

Elena Dimitri
12 May 2014

An Exploration of Dance and Culture in Brazil

Miller Arts Scholars – 4th Year Outcome Report

Overview

With many thanks to the Miller Arts Scholars Program, I completed a two-year long project entitled *An Exploration of Dance and Culture in Brazil*. The project included many stages such as Portuguese instruction at UVA, research on what to study and where, a summer trip abroad to Brazil, conducting interviews and observing the culture in Brazil, and finally returning to the United States to create a short documentary that summarizes my findings and experiences.

My faculty mentor for this project is Katie Schetlick, who has previous experience studying dance in Brazil. In Fall 2013, we began to discuss potential research options and to articulate my artistic goals. I wanted to observe Brazilian dance as an art form, but also as a social practice. I wanted to understand the role of dance within Brazil's complex society. My initial questions included: How does Brazilian dance relate to issues regarding race and how people shape their individual identities? How does Brazilian dance culture present itself in an international realm, especially during the World Cup when the country hosts a half-million foreign tourists? I intended to capture my experiences on film to eventually create a short film including footage of Brazilian dance and interviews.

With support from the Miller Arts Scholars Program, I purchased camera equipment to capture footage in Brazil and airfare to and from Brazil. I traveled to Brazil in late May 2014 where I stayed in Salvador, Bahia for four weeks. In Salvador, I participated in a study abroad program organized by the University of South Florida and Brazil Cultural in which I took a Portuguese language course as well as a class on Afro-Brazilian culture. After the program in Salvador ended, I traveled independently and with a fellow UVA student to Recife and Rio de Janeiro for another two weeks.

Overall, my experience in Brazil was incredible. I learned a great deal about Brazil's history, culture, and politics. I met many individuals who welcomed me into their culture and openly shared their insights on the current state of Brazil and its dance culture. This year, by reflecting upon and editing my footage, I worked to illustrate these ideas and opinions into a short documentary entitled *An Exploration of Dance and Culture in Brazil*.

Research

Throughout my trip, I worked to acclimate myself into Brazilian culture while absorbing as much information regarding dance as possible. In Brazil, dance and music are abundant and interconnected. Where there is live music, there is dance – and vice versa. In regards to dance, I took the role as both a participant and an observer. I viewed dance in various environments: instructional – I took several dance classes in different forms, performance – I attended shows and observed street acts, and social. I used my camera to record the dance events I witnessed and

to conduct interviews with Brazilians I met. While dance remained the focus of my research, I also became interested in investigating Brazilian culture more broadly. Below I have summarized some of my observations:

- *Dance as a universal language:* In Brazil, at times it was difficult to communicate with Brazilians due to the language barrier. My Portuguese skills definitely improved over the course of the trip, but I missed having the ability to communicate with others seamlessly. When communicating through words was difficult, it was nice to have the ability to communicate through body language, gestures, and dance. Because the body is the instrument, it has the ability to transcend cultural boundaries. Of course, Brazilian dance forms are very unique to the culture and many Brazilians move differently than I, but I think there is something very powerful about people coming together to move, regardless of where you are from. So when communicating through language was difficult, it was nice to relate to someone else in a different way through dance.
- *Dance as a form of resistance:* The study abroad program I participated in focused on Afro-Brazilian culture. As the program progressed, I began to connect the dance forms I observed to the larger conversation of Afro-Brazilian resistance in society. Through dance, populations are affirming their presence in society and are preserving historical movement traditions. Capoeira serves as a good illustration of this idea. Capoeira began during slavery as a way for slaves to fight against their masters. It was disguised as a dance in order for them to continue practicing. The form was once banned from society, but populations continued to engage in it. Today, the form is still used to remember the Afro-Brazilian past, but it is also used as a form of resistance in the current society. Afro-Brazilians remain oppressed in society and lack proper representation in the government. In this way, capoeira continues to act as a form of resistance. Candomblé shares a similar history of oppression in Brazil. Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion that incorporates dance, sacrifice, and the summoning of spirits through the human body. Like capoeira, this religion was once banned for its beliefs and practices. So today, this practice acts as a form of resistance and a way for Afro-Brazilians to assert their rights and beliefs in society.
- *Dance as a way to assert identity:* I often asked people if they could describe when they learned to dance. Most people could not identify exactly *when* or *how* they learned to dance because it's how they grew up and it is something they have always known. I found that dance is not just an activity for many Brazilians, but it encompasses part of peoples' identity. The traditional dances have been around for years and serve as a way for people to connect with their past.
- *Relationship between dance and tourism in Brazil:* During my trip, I was also interested in the relationship between Brazil's genuine culture and the culture observed from an outsider's perspective. Many people travel to Brazil for its music, dance, and celebrations. What people need to realize is that the image Brazil projects to the rest of the world is not always the most authentic. For instance, a huge celebration like Carnival is much more complex than outsiders realize. It involves ideas of inclusion and exclusion that are deeply engrained in society. After my trip, I became more aware of how culture

can be changed, altered, and packaged for foreign audiences. It was interesting to hear Brazilians speak about this concept in relation to popular forms such as samba, capoeira, forro, etc.

- *Brazil as a resilient society*: I learned a lot about Brazil during my time in the country. The country is currently undergoing many changes and developments. For example, it just hosted the World Cup and will host the Olympics in 2016, placing Brazil in the international spotlight once again. While the country is quickly becoming more dominant in the international realm, it still has many internal conflicts regarding poverty, political representation, sexism, etc. While problems continue to exist, I observed how resilient the society is. One of the ways I observed this resilience is through dance.

Outcome

After returning from Brazil, I had several hours of footage. I had support transcribing all my interviews, which saved me hours of tedious work. After thoroughly reviewing my footage and listening to interviews, I chose to use the documentary to illustrate the dualities that exist between different dance forms in Brazil. The majority of the dance forms I focused on exist in two different realms; on the one hand, there exists the authentic and traditional form practiced by Brazilians as an attempt to preserve and celebrate cultural roots. And on the other hand, there is the dance form that is altered and commodified to attract foreign audiences. Many of these dualisms also included a racial component. For example, in many cases, traditionally Afro-Brazilian forms are utilized for commercial purposes, but the original populations do not reap the financial or social benefits of the form.

The film begins by illustrating the vibrant dance culture that exists in Brazil. Then, through interviews and visual segments, the documentary dives into three particular forms: samba, capoeira, and candomblé. Next, I ask interviewees to directly address questions of commodification and dualism that exist in Brazil.

The editing process was challenging for several reasons. Because this was my first major film project of any kind, the quality of my footage did not always result in the best quality. For this reason, it was sometimes difficult to piece everything together to form a succinct narrative. It was also challenging to create seamless transitions from different shots and ideas. Overall, the process was very time-consuming and included efforts to create legible subtitles with appropriate timing. I also wanted to ensure that I gave everyone in my film a true voice. I did not want to stifle their ideas through my editing. In all, the film's run-time is 37 minutes.

The film can be found online at the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AS25dfZq5UM&feature=youtu.be>