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Presenting Live Professional Theatre Field Trips & Workshops for Students

Rich in history and wide in appeal, the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers have made a colossal contribution to the efforts to preserve and perpetuate Native American culture. Directed by Louis Mofsie, also known as Green Rainbow from the Hopi Tribe of Arizona and the Winnebago Tribe of Wisconsin, Thunderbird evolved from The Little Eagles, a group in which Mofsie was a member during his teenage years. For twenty-nine years, Thunderbird has staged performances in almost all fifty states and enthralled both native and non-native audiences with the diverse traditions of America's indigenous peoples. Thunderbird takes pride in sponsoring the only monthly pow-wow in New York City at the 23rd Street YMCA in Manhattan.

The ensemble performs songs and dances from the:

- Northwest Coast
- Eastern Woodlands – especially the *Iroquois*
- Plains – *Souix* and *Winnebago*
- Southwest – *Hopi* and *Santo Domingo*

Thunderbird's repertoire includes the traditional *Fancy Dance*, *Old Time Dance* and *Women's Dance*, as well as a variety of other distinct regional tribal dances.

Beyond performing, Thunderbird has also actively contributed to the Native American community by organizing numerous other activities, including the Native American Craft Workshop, Indian studies programs for native youth, as well as Cherokee language classes. The ensemble has also established the Thunderbird American Indian Dancer's Scholarship Fund for Indian students.



FORMS OF MUSIC & DANCE

To dance is to pray, to pray is to heal, to heal is to give, to give is to live, to live is to dance.

– MariJo Moore, Native American poet, from “Why We Dance”

In Native American culture, music and dance are metaphors for the celebration of all aspects of life. They are, at the same time, indispensable fuels that have fed the flames of honor and tradition. Not only do they enable people to remember history in their minds, but to experience it with their bodies.

Music is a part of everyday life for Native Americans and is deeply rooted in the relationship between the sounds of nature and the human need to express emotions. Along with dance, it serves to complement an action, such as grinding corn or riding a horse. Therefore, the concept of listening for pleasure does not exist in Native culture. For the large part, music is vocal in nature and not composed in the Western sense. Rather, it is considered to be channeled to an individual through a spirit by means of visions or dreams. Instruments are mostly percussive, although few wind instruments (including flutes and whistles made of wood, clay, sea shells, metal, bird bones, reeds, and animal horns) exist, in addition to rattles.

Historically, dances were held for various purposes, including preparation for war and commemoration of victories. A number of Southeastern American Indian dances were named after animals, such as the quail and guinea, in the belief that dance movements impacted animals and their relations with humans. Dancing intervals also appeared in rituals and ceremonies, such as the annual Cherokee Green Corn Ceremony, which signifies rebirth, forgiveness, and new beginnings, as well as the Ribbon Dance of the Creek (Muskogee) tribe, which praises the role women play in tribal matters.

Native American dance does not serve to entertain or amuse. Rather, it acts as a vehicle for praise and worship while providing the means for dancers to experience interconnectedness through motion. Dance is celebrated in everyday life and in powwows, where dancing areas are considered to be sacred.

POWWOW

- Purported to have evolved from the Omaha tribe of Nebraska’s “Grass Dance” ceremony, which was performed by victorious warriors
- Inspired the Plains tribes to perform the “Omaha Dance” after the return of successful war or hunting parties
- Since the 1930s, the powwow has become the principal social gathering for Native Americans
- Provides the means for Native Americans to communicate with each other and to share a sense of belonging
- Is not a show, but a series of private performances showcasing various individual dance styles and regalia
- Dances in powwows are:
 - ◆ Improvised to the beat of the drum according to one’s individual way of relating to the music
 - ◆ Very loosely based on traditional styles of dancing where warriors would pantomime their combat tactics
- Highlight of contemporary powwow is dance competition, which may include:
 - ◆ *Fancy Dance*
 - ◆ *Old Time Dance*
 - ◆ *Women’s Dance*
- Dancers are judged on how accurately they anticipate the final beat of the drum
- Other elements of the modern-day powwow include:
 - ◆ Native American arts & crafts booths – featuring beadwork, leather goods, and sculpture
 - ◆ Native American food booths – featuring fry bread, buffalo & caribou burgers, and *succotash* (corn soup)

POWWOW MUSIC

- Originated among Plains Indian people
- Different in meaning and significance from music of other tribes, including those from the Southwest, Northwest, and Eastern Woodlands

SONGS

- Each song consists of short melodic phrases built on related tones
- Tonal range of songs spans one to three octaves
- Some songs have lyrics:
 - ◆ *Honoring Song*
 - Honors particular people, including warriors in earlier times and war veterans in modern times
 - Praises the courage of warriors and veterans in serving and protecting their people
- Other songs have only voice-sounds or vocables, which sound like words but lack specific meaning
- Vocables that are set to a melody never change
- Singers sit in a group around a large drum
- Usually, a lead singer is backed up by one or two second lead singers and a chorus of male and female voices
- One voice precedes two or three voices repeating the same musical line, which is then followed by the chorus

DRUMS

- Roundness represents shape of sacred universe
- Emit strong, steady heartbeats that induce meditative state through repetition
- Traditionally played by men

EXAMPLES OF NATIVE AMERICAN SONGS

HONORING SONG (Sioux) – Composed during the Korean War

*Lakota hoksila blihic'iya po!
Mila Hanska kin tawapaha ca neyecejinpe lo.
Ekta etowan
Korea oyate kin nata au welo*

Indian boys, do your duty!
Stick by the United States flag.
Look at it! (the flag)
The Koreans are charging

KACHINA SONG (Hopi)

*Yellow butterflies
Over the blossoming virgin corn,
With pollen-painted faces
Chase one another in brilliant throng.*

*Blue butterflies,
Over the blossoming virgin beans,
With pollen-painted faces
Chase one another in brilliant streams.*

*Over the blossoming corn
Over the virgin corn
Wild bees hum:
Over the blossoming beans
Over the virgin beans
Wild bees hum.*

MOUNTAIN CHANT (Navajo)

*In beauty may I walk.
All day long may I walk.
Through the returning seasons may I walk.
On the trail marked with pollen may I walk.
With grasshoppers about my feet may I walk.
With dew about my feet may I walk.
With beauty may I walk.
With beauty before me, may I walk.
With beauty behind me, may I walk.
With beauty below me, may I walk.
With beauty all around me, may I walk.
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty.
Lively, may I walk.
In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty.
Living again, may I walk.
It is finished in beauty.*

EXAMPLES OF NATIVE AMERICAN DANCES

HOOP DANCE

- One of the most popular Native American dances today
- Performed by both men and women
- Dance routine requires dancer to dance in and out of hoops while creating fancy figures with them and keeping in time with the rhythm of the drum
- Tests skill and physical endurance of dancer
 - ◆ More hoops = More skill
 - ◆ At North American hoop dance championships, competitors have used more than 50 hoops
- Originated with the Ojibwe of upper Minnesota, who created hoops from flexible young branches of the willow tree and included the hoop dance in a private healing ceremony designed to restore balance and harmony in the universe
- Popularized by the Taos Pueblo people of New Mexico, who took the dance on various expositions throughout the United States and abroad in the 1930s
- Now danced in different tribes from coast to coast
- Modern hoop is made of light material and is approximately one inch in circumference
- Diameter of hoop is on average 30 inches, but varies according to size of dancer
- Dance starts with hoops placed on ground and dancer using footwork to make them jump off the ground into his hand, which then pulls the hoops completely over his/her body in one sweeping motion
- Hoop represents the meaning of the universe
- Hoop dance symbolizes the meaning of the circle in that all things are connected and related
- The gyrations of the dancer's body needed to manipulate the hoops portray the obstacles that must be overcome in life

ROBIN DANCE

- Iroquois (from New York State & Canada)
- Celebrates the coming of spring, as the robin is one of the first birds to appear after long, cold winter
- Dance includes quick, hop-like steps that mimic the robin's movements

FISH DANCE

- Iroquois (from New York State & Canada)
- Dance replicates movements of squirming fish caught in a net

SMOKE DANCE

- Iroquois (from New York State & Canada)
- In the past, when five to six families lived together in long houses made out of bark, people would build indoor fires during the winter to keep warm. Sometimes the draft was not strong enough to carry the smoke out of the smoke hole, so people would gather together close to the fire and dance so as to create enough movement to carry the smoke out of the hole.

GRASS DANCE

- Popular dance that originated in the Great Plains (North & South Dakota)
- One story behind the grass dance concerns the migratory nature of the native people, who were dependent on the buffalo for food, clothes, shelter (hide was used to construct teepees), and eating utensils (bones were fashioned into spoons and knives). Wherever the buffalo moved, the people followed. Since buffaloes often ventured into prairies that were covered with tall grass, steps had to be taken to make the land livable for humans. Therefore, 100 to 150 dancers would be dispatched to mat down the grass in a new area where the buffalo grazed before the rest of the tribe settled there.
- Grass dancers wear yellow fringe on their shirts and trousers, which sway as they dance and serve as a reminder of the long grass blowing in the wind.

OLD STYLE OR TRADITIONAL WARRIORS' DANCE

- Originated in Oklahoma
- In the past, warriors returning to their tribes after a battle would perform a dance with movements that told a story about their experiences on the trail
- Warriors always showed their pride in being protectors of their people, as people looked up to them
- Dance stick that is carved in image of warrior's favorite horse is held in dancer's hand
- Dancers point and look to the ground to indicate that they are following the footsteps of their enemy
- Dancers get close to the ground to show that they are hiding behind bushes and trees

WOMEN'S FANCY SHAWL DANCE

- Contemporary dance that originated in Oklahoma in the late 1950s
- Fast-paced with fancy footwork
- Contrasts with traditional slow dance performed by women on outside of circle as men danced vigorously inside
- Dance begrudgingly became accepted over the years after young women dancers showing off their intricate footwork started beating traditional dancers in competitions
- Women wear shawls over their shoulders and elbows to show they are properly dressed
 - ◆ Shawl is adapted from blanket traditionally carried or worn by women
- Long fringe on shawls sway back and forth just like feathers on men's regalia
- Women do not wear feathers or bells
- Style of dance should be graceful and beautiful rather than wild

MEN'S FANCY DANCE

- Contemporary dance that originated in Oklahoma in the early 1900s
- One of the origin stories of the fancy dance harks back to the days when the *Wild, Wild West* shows were popular. When Native American dances were featured, traditional dances were considered to be too subdued. Therefore, dancers started to dress differently and dance faster.
- The most athletic of powwow dances
- Outfits are exceptionally colorful, with double bustles in the back and sometimes small bustles worn on the arms
- Competitive fancy dance judging criteria:
 - ◆ How many fancy turns and movements were executed while keeping in time with the rhythm of the drum?
 - ◆ Did all elements of the regalia (outfit) remain intact?
 - ◆ Did the dancer finish on the last beat of the drum?

REGALIA

With over 500 Native American tribes nationwide, diversity in traditions comes as a given. Among the many varied traditions is clothing, otherwise known as regalia, which is not to be referred to as costumes.

Thunderbird dancers usually dress in Iroquois (from the Northeast Woodlands) and Oklahoma style (Plains) regalia.

IROQUOIS (Northeast Woodlands)

Men:

- Colorful calico shirt
- Leggings or pants traditionally made of deerskin but now made of darkly colored material with beaded cuffs
- Beadwork on breechcloth, moccasins and belts have stylized floral design characteristic of Eastern Woodlands
- Woven sash worn over left shoulder and across chest, providing background for several silver pins
- Silver gorget (ornamental collar) at neck
- *Gastóweh* – split feathered headdress
OR
Roach – headdress made of deer tail and porcupine hair
- One or two eagle feathers complete outfit

Women:

- Intricate lacelike designs achieved through using small white beads
- Elaborately beaded skirt, leggings, and moccasins
- Silver pins decorate calico top, which has contrasting ribbon border
- Layered look: knee-length top is worn over calf-length skirt, which is worn over leggings
- Necklaces and an overlay beadwork cap or crown is sometimes worn

OKLAHOMA STYLE (Plains)

Subdivided into two distinct categories: Fancy & Straight

FANCY

Men:

- Roach
- Breechcloth (loincloth) with ribbonwork design
- Beaded belt characterized by more geometric designs than Eastern Woodlands designs
- Harness
- Headband
- Moccasins
- Satin ribboned skirt
- Angora leggings
- Assorted dance bells that keep beat with drum
- Colorful feathered back, neck and arm bustles

Women:

- Female counterpart to fancy dancer is known as *shawl dancer*
- Shawl is essential part of wardrobe that makes one appropriately dressed for powwow
- Shawl is decorated with long knotted fringe and embroidery
- Beaded high top moccasins

- Brocade, satin or velvet dress worn with fringed apron of complimenting color
- Silk scarf worn around neck with ribbon streamers flowing down the back
- Beaded or leather conch belt is set a hip
- Beads, quills, and feathers adorn hair

STRAIGHT

Men:

- Understated and seemingly more conservative than fancy dancer attire, but is actually just as intricately decorated
- Shirt usually made of lush fabric and is ribboned
- Beaded belt, leggings, and moccasins
- One or two bandoliers (belt fitted with small pockets or loops for carrying cartridges and worn by soldiers) may lie across chest
- Trailers of otter pelts (the skin of an animal with the fur or hair still on it) or trade cloth (wool) with ribbonwork
- Rosettes (an ornament or badge made of ribbon or silk that is pleated or gathered to resemble a rose)
- Feathers
- Several scarves
- Headgear is quite varied

Women:

- Elegant fringed leather attire usually made from deerskin or elkskin
- Fringed at bottom of skirt and at arms of cape
- Fringed shawl that is carried rather than worn
- Rosette, belt, moccasins and bag in matching beaded designs compliment dress
- Beaver, ermine or mink pelts may be worn in hair with hairties

CULTURAL & SOCIAL CONTEXT

IROQUOIS

- Named by their Algonquin enemies, who called them *Iroqu*, meaning “rattlesnakes”. The French added the suffix “-ois”
- Called themselves *Haudenosaunee*, meaning “people of the long house”
- Native American confederacy living in New York State
- Consists of six sub-nations:
 - ◆ Cayuga
 - ◆ Mohawk
 - ◆ Oneida
 - ◆ Onondaga
 - ◆ Seneca
 - ◆ Tuscarora (non-voting member)
- The most important native group in North American history
- Were a tightly-knit group of people who had a strong sense of purpose and sophisticated political system with checks and balances
- Like non-Iroquois neighbors, had matrilineal social structure
 - Women owned all property and determined kinship
- Diet included corn, beans, and squash, although ritual cannibalism did exist

HOPÍ

- Means good, peaceful, or wise
- Come from a group of Southwestern people called *Pueblo*
- Live in northeast Arizona on *mesas* (small isolated flat-topped hill with three steep sides)
- Villages and homes are called *pueblos*, which are made out of mud and stone and stand several stories high
- Known for their wooden *Kachina* dolls, which wear elaborate masks and don clothes to appear as if they are men dressed up as *Kachina*, or God, spirits.
- Were dependent on buffalo and corn for sustenance

OJIBWE

- Originally resided north of Lake Huron before moving westward to Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, western Ontario, and Manitoba in the 17th and 18th centuries, with later migrations to northern Great Plains in North Dakota, Montana, and Saskatchewan
- The majority of Ojibwe adopted a classic Woodlands culture, but major discrepancies existed since so many different groups lived across a wide area
- Language is Algonquin. Following 1680, Ojibwe became the trade language in the northern Great Lakes
- Traditionally, were rather sedentary and fished, hunted (deer), farmed (corn and squash), and gathered wild rice for food
- Were the largest and most powerful Great Lakes tribe, and possibly the most powerful east of the Mississippi
- Defeated the Iroquois and forced the Sioux to leave Minnesota
- Signed more treaties (51 in total) with the U.S. than any other tribe
- As with other Great Lakes warriors, ritual cannibalism of dead enemies was practiced
- Had a patrilineal social structure
- Today, is the third largest Native American group in the U.S. with a population of over 130,000

SIOUX

- Believed to come from a term meaning “snakes” created by their Ojibwe enemies
- Present-day Sioux prefer to be known as the Dakota
- Resided in the northern Great Plains from Minnesota to eastern Montana and from southern Saskatchewan to Nebraska
- Today’s Sioux mostly live in North and South Dakota

- More than any other Native American tribe, symbolizes the romance of the unspoiled West
- Probably best known for defeating General Custer
- Known to be great warriors, but family was key unit of life
- Free nomads of the Plains
- Took advantage of horses brought into the U.S. by the Spanish
 - ◆ Horses allowed them to pull their teepees as they hunted down buffalo – their main staple

WINNEBAGO

- Comes from a Fox word that means “people of the stinking water”, as they lived near algae-rich water
- Call themselves *Hochungra*, or “people of the big speech”, since their language is the parent speech of all the Siouan-speaking tribes.
- Originally lived in Green Bay, Lake Michigan area of northeastern Wisconsin
- Currently inhabit parts of Wisconsin and Nebraska
- Patrilineal with descent and clan membership
- One of the northernmost agricultural tribes
 - ◆ Grew corn, beans, squash, and tobacco
- Like other Siouan-speaking peoples, were taller than other Natives and most Europeans, as well
- Unlike other Siouan-speaking peoples, did not spend much time riding horses, hunting buffalo, and living in teepees

SANTO DOMINGO

- Reside in New Mexico, 25 miles south of Santa Fe
- Pueblo is fifth largest out of nineteen in New Mexico
- Of all pueblos, is considered the most conservative in terms of customs and culture, as they still retain their traditions
- Have strictly guarded their religious ceremonies, which is the center of their social structure
- Famous for silver and turquoise jewelry
- Pottery still made the traditional way
- Known for Corn Dance of the Patron Saint’s Day and the burlesque Sandaro

CENSUS 2000 RESULTS

According to Census 2000 findings, 1.5% of Americans have Native American ancestry, either in part or in whole. This amounts to over 4 million people out of a total population of over 281 million. Of the 4 million who have Native American ancestry, 2.5 million, or 0.9% of the total U.S. population, are 100% Native American. The other 0.6% are mixed with one or two other races. As far as geographic distribution is concerned, most Native Americans (43%) live in the West, while 31% reside in the South, 17% in the West, and 9% in the Northeast. The state with the highest Native American population is California, with over 627,000 people. Oklahoma comes in second with 392,000 Natives. Interestingly, the majority (62%) of Native Americans live in only 11 states: California, Oklahoma, Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, New York, Washington, North Carolina, Michigan, Alaska, and Florida. In 26 counties in the West and Midwest, Native Americans form the bulk of the population. These counties are located in Alaska, Arizona, Montana, Utah, South Dakota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and Nebraska.

GLOSSARY

Arrangement	An adaptation and orchestration of a musical composition to a different medium than what it was originally intended for.
Bass	A musical instrument that produces tones in a low register (e.g. – electric bass, double bass, tuba).
Bustle	
Ceremonial	Formal; ritualistic; a group of ceremonies performed as part of a rite
Choreographer	One who plans and oversees the movement in a dance program.
Choreography	The arrangement of movement in a dance.
Chorus	The section of a song that a group of singers or musicians repeats at certain intervals.
Gastóweh	A split feathered headdress worn by the Iroquois.
Harmony	The relationship between chords, their progression and structure that result in a sound that is pleasing to the ear.
Improvisation	The unplanned and spontaneous creation of music during a performance.
Interpretation	A performer's expression of a particular conception of a musical composition.
Lyrics	The words in a song.
Melody	A succession of notes that forms a distinctive sequence; a tune.
Musical Director	One who oversees all aspects of an orchestra's musical production and often serves as the conductor.
Percussion	The sound produced by beating or striking a musical instrument, such as a drum.
Powwow	Purported to have evolved from Omaha tribe of Nebraska's ceremony celebrating victorious warriors, a contemporary powwow is a social gathering for Native Americans in which participants focus on communicating and sharing a sense of belonging through song and dance.
Regalia	Fancy attire; the distinguishing symbols of any rank or order
Repertoire	The list of songs and dances that an artist or ensemble is prepared to perform.
Rhythm	The pattern of sounds at a particular speed or tempo.
Roach	Headdress made of deer tail and porcupine hair.
Solo	A composition or passage performed by one voice or instrument, with or without accompaniment.
Syncopation	The act of stressing unaccented beats.

Tempo

The speed at which music is played.

Thunderbird

A cross-cultural element appearing in Native American mythology of not only Plains Indians, but also of Pacific Northwest and Northeastern tribes. There are numerous versions of the thunderbird story, but in many, the thunderbird is believed to be a great eagle who creates thunder from flapping his wings and flashes lightning from opening and closing his eyes. Usually, he fulfills a role as the protector of the Native Americans.

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Maps and Photos



Hoop Dancer



Fancy Dance