



Walton Arts Center

Performance Guide



Written in Water

Although the South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam (ba-rat-NAT-yam) is ancient, the art form continues to evolve to express myths, legends and themes from traditional Hindu texts. The movement performed to live music includes intricate footwork and a vocabulary of sign language based on hand gestures as well as eyes and face muscles. Ragamala Dance creates contemporary intercultural performances based on this impressive heritage. Written in Water explores the search for meaning and understanding of the self through a fusion of South Asian music traditions, scenic projections and singular movement.

Ideas for Curriculum Connections

Arkansas Learning Standards: Fine Arts Standards

Music: P.6.5.3; CRA.SL.1; R.7.5.3, R.7.6.3, R.7.7.3, R.7.8.3; R.8.6.1; R.8.5.1, R.8.6.1; R.8.7.1, R.8.8.1; R.9.5.1, R.9.6.1, R.9.7.1, R.9.8.1; CN.10.6.1, CN.10.7.1, CN.10.8.1; CN.11.6.1, CN.11.7.1, CN.11.8.1, CN.11.6.2, CN.11.7.2, CN.11.8.2; P.6.MA.2; R.9.MA.1.

Fine Arts Standards Dance: R.1.DAP.1, R.1.DAP.2, R.1.DAP.3; R.2.DAP.1; CN.5.DAP.1; CN.5.DAP.3; CN.5.DAP.5. Fine Arts Standards Theatre: CR1.7.1; CR1.5.3, CR1.6.3, R.7.5.1, R.7.6.1; R.7.7.1; R.7.8.1; R.8.5.1, R.8.6.1, R.8.7.1, R.8.8.1; R.8.5.3, R.8.6.3, R.8.7.3, R.8.8.3.



Photo Credit: Three Phase Multimedia LLC

The Artists

Ranee Ramaswamy founded Ragamala Dance Company in 1992 and currently serves as co-artistic director, choreographer and principal dancer along with her creative partner and daughter, Aparna Ramaswamy. As mother and daughter, each brings her generational experience to their work. The rich traditions, deep philosophical roots and ancestral wisdom of India meet and merge with their perspective as Indian-American artists. As a dancemaker and performer, Ranee explores the dynamic tension between the ancestral and the contemporary, making dance landscapes that dwell in opposition—secular and universal life, inner and outer worlds, the human and the natural, rhythm and stillness—to find the transcendence that lies in between.

The Art Form

Bharatanatyam is a classical dance form originating in Tamil Nadu, India. It follows the rules of the Natya Shastra, which is an ancient Indian treatise on the performing arts, encompassing theater, dance and music, written between 200 BC and 200 AD. Bharatanatyam is considered the embodiment of the element of fire in the human body and is usually learned from one Guru (teacher). Learning Bharatanatyam normally takes many years.

Bharatanatyam comes from four words:

- Bha, from “bhava” meaning feelings and emotions
- Ra, from “raga,” an Indian musical concept somewhat akin to a scale
- Ta, from “tala” meaning rhythm
- Natyam, which is Sanskrit for dance.

The Performance

In *Written in Water*, dancers explore the concept of refined awareness through the 2nd century Indian board game Paramapadam (a precursor to Snakes & Ladders), the 12th century Sufi text *The Conference of the Birds*, and the Hindu mythological story *Ksheerabthi Madanam*, the churning of the seven seas.

In developing *Written in Water*, the dancers played the game hundreds of times, using the floor as the board and negotiating snakes and ladders—which represent the heights of ecstasy and depths of longing in Hindu and Sufi thought—to connect the human with the transcendent and reveal mysteries within the self. The projected images are from original paintings by Chennai-based visual artist Keshav, specially commissioned by Ragamala for this work. *Written in Water* was developed through an ongoing collaboration in which choreography, music, and visual art were constructed simultaneously in a constant artistic dialogue that spanned two years.

Learning Activities

Costumes

A classical Indian dance costume reflects the history and tradition of the region from where the dance originated. Tamil Nadu, the region where Bharatanatyam originated, features a costume made of colorful silk fabric containing borders embroidered with fine gold thread. There are two styles::

The **pyjama (pant) style costume** includes

- Blouse
- Davani (wraps around the blouse)
- Pants
- Pleats (fan-like piece attached to both pant legs)
- Seat (hugs the pants and the fan at the hip area)

The **saree (skirt) style costume** includes

- Blouse
- Davani (wraps around the blouse)
- Skirt with fan like pleats folded into it
- Small fan tied around the waist

Jewelry and Accessories

South Indian dance jewelry is called “temple jewelry.” It is traditionally made of rubies, gold and pearls. These days, many dancers wear artificial “costume” jewelry.

The Jewelry includes

- Chutti (head piece)
- Sun and Moon (jewels attached on the top of the head on each side of the chutti)
- Necklace
- Mattal (jewels attached to the earrings and run over the ears)
- Earrings
- Jimiki (dangling jewels of the earrings)
- Mukuthi (side nose ring)
- Bullaku (center nose ring)
- Bangles (gold bracelets)

Flowers decorate the hair of a dancer and may be real or fake flowers made of soft paper often in colors of orange and white.

Make-up

Eyes

To accentuate and elongate the eyes, a dancer uses black eyeliner and applies it in thick layers around the curves of the eyes.

Pottu

Also known as a bindi, is a bright dot of some color applied in the center of the forehead close to the eyebrows worn in Indian, particularly amongst Hindus.

Painted feet and fingers

Red dye known as alta is used to paint the fingertips of the hands and toes of the feet to resemble henna. This accentuates the hand gestures and feet movements of the dancer.



Photo credit: Valley Performing Arts Center

Post Performance Learning Activity

Every dance needs a costume designer to create the ideas and designs for garments worn by the dancers on stage. The costumes worn by dancers in *Written in Water* must allow dancers freedom of movement, be highly visible, convey the theatrical story and be authentic to the details of Indian traditions.

Use visual art skills to develop a costume for the dance form of Bharatanatyam.

- See a performance.
- Make a gestural drawing in a format of 5 spaces. Use the spaces like a story board, to convey motion.
- Look at the traditional clothing of India. Notice colors and shapes.
- Notice traditional clothes worn in the performance.
- Design and sculpt a form with wire on a pedestal of wood. This armature is the model for designing a costume.
- Design and build a costume of paper and felt. Cut and pin a paper pattern on the model form. Then cut the final costume of colorful felt. Draw or stitch the patterns on the costume.
- Display your work and look at it from all directions.



Photo credit: Valley Performing Arts Center

Photo Credit: Bruce Palmer

Reflect and Assess

Help students develop and expand their responses to concert dance.

- Describe the performance of one dance in as much detail as possible.
- How was the dance organized? (Simple or complex floor patterns? Movement sequences? Pantomime representation? Solo or ensemble?)
- Describe the characters. Who were they? What were they doing? Why?
- Did the musicians and dancers communicate with each other? How?
- What did you like most about the live performance? Dances? Costumes? Set? Props? Music?
- How did movement elements of body, energy, space and time convey mood?
- How did the music help tell the story?
- Can you connect your own experience with any movement in the performance?
- Did the artists express a universal feeling or idea?

Learn More Online

Ragamala Dance Company

www.ragamaladance.org/

Watch and Learn: The making of *Written in Water*

vimeo.com/166574439

Cultural India: Learn more about Bharatanatyam

www.culturalindia.net/indian-dance/classical/bharatnatyam.html

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Learning & Engagement

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