



broadstage

Learning Guide



Let the Crows Come

broadstage
at the Santa Monica College
Performing Arts Center



Photo via Ashwini Ramaswamy.

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Performing Arts Center

1310 11th St., Santa Monica, CA 90401 BroadStage.org **2**

Inspiration



Photo by Jake Armour.

“Creativity is not born in isolation. It is a cumulative residual legacy from generations of philosophers, artists, intellectuals, scientists and artists. Without this DNA, creativity cannot have a future. This is the challenge the present generation is faced with.”

—Ratan Thiyam, playwright, theatre director, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award winner

Ashwini Ramaswamy

Ashwini Ramaswamy was born into a family of artists who are **culture bearers** of the ancient South Indian dance tradition, Bharatanatyam. Her mother, Ranee Ramaswamy, and sister Aparna Ramaswamy, Co-Direct Ragamala Dance Company in Minneapolis, MN. Although her work clearly acknowledges her roots in the ancient Bharatanatyam dance form, her experience as first generation born in the United States manifests itself both culturally and artistically. Ashwini’s **bicultural** experience informs her creative process and by choosing to explore and work with Modern and African Diasporic dance styles and the Gaga technique originated in Israel, Ashwini intentionally provokes a reworking of Bharatanatyam while maintaining its core essence.

Let the Crows Come evolved influenced by the way a DJ remixes a song, maintaining its essence while changing its trajectory. Ashwini involves dance, music, texts, and ritual in the development of her work. The original recorded score brings together music by three composers that is played by a hybrid musical ensemble. Texts from poets of South India, including the Ramayana, the Brihatsamhita, and the Kakajarita, which is an ancient Sanskrit text, are heard throughout. Ashwini incorporates elements of Pitru Paksha (fortnight of the ancestors), an ancient Hindu cultural practice that involves crows as messengers between the living and the spirits of the **ancestors**. *Let the Crows Come* emerges in the present, moving elements from the past with it into the future.

Investigation



Where & How Did These Dance Forms Begin?

When we dance, whether individually or as a group, we use our body to express emotions, ideas, intentions, stories and our ways of being. Our way of being in this world is what we call **culture**. Throughout history, people have created dances that reflect personal or group **cultural identity**, which includes the values, beliefs and ways of being as observed or expressed in one's community and family.

Modern dance was developed in the United States and Germany in the late 19th century as a rejection of the rigid structure and formality of classical ballet technique. Dancers chose instead to explore their personal movement styles and preferences, which, especially in the early years, included learning and incorporating movements from dances of other cultures. Modern dance focuses on a choreographer's individual movement vocabulary, physical interpretation and point of view, using the entire body to express abstract ideas.

Created in the 1990s by Ohad Naharin in Israel, Gaga is a dance technique that guides the individual to explore (without mirrors) their own flow of movement, identify and embrace their natural movement habits, and take pleasure in the sensations this creates. Naharin used his Modern dance experience to develop specific **terminology** that leads both dancers and non-dancers to listen to their bodies and, without seeking perfection, experience healing through their own movement.

African Diasporic dances are those that originate in Africa and by the descendants of the African ancestors who were taken from their homeland during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Over roughly 400 years (1500s-1800s), millions of people were dispersed to regions throughout the Americas and the Caribbean, creating what is known as the African Diaspora. To varying degrees and over time, elements from the regional Indigenous cultures were integrated with African dances that people brought with them and new dances were developed as well, resulting in countless dance forms. Some of the distinctive elements of these dance styles include polyrhythmic patterns, improvisation, and call-and-response.

Bharatanatyam is amongst the oldest of the numerous classical Indian dance forms. Originating in the ancient temples of South India more than 2,000 years ago, this dance discipline integrates elements of music, theater, poetry, sculpture, and literature. Bharatanatyam's dance vocabulary includes a structured set of steps, postures, gestures, and rules. Once these elements are studied and absorbed, they can be used like a language in creative and personal ways. Similar to how a poet uses language to write their own poetry, a choreographer utilizes the Bharatanatyam vocabulary as a foundation from which to create their original choreography, making Bharatanatyam a great medium for personal expression. As a U.S. born Bharatanatyam artist, Ashwini Ramaswamy references her bicultural experience as inspiration for creating *Let the Crows Come*.

Exploration

Vocabulary

Ancestor: A person related to you who lived a long time ago; one from whom a person is descended

Bicultural: Belonging to, representing, or understanding two different cultures

Culture: A way of life of a group of people; their behaviors, beliefs, values, artistic expression, shared history, language, and worldview, among other elements, which are passed on to the next generation by communication and imitation

Culture Bearer: A person, usually an elder, who carries and transmits ancestral knowledge of a particular culture

Cultural Identity: Refers to self identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on a various cultural elements, including nationality, beliefs, traditions, heritage, language, and shared collective knowledge; this identity is dynamic and developed in relation to others

Terminology: The technical or special words used in a business, art, science, or particular subject

Did You Know?

Mudras are the hand/finger gestures used to communicate specific ideas, events, actions, or creatures. In the ancient Sanskrit language of India, “mudra” means “seal”, “mark”, or “gesture”. They are used in Indian dance forms, such as Bharatanatyam, in which there are approximately 51 primary mudras that branch off to many more. As sacred and symbolic gestures, mudras can be seen in yoga, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism.

American crows and common ravens are songbirds with a vast repertoire of noises: caws, rattles, croaks, clicks, honks, screeches, and more. The “caw” sound is the call you’ll hear most, but they also mimic the calls of other birds, human voices or machines. Even after much research, their vocal range is so expansive that nobody knows for sure what a crow is saying. It’s just that “caw”mplex.

Poem

Song of A Dream

By Srojini Naidu

ONCE in the dream of a night I stood
Lone in the light of a magical wood,
Soul-deep in visions that poppy-like sprang;
And spirits of Truth were the birds that sang,
And spirits of Love were the stars that glowed,
And spirits of Peace were the streams that flowed
In that magical wood in the land of sleep.

Lone in the light of that magical grove,
I felt the stars of the spirits of Love
Gather and gleam round my delicate youth,
And I heard the song of the spirits of Truth;
To quench my longing I bent me low
By the streams of the spirits of Peace that flow
In that magical wood in the land of sleep.



Exploration

“If there’s a book you really want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”

—Toni Morrison, writer,
Nobel Prize for Literature recipient

Try This

YOUR ANCESTORS AND YOU

What is your connection to your ancestors? Ask your family and/or friends if there is a tradition or practice that you or your friends participate in that is centered on either honoring or commemorating ancestors. Is this tradition or practice something that is done as a cultural group or is it more individual? Do some research and learn about it. If it’s part of your culture, did you learn anything new? Reflect and consider if this will become or continue to be part of your personal practice as you develop your cultural identity.

DANCING TELEPHONE

Try this dance game with a group of 4 or more people. Stand in a line, one behind the other, all facing the same direction. The last person in line will create a brief movement and then share it with the person next to them as the others continue to face away. That 2nd person will add their own style or movement piece to the original sequence and then share what they created with the next person in line. The sharing continues to the end of the line. Movements should include arms, legs, head and torso. When the final person receives the movement and adds their part, they will present this at the same time as the first person with the original movement. As a group they will observe how the movement sequence changed from start to finish. What do you see? How much change can happen in one day? Can you imagine the changes over years, decades, centuries?

Take It Further

Check out our [Resources Page](#) with website links and relevant state standards to use for the classroom.



SUGGESTED CA STATE STANDARDS

NINTH THROUGH TWELFTH GRADE STANDARDS

CA VAPA Dance Grade 9-12 Proficient 3.2 Describe ways in which folk/traditional, social, and theatrical dances reflect their specific cultural context.

CA VAPA Dance Grade 9-12 Proficient 4.1 Describe how the qualities of a theatrical production contribute to the success of a dance performance (e.g., music, lighting, costuming, text, set design).

CA VAPA Dance Grade 9-12 Proficient 4.4 Research and identify dances from different historic periods or cultures and make connections between social change and artistic expression in dance.

CA VAPA Music Grade 9-12 Proficient 4.4 Describe the means used to create images or evoke feelings and emotions in musical works from various cultures.

CCSS ELA Writing Grades 9-12 3.a,b,c,d,e Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS Literacy WHST 11-12 2.d Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes. Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic; convey a knowledgeable stance in a style that responds to the discipline and context as well as to the expertise of likely readers.

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Resources

SOCIAL JUSTICE STANDARDS

ID.9-12.2 I know my family history and cultural background and can describe how my own identity is informed and shaped by my membership in multiple identity groups.

ID.9-12.5 I recognize traits of the dominant culture, my home culture and other cultures, and I am conscious of how I express my identity as I move between those spaces.

JU.9-12.13 I can explain the short and long-term impact of biased words and behaviors and unjust practices, laws and institutions that limit the rights and freedoms of people based on their identity groups.

AC.9-12.18 I have the courage to speak up to people when their words, actions or views are biased and hurtful, and I will communicate with respect even when we disagree.

SEL COMPETENCIES

Social Awareness: Perspective-taking, Empathy, Appreciating Diversity, Respect for Others

Relationship Skills: Communication, Social Engagement, Relationship Building, Teamwork

Website and Research Links

History of Bharatanatyam

Introduction to Bharatanatyam

How the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Created the African Diaspora

Katherine Dunham and the Dances of the African Diaspora

History of Modern Dance

About Gaga

Flowing Together

Cultural Identity