Five cultures, five dances, five stories

BY CYNTHIA K. BUCCINI
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ASIA KEPKA

ON A FRIDAY night at the Tsai Performance Center, eight young women take the stage, wearing costumes in bright red and royal blue, cuffs with shiny bells strapped around their ankles, gold belts around their waists, and headdress in the part of their hair.

They begin dancing in graceful, practiced unison, the bells tinkling with every stamp of their bare feet. The performance, by BU Dheem, the student classical Indian arts association, is adapted from the fairy tale The Red Shoes, only in this version the bells are bewitched by a demon.

“We soon realize that the bells have taken on a life of their own,” says Shivani Ray (CAS’12), vice president of BU Dheem. “They keep making us dance, even though we are getting more tired and pained. Finally, we get so tired, we fall to the floor and take our last breaths.” The performance is at once theater, music, and dance.

“One of the most wonderful things about Indian classical dance is that it spans thousands of years,” says Ray. “It’s full of rich culture, language, history, and traditions.”

BU Dheem is one of nearly 50 student cultural organizations at the University, from the African Students Organization to the West Indian Network. Many have their own dance groups, which practice regularly and perform several times a year at multicultural events on campus and at festivals or competitions in the city and out of state. The goal, students say, is to express themselves, showcase their talent, and share their culture.

Maureen Njung’e (CAS’13) is a member of the African Students Organization dance troupe AFRITHMS. “Instead of just telling the BU community about Africa,” she says, “we bring Africa to the BU community and show it through dance.”

Here, Bostonia highlights five of the University’s cultural dance groups: AFRITHMS, Boston Salsa University, BU Dheem, the Vietnamese Student Association, and X-Ception Step Team.

WEB EXTRA
Watch videos of BU’s cultural dance groups at bu.edu/bostonia.
Language

The wraps we wear express the vibrancy and fun of our dance.

AFRITHMS

THE TROUPE: Founded in 2010, the troupe has about 10 students. “We are all Africans, representing countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Cameroon, and Congo,” says Maureen Njung’e (CAS’13).

THE DANCE: “I would describe the moves as modern,” says Njung’e. “It’s a very energetic dance that combines moves from all over Africa, with a lot of hip movement.”

THE COSTUMES: Wraps commonly worn across Africa, Njung’e says. “We wear them not only for the colors, but because they also express the vibrancy and fun found in our dances.”

WHAT SHE MOST ENJOYS ABOUT AFRITHMS: “Being with everyone every Sunday and dancing to amazing music that reminds us of home.”
VIETNAMESE STUDENT ASSOCIATION

THE ASSOCIATION: The 25-year-old nonprofit organization enables students to explore, preserve, and promote Vietnamese history, culture, and experiences.

THE DANCE: Vivian Minh (COM’13) says the ribbon dance she choreographed for the group this year celebrates the Vietnamese New Year and spring festival. (Vietnamese spring festivals often feature dragon performances, family get-togethers, and singing.) The dance involves twirling long red ribbons attached to a stick. Making a large circle with the ribbon represents unity, Minh says, which is a symbol of the new year.

THE RIBBONS: The red ribbons represent good luck and fortune.

THE DRESSES: Flowers and vibrant colors symbolize the coming of spring.

WHY MINH IS INVOLVED: “My parents were born in Vietnam, but are Chinese. I’ve always had a connection to Vietnamese culture because my parents know the language and eat the cuisine. I wanted to explore more of the culture.”

OTHER WAYS SHE’S EXPLORED THE CULTURE: Minh visited Vietnam for the first time last December. “It’s still a developing country,” she says, adding that she liked the people. “They love to celebrate holidays, and they take family seriously.”

Making a large circle with the long red ribbon represents unity, a symbol of the new year.
X-CEPTION STEP TEAM

THE TEAM: Cofounded in 2005, “Tanya Bascombe (SAR’08) named the team X-Ception based on her childhood experiences,” says cocaptain Paul Renolis (SAR’11). “Growing up in New York, she always felt that she and her brother were ‘exceptions’ in the community, in terms of race, culture, and ethnicity. They had to work harder than the average person in order to succeed. X-Ception was established under the National Society of Black Engineers, but we decided we wanted a stronger tie with BU. In 2009, we were established as Boston University’s premiere step team.”

NUMBER OF MEMBERS: Nine students of all cultural and racial backgrounds are on the 2010–2011 team.

HISTORY OF THE DANCE: Step originates directly from African culture, says Renolis. “Step was originally in the form of tribal and spiritual dancing, where people made sounds in order to express their emotions.” The dance became part of American culture during the era of slavery and entered the mainstream in the 1960s and 1970s.

THE STEPS: Described as “body percussion,” step is a combination of stomps, claps, and other beats, using the body as the main instrument, Renolis says. The dance can also include props, such as canes, umbrellas, and chairs, for additional sounds.

WHAT’S DIFFERENT ABOUT X-CEPTION: The team often incorporates its steps into a comedy sketch. “We often brainstorm what’s popular in pop culture and poke fun at it,” says Renolis. “We play different characters on stage and implement steps between small scenes of dialogue.”

WHERE TO WATCH: www.youtube.com/buxception

Step became part of American culture during the era of slavery.
Salsa dancers convey strength, passion, ferocity, grace, and poise. “It is a very delicate balance.”

**BOSTON SALSA UNIVERSITY**

**THE GROUP:** Founded in 2008 by Nadia Ouhib (ENG’11), who is also president. “I had begun to really enjoy the dance,” she says, “but I noticed that in Boston, the salsa population was typically a middle-aged crowd. I wanted to give students the opportunity to learn in order to grow the salsa scene.”

**NUMBER OF STUDENTS INVOLVED:** About 600 members, roughly 400 of whom are active and attend lessons and socials.

**THE FOUNDER:** Ouhib has been dancing for about three years and has performed with a professional team in Boston. “I spend a lot of time dancing, about two nights per week in local salsa clubs,” she says.

**WHAT SALSA DANCERS TRY TO CONVEY:** Strength, passion, ferocity, grace, and poise, says Ouhib. “It is a very delicate balance.”

**IS A PARTNER NECESSARY?** “If you like to go out social dancing at a local salsa club,” Ouhib says, “absolutely not. Performers often put together solo footwork routines.”

Boston Salsa University founder and president Nadia Ouhib (ENG’11) and her partner Paul Herrera (below). Members of BU Dheem (facing page), including Barkha Patel (SMG’11), perform their adaptation of the fairy tale The Red Shoes.
BU DHEEM

THE GROUP: Created in 2004, BU Dheem has 13 dancers and 5 musician-singers.

MEANING OF THE WORD “DHEEM”: The sound the bells make when performers dance.

HISTORY OF INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE: Nine distinct forms, hailing from various parts of India. “Indian classical dance follows the Natya Shastra, an ancient Indian textual authority on the performing arts,” says Shivani Ray (CAS’12), club vice president. Each dance form has a wide breadth of facial expressions, hand gestures, head and neck movements, hip movements, and foot placements, which all have different meanings. Each part of the body is literally showing a specific but integral part of the story.

PRE- AND POSTPERFORMANCE RITUAL: “Before an Indian classical dancer begins a dance, he or she pays respect to the gods above, the audience in front, and Mother Earth below, on whom we ask permission that we may stamp to do our dance,” says Ray. “We also pray to our bells, because they are sacred to the art of our dance and we must pay our respects.”

THE COSTUMES: Each part has a specific function, but it’s predominantly about elaborate decoration of the body, Ray says. “The beautiful colors are just a perk to liven the performance. As for the bells, they add to the complex foot movements we do, and almost make them more distinct with the sound they make.”

WHERE TO WATCH: www.youtube.com/user/budheem

Before dancing, they pay respect to the gods above, the audience in front, and Mother Earth below.