TEACHERS' RESOURCE GUIDE

Grades 6–12th

BALLET FOLKLÓRICO DE MÉXICO
de Amalia Hernández

Navidades
A Christmas Spectacular
About Ballet Folklórico de México

During the 1950s, folkloric artistic groups formed all over the world to capture the indigenous art form of their own culture and communicate it locally and internationally. In Mexico, Ballet Folklórico de México de Amalia Hernández is one of the few of these artistic endeavors that still exists today. Folkloric dance in Mexico is a form of artistic expression exclusive to a particular region and nurtured by the people who live in that region. Hernández researched that artistic expression and choreographed dances to create what we see today as Ballet Folklórico de México. She has earned worldwide recognition and has demanded the world take notice of Mexican dance. In 1952, eight original members performed Hernández’s choreographed pieces for anyone who would come to see them. They were called Ballet Moderno de México. They gained recognition and notoriety as they performed a new dance for a television program once a week. Today, the Ballet Folklórico de México de Amalia Hernández is comprised of two companies, one that performs year-round in Mexico City and one that travels and dances before sold-out houses around the world.

The company’s repertory consists of dances representing different eras of Mexican history, from pre-Hispanic cultures, through the colonial era, and into the Mexican Revolution. In her latest piece, entitled Navidades: A Christmas Spectacular, Hernández has choreographed a dance reflecting the rich Christmas traditions of Mexico.

Meet the Founder and Choreographer

Amalia Hernández (1917-2000) is known throughout the world for the research and depiction of the art form of Mexican folkloric dance.

At the early age of eight, Hernández proclaimed to her family that she would be a dancer. However, dance was looked down on as an unworthy profession for a daughter of a family with high social status and wealth. Initially, she studied privately in a dance studio that her father built for her and her sister. She studied all forms of dance with some of the best dance teachers from around the world.

As Hernández’s vision for her future became clear, her parents knew that she would follow her dream. She developed a penchant for folk forms of dance. She recorded these dances, researched their origins, and then translated them into a theatrical event that premiered in Mexico City and now performs around the world.

As Ballet Folklórico de México developed, Hernández’s family became integral to its success. Her oldest daughter, Norma López Hernández, serves as the artistic director and her youngest daughter, Viviana Basanta Hernández, dances in the company and is the director of the School of Ballet Folklórico de México in Mexico City.

The World of Dance

What makes a dance a dance? Everyday we move through space: walking to class, playing basketball, and eating lunch. How could our lives be seen as the dance of life? Professional dancers practice their craft for years, typically starting at a very young age. But everyone can dance in his or her own way.

Activity:

Thinking About the Way We Move

Play different types of music for your class. Ask students: How does this music make you feel? How does your body want to move? How can you tell a story through movement? Try telling the story of your day through dance. This can be literal or abstract. Now have everyone gather and share his or her stories. Have each student lead the rest of the class in a section of his or her dance.
Folkloric Dance

Folkloric dance is similar to a folk dance, which means a dance of the people. Folk dances generally reflect the traditions, customs, legends, beliefs, and lifestyles of people in a particular country or region. Folk dance preserves traditions, reflects history, educates the observer, translates into modern language, and expresses life through dance.

**ACTIVITY:**

Defining Folkloric Art

What could be folkloric art in your life? Have your students think about folkloric art beyond just dance. What art form exists today that represents a tradition that you have or reflects an image of your life? What music could be called the sound of your generation or your culture? What dance could be called the look of your generation or your culture? Think of five things that need to be included in an art form to represent you. What art form is best able to communicate who you are? Now, develop a song, a dance, a ritual, a painting, or any art form to express your folkloric art.

**NA-5-12.5** DEMONSTRATING AND UNDERSTANDING DANCE IN VARIOUS CULTURES AND HISTORICAL PERIODS

Presenting Dance: Costumes

When costuming Ballet Folklorico de Mexico, many things have to be considered. Of course colors and designs are very important; however, designers also need to think about the weight of the costume, the quick changes between dances, and durability, since dancers are very active and the costumes get a lot of wear and tear. Many of the headaddresses and masks are large and cumbersome.

**ACTIVITY:**

The Challenges of Costume Design

Have students try walking around the room with a book on their heads. How much movement can they have? Now have them try putting on a mask with small holes for the eyes and move around. How does the mask affect their movement? What could a costume designer do to make it easier for a dancer to use a headdress or mask?

**NA-T-5-12.3** DESIGNING BY VISUALIZING AND ARRANGING ENVIRONMENTS FOR CLASSROOM DRAMATIZATIONS

Studying Dance: Ballet School

The Ballet Folklorico de Mexico School, located in Mexico City, trains dancers in folkloric dance, which encompasses mestizo, Spanish, and indigenous dances, and mixes modern and classic dance. Students may begin classes as early as age seven, but they cannot be admitted into the Ballet School until age fourteen. Classes are held in the evening, so students can attend their regular school during the day. Students who complete the four-year program receive a diploma of Practicing Dancer and may become one of the understudies for the Ballet Folklorico de Mexico. This is where dancers learn the actual dances of Ballet Folklorico de Mexico and wait for a chance to begin dancing in one of the professional companies.

Mexican Christmas Traditions: The Performance You Will See—“Navidades”

After much research into the traditions and origins of the Mexican Christmas, Amalia Hernández choreographed Navidades: A Christmas Spectacular. Performed in two parts, Navidades begins with the celebrations and indigenous, festive dances performed for the Virgen de Guadalupe at the Basilica de Guadalupe, which houses the original image of the Virgen. The Virgen de Guadalupe, Mexico’s patron saint, was an apparition of the Virgin Mary that appeared to an indigenous man in Mexico in the sixteenth century. Pastorelas (short plays depicting the events leading to Christ’s birth) and posadas (processions reenacting Mary and Joseph’s search for shelter in Bethlehem) are also included in the first part of the performance, thereby creating a unique blend of both Aztec and Catholic traditions.

Navidades ends with a nativity scene set in the Mexican countryside, a New Year’s Eve celebration, and the celebration of the Three Wise Men on Epiphany, which concludes the Christmas observation in January.
The Christmas Flower and Mexican Christmas

The brilliant red poinsettia flower, native to Mexico, has a rich history starting with the Aztecs. It was first called cuetzalxochitl, meaning “mortal flower that perishes and withers like all that is pure,” and served as a symbol of purity, a medicinal plant, and a red dye that reminded the Aztecs of the need for blood sacrifices to the gods. During the sixteenth century, Mexicans developed another legend about the flower. At Christmas, a white variation of the flower lavishly decorated a nativity scene. By the end of the Christmas celebrations, a miracle had happened and the flower had turned red. The flower became known as the Flor de la noche buena (The Flower of the Holy Night). This beautiful flower made its debut in the United States in 1825. Joel Robert Poinsett, the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, was celebrating Christmas in Mexico when he saw the vibrant flower decorating the nativity scene. Immediately, he shipped the flower to his friends in the United States, causing it to be known here as the poinsettia.

ACTIVITY:
Comparing Traditions

Ask your students: What are the first words or images that come to mind when you hear “Mexican traditions,” “Mexico,” and “Christmas”? Allow students to brainstorm in groups and write all the words that they say on the board. Now, assign certain words to each group to research the relevance to Mexico. What stereotypes or generalizations did students make? Why? What did students know about Mexico? How did they know that information? What are some Christmas traditions in Mexico? Explain that even though these are traditions of Mexico, not everyone celebrates in the same way. The United States has many traditions surrounding December and January, as does Mexico. What are the U.S. traditions during this time? How do they compare to Mexican traditions? Write a comparative paper on the Christmas traditions of Mexico and the United States. How are the origins different? How are the origins the same? What has caused the development and changes of these traditions?

NA-D.5-12.7 MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN DANCE AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

ACTIVITY:
Cultural Identification

For some Mexicans, Ballet Folklórico de México has captured a part of their heritage and preserved this tradition of folkloric dance by presenting it on stage. How could your students preserve their heritage so future generations will know who they were and what they stood for?

Ask them:
Do you know your lineage? What country/countries do your ancestors come from? What are types of food that come from those countries? Do you still enjoy that food? What traditions come from those countries? Do you still practice any of those traditions?

After answering these questions, try to think of an art form that represents who you are. If so, what is it? If not, how could you represent your heritage and traditions through dance, writing, poetry, or music? Share your representation with a classmate.

NA-5.12.9 UNDERSTANDING MUSIC IN RELATION TO HISTORY AND CULTURE

NL-FLK-12.2 CULTURES

More about Mexico

Fast Facts

The Mexican flag has three colors: green for independence, white for the Roman Catholic religion, and red for unity.

Huitzilopochtli, the hummingbird-war god, told the Aztecs that they would find their promised land when they saw an eagle devouring a snake perched on a cactus, the image now depicted at the center of Mexico’s flag. After wandering for hundreds of years, in 1325, they found the eagle on a small swampy island in Lake Texcoco and built their capital Tenochtitlán, the site of modern day Mexico City.

Mexico’s name comes from the word Mēyīca (mēy-E-EE-ca). The Aztecs called themselves by this name.

There are over 250 threatened animal species in Mexico, including the jaguar, the green turtle, and the Veracruz quail-dove.

The earliest signs of human habitation in Mexico are stone tools that date from about 20,000 B.C.

At the time of Spanish discovery, Mexico was inhabited by both the Maya, a historically peaceful people who developed an accurate calendar (more accurate than our Gregorian calendar) and an intricate system of hieroglyphic writing, and the Aztecs, imperialists of great military strength who have become known for their human sacrifices.

The Voladores dance is performed by five men who climb up a pole to a platform, tie a rope
around their waist, and flinging themselves downward to fly around the pole in a beautiful, dangerous aerial dance. This is an ancient tradition that continues today.

Only 27 percent of Mexicans own a phone, but 96 percent own a radio.

Mexico City is one of the largest cities in the world (est. pop. 21,000,000).

1200-400 B.C. – Olmecs form a highly sophisticated agricultural society located on the southwestern coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

300 B.C. – The Maya establish themselves throughout parts of Central America and the Yucatán Peninsula.

A.D. 1325 – The Aztecs establish their capital of Tenochtitlán.

1519 – Hernán Cortés arrives at Tenochtitlán and gains control over the Aztecs in 1521.

1531 – The Virgin Mary appears to an indigenous man, Juan Diego, beginning the adoration of the Virgen de Guadalupe.

1582 – Mexico wins independence from Spain.

1910 – The Mexican Revolution begins, bringing to an end the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz.

1917 – Amalia Hernández Navarro is born in Mexico City.

1925 – Hernández proclaims that she will pursue dance as a vocation and begins to study ballet, indigenous dances, tap, modern dance, Spanish dance, Oriental dance, Mexican art, and theater.

1939-1945 – World War II.

1952 – Hernández forms Ballet Moderno de México.

1953 – Ballet Moderno premieres on Función de Gaia, a television show.

1958 – First-time women are allowed to vote for president of Mexico.

1959 – Hernández's dance group represents Mexico at the Pan-American Games in Chicago. She coins the name Ballet Folklórico de México for this event.

1959 – Ballet Folklórico begins performing at El Palacio de Bellas Artes and continuously perform there to present.

1962 – The Ballet makes its first formal tour of the United States and Canada.

1963 – Hernández forms a resident company to perform at El Palacio de Bellas Artes and tour within Mexico.

1968 – Hernández introduces the Cultural Olympics: Ballet of the Five Continents.

1968 – Hernández opens a school to prepare dancers.

1970 – Mexico's debt grows to $20 billion. Inflation grows by 20 percent a year.

1979 – Mexico becomes the fifth largest oil producer in the world.

1985 – Earthquake in Mexico City kills 7,000 people.

1990 – Ballet Folklórico de México celebrates the 100th anniversary of Carnegie Hall in New York.


2000 – Amalia Hernández dies, and daughter Norma López Hernandez is named artistic director of the Ballet Folklórico.

2003 – Navidades: A Christmas Spectacular, the first new dance in twenty years, premieres at The University of Texas at Austin.

The Rights of Citizenship

On the timeline above, find the date when women were allowed to vote. Ask students (some may need to research for yellow strips need to stand or sit on the floor. Tell the students that some important decisions will be made today. You may wish to vote on something really happening in your school or you could ask them to vote on the rights (e.g., restroom privileges, homework assignments, lunch breaks, etc.) of the students with yellow paper. Yellow students may participate in the discussion but are not allowed to vote. After the activity, ask students what it feels like to be left out of the decision-making process when the decision affects them. How did the purple group feel about being in charge? How were the dynamics of the classroom changed by having some students able to sit in desks and others on the floor?

2021 – After she had the right to vote, how may society have changed? Do you think it would be a slow or fast change?

NSS.C.5-12.4 OTHER NATIONS AND WORLD AFFAIRS

NSS.W.HS.12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945

NSS.W.HS.12.9 ERA 9: THE 20TH CENTURY SINCE 1945: PROMISES AND PARADOXES

ACTIVITY:

The Rights of Citizenship

On the timeline above, find the date when women were allowed to vote. Ask students (some may need to research for
**Guidelines for Your Students**

**Etiquette:**

1. **Arrive at the theatre early.** You can read the program or stop by the lobby display, if there is one, which will help you to enjoy the production.

2. **Order tickets ahead of time if possible.** Then you don't have to worry if there are seats left.

3. **Take your seat at least 5 minutes before the show begins.** This allows you to get situated so you can fully enjoy the production.

4. **When the lights go out at the top of the show,** you can relax and applaud. The show is about to begin.

5. **Feel free to applaud whenever you feel moved by the production.** Good places to applaud: when a dancer completes an amazing jump, at the end of a dance, or at the end of a solo piece.

6. **Do not leave the auditorium until intermission.**

7. **Discuss your reactions with friends during intermission or after the show.**

8. **If you truly enjoyed the performance, feel free to give a standing ovation at the end of the production!**

**NA.0.5-12.4 APPLYING AND DEMONSTRATING CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING SKILLS IN DANCE**

**Activity:**

**Before the show...**

- Learn everything you can about the company and choreographer
- Read articles from the newspaper
- Read the program at the performance

**During the show...**

Notice all the different aspects that make up a dance piece:
- Contrasting or complementary colors
- Quick, sharp, slow, or smooth movements
- Consistent or varied styles
- Upbeat, big, quiet, or small expressions
- Loud, slow, soft, or fast music
- Costumes changes and colors
- Group or individual dances

Enjoy the show!

Relax and allow yourself to enjoy what is most interesting to you.

There isn't one right way to interpret or enjoy a dance, so you do it your way!

**After the show...**

Now is the time to talk to your friends or teachers who saw the dance piece and to engage in activities to extend your learning about dance.

Notice the similarities and differences in:
- Your reactions
- Your interpretations
- Your enjoyment level

**NA.5-12.7 EVALUATING MUSIC AND MUSIC PERFORMANCES**

**NL-ENG.K-12.4 COMMUNICATION SKILLS**
For More Information


The Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin

Photography Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin
Page 5: photo of Porfirio Diaz painting.

Alamy Images
Page 5: Chaac Mo’ photo by Steve Allen.

Woodfin Camp and Associates
Page 4: Mexican seal photo by Robert Frenck.

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Without a doubt it is the most colorful, most lively, most accessible and best performance that we have seen up to today.

—Nicole Hirsch of France Soir