Title of Unit: The Influence of the African American Dance Artists on the Development of the 20th Century Concert Dance

Period of History: 1900 to present

Grade Level: 9 - 12

Subject Focus: Dance

Theme of Unit: Celebrating the contributions of the African American Dance pioneers who contribute to the advancements of the dance arts in the United States. We will research, examine and perform etudes created by masters in the field of dance who were inspired by their ancestors, celebrated their humble heritage and took a stand for the future generations. The unit explores the work of Pearl Primus – Doctor of Philosophy in anthropology and sociology she explored the African and African-American culture fusing her knowledge into her innovative choreography and performance.

Goal: Students will understand how the African American Performers and Choreographers contributed toward and furthered the development of the 20th Century concert dance.

Infusion Point: African American Performers and choreographers contributed toward the enrichment and development of the 20th Century Contemporary dance braking the racial barriers and prejudice.

Sunshine State Standards:
DA.912.C.1.1, DA.912.F.1.1, DA.912.F.1.3, and DA.912.H.1.1

Benchmarks:
DA.912.C.1.1 Research and reflect on historically significant and/or exemplary works of dance as inspiration for creating with artistic intent.
DA.912.F.1.1 Study and/or perform exemplary works by choreographers who use new and emerging technology to stimulate the imagination.
DA.912.F.1.3 Employ acquired knowledge to stimulate creative risk-taking and broaden one’s own dance technique, performance, and choreography.
DA.912.H.1.1 Explore and select music from a broad range of cultures to accompany, support, and/or inspire choreography.

Objectives:
1. Students will use biography, the internet, and other print/media to research the life of the renowned artists - Pearl Primus.
2. Students will understand the importance of the contributions African American dancers and choreographers made to the enhancement of the concert dance, breaking the racial barriers and overpowering prejudice.
3. Students will learn etudes choreographed by Pearl Primus and create studies inspired by the original works
4. Students will write a reflection report on the learning and creative process.
Cultural Concept/Information

“Dance has been my freedom and my world. It has enabled me to go around, scale, bore through, batter down or ignore visible and invisible social and economic walls.”

Pearl Primus

Dance historians recognize Pearl Primus as one of the great pioneers in the twentieth century dance, though she never considered dance as a career until she earned a degree in biology and pre-medicine. In fact, she might have become a doctor if she had not been turned down for a job as a laboratory technician and needed to look for other employment. Yet it is unlikely that the medical profession would have satisfied the energetic Primus, who Charles Weidman used to give time before class “just to dance out all (her) energy” (Jean Grover, 1989). Dr. Primus combined her extensive knowledge of anthropology, in which she earned a Ph.D., with her talent for performance and choreography to create a long list of dances known for their power and social impact.

Born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad in 1919, Primus moved with her family to Harlem at age of three. A penchant for art was deeply imbedded in Primus’ family. Her mother earned the nickname “the Queen” as a result of her accomplished dancing at social gatherings and one of Primus’ grandfathers was a holistic doctor and lead drummer on their home island.

Primus’ introduction to formal dance came about accidentally. After graduating from Hunter College in 1940, she began graduate studies in psychology and went to the National Youth Administration (NYA) in search of a job to support her education. When she failed to find any that suited her. She became an understudy for the NYA dance group. When this program disbanded in 1941, Primus was awarded a scholarship with the New Dance Group. Before long she was studying Caribbean and modern dance with pioneers such as Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, Hanya Holm, and Doris Humphrey. It did not take these master teachers long to realize Primus’ unique talent and dedication. She recollected, “Martha Graham called me a panther. She liked the fact that I expressed myself in the movement”. Graham recognized Primus’ commitment to making her own voice heard. The view that dance needed to express something important to the dancer was central to the New Dance Group; therefore it is no surprise that Primus found a home with this group.

February 14, 1943 was not only turning point in Primus’s life, but an important date in twentieth century dance. Primus made her first professional appearance at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York City in a Sunday afternoon concert entitled Five Dancers. Primus performed her own composition based upon traditional African movement entitled African Ceremonial. She also performed Strand Fruit, a work that grew out of a New Dance Group composition class that deals with a white woman’s reaction to a lynching, Rock Daniel, and Hard Time Blues, which protested the situation of the sharecroppers in the American South. These works have become American dance classics. Critic John Martin acknowledged Primus’ accomplishments in his review of the concert, “If ever a young dancer was entitled to a company of her own and the freedom to do what she chooses with it, she is it”. After her success at the YMHA, Primus was hired in April of 1943 to perform at Café Society, a nightclub in Greenwich Village. During her time there John Martin declared her “dance debutante of the year” and described her as “an outstanding dancer without regard for race”. Martin’s praise encouraged Primus to focus on dance as a career.

She left Café Society after ten months to teach with the New Dance Group, study, and prepare for more performances. However, Primus soon knew that she needed more life experiences to grow as a choreographer. In the summer of 1944, she traveled to the South and visited nearly seventy African American churches. Here she realized most fully the African retentions alive in
American culture. She also chose to live with the sharecroppers and pick cotton alongside them, experiencing firsthand the degrading racism and poverty of their lives. This trip saddened and deadened her for a while but also provided experience for her future dances that drew on and responded to African-American traditions.

On October 4, 1944, Primus made her Broadway debut at the Belasco Theatre. She performed _Strange Fruit, Hard Time Blues, African Ceremonial_, a composition based on Haitian dance called _Yonvaloo_, and _The Negro Speaks of Rivers_, set to the poetry of Langston Hughes. She danced in the Broadway revival of _Show Boat_, which opened on January 6, 1946, at the Ziegfeld Theater. Choreographed by Helen Tamiris, _Show Boat_ included a performance by fellow New Dance Group Member Talley Beatty. Primus then began her first national concert tour, sharing the stages with Joe Nash and Jacqueline Hairston. In 1947, Ruth Page, the famous ballerina and choreographer, invited Primus to Chicago to perform in the revival of _The Emperor Jones_. That same year, Primus choreographed a Broadway show entitled _Caribbean Carnival_.

It had been five years since her professional debut. Primus had created a group of “social protest” dancers and Afro-Caribbean based dances astounding in depth and scope. While performing these dances at Fisk University in 1948, Dr. Edwin Embree, president of the Rosenwald Foundation, Discovered that she had never been to Africa. He procured for her the last and largest Rosenwald Fellowship ever awarded that allowed her to study and perform in what was then known as the Gold Coast, Angola, the Cameroons, Liberia, Senegal, Nigeria and the former Belgian Congo. Primus stayed in Africa for eighteen months at a time. While in Africa, the Nigerians embraced Primus’ research and dance. His Excellency Sir Adesou Aderemi II, the Oni (king) of Ife and the spiritual head of the Yoruba people, gave her the name “Omowale” or the “child returned home”. She was recognized and “adopted” but few of the Paramount chiefs in Liberia. She was only twenty-nine years old.

Primus returned to the United States transformed, bursting with new knowledge and experience. She recreated many of the dances she had witnessed and learned in Africa and dedicated herself to educating the public on the importance and complexity of African dance. In 19511 she began a series of international tours, visiting London, where she performed before King George VI, as well as France, Italy, and Finland. The following year she performed in Israel.

In 1953 Primus returned to her homeland and spent the summer studying dances of the West Indies. Here she met the dancer and choreographer Percival Barde, whom she married a year later. Borde and Primus began a long professional collaboration as well, with Primus performing as a guest artist in her husband’s company.

Primus returned to Africa, the most important trip coming in 1959 when she and Borde visited Liberia for two years. They became the Directors of Kenoma Kende, the African Center for Performing Arts, in Monrovia, where they worked to revitalize African cultural traditions and bring them to New audiences. In the last decades of Primus’ life she completed a PhD in Anthropology in New York University, established Earth Theater, a school and company with her husband, taught around the world, and re-staged her works. She taught at the State University of New York at Binghamton, was the Head Master of the Cora P. Maloney College at the State University of New York at Buffalo, she was a Distinguished Professor in the Five Colleges at Smith College and University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She was awarded the National Medal of the Arts by President Borge Bush and was honored by the American Dance Festival and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her awards and honors were numerous.
A pioneer in dance education, Primus, the “consummate teacher”, believed that the study of different world dance traditions helps students to understand different cultures. The African dance classes now popular around the country are a living legacy of Primus’ tremendous efforts. Her combination of intense performances, extensive scholarly research, and dedication to bringing dance to people everywhere entitle her to a place among the dance legends of the twentieth century. Her work provided the foundation upon which African Americans could look to Africa as their source of artistic, cultural and spiritual heritage. Through performances, lectures, lecture demonstrations, workshops and teaching, she shared this vision freely with all of America. Dr. Pearl Primus, Omowale, died on October 29, 1994

References:

Jean Grover, Pearl Primus: Cross-cultural pioneer of American dance (American University, 1989) 17

Leah Creque-Harris, The Representation of African Dance on the Concert Stage: From the Early Black Musical to Pearl Primus (Emory University, 1991) 156


Technological resources:
http://brbl-rchive.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/cvvpw/gallery/primus1.html
http://www.dance-teacher.com/2009/03/pearl-primus/
http://www.britannica.com/biography/Pearl-Primus
http://www.danceheritage.org/primus.html
http://www.theatredance.com/d_primus.html

RECOMMENDED STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Prepare the Space
   In West Africa cultures, great respect is given to the ancestors. These are not just the people that one is related to, but all those who came before.
   Each dancer who will be working on Bushaasche should bring a photo or object that reminds him or her of a person who helped them along the way. This may be a relative, an ancestor, a teacher, someone from history, or anyone who has been an inspiration. These objects should be placed together in a corner of the room along with a photo of Pearl Primus (included in this plan). The group should take a few minutes of silence to think about these ancestors and to prepare for the seriousness of the work to come.

   Each rehearsal should begin with the following:

2. Opening Discussion
   Students should read and analyze the following statements of Pearl Primus on African Dance.

   “African dance is basic, vita. For me it is the source, the well from which I draw inspiration for my work. African dance is complete. It ranges from the most lyrical of movements to the most dynamic, from the most sophisticated presentation to the simplest. It can defy space in fantastic leaps into the air or borrow into the earth. It does not limit itself to any one part of the body but employs the use of even the most intimate
minute muscle. It varies from the slowest and stateliest of court dances to those which move so rapidly the eye cannot hope to register all that is happening."

“In Africa people use their bodies as instruments through which every conceivable motion or event is projected. The result is a strange but hypnotic marriage between life and dance. The two are inseparable. When a child is born, when a man is buried, there is the dance. People dance the sowing of the seed and the harvest, puberty rites, hunting, warfare. They dance for rain, sun, strong and numerous children, marriage, and play. Love, hatred, fear, joy, sorrow, disgust, amazement, all these and all other emotions are expressed through rhythmic movement.”

_African Heritage, Jacob Drachler, Collier Books – 1964_  
_Toronto, Copyright 1963 Crowell-Collier_

3. Students should research the history and culture of Congo (formerly Zaire).  
   Students should research the some of the customs and religious believes in Congo.

**Day 1**

**Subject:** Dance  
**Title:** Introduction to the African Rhythms and Movements

**Grade:** 9 - 12  
**Time required:** 1 hour

**Benchmarks:** Dance Arts Sunshine State Standards  
DA.912.C.1.1  DA.912.F.1.1 DA.912.F.1.3 DA.912.H.1.1

**Key Terminology:**  
Tribal society, Spiritual Connection, Isolated movements, Syncopation,  
Polyrhythmic, Simultaneously

**Objectives:**
1. Students will examine the elements of the African dance that have affected the development on the contemporary dance
2. Students will use images as they warm up the bodies:  
3. Students will explore and implement isolated movements of each part of the body.  
4. Students will read about the polyrhythmic music and create eight measures phrase using polyrhythm.  
5. Students will write a reflection on the experience of implementing isolated movements using polyrhythmic music accompaniment.

**Pre-lesson:**  
Inquire background knowledge on African dance and its influence on the American culture.

**Lesson:**
Split the class in two groups. Each group should read and analyze one of the following statements of Pearl Primus on African Dance. Groups should discuss the readings, share with the class and speculate how her findings are related to the application of the dance today.

“African dance is basic, vita. For me it is the source, the well from which I draw inspiration for my work. African dance is complete. It ranges from the most lyrical of movements to the most dynamic, from the most sophisticated presentation to the simplest. It can defy space in fantastic leaps into the air or borrow into the earth. It does
not limit itself to any one part of the body but employs the use of even the most intimate minute muscle. It varies from the slowest and stateliest of court dances to those which move so rapidly the eye cannot hope to register all that is happening.”

“In Africa people use their bodies as instruments through which every conceivable motion or event is projected. The result is a strange but hypnotic marriage between life and dance. The two are inseparable. When a child is born, when a man is buried, there is the dance. People dance the sowing of the seed and the harvest, puberty rites, hunting, warfare. They dance for rain, sun, strong and numerous children, marriage, and play. Love, hatred, fear, joy, sorrow, disgust, amazement, all these and all other emotions are expressed through rhythmic movement.”

*African Heritage, Jacob Drachler, Collier Books – 1964 Toronto, Copyright 1963 Crowell-Collier*

6. Warm-up:
   Students will use images as they warm up the bodies:
   Example:   Imagine the floor is the earth,
              Allow the earth to push the feet
              Imagine tall grass in the wind
              Feel one with the drum
              B clear and define with all steps and gestures

7. In Place:
   Students will use isolation and explore how each body part can move. While in place they should investigate movement possibilities while changing levels, dimensions and dynamics.

8. Moving Through Space:
   Students will apply isolated movements while moving through space changing levels, dimensions and dynamics

9. Applying different types of rhythms
   Using the drum beat clap using simple patterns:
   Example:  1, 2, 3, rest, 1, 2, 3, rest, 1, 2, 3, rest, 1, 2, 3, rest
             Repeat the sound phrase while moving in isolation

10. Make up arm and hand gestures in different rhythms

11. Apply the arm gestures while performing the movement phrase in different rhythms simultaneously.

**Post Lesson:**
Students will complete self evaluation reflecting on the application of isolated movements on place or moving through space while using polyrhythmic.

**Materials Needed:**
If possible use conga drums or pre recorded authentic African rhythms.
Sound system
Dance studio space with sprung floors

**Assessment:**
Student's understanding will be assessed on the following criteria:
Creativity and Focus on Topic,
Flow and Rhythm
Collaboration,
Technical Skills,
Musicality,
Final Movement Study
ESOL Strategies:
1. Use authentic materials
2. Provide a language and literature rich environment
3. Read aloud to students
4. Introduce vocabulary through pictures
5. Use chunks of language in meaningful and appropriate context
6. Allow sufficient wait time
7. Engage students in questioning techniques
8. Ask open-ended questions

ESE Strategies:
1. Reduce quantity of work
2. Provide opportunities to orally complete assignments
3. Emphasize content rather than spelling in written communications
4. Use small group/individual instruction
5. Adapt reading levels
6. Use highlighted or altered materials
7. Allow sufficient wait time

References:
http://www.mamboso.org/primus.shtml
http://www.adli.us
Day 2

Subject: Dance  
Title: Using Improvisation to Create Study Inspired by Pearl Primus

Grade: 9 - 12  
Time required: 1 hour

Benchmarks: Dance Arts Sunshine State Standards
DA.912.C.1.1  DA.912.F.1.1  DA.912.F.1.3  DA.912.H.1.1

Key Terminology:

Objectives:
1. Students will analyze statements by Pearl Primus
2. Students will create movement phrases inspired by Pearl Primus's statements

Pre-lesson:
Review the learned material from the day before. Use the same warm-up exercises in place, moving through space using level changes, different dimension and dynamics to polyrhythmic accompaniment simultaneously.

Lesson:
1. Prior to the lesson make copies of the following statements made by Pearl Primus about dance.
   
   “In the dance I have confided my most secret thought and shared the inner music of all mankind. I have danced across mountains and deserts, ancient rivers and oceans and slipped through the boundaries of time and space.”

   “Dance has been my freedom and my world. It has enabled me to go around, scale, bore through, batter down or ignore visible and invisible social and economic walls.”

   “Dance is my medicine. It is the scream which eases for a while the terrible frustration common to all human beings who, because of race, creed or color, are “invisible”. Dance is the fist with which I fight the sickening ignorance of prejudice. It is the ceiled contempt I feel for those who patronize with false smiles, handouts, empty promises, and insincere compliments. Instead of growing twisted like a gnarled tree inside myself, I am able to dance out my anger and tears.”

   “I dance not to entertain but to help people better understand each other. Because through dance I have experienced the wordless joy of freedom, I seek it more fully now for my people and for all people everywhere.”

2. Randomly each student should pick up a statement and choose ONE image from the Pearl Primus's quotes that inspires him or her to create a movement phrase.

3. Using choreographic tool such as: levels, dynamics, dimensions, theme and variation or canon student will create the movement phrase.

Post Lesson:
After sharing the phrases, the students will discuss the chosen images and how they relate to their lives. Students will record in their journals the thoughts, feelings and experience of creating inspirational phrase.
**Materials Needed:**
Copies of the statements made by Pearl Primus about dance
Rhythmic music accompaniment
Video camera to record the students’ improvisations

**Assessment:**
Student’s understanding will be assessed on the following criteria:
Creativity and Focus on Topic,
Flow and Rhythm
Technical Skills,
Musicality,
Final Movement Study

**ESOL Strategies:**
1. Keep learning logs
2. Teach vocabulary contextually
3. Use synonyms and antonyms
4. Activate prior knowledge before learning
5. Keep a word wall in the classroom
6. Use interactive strategies during reading

**ESE Strategies:**
1. Allow extra time to complete assignments
2. Provide opportunities to orally complete assignments
3. Emphasize content rather than spelling in written communications
4. Use assistive technology
5. Repeat instruction of content
6. Group similar items
7. Adapt reading levels

**References:**
http://brbl-archive.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/cvvpw/gallery/primus1.html
http://sacreddanceguild.org/about/sacred-dance-quotes/