

# LULA WASHINGTON DANCE THEATRE

**Art Form: Dance**  
**Style: Traditional**  
**Culture: African American**

## MEET THE ARTIST:

The **Lula Washington Dance Theatre** communicates the vitality of the human spirit and gives voice to the emotions and experiences of African Americans. Artistic Director Lula Washington didn't start to dance until after she had a child. One day she was walking through Sportsmen Park in Los Angeles with her daughter, Tamica, and stopped to watch a dance class being taught there. The instructor invited her to join in. That was the beginning of her commitment to dance. Her company performs diverse styles that range from West African, Afro-Caribbean and street-dance forms to abstract modern pieces. Although she herself got off to a late start in dance, she was successful because of her focus, discipline and a belief that people can do anything they really want to. She enjoys the fact that her thoughts can be turned into choreography. Lula is committed to telling about African American history, feelings, everyday occurrences and social issues through dance.

## ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Beauty, power, high energy and emotional expression are the cornerstones of this dynamic troupe. Three dancers immediately engage the interest of the audience by performing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" in which they toss and float brightly colored scarves. Ms. Washington introduces herself as a choreographer and shares highlights of her work as well as dances by other important black choreographers. One dance is based on the life of Harriet Tubman, a former slave, featuring her journeys into the wilderness where she envisioned and prayed for freedom. A section of "Mahal Dances" reveals an earthy, folksy, fun combination of movements to the music of Blues and Jazz legend, Taj Mahal. It joins child games and fast footwork in urban-contemporary square, circle and line dances.



## PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The New York Times stated, "Washington is a gifted original," who offers an "elegant and smoothly blended mix of styles." Although the company performs in a variety of styles, their dances are rooted in traditional African and modern dance. The history of African American culture began when Africans were forcibly brought to this country and sold as slaves. Their history of oppression was mixed with hope, courage and spiritual strength. There were many social and political struggles to cope with during this long evolution and many of these issues became the focal point of expression for black artists. From the early part of the 20th century, social reform collided with the traditional attitudes of the dominant culture. As a result, African Americans were often cast into roles that prevented them from participating in society as equal citizens. Black artists addressed these themes during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. In the Los Angeles Museum of Modern Art Magazine it states, "This was also the era in which the African American community liberated itself by creating art that affirmed its pride and identity..." In the 1960s when segregation was challenged, issues such as violence and inequality and roles of the victim and aggressor were often explored by black artists. Out of difficult times, many unique forms of artistic expression have been born, such as the music and dance styles heard and seen in this program.

Writer Alex Haley awakened an interest and need within many African Americans to return to Africa in search of their roots. In so doing, it has been possible to see the great African influence that has deeply touched the culture of blacks, as well as others. This influence is often referred to as the "African Diaspora," which means that wherever black Africans were placed, they brought their culture. Even when their language, music and dance were suppressed, they didn't disappear, but rather fused with each culture in which they came in contact. The Lula Washington Dance Theatre embodies this fusion through modern dance.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What most impressed you about the performance?
- If given the chance, what would you make up a dance about? How might you do this?
- What movement or gesture do you remember from the performance? Show it to the class.
- Did you get any ideas of your own from watching these dances? If so, discuss what these ideas were.
- What did you learn about Harriet Tubman from watching the dance about her?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

After discussing the performance and reviewing each of the dances, select one that impressed you and either describe the dance as you remember it or write a story of what you think the dance was about.



Begin by writing the name of the dance in the center of a piece of paper and then writing all the words and images that come to your mind around the outside. Make sure to include words that describe some of the movements and/or incorporate words from the vocabulary list. Select one or two

of your ideas and develop them into a short written essay. The essay should have a good beginning, middle and end.

When you finish discussing the dance and your impressions and feelings, find a partner. Take turns reading your essays to each other. Then give each other positive feedback.

Legend:

- ⦿ Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- \* Connections, Relations, Applications

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

❖ Try to recall and imitate one or two of the gestures you remember from the performance. Work with a partner and create two original gestures you can perform together. Share them with another set of partners.

⦿ Review the following vocabulary terms related to dance:

choreographer	dancer
choreography	body parts
Gospel	modern dance
improvisation	gesture
tempo	

❖ Make a dance incorporating three or four movement ideas such as a run, jump, fall or turn. Put your choices of three movements together any way you want. Change the tempo (speed) and then change the emotion. Be aware of how this changes the way the movement looks and feels. Get into groups of four and share each person's idea. Take turns trying one or two of the ideas.

❖ Using paper and pencils, crayons or pens, draw some of the different positions of the dancers that you can remember. If you like, think about how you are placing the dancers in relationship to each other on the paper.

\* Recall "Mahal Dances" and discuss what children's games you could identify (tag, basketball, circle and line games). Discuss the relationships between people that you observed during the playing of the games.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Emery, Lynne. *Black Dance: from 1619 to Today. Second Edition.* Princeton Book Company, Pennington, NJ: 1988.

Long, Richard. *The Black Tradition in American Dance.* Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., New York, NY: 1989.