



# Ballet Hispanico: ¡Viva Las Americas!

Grades 4-8

Friday, April 8, 2005 • 11 a.m.-12 p.m. ET

When viewing *Ballet Hispanico: ¡Viva Las Americas!* and participating in this guide's suggested activities, the following National Standards for Dance: 3, 5 and 7, and Music: 6, 8 and 9 will be addressed.

## Students Will See and Hear...

The *¡Viva Las Americas!* program includes five dances:

“Shango” from Cuba/Brazil—a dance to call up spirits

“Los Viejitos” from Mexico—a dance about feisty elderly men who disrupt a market scene

“Samba” from Brazil—a celebratory dance

“Punta” from Belize/Honduras—a farewell dance about the spirit of a dead loved one

“Mambo” from Cuba—a popular social dance born in the 1950s

The whole company, six female dancers and seven male dancers, performs in the program.

## Classroom Connections:

*¡Viva Las Americas!* correlates with a wide range of curricula: Dance, Music, Social Studies/History

## Educational Objectives

- To examine different movement styles in the folk dances of different regions; to understand how choreography can help tell a story, set a mood, or portray a character
- To identify musical instruments of different cultures, and the fusion of the music produced in Latin America
- To examine the effects of European Colonization and slave trade on Latin America; to explore how the indigenous cultural practices of the region have evolved

## Program Notes

### Ballet Hispanico

Ballet Hispanico is a dance company that blends modern, ballet, and Latin dance forms. The mission of the company is to demonstrate the vibrancy of Latin American cultures through dance. The program *¡Viva Las Americas!* showcases Latin American dances from different countries, including Mexico, Brazil, Belize, and Cuba. The movement and music reflect the mixture of indigenous, European, and African cultures in the region.

### Growing a Dance Company

Tina Ramirez, the founder of Ballet Hispanico, was born in Venezuela and came to the United States at age seven. She studied dance in New York, and eventually became a professional dancer, touring the United States and abroad. In 1963, Ramirez returned to New York and created a program for inner-city children called Operation High Hopes. The success of the student dancers led Ms. Ramirez to formally establish the Ballet Hispanico dance

company there in 1970. Since then, the company has toured extensively and has built up a repertory of dances by known choreographers.

Ballet Hispanico maintains a school in New York City where they train students in ballet, Spanish dance, and modern dance. They also conduct in-school residencies around the country.

## Latin America:

### A Blend of Cultural Traditions

The Latin American region includes Mexico, Central America, and South America. The region's language and culture are influenced by the history of colonization.

After Columbus's voyage in 1492, the Spanish and Portuguese began colonizing Central and South America. The conquistadores established large sugar, coffee, and cotton plantations. The diseases the Europeans brought with them decimated the native Indian populations, as did the hard labor on the haciendas, or farms. Consequently, the conquistadores imported African slaves from areas that today include Ghana, Nigeria, and Angola. The dances of Ballet Hispanico reflect this blend of linguistic, religious, and cultural traditions of the indigenous, African, and European people.

### Musical Mix

Mexico and Brazil are two countries which exemplify how the mixture of cultures and religions affected the music being produced. In Mexico, Spanish settlers founded music schools to teach the indigenous Indians music essentials for religious practices. The Indians adapted the instruments, such as guitars and harps, for their own uses. Listen for the Spanish sounding guitar in the Mexican dance "Los Viejitos".

In Brazil, African slaves were allowed to keep their drumming traditions alive. Brazilian plantation owners did not outlaw the playing of drums, like their North American counterparts did. Thus, drumming and dancing, central components in the festival and ritual life of the slaves, were allowed during recreational time.

### Movement Mix

Traditional European, American indigenous, and African folk dances have different types of gestures, steps, and movements. African dancers typically employ a flexible or articulated torso, where the back shoulder, pelvis, and hips can move independently of one another. This kind of movement greatly influenced dance in Latin America, and can be seen in the Cuban "Mambo", the Brazilian "Samba", and the Cuban/Brazilian "Shango".

In contrast, the dances of indigenous peoples of the Americas have choreography with fixed torsos that move as a unit, and arms that move in straight strokes. You will notice this kind of movement in "Los Viejitos", a dance from the Mexican state of Michoacán. This highland area did not experience an influx of slaves, so the movement and music reflect the indigenous and Spanish influence.

## What to Watch and Listen for:

Observe how the choreography reflects the character of each god portrayed in "Shango". The gods come from the Yoruba people of West Africa. They are:

- Eshu—the gatekeeper and mediator between ancestor spirits and men. He is associated with water.
- Oyá—guardian of the cemetery and spirit of the wind; also Shango's wife.
- Shango—a powerful deity representing the spirit of fire, thunder, and lightning; known as an excellent drummer and dancer.

The dancers wear unitards and add different costume elements to fit the piece they are performing. Look for the headdresses in "Shango" that indicate which dancers are deities. Notice how the shawl in "Punta" helps the audience understand the character's feelings of grief.

## Researching the Roots of Your Family Tree

Many families are a blend of nationalities and traditions. Interview members of your family (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles) about their pasts. Where were they born? Where were their parents/grandparents born? If they came from another

country, do they still practice the cultural traditions from that country? How have the traditions changed? Create a visual representation of the family tree that shows where your family traditions come from.

