Background Information

Deconstructing Modern Dance
Modern dance was developed in America in the early 20th century. Dancers wanted to break away from the rigid rules and structure of classical ballet and sought to develop a dance that would communicate ideas, emotions, and even stories to audiences through the use of movement. Choreographers and dancers created a freer type of dance through loose and fluid movements and is more theatrical. In modern dance, dancers are often thought of as characters expressing their emotions on stage.

The Choreographer
Neil Ieremia, founder and Artistic Director of Black Grace, began dancing after falling ill with rheumatic fever. His illness left him weak and homebound, but Neil was determined to dance. Not only did he have to regain his strength, Neil had to face the ongoing criticism that surrounded him. Ieremia’s family had come from Samoa [suh-moh-uh] to the mainland where he had to adapt to a culture in which he was now a minority. Growing up as a Samoan in New Zealand it was hard for him to fit the mold of a ballet dancer because he was unable to move and manipulate his body like other dancers. Although it was difficult, Neil continued to study dance because it was his goal to discover his Samoan heritage, through dance. Ieremia maintained his strong ties to his homeland and continued to identify himself as a Somoan. Ieremia states, “Art is an important part of who we are as a young nation. Our stories, ideas, and expression of these are just as valid and important as those from Europe and America.”

Because of his experiences as a dancer and the restrictions he felt by certain types of dance, Ieremia decided to develop his own unique style that took advantage of the special talents of dancers like himself. He integrated athleticism, physical strength, and stamina into his choreography while still maintaining precision and grace.

The Company
The dance company, which was formed in 1995, is made up New Zealand’s finest and most respected contemporary dancers. The dancers are predominantly Pacific Islanders and Maori [mou’re], which means “original people” or those who are indigenous Polynesians of New Zealand.

Black Grace

Tuesday, April 29, 2008
11 a.m. – 12 p.m. ET
Grades 7-12

When viewing Black Grace and participating in this guide’s suggested activities, the following National Standards for Dance will be addressed: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6.
The Company’s body of work is a combination of traditional and contemporary dance forms and is what sets this innovative company apart from other companies in New Zealand. Ieremia weaves these two dance forms into his choreography along with his abiding belief in three key Samoan principles—Fa’amoa (integrity, honesty, and pride), Fa’amalosi/Loto Tele (perseverance and determination), and Fa’aloalo (humility and respect). Ieremia also draws from his native land and from the uniqueness of New Zealanders when creating new works.

Cultural Dance
Dance is a part of many cultures around the world. In the Pacific, song and dance is an important part of their heritage and is representative of their identity and history. Traditional dance in the Pacific is expressive and is usually about relationships. For example, a dance can be representative of the relationship between people and the land or sea or it can be about the members of the community. Dance techniques differ based on the culture. The way dancers hold their bodies as well as their movements are distinctive especially during a ritual such as a wedding ceremony or other dance related events.

About the Program
Black Grace takes the stage with an explosive program that mixes athleticism, rhythm, physical strength, and energy. Dancers demonstrate the principles of both traditional and contemporary dance forms as well as the integration of their cultural heritage and founding principles. Company members also discuss the unique cultural aspects of their work and demonstrate the mix of traditional and contemporary dance forms.

Instructional Activities
The role of dance in Pacific Island societies is important to the cultural heritage of the native people. Through research, learn about the history and characteristics of specific styles of dance in the Pacific Islands. Then research the role of dance in American society. After you have completed your research, compare and contrast the styles of dance and how history has influenced the different types of dance.

Resources:

Internet
For more information, connect to:
blackgrace.co.nz/
pbs.org/blackgrace/about.html
jacobspillow.org/
americanpentimento.com/dance.htm
kennedy-center.org/pwtv

DVD

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