



ArtSmarts

2004-2005 Wells Fargo School Matinee Series

American Indian Dance Theatre

November 5, 2004 11:00am

Jackson Hall, Mondavi Center

Dear Teachers:

We hope you find this CueSheet helpful in preparing your students for what they will see and hear at the **American Indian Dance Theatre** school matinee. This guide, which complements the Ethnic Dance Curriculum Guide, provides background information on the artists and the performance, as well as a brief overview of Native American peoples and dances. A review of audience etiquette is also included.

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AMERICAN INDIAN DANCE THEATRE

American Indian Dance Theatre (AIDT) was founded in May 1987 at a Colorado Springs gathering of dancers, singers, and drummers representing several Native American tribes. Brought together by Barbara Schwei, a New York-based concert and theatrical producer, and Hanay Geiogamah, a renowned Native American playwright/director and a member of the Kiowa and Delaware tribes of Oklahoma, these artists would form the nucleus of what would become AIDT. This pioneering dance company has since garnered significant critical and popular success, and was acclaimed by Lewis Segal of the *Los Angeles Times* for pushing “the whole idiom of theatrical folkloric performance toward a new maturity and depth.”

The current company is comprised of more than 20 dancers, singers and musicians from tribes across North America, including members of the Apache, Assiniboine (Saskatchewan), Chickasha, Choctaw, Comanche, Cree, Menominee (Wisconsin), Navajo (New Mexico), Northern Arapaho, Oneida, Seminole, Seneca, Sioux, and Southern Ute (Colorado). During each performance, AIDT demonstrates their virtuosity in many styles of American Indian music and dance. “All our dances are traditional and authentic, but have been staged as theatrical pieces,” says director Geiogamah. He continues: “In making this transition, however, we have been careful not to alter the basic structure of any of the dances. Whenever we add a new tribal piece, we first make sure that there are no religious restrictions to

performing that piece in public”.

In addition to performances at leading venues in Europe, North America, Australia, Africa, and the Middle East, AIDT has also appeared on television, film and in concert with popular musical artists such as Robbie Robertson, Jackson Browne, Bruce Cockburn and Ian Astbury of The Cult. AIDT has appeared twice on PBS’s “Great Performances” series, and has received an Emmy Award nomination for their 1993 performance “Dances for the New Generation.” AIDT also performed in the 1991 film *The Doctor*, featuring William Hurt, Christine Lahti, and Elizabeth Perkins.



Northwest Dance Photographer: Don Purdue



Women's Fancy Shawl Dance Photographer: Don Purdue

SAMPLE PROGRAM

The school matinee performance will include selections from the following repertoire:

Grass Dance

This ancient dance is the basis of many men's dances. In the northern plains the elders would ask the younger men to prepare the ceremonial clearing by stomping down the tall grass. The dancers' movements and their outfits simulate the grass rippling in the wind. Today, this is a popular competition at pow wows.

Animal Dances

All tribes celebrate and honor animals through dance. The dancers pay tribute to the buffalo which have made the ultimate sacrifice to provide man with food, shelter and clothing.

Eagle Dance

The eagle is sacred to all tribes and a symbol of wisdom, strength and power. It is believed that eagles are messengers between Man and the Creator.

Traditional Dances

Most dances are considered traditional, but in recent years this is a name given to certain types of older dances. The women in buckskin reflect the earliest participation by women in the dance circle. The men's dances recreate old myths, depict stories of the hunt and battles and incorporate animal movements.

Old Style War Dance and Fancy Dance

The steps of the modern Fancy Dance are based on the older Warrior Society dances. Modern warriors challenge each other using their most intricate footwork, spins, leaps and brilliant plumage.

Traditional and Modern Hoop Dances

Using many reed hoops to create a variety of shapes, the dancer tells stories about nature. The hoops become animals, insects and flowers, showing how all living things in the circle connect, yet continue to change and grow.

Smoke Dance

Throughout the eastern woodlands, socials are held in the Long Houses. The Smoke Dance fans the smoke from the center fire out through the roof smoke hole. Recently, this dance has been added to pow wows as a competitive piece.

Fancy Shawl Dance

Women rarely entered the dance circle as soloists until recently. The Fancy Shawl dance is very popular today at pow wow competitions. The dance traces its beginnings to the Butterfly Dance. After her mate is killed, the female butterfly mourns her loss by retreating into her cocoon, represented by the shawl. Her emergence celebrates freedom and her new life.

NATIVE AMERICAN PEOPLES

Native Americans are members of any of the aboriginal peoples of the Western Hemisphere, with the exception of the Eskimo, or Inuit, and Aleuts. The aboriginal peoples of the Western Hemisphere usually are recognized as constituting two broad groupings. The first and larger group, called Native Americans, is further divided geographically into North American, Middle American, and South American Indian peoples. The second group consists of a number of Arctic peoples, most of whom are variously called Eskimo or Inuit but also including such other groups as Aleuts.

The date of the arrival of humans in North America has not been accurately established, but it is known to have occurred during the Pleistocene Epoch (1,600,000 to 10,000 years ago). For some time the earliest human occupation of America was thought to date to the last (Wisconsin) glacial period, or about 35,000 to 20,000 years ago. More recently, however, some authorities have asserted that the first arrivals were much earlier, even up to 60,000 years ago. The site of entry into North America is widely assumed to have been a land bridge—formed as glaciers advanced and sea levels fell—where the Bering Strait now divides Asia and America.

The waves of newcomers to the Americas possessed a series of traits that were relatively ancient and were shared by most peoples of Africa and Eurasia. These included the use of fire and the fire drill; the domesticated dog; stone implements of many kinds; the spear thrower, harpoon, and simple bow; cordage, netting, and basketry; and various rites and healing beliefs and practices. By the time Europeans began arriving in significant numbers at the beginning of the 16th century AD, the descendants of these and later waves of migrants had spread over the Americas and developed a variety of cultures adjusted to various ecological conditions.

At the time of European contact there were perhaps as many as 240 different tribal entities in North America. Groups of these tribes, however, have been classified by anthropologists into a limited number of culture areas, determined very much by physiographic or environmental differences: the sub-arctic, the Northwest Coast, California, the western Plateau, the western Great Basin, the Southwest, the Plains, the Eastern Woodlands, and the Southeast.

NATIVE AMERICAN MUSIC & DANCE

While many art forms can be passed from generation to generation by means of textual or photographic documentation, some forms of music and dance best endure when one person can teach it directly to another. If the chain is broken, certain dance forms may die, particularly those of embattled or marginalized cultures. Throughout past generations the indigenous peoples of the Americas have used dance as a key to keeping their culture alive. Dances were used for many purposes, such as ceremonial, story telling and entertainment. In recent years, Native American social dances have served as a means to engage and to educate the younger generation.

The dances of the American Indian peoples are comparable in many ways to the folk dances of Europe. They represent forms passed down over centuries and modified through interaction with foreign and other Indian cultures. The origins are similar, lying in religious rite; in attempts to invoke magic to cure illness or assure success in food production, hunting, and warfare; and in such life-passage rites as birth, puberty, and death.

Many themes, typically the celebrations of life transitions, developed in the New World during millennia of residence, migration, and exchange. These were most prominent in the marginal cultures of western North America (particularly in what is now California), Venezuela, and Tierra del Fuego in the southernmost reaches of South America. Mortuary rites were prominent in the northland and the deserts. War and hunt dances have had different degrees of prominence, their greatest development being among the hunters in the Great Plains of North America. So-called animal dances varied according to the local fauna, a tiger mime belonging to tropical peoples and a bear cult reaching across the northern part of the New World and into Siberia.

The most distinctive tribal dance customs originated in response to animistic religious beliefs—i.e., that all objects and living things have living souls. The customs changed with pre-historic and historic migrations, with intertribal contact, and, since European contact, with upheavals in the way of life and thought. Although many dances became extinct, some survived European influences; others are amazing hybrids or new creations of the period after European colonization.

THINK ABOUT IT!

Talking with your teacher, friends, and family about a performance after attending the theater is part of the experience. When you share what you saw and felt, you learn more about the performance. You can now compare ideas and ask questions and find out how to learn even more. Here are some questions to think about:

- 1) How would you describe Native American dance to a friend?
- 2) What feelings did you have while you listened to the music?
- 3) What did you like best about the performance and why? Was the program different from what you expected? How?
- 4) Write a poem expressing your impressions of the performance: what you saw (the dancers); what you heard (the songs and music) and the kinds of feelings and thoughts you had during the show.

This CueSheet was written by ANETT JESSOP, Department of English, UC Davis
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ATTENDING THE THEATER

What is expected of student audiences at the matinee:

- * Enter the auditorium quietly and take seats immediately;
- * Show courtesy to the artist and other guests at all times;
- * Demonstrate appreciation for the artist's work by applauding at the appropriate times;
- * Refrain from making unnecessary noise or movements;
- * Please eat lunch before or after the performance to avoid disruption;
- * Please turn off cell phones and pagers. Flash photography is strictly prohibited.
- * Relate any information acquired from the pre-matinee discussion to the new information gained from the matinee.

What you can expect of your experience in a performing arts theater:

A theater is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, the excitement level goes up! Theaters are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience: whispering, rustling of papers, speaking and moving about, can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these upset everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance.

The performers on stage show respect for their art form and for the audience by doing their very best possible work. The audience shows respect for the performers by watching attentively. Applause is the best way for audience members to share their enthusiasm and to show their appreciation for the performers. Applaud at the end of a performance! Sometimes the audience will clap during a performance, as after a featured solo. Audience members may feel like laughing if the action on stage is funny, crying if the action is sad, or sighing if something is seen or heard that is beautiful. Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form and the culture(s) of the people in the audience. While the audience at a dance performance will sit quietly, other types of performance invite audience participation.