

Dance as Popular Culture

Dance has been greatly minimized in the United States culture today, but is still a very integrated aspect in popular culture. It serves many functions such as artistic expression for the choreographer, who creates the dance, and communication for the dancer to the audience. Dance can relay messages of everyday life, behavior and values through the body movements. There are a number of different styles of dance such as ballet, jazz, modern and tap, which are the best known. There are also an endless number of dances which originate from other countries that have been adapted into the American culture. Because of the various styles of dance there are many ways in which aspects of popular culture can be conveyed to the audience.

You must ask yourself though, what is art? It is a method of expressing yourself, a creative thinking process, something pleasing to the audience's eye. Dance is very much a form of artistic expression in my opinion. There is an intense creative process attached to this genre of art. Many years of learning and practicing different techniques are essential of effectively being able to communicate to the audience. There is a formula to learning dance. Many dancers begin their training at a young age in a dance school. There they begin to develop the dance

techniques and allow their bodies to adapt into the new shapes taught to them. As the dancer progresses in their training they may choose to move on to a private dance school with more intense and individual attention, or if it is at the right time in their lives they may move on to dance at a University. As a dancer, you must be serious about your training to enable yourself to enhance your skills and succeed in communicating a message to the audience.

For many dancers within the United States dance is seen as a form of exercise, an activity done for fun or possibly a career. We do not use dance in the same context as other cultures that incorporate dance into their daily routines and rituals. In many eastern cultures they have different dances specific to certain occasions like birth, marriage, death, puberty and religious ceremonies. In cultures like those who use dance in everyday life, dance becomes more than just an art form, as it is seen in the United States, it is a way of socializing others into a culture. Dance is used at the community level rather than at the family level in these cultures where dance is used as a form of socialization. The community will gather together in celebration for these ceremonies and dance together in support of the occasion.

Not only does dance socialize young members into a culture, but also individuals who are foreign to the culture can be socialized into it. It is said that one will learn an increased amount about a culture through the dance than through any book you

could read. Specific behaviors and values you could not learn through reading a book could be learned through dance. Certain behaviors attached to race, age and gender differ between cultures, but it is those behaviors that aid in a functional way of life. Also, the way the people think in terms of their personal identity and their impressions they have of others' identities may come out through dance. Certain stereotypes people would not just plainly come out and say may be incorporated into their ritualistic dances. Using dance in a ritualistic manner also gives the community a sense of unity and resistance to other outside forces that may bring change upon the culture. Dance keeps their culture and heritage alive through this universal form of communication; dance.

The style of dance typical to what we would see in the United States has been developed by a number of choreographers who have been influenced by their life experiences and brought it to the stage. Bob Fosse, a well-known Broadway choreographer of the 1950's, has created many shows such as *All That Jazz*, *Chicago* and *Damn Yankees*. His choreography has a signature style to it influenced from his past experiences dancing in saloons and burlesque houses. He was the first to introduce this sexy, seductive style of dance to the public eye and also one of the first jazz choreographers. Jazz dance was first introduced into the American culture during the time when Fosse became popular.

Katherine Dunham is another popular choreographer in the United States during the 1940's. "The general openness of society

during the war years brought to the forefront a number of African-American dancers," (Crump & Staley, 1992, p.186) such as Miss Dunham. It was during the right time in her life and in the changing times that she prospered in her dance choreography career. Through her technique she interprets cultural values and uses dance progressions to convey a cultural meaning. In Dunham's dances she incorporates ceremonies and rituals from countries of Latin and Gallic roots such as Jamaica, Trinidad, Martinique and Haiti. She was more than just a dancer, but an anthropologist also. She was very interested in culture and used dance as a way to relay her knowledge to others.

Both Bob Fosse and Katherine Dunham had a similar goal for their dancers. They wished for their dancers to achieve self-confidence so that they could allow themselves to show a sense of individuality in their dancing. Miss Dunham teaches her dancers the method of self-knowledge, it "allows the individual to sense his place within society (Rose, 1990, p.22)" and gives insight into the social structure that surrounds him/her, forcing the dancer to look within himself. When Fosse created his dances he used repetitious music so that the dance movements also could be repeated, allowing the dancer to feel comfortable. This sense of repetition he used permitted the dancer to incorporate their sense of individuality and let them present the meaning of the dance successfully.

Dance also incorporates other aspects of art forms into itself. The music and costumes are also essential parts. If a

ballet dance was done with hard rock music and bellbottom pants, it would not portray the same message as it would with traditional ballet music and a ballet skirt. Haiti's cultural influence on Katherine Dunham's style of dance is in the music. Each rhythm usually has a corresponding movement that reflects reasons about why the dance is done. The music is also the foundation for the mood of the dance and the dancers. A certain feeling is also created by the certain tone of the music whether it was smooth or sharp. A smooth tone would hint that the dance is of a calm and content nature such as birth or marriage, rather than a sharp tone that would hint a more aggressive dance about war or conflict. Bob Fosse also used music, in a repetitious manner rather than the tone, to stimulate the dancers individual style. Costumes play a big role in performances too. Fosse preferred simple outfits to bright flashy costumes. He liked to keep them simple so they would not over power his choreography and take away from the art of his dance and the significance of the dance that the performer is trying to convey. Because Dunham was very interested in portraying aspects of outside cultures into her dances she even kept the traditional costume of the culture she was displaying in her performance. Even though many of them were brightly colored and flashy, they added to the style of her dance, unlike Fosse.

Choreographers such as Bob Fosse and Katherine Dunham have become so well known because during the time when they were just trying to get their career started the society was willing to accept their styles. Dance reflects the changing times. About

every decade there is a new era emerging from the changing interests of society. As far back as 1785 dance was just emerging onto the stage in ballet and opera houses. In the 1820's ethnic dance was introduced. At that time European's were immigrating to the United States in search for freedom and opportunity. Americans were interested in seeing dances like the Irish jig, Russian trepaks and Italian tarantellas. By the 1900's ballroom dancing and the more up-beat and saucy ragtime became popular for that era. Ragtime was what began the transition from conservative, classical dance to the more risqué, popular dance styles that have and are continuing to develop.

The jazz age emerged around the time of World War I in the 1920's. Also, it wasn't until this time in the evolution of dance that man and women would share the stage. Before the jazz era, men would perform usually in solos or duets and when they finished the women would perform in large groups. Tap dance is another item that gained popularity during the 1920's. During the 1930's the modern style of dance emerged from people creeping out of the Great Depression and having a need to express their emotions through this new style of dance. The rich at this time were vacationing in many Caribbean islands and brought back their dance styles that came to be popular social dances such as the mambo, rumba and tango. At this time Fred Astaire, who many would consider the greatest dancer of the twentieth century, was introducing dance into motion pictures also.

During the 1940's, World War II brought a sense of unity among the nation because we were all fighting for a common cause. That sense of oneness brought African-American dancers to the stage. At this time was when choreographer Katherine Dunham made her stand out debut. African-American dancers were the inspiration for jazz dance; many black dancers dominated the jazz dance scene in the forties. The swing style of dance became notable during this era also. It is even returning into the popular culture scene today. Elvis "The Pelvis" Presley created a new fad in the 1950's. Dance became more popular in clubs and was seen on television on shows like *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train*. Although dance was so promoted on television, choreographer Bob Fosse still kept the Broadway scene alive. In the sixties the jazz style most popular today was just being coalesced. The seventies style of dance was influenced by acrobatic street style dancing which created the disco style, seen in the film *Saturday Night Fever*. The 1980's introduced break dancing from the streets to the stage. From the 1990's through today, dance is still seen on Broadway but is mainly viewed on music videos seen on television like MTV.

The dance scene has also popularized in nightclubs; which is very different from the style of the 1950's club dance because through the years people have become less conservative and "sexy" in their dancing. Today mainly college students go to clubs with the intent to meet someone of the opposite sex and use dance to be noticed. The teen subculture crowded into a smoky room playing loud hip-hop music is a slight representation of popular culture.

You can define it as such in the sense that males and females are communicating to each other through their provocative body movements, which also says that. It is also a way of socializing either with the friends you go with, or the new people you meet while you are there. Today's club dance does represent the times as each of the other dance eras has, so in that sense it is still consistent.

Dance may seem so simple so some, but when it is picked apart and looked at in greater depth it incorporates so many aspects of popular culture. Dance in the United States has, and still is changing with the evolution of society; it reflects the common interests of the people and the way that our society functions at the given moment. There are a number of styles of dance that are used to express the changing times. Emotions, a story or a ritual can also be communicated through dance because it is such a universal way of expressing these things. Although in the American culture dance is not used in our daily lives, in many other cultures it is used in that manner. This form of artistic expression is a great contribution to all cultures because it incorporates so many things into it. Therefore dance has survived as a means of popular culture until today; and it is still growing.