



Sonora: Yaqui Indian



Mexican regional dance is comprised of dances from social settings in villages and cities, from different parts of Mexico, which have been adapted for the stage. Over the last 40 years, dance instructors have arranged some of the most popular dances from each region for the stage. Each folkloric group is usually capable of performing dances from several regions.

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People Like Me 2002: Face to Face! features *Danza del Venado* –Dance of the Deer–presented by Ensamble Ballet Folklorico (online at <http://www.ensambles.com>). This is one of the most popular among the traditional Mexican dances, and is one of the least altered. The Yaqui Indians from the state of Sonora and Sinaloa continue to execute this dance in a way that is believed to be almost identical to the way it was performed before the arrival of the Spanish.

The Yaqui and Mayo tribes are native to the Northwest Mexican highlands, and are the creators of some of the most beautiful and spectacular Mexican folk dances. Under the generic title of "Pascolas," these dances are performed in Sonora, the Bacatete Sierra, and in a town called Tehueco in Sinaloa. This elegant and profound dance symbolizes the struggle between good and evil, through a confrontation between a sacred deer and aggressive coyotes and hunters, bringing to mind parallels of cultural, philosophical, and spiritual struggles as well.

The deer dancer wears a tall mask / headpiece with large antlers, and the movements of the graceful and noble deer are beautiful and poignant in the expression of freedom. With elegant jumps, turns of the head, and proud body movement, the life of the deer is recounted; traveling through the forest, jumping into the air, grazing in the meadows and meeting the hunter.

The deer soon senses danger as the coyotes draw near, and the dancer's movements and rhythm suddenly change. The sounds made by the rattles and objects trimming the deer dancer's garments, and musical instruments, suggest the noises of the forest. The course of this performance is traditionally accompanied by a metaphoric commentary, chanted by an old man of the tribe.



Two coyotes enter the scene wearing masks covering one side of their faces. Around the waist is a thick leather belt with bells attached; the legs are wrapped in a rebozo, sarape or robe secured with leather straps, and the trouser legs are edged with strings of tiny rattles made of butterfly cocoons filled with pebbles. To accompany the coyotes, the musicians traditionally used string instruments of European origin, violins and a harp. The musicians were saluted by the coyote characters as beings of superior social standing. By contrast, the instruments that accompany the deer are purely indigenous drums and a five-tone reed flute. The musicians receive no special respect from the deer who is the holy animal of the people.

Ensembles Ballet Folklórico de San Francisco was founded in 1992 in San Francisco, California by enthusiastic dancers with different degrees of experience in Mexican folk dance. They came together with the objective of promoting Mexican dance with quality and authenticity. Today, under the artistic direction of Zenon Barron, Ensembles has developed a stylized touch to enhance the traditional elements of the culture without sacrificing the folkloric value of this dance form.

This PDF file was added to the Viewer's Guide in 2002.