

Traditional Arts in King County: *Kathak* Dance of South Asia

Dance was performed as part of Hindu rituals for many centuries, and several classical dance traditions of India originated as regional temple dance forms. According to Hindu belief, the world was created by the dance of the god Shiva as *Nataraja*, bringing the world into being as he drummed and danced, with one leg raised and his hair flying.

Kathak is a major classical form of dance in North India that developed in the courts of both Muslim and Hindu rulers and princes. *Kathak* draws from literature and drama, as dancers tell stories through mime and facial expressions as part of the dance. Usually these stories are in praise of Krishna, and many of them have a romantic mood.

Kathak is also a kind of percussion duet-competition between the dancer and the drummer, who plays a pair of tuned drums known as *tabla*. The dancer emphasizes footwork, with rhythms that he or she stomps out barefoot on the floor, accented with many bells worn around the ankles. The drummer accompanies the dance rhythms, but also has a musical conversation with the dancer as they trade rhythmic phrases, and answer one another back and forth. It is difficult to think of a *kathak* dancer performing to recorded music, as this give-and-take between the dancer and musician is so much a part of the performance.

Drama and storytelling in *kathak* dance

Typically one dancer performs with a group of musicians, playing string instruments and sometimes singing, along with the *tabla* drummer. This single dancer performs the parts of all the characters in a story, and at times will flash back and forth rapidly between two characters. Without changing their position on the stage, changes in gestures and facial expressions signal instantly which character they take on at that moment. For instance, a pleading Krishna might alternate with a resistant Radha, who backs away from his romantic advances.

Bonding of dancer, musician and audience in performance

Along with the dramatic storytelling, another section of the performance is all about the music and the dance. Here the dancer is clearly a musician as well as dancer, and a master of intricate rhythms, with fast turns in swirling skirts, and graceful arm movements. The dancer and musicians communicate openly with one another during a performance, sometimes give an instruction or comment, without a feeling of interruption.

The performers and audience likewise respond to one another openly. Often the performers will lengthen a section of the dance when the audience is responding enthusiastically. The audience is not shy in responding, and may shout in delight, stretch out their arms, and nod or shake their heads when moved by the performers.

To hear and watch some of these rhythmic cycles, visit a few of the online examples listed below. Drummers learn spoken syllables that correspond with the different strokes on the drum, and recite as well as play the rhythms. A couple of these examples begin with a demonstration of various sounds produced by the drums, known as *dha*, *dhin*, *ta*, *na*, and many more.

Kathak Dance in King County

For many years, a *kathak* dancer named Prabha Rustagi lived in Bothell and performed around King County regularly with *tabla* player Annie Penta and singer Shanta Benegal. They formed an ensemble and taught dance to a group of young girls. Sadly, Prabha Rustagi died of cancer at a young age, and the community responded by forming the Prabha Rustagi Memorial Trust in 1995. Through this organization, many more young people have studied North Indian dance and music. Beginning in 1996, Prabha Rustagi's guru, Urmila Nagar, has come from India every summer to teach through this organization, along with her son Vishal Nagar, a *tabla* player. Visit their information at:

Prabha Rustagi Memorial Trust: <http://www.geocities.com/leelakathak/prmt.htm>

Urmila Nagar: <http://www.geocities.com/leelakathak/urmila.htm>

Vishal Nagar: <http://www.geocities.com/leelakathak/vishal.htm>

On-line video examples:

“Birju Maharaj,” 0’55”, one of the masters of kathak dance in a colorful old video,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp1ZWIOdEAM&feature=related>.

“Indian Kathak Dance,” 0:38”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJCNm2yGlpA&feature=related>

“Ravi Shankar, Alla Rakha – Tabla Solo in Jhaptal,” 8’23.” A top master of table drumming demonstrates drum syllables, and a ten-beat rhythmic cycle.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Joyk_EMtzn0&feature=related

Tabla Lesson 1 by Venkat, 7’58”, shows hand positions for basic strokes on the drums,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vh3DjTbhb6o>.

Sources

“Kathak.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 7 Feb. 2008
<<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9044834>>.

"South Asian arts." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 7 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-65245>>.

Other Resources: *Tabla Beat Science*, National Geographic Music. Master tabla musician Zakir Hussein creates contemporary global music with this group.
http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com/worldmusic/view/page.basic/artist/content.artist/tabla_beat_science_20222