (Aboriginal Dance: History & Ceremonies) Due to the sacred nature of these rituals, people from outside the community are not allowed to participate or observe the event. Therefore, there is not as much documentation of the specifics of the form of ancient Aboriginal dance.

One main purpose of Aboriginal dance is to tell stories. Stories about the land, people, animals, and the Dreamtime are passed from generation to generation through dance. Animals are often imitated in the dances to help tell the stories and bring life to the Dreamtime. Some animals, like the crane that is performed by males, can only be performed by a specific gender. The dances and their storytelling are also a part of initiation and coming of age ceremonies for both boys and girls. (The Tradition Of Aboriginal Dance)

During Aboriginal dances, both performers and audience members paint their faces and bodies. The body paint relates to the character the dancer is imitating or is representative of the dancer's family. Costumes or adornments are also worn. They are



made of a variety of fur and feathers from Australian animals. The fur and feathers are mixed with cloth. Sometimes tree and bush

branches are attached to dancers' hips.

(The Tradition Of Aboriginal Dance) Two men recounted their participation in a Corroboree that included a dance called the Mudlunga, "The performers wore unusual head-gear, carried bunches of box-leaves, and also had leaves tied to their ankles." (Hercus)

Aboriginal dancing is usually accompanied by music. Two instruments prevalent in accompaniment are the didgeridoo and clapping sticks. Elders or songmen sometimes sing along to the music. The singing tells stories through song. Talented dancers and singers are highly respected members of the Aboriginal



Dancer Applying Paint

community as they are the ones to pass the stories from generation to generation. (The Tradition of Aboriginal Dance)

## Polynesian Dance

The peoples of the Polynesian Islands also have a history of using dance to communicate. The islands, from Hawaii to Easter Island to New Zealand, all have very similar dance patterns. I will explore dances from both New Zealand and Hawaii. In New Zealand the Maoris most well known dance is the haka. In Hawaii you have the hula.

## Haka

Due to the intertribal wars during the eighteenth century the Maori people perceived the European explorers to be enemies. The Europeans often were. However, this inhibited how much the Europeans could properly study native life. A lot of the reports of Maori dancing from this time are inaccurate and distort the Maori people and their dancing. Most journals from this time describe the dancing as war-dances or grotesque. The Europeans rarely ever mention the other dances of the Maori people beyond the "war dances". (Youngerman, 76)

Haka, is the generic term for both Maori singing and dancing. Haka can be used as both a noun and a verb. There are different types of haka. Each type of haka was traditionally used to communicate something different. The different types of haka are differentiated by the words accompanying "haka". The accompanying words typically refer to either specific movements or the function of that particular dance. For example, haka koiri refers to a haka with swaying movements. Koiri roughly translates to curly or curling. Haka tutohu, is a haka performed in formation that resembles a wedge. It is used for purposes of divination. The word tutohu roughly translates to acknowledge or receive a proposal favorably. Today when the term haka is used it generally refers to the haka taparahi. Haka taparahi is a ceremonial haka, a posture dance, and is performed without weapons. Haka powhiri is a welcoming dance. Powhiri roughly translates as to welcome, invite, beckon, wave.(Youngerman, 77) In this haka it is still custom to wave articles of clothing and plants. (Youngerman, 81) Haka waiata was described by the European explorers as "graceful", but it still had the shaking hands, chest slapping, and dynamic breathing that can be seen in other hakas. Waiata translates as to sing. Haka waiata is called a song, but arm and leg movements are used. Youngerman believes the song and the dance could be more closely interrelated in haka waiata than in the haka taparahi and peruperu. (Youngerman, 93)

A characteristic of Maori dances that was and is still practiced today is that the dancers seem to always line up to face one direction or create a center-facing square.

This setup implies an audience. (Youngerman, 87) In hakas the feet are essentially used to keep time. The feet usually do not move aside from stomping. Arm movements are essential and along the lines of pantomime. The arm movements explain the attitudes or feelings of the words, but the arm movements do not literally act out the words. The main function of the movements in any of the haka styles is to emphasize the words of the song (haka refers to both dance and song). (Youngerman, 82-83)

## Hula

Dr. Taupōuri Tangarō stated, “I don't even think (people) notice that if there's a hula dancer there's words. We can't dance without narrative. The language is how we communicate to our universe. People think hula is choreography. Hula is first a language that has a choreographical piece to it.” (Hula: Preserving Native Hawaiian Language and Culture) The Hawaiian people did not have a version of a written language until the early nineteenth century. Hula is how the Hawaiian people kept their stories alive.

Hula has developed over the years from a religious ritual to secular entertainment. Hulas played an important role in the religious life of early Hawaiian people. Hiiaka, the younger sister of the volcano goddess Pele, is credited with originating the dance. Laka is the patron goddess of the hula but is ranked lower in the hierarchy. In Ancient Hawaii there was a class of paid dancers that kept the dance alive. These dancers were in service to the goddess and received free training, a steady salary, prestige, and a form of retirement. These dancers, both male and female, were chosen at a young age and sent to the halau, hall of hula. The kumu, priest of hula, and his assistants taught them to chant genealogies, sing songs, make costumes, and learn the dances. Once they had mastered the dances, they were presented in an uniki to the king and court. (Pollenz, 225)

Hula chants preserved many traditions of gods and kings. There was a variety of ancient hulas. Each of the dances is dependent on hand gestures, similar to Bharatanatyam of India that I discuss later. The hand gestures are divided into three

categories, but all enacted the story of the chant. The first category is that of symbols. One or two hands can be used to symbolize an object such as a tree or flower. The second category gestures can fall into is locomotive. Both hands are used in a moving position to represent action such as walking, climbing, paddling, or even rain. The third category of gestures used one or two hands while stationary to illustrate concepts like love, sadness, and hope. (Pollenz, 226)

Hula could be performed both sitting or standing. The dancer never sat cross-legged but always knelt. Some sitting hulas featured dancers holding rattles while also performing the gestures or beating their chest to change the song/rhythm. Standing dances depended on hip movement. The dancers would stand with knees bent and back straight as their hips moved in circular or side to side motions. Extremely fast rotations of the hips were called ami. Their feet almost never left the ground. However, they did rise up on their toes and sometimes quickly hop to the side. These dances were performed in large groups performing in unison to chants and music (music was often performed by retired dancers). Some instruments that were featured in the accompaniment include an ipus (calabashes), a puniu (knee drum), the ukeke (musical bow), and ohe (nose-flute). (Pollenz, 227)

For the Hawaiian people to survive colonization they had to stop speaking their language. Yet, the hula continued underground. Hula took on the language even more so. Bob Holman in his Language Matters documentary says, “In Hawaii they have a saying that ‘In language is life, in language is death’.” Hawaiians began to reclaim their heritage and there was a cultural renaissance in the 1960s and 70s. Hawaiians began dancing the hula again to embrace their history. Hawaiians dance the hula today to honor the language to which they move. Keali’i Reichel has devoted himself to the revival of the Hawaiian language and hula has been an integral part of that. (Language Matters) In response to the question, “What does hula have to do with language?”, hula master Keali’i Reichel,

**“It has everything to do with language...Hula is one of the very few dance forms that requires words. All hula springs from expressing oneself**

**physically through the poetry of the text...It's the physical manifestation of the chant."**

## Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam originated in southern India in the state of Tamilnadu. It started as a temple dance tradition, and until the 1930s it was called Sadir Nac or Dasi Attam, the dance of the devadasis. (Puri, 45) The foundations of Bharatanatyam come from the *Natya Shastra*. *Natya Shastra* is the ancient Hindu text of performance arts written by Bharata Muni, the father of Indian theatrical art forms. The dance expresses Hindu religious themes and spiritual ideas, particularly of Shaivism. The name is derived from the most important aspects of dance in the Indian culture. Bha comes from the word bhava. Bhava means emotions. Ra from the word raga. Raga means music or melody. Ta comes from tala. Tala means rhythm. Natyam means dance. Bharatanatyam is



characterized by both the linear form of the body and the linear spatial patterns. Bharatanatyam encompasses music, rhythm, and expressional dance. (Bharatnatyam) Bharatanatyam is a major genre of classical Indian dance and is traditionally performed exclusively as a woman's solo.

The devadasis, which translates as servants of god, were the women who were dedicated to temple service and performed these dances. (Puri, 45) The British colonizers were often entertained by the devadasis when visiting local rulers. Colonizers

began using devadasi to mean “dancing girl”. They ultimately disapproved of the custom, and a group of English social reformers launched an anti dance movement to prohibit Bharatanatyam and the devadasis system. (Puri, 47) The dance was exclusive to Hindu temples up until this point in the nineteenth century. When Bharatanatyam was banned by British colonizers in 1910 the dance, exclusive to temples, began being performed in protest outside the temple walls by the Indian community, particularly by dance and music scholars. (History of Bharatanatyam) The work of dance and music scholars in the early twentieth century allowed for Bharatanatyam to continue. Their work eventually revived the dance and its study. Bharatanatyam’s popularity spread throughout India so that the tradition was not lost and it can still be studied today.

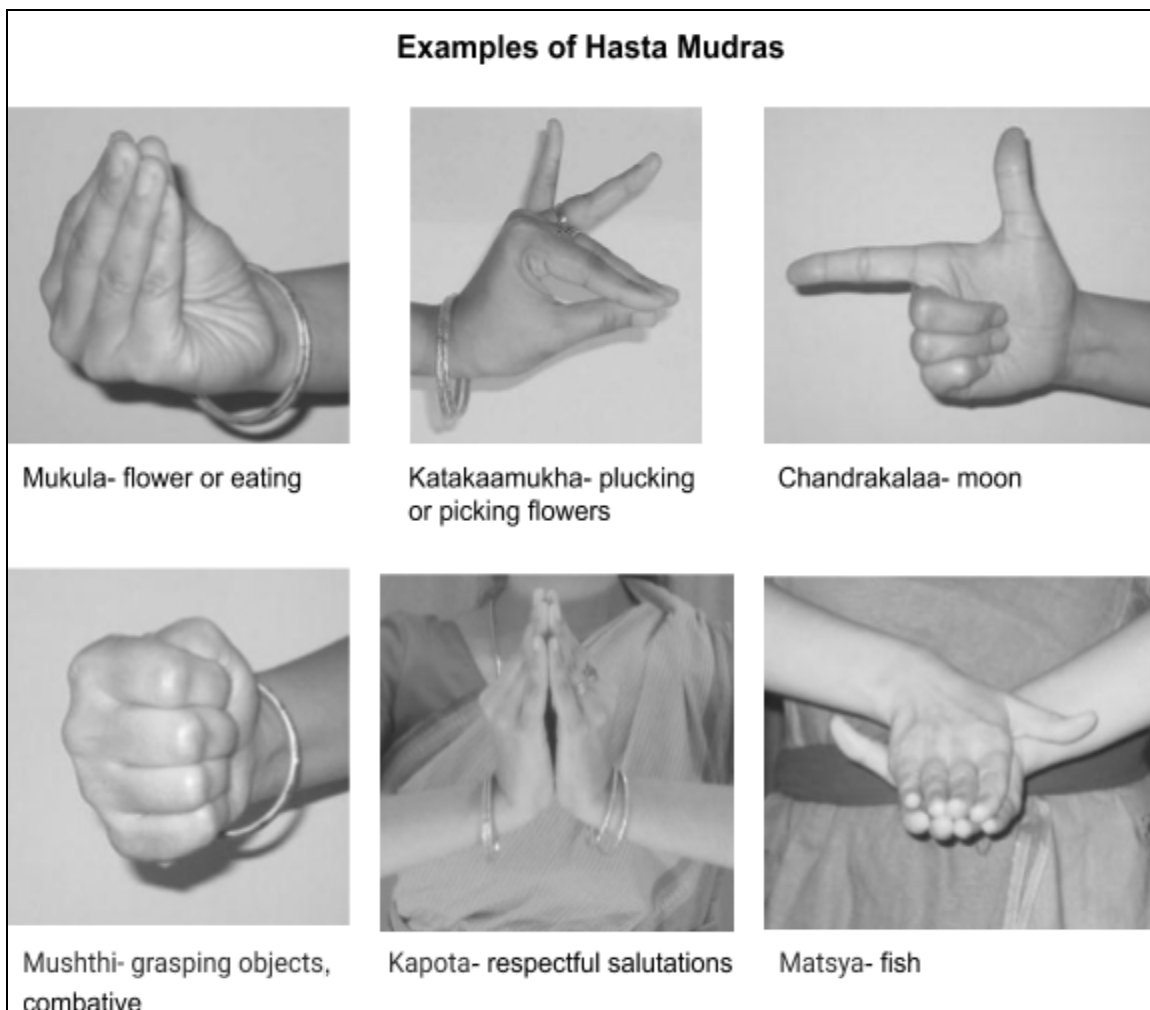
Movements and posture that are typical of the dance: fixed upper torso, bent legs, knees flexed out, rhythmic footwork, and sophisticated sign language. The vocabulary of sign language is based on hand gestures, eyes, and face muscles. (History of Bharatanatyam) Traditionally, a performance could last anywhere from half an hour to five hours. The performance is a series of dances rather than one dance. Each dance in the series has a unique form of music, and their name is derived from the musical form. The dances have a specific order in which they are to be performed. (Puri, 53)

The dancer interprets three elements of music through movement in the series of dances: raga (musical mode or scale), tala (metrical or time cycle), sahitya (lyrics or words). Every dance in the series begins with an improvised musical introduction or prelude, the raga, to which that dance is set. The raga leads into the first phrase of the music the dancer is to interpret. Each musical composition is also set to a particular tala and may include sahitya. (Puri, 52)

South Indian music belongs to the Carnatic school, and the instruments used in Bharatanatyam are specific to that style. Unique to Bharatanatyam, however, is the nattuvanar or dance master (they are often the dancer’s guru) that chants the rhythmic syllables in certain sections of the dance and beats the rhythms made by the dancer’s feet with talam or cymbals. The other participating musicians are: a drummer, one or

more singers, and two or more other instrumentalists. The two-headed mridangam (drum), a tanpura (drone), and a vina (a sitar-like instrument), and bamboo flute are instruments featured in music accompanying Bharatanatyam. (Puri, 52)

The seven main genres of dance in the typical Bharatanatyam series are performed in this order: alarippu, jatiswaram, shabdham, varnam, padam, tillana, and sloka. The first dances in the series focus on nrmta, movements without narrative meaning. The songs these initial dances are characterized by a singer who either sings jatis (rhythmic patterns) or the names of the svaras (melody or notes). The dancer combines movement from the Bharatanatyam vocabulary to form phrases to fit the music. Her main concern in the initial dances is interpreting the melody and rhythm. The dancer's feet will beat out the rhythm while the rest of her body marks time. She uses stylized hand-positions or hasta mudra to create patterns that express both the svaras and jatis.



The series continues with the dancer beginning to incorporate abhinaya or mime into her movements. The dances in this part of the series are when facials and hasta mudra interpret the narrative of the sahitya of the songs. These songs bring Sanskrit, Telugu, or Tamil poems to life. These dances are usually for a deity, Shiva. The dancer may describe the deity or address him directly, and she may act out Hindu legends to evoke emotion or mood. (Puri, 54) The dancer does this all solo and may act as many characters. Her movements not only create the characters but the setting as well.

The last half of the performance series are usually several padams. Padams are described as love poems with the male lover usually revealed to be a Hindu deity, such as Shiva. The padams describe love between a woman and a man. The narrative padams are followed by a dance that is mainly nrta, tillana. Following tillana the dancer would interpret a sloka (Sanskrit verse) to praise a deity. Sloka has a raga but no tala. At the end of sloka the dancer concludes with a mangalam, a type of salutation to invoke the blessings of the deities. (Puri, 60-61)

Natya is a generic Sanskrit word for theatre: spoken word, sung word, music and movement. Several ancient Indian treatises on theatre state the importance of body language in communication. Nriya is the word closest to “dance” in India and is the main medium of natya (theatre). It is used in reference to movements that act and dance. Nriya encompasses both abhinaya and nrta. Abhinaya is believed to refer to the mime element of movement; abhinaya movement communicates or brings meaning. Facial expressions and especially hand gestures convey a narrative. Nrta refers to movements that do not have narrative significance; they are abstract or pure dance. All forms of both natya and nrtya use gesture language (this includes facial expressions), hasta mastras, and full body movement. The elaborate use of gesture-language in line with Indian aesthetic standards of dramaturgy makes Bharatanatyam considered a part of both classical theatre and tradition in India. Bharatanatyam is both dancing and acting. (Puri, 54-58)

Bharatanatyam is still performed today and travels the world in the form of recitals. The recitals of today that travel often begin with a translation.



**“...the dance form appears internationally as both an emblem of national and diasporic identity and as a ‘high art’ that transcends national and linguistic boundaries... The act of translation, then, marginalizes the dance form for its international viewership, designating it as that which requires explication; but at the same time, this translation universalizes the dancer's status as she adopts the position of the agent of information.”**

**-Janet O’Shea**

## Ballet

In the 17th century ballet rose from the French court of King Louis XIV. Ballet was inspired by minstrels traveling from Italy. It started in Italy during the Renaissance. Ballet was originally a form of royal court entertainment. Catherine de Medici brought ballet to France, where Louis XIV loved it. King Louis XIV was known for being a great dancer. He formed the Royal Academy of Dance, and it turned into the oldest ballet company in the world, the Paris Opera Ballet. (Ballet’s Greatest Hits)

In 1681 Jean-Baptiste Lully's opera, *Le Triomphe de L'amour*, marked the movement of ballet from court to the stage and female dancers made their professional debut. (A Brief History of Ballet) Ballet continued to evolve through the early 1700s and ballerinas gained popularity. Famous female dancers such as Marie-Anne de Camargo and Marie Salle made radical reforms in ballet, to costumes specifically. By the mid-eighteenth century women had evidently taken over ballet. (Ballerina, The: Footnotes)

Also during the mid-eighteenth century, Jean Georges Noverre rebelled against the notion that ballet was merely a subsection of opera. He believed ballet was an art form that could stand alone. Noverre’s ideas of ballet containing expressive and dramatic movements to create characters lead to ballet d’action. Ballet d’action is a dramatic style of ballet with a narrative or plot. Noverre’s ballets laid the groundwork for narrative ballets of the nineteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, narrative ballets such as *Giselle* and *La Sylphide* were created. Ballet became popular in Russia

at this time. Russian choreographers, such as Marius Petipa, and composers elevated ballet to what some say was its greatest height. Marius Petipa choreographed The Nutcracker, The Sleeping Beauty and Swan Lake during this period. The main purpose of these ballets was to display classical technique to the fullest. Complex sequences displaying demanding steps, leaps, and turns were blended into the narrative.(A Brief History of Ballet)

Today, Ballet companies tour the world. While more contemporary and abstract stories are told through ballet today, these classic stories are still performed by the most well-known classical ballet companies in France, Cuba, United States, Russia, Australia, Canada, Netherlands, Italy, and England. Common stories told through dance no matter what country the company is in: Swan Lake, The Nutcracker, Giselle, Romeo and Juliet, Don Quixote, Cinderella, La Bayadere, Coppelia, The Sleeping Beauty, and La Sylphide.

**“Wherever they may be found in the world, the great traditions of dancing deliberately and consciously convey meaning. They are not simply mindless entertainments.”- Rajika Puri**

## PERSONAL RESEARCH

I decided to conduct my own study. What would happen if I choreographed a dance to tell a story? What form of dance would I use and where would I find my dancers? Would the audience understand the story I told? How would I know? I auditioned and made it into the Henderson State University Dance Company. I was given the privilege to choreograph for them as well as dance. I now had an entire company of dancers to use and collaborate with. I could begin my process of attempting to tell a story through dance an audience would connect and understand.

## My Process



My process of choreographing a piece all began with the question of, “What story will I tell?” I needed a story that I knew well enough to dig deep into but was passionate enough about telling to work on for several months. It also had to be a story that I felt the dancers I was working with could connect to. And I thought, “What better story than my own?” I needed to pinpoint a defining moment in my life to dig deep into, and I remembered an idea I had, had years ago about a dancer moving closer and closer to a light for the duration of an entire piece. There was a portion of my life when I battled with severe depression, and the only thing that got me through was this very vivid picture in mind of a light at the end of the tunnel and the community that surrounded me.

I created an inspiration board on Pinterest of images. Images of this idea of light at the end of the tunnel. I listened to song after song trying to find something that encapsulated what I felt in those moments and the story I wanted to tell without words. I narrowed my song choices down to the instrumental version of "A Prayer" by Kings Kaleidoscope and "Where the Light Gets In" by Sennen. I played both the songs for the 2019-20 members of Henderson State University Dance Company as I went through my inspiration image board. Next, I played the music for them and had each dancer improvise reaching for light at the other side of the space. I wanted to see how each of them told me about desperately clinging to hope. Then, I narrowed down which dancers I would use to tell my story. I chose one soloist to reach and move towards the light while everyone else would be the community that surrounds her.

I chose to use the medium of modern dance because in my opinion it has the most creative freedom. Yet, I was wondering how in the world I was going to tell a story about hope and the light at the end of the tunnel to an audience. At the time I was taking a directing class, and in class I rewatched a Brene Brown talk on vulnerability. One thing really stood out to me in her talk, "When you ask people about love they tell you about heartbreak. When you ask people about belonging they'll tell you their most excruciating experiences of being excluded. And when you ask people about connection, the stories they told me were about disconnection." That was it. I was going to have to be vulnerable with my choreography. My dancers were going to have to be vulnerable. In order to tell a story of hope I was going to need to tell a story of despair.

I spent an entire rehearsal with my soloist on her opening choreography. I had to take her back with me to all those times I felt despair alone in my room. I was researching grief, depression, and body language. In despair, grief, depression, etc. they often mention how hard it can be to get out of bed in the morning. That is where we started. The soloist's beginning choreography was her trying to get out of bed in the morning. It was painful. It was hard. She found her light to reach for and was able to do it. The rest of the dance slowly but surely fell into place after months of rehearsal. Her community surrounded her. They danced through their own daily lives and made getting

out of bed look easy. Every now and then in the piece someone would notice the soloist struggling and carry or lift them. The community at one point became an obstacle in her path towards the light. The soloist climbed, reached for the light, and continued to make her way towards the light. Some people even knocked the soloist down as they danced through their own lives. However, the ending that I had prepared for my informal audience viewing, despite being knocked down the soloist rises up to continue dancing towards the light. She repeats the choreography from before but this time with more strength. Throughout the piece the soloist never once took her eyes off the light.

## Obtaining Data

The piece was presented at Henderson State University Dance Company's Fall Showcase. The showcase is informal and takes place in the company's dance studio-no lights and no costumes. Dancers were dressed in neutral clothing. Notecards were distributed along with programs to everyone who came to the showcase. My piece was left untitled in the program and audience members were asked to answer two questions:

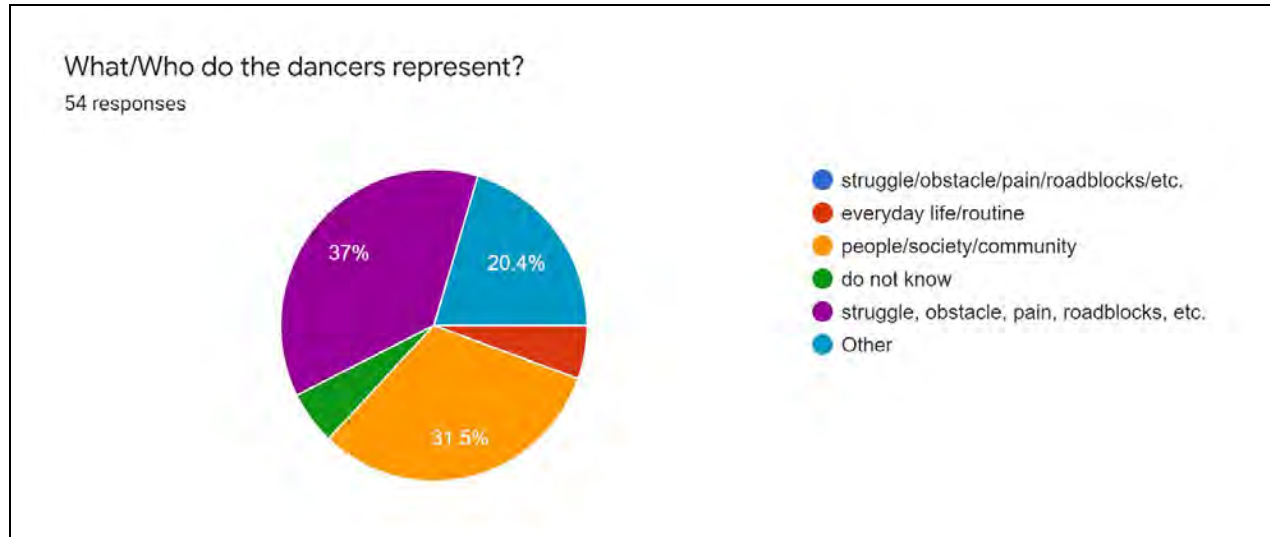
1. What is the story of the piece?
2. What/who do the dancers represent?

I received fifty-four responses from college students, faculty, staff and parents.

## Responses

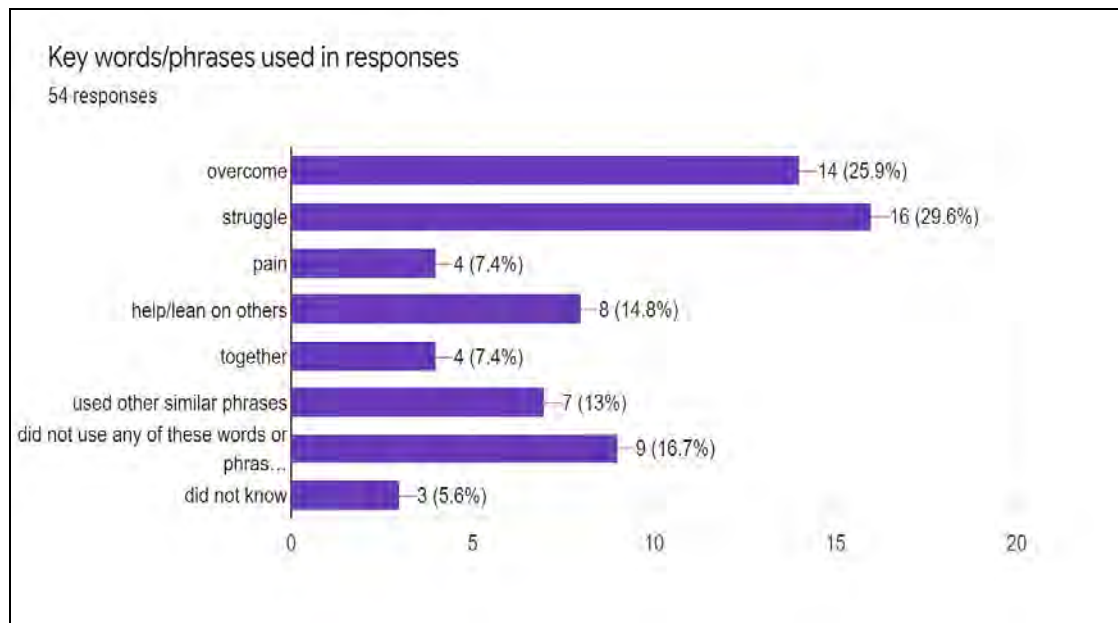
I did not know what to expect when reading through the notecards of responses. As I flipped through the deck and began reading I immediately started seeing similarities between responses. The dancers were meant to represent people. They represented people in pain, people as obstacles to others, people going about everyday life, and people struggling to overcome with hope. According to the responses the audience was able to pick up on all of those things for the most part.

What really amazed me was the amount of people that used some form of the word "overcome" or "struggle" in their response. If those words were not used in their



response then something similar was. Words like obstacle, hardship, issues, adversity, roadblocks, bad things, and stress were some words used in the similar phrases.

Out of the fifty-four responses, fourteen wrote that they saw the story of someone needing others' help or support. Only three people responded that they did not know or could not tell who/what the dancers represented or what the story of the piece was. Of the remaining fifty-one responses, there were only four that stuck out as not connecting to the story that I was trying to tell. The first saw lights trying to shine, the second saw the brain going to sleep and a dream, the third saw flowers reacting to climate changes, and the fourth saw time pieces in a bad dream. However, even within these responses motifs of the piece can be seen: light (hope), trying to shine (struggle), brain going to sleep and a dream (the act of getting out of bed in the morning-sleep), flowers reacting to climate change (struggle and outside forces either helping or hindering you), and time pieces in a bad dream (the act of getting out of bed in the morning-sleep). Overall, the story was perceived by the audience as I intended for it to be. The audience was able to connect and understand the story I was trying to tell.



## CONCLUSION

Language can be a barrier as we try to communicate with one another, but people from countries all over the world for centuries have utilized dance to tell stories and pass down traditions. Aesthetic pleasure, self-expression, and/or entertainment sets dance apart from other patterned movement. Dance has filled a variety of functions from religious, to military, to social across cultures and time as exemplified by Aboriginal people, haka, hula, bharatanatyam, and ballet. Throughout all forms studied there is an element of storytelling found in each, regardless of the function. A common theme of mime and gesture was used in all forms. I was then able to carry over the use of gestures in my own piece as I told a story through dance. The dance was successful in portraying the story I wanted to tell. Respondents saw the story of people. Respondents saw struggle and overcoming. I found that dance is in fact a language for storytellers. However, rather than dance being a universal language I have found international to be the better word. Merriam-Webster defines international as, “active, known, or reaching beyond national boundaries.” I have come to the conclusion that dance is an international language. In an age of social media, live video, and travel dance has the ability to tell stories and share ideas, like hope, beyond national boundaries.

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