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Embodied Inspiration

How Anna Pavlova inspired one dancer while learning Assyrian dance for an opera

by Clara Bond

Last spring, I found myself in rehearsal for a brand new opera called *Gilgamesh: The Opera*, commissioned by the Assyrian Arts Institute. None of us dancers knew traditional Assyrian social dances, which we had to learn for several scenes, including a wedding scene. However, we felt like we were in good hands with the production team, which included librettist and stage director Diana Farrell, composer Derrick Skye, dramaturg and ethnomusicologist Dr. Eve Sada, executive producer Nora Betyousef Lacey, principal choreographer Stephen Martin Allan, and director of cultural integration Ashtar Ashurseen.

Being involved with this project, I was reminded of Anna Pavlova, who watched and even studied some traditional dances from many different cultures as she toured, emphasizing that all forms of dance are respectable and serious art forms. She would ask people around the world, “Where is your dance?”, showing a genuine interest and sometimes encouraging interest in traditional dances where it had been left behind by notions of modernity. The most famous example is India, where she inspired a revival of bharatanatyam and kathak dance, by suggesting that their dances were worthy of respect and pride.

I decided in rehearsal one day to be inspired by Pavlova’s interest in learning the dances of wherever she travelled, and embody her curiosity as I learned Assyrian dance for the first time. That day, we were learning the Khiga, which is the most fundamental social dance done by Assyrian people at weddings. This dancing is characterized by gently lifting the left foot, then the right foot, then taking one step to the right, moving in a circle. People may add different footwork patterns and variations depending on their familiarity with the dance. There is an emphasis on bouncing the shoulders and keeping all movements grounded, and all participants hold hands. The person at the front of the line, leading the Khiga, is holding a decorated scarf called a yalekhta.

Like Pavlova, I was trained in Western concert dance, predominantly ballet, and had no experience with Assyrian folk dance before being hired for this project, so the practice did not come easy at first. But by embodying Pavlova’s curiosity and willingness to learn about dances different from the ones she trained in, I found myself enjoying the process and started getting the hang of it as I practiced. Eventually I figured out how to accent my steps and bounces down as they’re supposed to be in this dance instead of up like I was doing instinctively, and to think of rolling my shoulders back when bouncing them to give them a more natural and relaxed feel, rather than just moving them up and down and looking forced.

Where Pavlova and I differ in our approaches is that she, as an internationally acclaimed ballet dancer, created ballet pieces *inspired* by the dances of the places she visited, such as Jarabe Tapatio in Mexico; she did study traditional Japanese dance for a while but decided that ballet suited her more, which was why she more often performed ballet that incorporated elements of the cultures she visited. I, on the other hand, was learning the dances as they are usually

performed, trying to make it look like the dances came naturally to me. I was working not to engage my ballet training or I would get the energy and accents of the steps wrong. For example, when I first started learning, I often accented my steps up when they are supposed to be down, and had straight legs when they were supposed to be bent and grounded. These are both elements of my ballet training poking out, and I had to actively think about doing what the choreographers and directors were telling me to do rather than what my ballet-trained body wanted to autopilot to.

Gilgamesh: The Opera has given me a new appreciation for Assyrian folk dances, enhanced by intentionally imitating Anna Pavlova's interest in learning and respecting dances she was not familiar with beforehand and her choice to help people feel pride in their traditional dances. Having the opportunity to learn a new kind of dancing is always a wonderful reminder for me that all dance is worthy and deserving of respect simply because it is dance, a message that Pavlova helped share with people all over the world when she was alive. I hope that audiences who watched *Gilgamesh: The Opera* and saw a taste of Assyrian folk dance will gain a similar appreciation and curiosity about the culture, and that this is only the beginning of renewed interest in Assyrian culture and dance.



Clara Bond is a third-year Dance major at the University of California-Irvine, set to graduate in 2028. She is a freelance performer and children's dance teacher, and plans to continue performing, teaching, and choreographing after graduation.. Later down the line, Clara plans to either open her own dance studio or direct a public school dance program.