

Ballet

NEBRASKA presents a study guide to

momentum featuring

POSEIDON

and

Party Animals



Focus: Designing for Dance

What do you see when you go to a ballet performance? Dancers, of course! But what else?

Two other things you're sure to notice are the *sets* and *costumes*. "Sets" is the theater word for the **objects and decorations** that you see on the stage around and behind the dancers as they perform. "Costumes" are the special clothes that the dancers wear.

Why are sets and costumes so important? Take a moment and try to think of a few ways that sets and costumes help you understand and enjoy the performance more. Here are some possibilities:

Sets help you understand *where* the ballet takes place. Does it happen in a town, in a forest, in your imagination, or no place in particular?

Our ballet *Poseidon* is set in a fantasy world under the sea. Its set is a huge piece of cloth called a *backdrop*, which is painted in colors and designs that suggest what it would be like to live under the water.

Costumes help you understand *who* the dancers are in the ballet. Are they real people, or animals, or imaginary creations? Do they live in the present time, the past, or no specific time or place?

In our ballet *Party Animals*, the dancers portray animals that live in the African *savanna*, a warm, grassy plain that is the home of many kinds of wildlife.

Erika Overturff, the ballet's choreographer, wants us to have fun by imagining what these animals would act like if they got dressed up and went to parties! So their costumes are a mixture of real animals' features – such as ears and tails – and swanky party clothes.

Some other things that sets and costumes do:

- Help explain *mood* of the ballet. Is it spooky and mysterious? Elegant and glamorous? Funny and quirky? The costumes and sets help you know.
- Give the ballet a *style*. Costume designers and set designers choose colors, shapes and textures that work together with each other and with the movements the choreographer creates. When everything goes together, the production makes a stronger impression on the audience.
- Add to the *beauty and enjoyment* of seeing the ballet. How everything looks is an important part of the experience!



Dancer Vivi DiMarco shows us the costume of a flamingo in *Party Animals*. Her costume combines some features of a real-life flamingo (the beak, the orange/pink color) and of party clothes (the fancy skirt.)

Try It: Designing for Dance

Let's imagine you and your friends are going to put on a ballet performance – and YOU are the set designer or costume designer! How would you start creating your work?

Monique Belitz designed the set for *Poseidon*, and Deborah Overturff designed the costumes for *Party Animals*. They both started by discussing the ballets with the choreographers, and doing research to gather information. Then, they began making drawings to help them plan their ideas. **Now it's your turn!** We'll give you some ideas from the choreographers, and some fun facts about African animals and the Greek mythological god Poseidon. You might want to try thinking up ideas for a set or a costume, and making some drawings! Then, we'll show you some drawings that Monique and Deborah did on the next page.

Choreographer notes:

Here's what choreographer Matthew Carter says about his ballet, *Poseidon*:

"Poseidon is an underwater fantasy ballet inspired by the Joslyn Art Museum's exhibit, Poseidon & The Sea. The ballet explores the themes of ebb and flow, the dynamics of the ocean, and the relationship between Poseidon, a Greek god, and his wife, Amphitrite."

And here's what choreographer Erika Overturff says about her ideas for *Party Animals*:

"These animals have such distinctive and interesting characteristics that I couldn't help seeing them as personalities. I envisioned my sophisticated 'party animals' all dressed up for a wild night out on the town."

African animals fact file:

Why are flamingos pink? Because they eat shrimp. It is a nutritious natural chemical, or organic compound, called beta carotene in the brine shrimp that turns the flamingos' feathers pink.

Crocodiles are successful predators. The eyes, ears and nostrils are located on top of the head, allowing the crocodile to lie low in the water, hidden from prey.

Hippos spend most of their day in the water close to shore and are considered graceful swimmers.

Gazelles have impressive horns. They are very nimble and use a bounding leap called "stotting" to avoid predators.

A python tastes the air with its tongue to sense prey. When catching its prey, it wraps tightly around and squeezes. It can swallow prey whole, even animals as large as gazelles.

Meerkats live in social colonies.

Cheetahs are large cats that can run faster than any other land animal- up to 75 miles per hour in short bursts!

Poseidon fact file:

Poseidon was one of three very important brothers in world of ancient Greek mythology.

Zeus ruled the sky and was the king of all the Greek gods. **Hades** ruled under the earth.

Poseidon ruled the sea. He was happy that he didn't have to be underground all day like Hades, or have all the responsibilities of Zeus. He enjoyed his beautiful and ever-changing underwater kingdom.

Poseidon was handsome, moody, restless and very powerful. When he was happy, the sea was calm and sparkling. When he became angry, terrible storms and tidal waves would break over the land. Everyone tried very hard to keep Poseidon happy because they were a little afraid of him. The only one who didn't try too hard was his beautiful wife, Amphitrite.

Poseidon really loved his wife, but they also liked to fight with each other. Poseidon and Amphitrite had many mischievous adventures and misunderstandings, but at the end of each day, they would return to their fabulous underwater palace to continue ruling their kingdom under the sea.

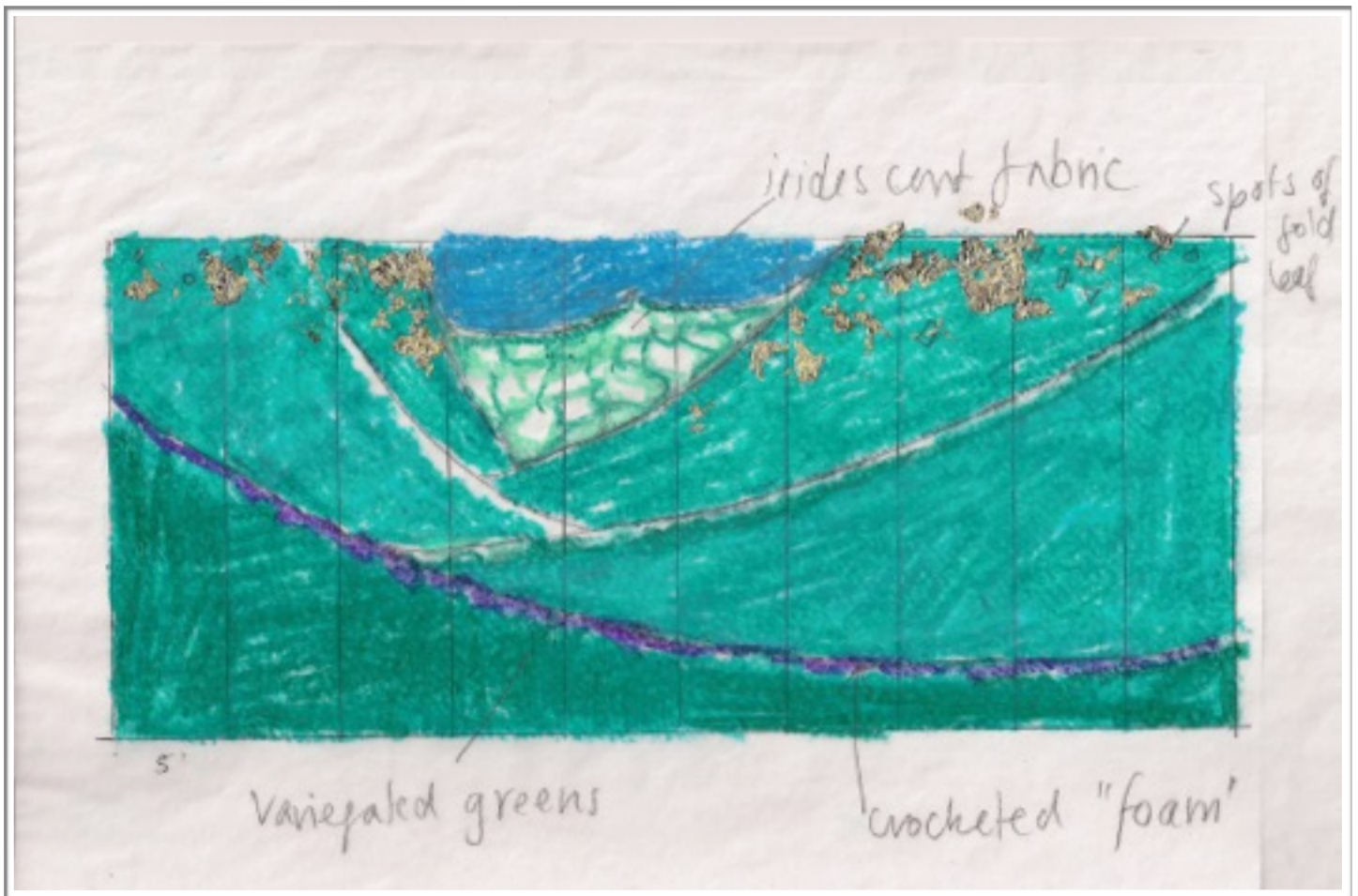
Try It: Designing for Dance

So... how did you do? Did you come up with some ideas for a costume or a set?

Remember, in costume and set design, there can be more than one “right” answer. Any idea that makes the ballet more beautiful and more effective is a good one.

Here’s the sketch that Monique Belitz did for the backdrop for *Poseidon*.

Monique is an art professor at Doane College, and her students – Becky Gasper and Hannah Knutsen – helped her design and paint the backdrop. Do you see how their design includes the blue-green colors of the sea and the swirling shapes of water?



Try It: Designing for Dance

Here are some sketches that costume designer Deborah Overturff did for *Party Animals*.

Notice how she draws the animals in dance poses, to show how the costume will look as the dancer moves. Do you see the combinations of real animal features and party-clothes features?



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.

In this performance, you'll see two different ballets. After the first ballet, the lights on the stage may fade out and the main curtain may come down – but that doesn't mean the performance is over! This is just a *pause* while the performers get ready for the next ballet. This will take only a couple of minutes, so just relax in your seat until the next ballet begins.

(When you attend longer ballet performances, you'll find they often have one or more intermissions. These are longer breaks – usually 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. This picture shows the final bow from The Nutcracker.

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 theater. 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.