

Ballet NEBRASKA

Presents a Study Guide to

momentum

If you've been to *The Nutcracker* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, you've already seen one kind of performance: a "full-length" ballet, with a single story that runs the whole length of the program. *Momentum* is something a bit different: a "mixed-repertory" program. It's a collection of short, individual ballets, each with its own subject and style. When you come to the school performance, you'll see two of the ballets on our *Momentum* program: *Cleopatra* and *DanceSport*. Keep an eye out for how they're similar, and how they're different!

Who Was Cleopatra?

In her new ballet Cleopatra, choreographer Erika Overturff has tried to imagine what it would feel like to be a completely different person, living in a different place and time. The person she chose was one of history's most fascinating women: Cleopatra, the last queen of ancient Egypt. She was famous for her beauty, her intelligence, and her skill at persuasion and politics. Erika wrote this story to help explain what happens in her ballet:

Cleopatra first ruled over Egypt together with her brother, Ptolemy. But Cleopatra, alluring and ambitious, wanted to be the sole ruler. To win full control, she persuaded a Roman general, Julius Caesar, to help her lead a revolt against her brother. She fell in love with Caesar and they had a son, Caesarion.

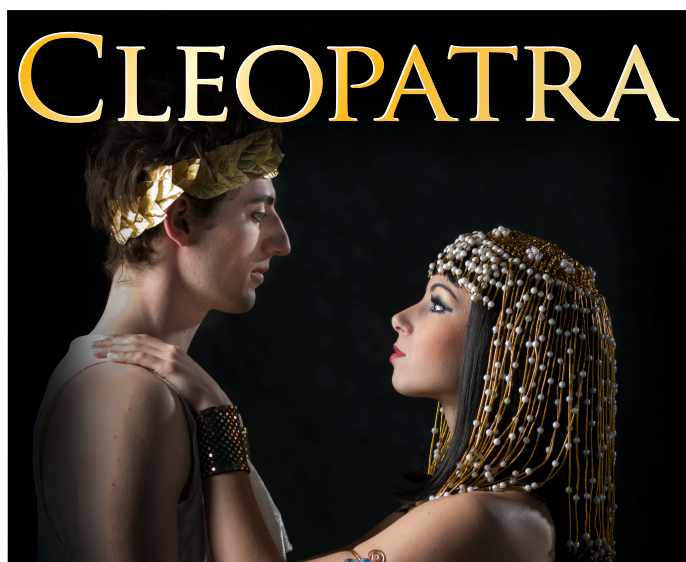
Cleopatra followed Caesar when he returned to Rome. But he was murdered by members of the Roman Senate, and she returned to Egypt. Marc Antony, a powerful Roman general, arranged to meet with her for political negotiations – but he could not resist her mesmerizing charm. Antony fell hopelessly in love with Cleopatra. This is where our story begins...

In Egypt's beautiful capital city of Alexandria, Cleopatra and Antony enjoy an evening of sumptuous dining, drinking, and entertainment in the royal palace. Following the festivities, the couple retires to the queen's chamber, very much in love.

The next morning, Antony receives news that he must return to Rome at once. While he is away, Cleopatra gives birth to their twins, a son and daughter.

When Cleopatra eventually learns the news of Antony's political marriage to the sister of his rival Octavian, she is furious. Upon Antony's return to Egypt several years later, he is greeted by a cold queen. However, their passion is soon rekindled.

Cleopatra, always aware of her royal birth and claims to divinity as pharaoh, wishes to reestablish the glory and power of the Egyptian throne with Marc Antony by her side. In a magnificent ceremony known as the Donations of



Alexandria, Antony crowns Cleopatra "Queen of Kings" and gives their children special royal titles, naming them rulers over foreign lands. Together in love, the couple celebrates their power and great ambition.

Antony's Roman rivals feel threatened and are fearful of the couple's powerful alliance, and plot to destroy the two lovers. Antony is defeated in battle and is ultimately deserted by his men. Despairing, Antony falls on his own sword in an act of suicide. He is carried to the site being prepared as Cleopatra's tomb, where the queen is hiding from the imminent Roman advance. The lovers are reunited briefly before Antony's death.

Faced with the reality of her own defeat and the death of her beloved Antony, Cleopatra ends her own life by allowing herself to be bitten by an *asp*, a poisonous snake. Cleopatra, as with all ancient Egyptians, believes that death is not the end, and that she will join a long line of her ancestors in the afterlife.

While Cleopatra's visions of glory and power ultimately failed, her ambition, capability, and remarkable charm left an unforgettable mark in history. Through our memory of the queen, Cleopatra truly has achieved an eternal life.

What if ballet were a sport?

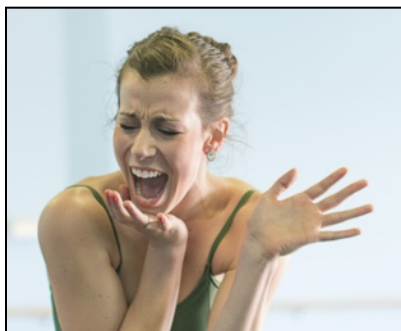
When you see *Momentum*, you're sure to notice that dancers are fantastic athletes. They run, turn and leap with tremendous power and exact precision. They lift and spin each other's bodies as if they were as light as feathers. And they do it all while making it look completely effortless.



Dancers are like athletes in other ways, too. The dancers of the Ballet Nebraska company are *professionals* – which means that dancing is their full-time job. That's the same as for professional football, basketball and baseball players, who work full-time at their respective sports. Like other athletes, our dancers begin every day with a workout, then practice for hours to perfect their skills. Like other athletes, they study with coaches who help them solve problems and improve their form. And like other athletes, they work together as a team to get the most out of each individual's abilities.

So by now you might be thinking: Why couldn't ballet be a sport? Well, maybe it could. But that would mean there would have to be referees, and uniforms, and maybe even play-by-play announcers! It might start to get a little silly...

...and that's exactly why Chicago-based choreographer Harrison McEldowney created our ballet *DanceSport*. Harrison is a showman – he loves to create ballets that entertain people and make them laugh. In *DanceSport*, he takes the athleticism and artistry of ballet and turns it into an actual sports event. Feel free to laugh, and don't forget to cheer for your favorites!



We took these pictures during a DanceSport practice session so you can see how the performers "get into character." Did she cheat? Will the ref catch her? Do they score? Watch for these moments in the performance!

Cleopatra: Things to See

To create her ballet *Cleopatra*, choreographer Erika Overturff studied ancient Egypt and its way of life: how people dressed, the things they used, and their beliefs and customs. Noticing these details can help you feel as if you are an ancient Egyptian, watching the story as it happens:

Pharaoh was the title given to the supreme rulers of ancient Egypt. The people of Egypt considered the pharaoh to be a half-human, half-god. Cleopatra was the last Pharaoh of Egypt.

The Nile is the 4,000-mile-long river beginning far to the south of Egypt and ending in a large delta in the northern part of Egypt. The Nile river was at the center of life for ancient Egyptians. Some consider Egypt itself the "gift of the Nile." The opening scene festivities include a celebration of the Nile, featuring the crocodile god Sobek.

The crook and flail are items associated with the pharaohs. The crook represents a shepherd's protection. The flail is a type of fly-whisk which kept pests away. Both of these items symbolized the pharaoh's protection of Egypt from invading armies or evil spirits. We'll see Cleopatra holding these items as Pharaoh.

Jewelry adornment was important for those who could afford to own such pieces. You will see many examples of Egyptian jewelry, especially adorned collars.

The scarab beetle shows up as a frequent theme in Egyptian jewelry, and on an important amulet placed over the hearts of mummies in their tombs. Scarab beetles symbolized resurrection and were associated with the Egyptian god Khepri. You will see scarab beetles in the jewelry worn by the dancers.

Makeup was worn by both men and women in ancient Egypt. In addition to being ornamental, makeup cosmetics were also functional. Kohl was black liner used on the eyes to protect them from the glare of the intense sun. Eye makeup also kept insects away, and in some cases had mild disinfectant properties. Many Egyptians believed that cosmetics had magical and healing power. You will see Egyptian makeup on the characters in the ballet.

Hair care and a fashionable style were important to the men, women and children of Egypt. Most of the upper class wore wigs. You will see examples of Egyptian hairstyles in the ballet.

Gods were the focus of the Egyptians' strong religious beliefs. They worshipped many gods and goddesses, all with specific areas of protection and power. The god Horus – known as the god of the Sky, War and Protection – is one of the oldest and most significant deities of Cleopatra's time. When the Donations of Alexandria celebration takes place, look for the wings of Horus featured on the dancers.

Hieroglyphs are sacred carvings using approximately 700 symbols. They were used for formal, religious and governmental inscriptions on monuments. Look for the hieroglyphs in Cleopatra's tomb.

Mummies were important because the ancient Egyptians believed that to journey to the afterlife, they must have an intact, mummified body wrapped for final rest in a tomb. In the final scene of *Cleopatra*, we see an elaborate coffin that houses the mummy before Cleopatra joins her ancestors in the afterlife.

What You'll See in the Theater

A ballet performance is similar to other “live” performances such as a symphony concert or a stage play. But it also has its own customs and traditions that help make your visit to the theater special. Although each production may handle things slightly differently, here's a general guide to what you can expect:

Before the show, people come in, find their seats, and get settled. The signal that the ballet is about to start will be the dimming of the lights.

The curtain will not go up right away; instead, you'll hear music called the overture. It's a preview of the music that will be heard during the performance. It helps viewers forget about their outside distractions and get into the mood to enjoy the ballet.

Once the overture ends, the curtain will rise and the dancers will begin the performance. One thing you'll notice right away that makes ballet different from a movie or a stage play: *Dancers almost never talk onstage!*

Instead of using speech, a ballet tells its story through movements, gestures, and facial expressions. This may seem like an odd way of telling a story – but if you think about it, it's perfectly natural. After all, you often watch your friends' movements, gestures and facial expressions to help you understand what they are saying and how they feel (can you think of a few examples?) So if you watch the performers carefully, you'll find you have no trouble knowing exactly what's going on in the ballet.

Changes in the music and the lighting also help you follow along in the story. You'll notice how the music changes to match what's going on in each scene, and how the lighting changes from one scene to the next, helping to create a mood that matches the action.

Most story ballets are divided into “acts,” which are like chapters in a book: After one chapter ends, the story continues in the next chapter. When the first act ends, the lights on the stage may fade out and the main curtain may come down – but that doesn't mean the ballet is over! This is just a short *pause* while the performers get ready for the second act. The pause will last only a couple of minutes, so just relax in your seat until the next act begins.

(Longer ballet performances often have one or more intermissions. These are longer breaks – usually 15 or 20 minutes – in which the lights come up in the theater and the viewers can walk out into the lobby to stretch their legs and talk about the performance with their friends. The program booklet will tell you which breaks are pauses and which are intermissions.)

You'll know the ballet is over when the music finishes and the lights fade out on the stage. But there's still one more important moment to come. The lights on the stage will come up again and the dancers will face the audience, step forward, and bow to thank the audience for attending. Often the dancers who had the most prominent roles will bow separately, and finally the whole company will bow together. After the final bow, the curtain falls and the lights come up in the theater, signaling that the performance is over.



At the end of the show, the audience thanks the performers with applause, and the performers thank the audience by taking a final bow.

Be In the Know

Ballet was invented to entertain kings and queens, princes and princesses. Today, of course, everyone is welcome! But it's fun to be “in the know” about its customs and etiquette:

- **Do** make sure you are ready to sit and enjoy the show in plenty of time before it starts. Try to take care of getting a drink, a tissue, bathroom breaks, etc., *before* you come to the theater.
- **Don't** chew gum, or bring food or drinks of any kind to the theatre. Also, texting, taking pictures, or using cell phones isn't allowed during the show.
- **Don't** leave your seat during the show. The theater will be dark, and it's hard to get around. If it's an emergency and you absolutely have to get up, check with your teacher or chaperone.
- **Do** laugh if the dancers do something funny. They like to know they're entertaining you!
- **Don't** talk during the show – not to your neighbor or to the dancers. There's a lot happening onstage, and you don't want to miss something important! There will be lots of time after the show to talk.
- **Do** applaud (clap) if you want to show the dancers you liked what you saw. If you've been to a stage play or to the symphony, you may have been told that you should applaud only at the end. *But ballet is different:* it's perfectly okay to applaud *any* time you see something you think is really, really good!

Visit balletnebraska.org to learn more about ballet, about our performers, and about our future productions.