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Inspired by Ruth St Denis's curiosity (if not her style)

by Jackson James Sanders

I practiced my historical embodiment during my choreography class with Professor Charlotte Griffin one day last February. I decided to channel Ruth St. Denis, inspired by her curiosity about other cultures. According to Thom Hecht, writing for The Dance Heritage Coalition, "St. Denis's legacy affected the development of modern dance through her exploration of dance as an art form of spiritual expression, which drew from the world's diverse cultural and spiritual knowledge and traditions." On this day, we were tasked with working in duets or groups with a specific idea that we wanted to explore. My classmate Katelyn, wanted to explore Chinese dance as well as Mongolian dance, so she and I partnered up to create a phrase that blends her Chinese dance training with contemporary movement. After she shared some of her fundamentals with me, she created a movement phrase based on her knowledge of Chinese dance. Then she and I collaborated by adding some contemporary elements and movements in the mix.

Ruth St. Denis and her works are to this day brought up as a negative portrayal of cultures in that her creations weren't authentic representations of the dances she was trying to portray. She became known for appropriating dances from around the world, Indian dance being one of them. In our dance history class, we learned that she created "in the style" of dance from other countries with very little real knowledge about them. While I see why her portrayals were controversial because they didn't portray dances in an authentic light, I was inspired by her curiosity about dance from cultures outside of her own. I had been particularly interested in Chinese dance, but I hadn't known where to get that training or experience, so this project with my partner seemed to be a great way to maybe explore my interest in this dance form. It also helped that my partner, Katelyn, was very open to teaching me some basics, indulging me in my curiosity.

When thinking of where Ruth St. Denis fell short, I wanted my intentions and creation to come from an authentic place. When Katelyn and I started our project, I wanted to learn some foundational elements that were important to the style, so we went over different hand placements like the lotus fingers. We also went over "fan shen," which is a circular movement of the arms while the body turns like a windmill. I also asked some questions about historical significance; sometimes she was able to answer, like how the lotus fingers were from court dances of ancient times. And how Mongolian dance has a lot of horse riding motifs and evokes a feeling of open space in part because Mongolia has a very vast amount of open land.

In my opinion understanding why movements are done and knowing the historical context are important to building authenticity. While our end-product wasn't necessarily an authentic representation because it fused contemporary elements, I collaborated with someone of that culture and had the experience of building something rooted in an authentic place.

Jackson James Sanders will be a senior at University of California, Irvine, expecting to graduate as a dance major in 2027.