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Kathak Dance

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Observing Kathak Dance

To start with, I watched the Circles Cycles video. Within the video, the viewers are informed about the historical and cultural significance of Kathak dance. We learn that the dance originated in Northern India before the Muslim invasion and was a part of daily activities. Furthermore, we learn that the dance was further cultivated during the 18th and 19th century, as evident by depictions of the dance in era paintings.

After the historical background section of the video, we have the chance to observe a Kathak dancer. Strict and cyclical timing and periods are some dance techniques used while dancing. Dancers stomp their feet, consequently ringing their bells, with strict following of the bols being sung. This made me think of our recitation of bols before performing our tihais. After hearing this, it reminded me that the nature of these ideas being cyclical comes through as the performer completes multiple spins in a circular pattern on the floor.

Moving on to idea of staging and make-up, I observed that the performer’s make-up and costume was very simplistic, no more than a headdress/earrings/necklace, with a focus on 3 areas: mouth, eyes, cheeks. I thought the make-up highlighted the key areas of the face where emotion is typically formed, leading to an easier conveying of emotion during storytelling. Additionally relating to costume, I noted that it is not always the case that feet are bare, for example, Birju Majaraj covered his feet with a cloth as a sign of respect for the story he was trying to convey.

Relating back to the idea of cycles and circles, we are informed that performers sometimes use turns to “unwind” themselves and change in between characters. In this video, I related back to our class idea of facial expression and body movement being key to storytelling! Additionally, while learning more about storytelling, I saw how passionate and emotional a kathak dancer’s facial expressions are; it was almost as if the dancer embodied the character they were trying to portray and had felt their emotions directly. From smiles and grins to frowns and wistful visages, the kathak performers I saw in the video clearly communicated their characters’ emotions to their audiences.

Accompanying the dancers are a small group of people, each with a focus on their individual role. In the video we see 2 people playing tablas, 1 person playing another stringed instrument, and another person reciting the bols. Together, these aid in the dancer’s storytelling as they help keep track of the beat and set the mood of the scene to be performed. Another detail I noted was how one can change their vocalizing of bols to change the mood; for example, Birju Maharaj pronounced his bols softly as a sign of respect just as he had signaled his respect by covering his feet with cloth.

The next video I watched was the Pandit Durgalal performance. In the video, I saw the performer wear a constant happy visage as he performed a lot of repeated turns. I could feel the energy he was conveying into his character. His dance technique was fast and sharp and ended with a soft elegance as he held his final pose. Unlike the previous video, Pandit Durgalal takes a moment to stop dancing in order to vocalize his bols. We see more emphasis on spins as he spins for about 20 seconds. This made me think of the cyclical nature mentioned in the previous video as his turns are completed while going around a circle on the floor.

Next, I watched the Guru Rajendra Gangani video. Similar to the previous videos, there is the typical accompaniment of a small group of people keeping track of the beat with their instruments/voices. We hear a woman strongly pronouncing her bols to help Rajendra keep track of his time. Throughout the video, I noted how we again see that facial expression is key. The dancer wears a happy facial expression. The video focused on footwork while the camera panned in on the dancer shaking their ghunghrus. His feet barely leave the floor. It’s interesting to see him being able to repeatedly shake his bells; when I tried to do this, my muscles usually tensed up and I was unable to do this for an extended amount of time. We then see a focus on the body as we observe the dancer dance fast and perform. His storytelling is very lively as he wears a proud smile. The next segment of the video is a combination of his footwork and body as he incorporates swift hand movements to aid in his storytelling.

The fourth video I watched was the Kathak meets Tap. In this video, we see how similar and different dance is between Tap and Kathak. I noted how the tap dancer uses shoes to achieve sound while the Kathak dancer uses bells around the ankles. Due to cultural significance, I wondered if Kathak dancers are barefoot in order to have a greater connection to the earth. I also noted how the tap dancer tended to lift his feet more off the ground compared to the smaller “lift” the Kathak dancer had. One of the largest differences I noted between the two was body position; the tap dancer tended to throw his body around while the Kathak dancer’s upper body remained still despite having an active lower half. I felt that storytelling was primarily done through the tap dancer’s body as opposed to mainly being through the hands and face for the kathak dancer.

The last video I watched was a TedTalk about Kathak dance ([**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fz\_Tpp0q73A**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fz_Tpp0q73A)**).** In the video, Vidya gives a brief history of kathak. Similar to previous comments about make-up, we see that Vidya emphasizes key areas of communication of her face to possibly help convey the emotion of her dance to her audience. One new feature introduced in this clip was the idea of using clothing to contribute to the performance. Vidya grabs her dress and flings the cloth side to side according to the bols. I saw how the kathak dancer spins around in circles around the floor. I wonder if this has a greater significance that I’m missing.

After viewing these videos, I was left with a few questions: How long did these performers train for? What gurus taught them? How long did they spend prepping their routine? Was their routine even prepared or was it more impromptu? Is there one way to tell a story that should be followed?