The Bull Dance

(or: After You.)

Tutor: I saw an amazing picture once.

*Student: Oh yes?*

Of a painting.

*Oh yes?*

4,000 years old.

*The painting?*

Yes.

*What was it a painting of?*

The Bull Dance.

*The Bull Dance?*

Yes.

*Where was the painting from?*

Knossos.

*Knossos?*

In Crete.

*And the painting showed this dance?*

Yes. The Bull Dance.

*What is the Bull Dance?*

Nobody knows for sure.

*Who did the Bull Dance?*

Nobody really knows.

*Well, do we know why they did it?*

Not really.

*We don’t know much, do we!*

No. Not for sure, anyway.

*Was there really a Bull Dance?*

How do you mean?

*Well, did it really happen?*

Oh yes.

*How do we know?*

Well, we’ve found some writing about it.

*Oh.*

And there are a couple of pictures.

*Like the one you saw?*

Yes.

*OK.*

And a few statues here and there.

*Statues of Bull Dancing?*

Yes.

*So there really was a Bull Dance?*

Yes.

*4,000 years ago?*

Give or take.

*OK. What do the pictures and statues show?*

They show young people leaping over the head of a bull.

*Leaping over a bull’s head?*

And landing on its back.

*How, exactly?*

They do a somersault.

*A somersault?*

Over the bull’s head.

*How could they do that?*

They grab the bull by the horns.

*Really?*

And swing themselves up and over.

*That sounds difficult.*

Yes.

*Very difficult.*

Yes.

*And very dangerous.*

Well, they were probably well trained.

*Trained?*

Yes.

*There was a school for Bull Dancing?*

Probably.

*Who did the Bull Dance?*

Well…

*You were going to say “We don’t really know”.*

That’s right. We don’t really know.

*Mmmm.*

We don’t know. Not for sure.

*Do we know why they did it?*

Not for sure.

*Or who they were?*

They might have been slaves.

*Made to do the Bull Dance.*

Maybe.

*Mmmm.*

But maybe not.

*Who else would do a Bull Dance?*

It may have been young elites.

*Young elites?*

Yes.

*Young rich people?*

Yes.

*Why would rich young people dance with bulls?*

Maybe to prove they were brave.

*Mmmmmm…*

Show off a bit.

*More than a bit !*

Yes. More than a bit.

*You would need to be brave.*

Well, yes.

*Really brave.*

Maybe it was a sort of test.

*Was it done in public?*

Oh yes.

*OK.*

That was the point, really.

*Where was it done?*

In a bull ring.

*Was there a bull ring?*

In Knossos?

*Yes.*

Yes. There was.

*So they danced in the ring?*

Probably.

*In front of a crowd?*

Everyone would come to watch.

*Probably.*

The dancers could show how brave they were.

*And a bit crazy.*

I’m not so sure.

*How do you mean?*

I think it may be quite possible.

*To dance with a bull?*

With a bit of luck.

*How would you do it?*

Walk up to him.

*Walk up to a bull?*

Yes.

*Surely he would charge?*

It’s a matter of confidence.

*A matter of confidence?*

If you walk up to a bull looking confident, he may stand still.

*Not for long.*

For a few moments.

*Well….*

That may be all you need.

*Mmmm...*

A bull fighter does exactly this.

*Exactly what?*

Walks up to his bull.

*Looking confident?*

Yes. Looking confident.

*And the bull may just stand?*

So long as you don’t wobble at all.

*You couldn’t rely on it.*

No. Not absolutely.

*I don’t think you could be sure he would stand.*

No. You couldn’t be sure.

*Dangerous. You’d be in trouble if he didn’t.*

Yes.

*So that’s how the Bull Dance begins?*

Could be.

*Everyone crowds round the ring.*

All excited.

*They’re going to see something really dangerous.*

The bull comes into the ring.

*He walks round a bit.*

Then the dancers come into the ring.

*Two, maybe three of them.*

They are very fit.

*Barefoot.*

Probably teenagers.

*They walk towards the bull.*

Nice and slow.

*Looking confident.*

Maybe they tease him a bit.

*Show him off to the crowd.*

Make him look wild, maybe.

*Get the crowd excited.*

Then they cool it.

*Now they calm the bull down.*

They dance round him.

*Not too close.*

Not yet, anyway.

*They work as a team.*

Yes.

*Look out for each other.*

Safer that way.

*They watch him carefully.*

Checking him out.

*What sort of mood is he in?*

Maybe two of them dance to the side.

*Keeping in the corner of his eyes.*

He’s not sure what they’re doing.

They want him to stand.

Yes.

*They don’t want him to charge.*

No.

*That would be hopeless.*

He would be in control.

*He would.*

And the dancers have to control their bull.

*The have to get him to stand.*

For a few moments, anyway.

*That’s really important.*

Well, the dancer who leaps must get a good grip.

*Of the horns.*

Yes.

*And he’s only got one chance.*

Yes.

*He has to grab the bull by the horns.*

He has to somersault up and over the horns.

*So he has to get a good grip.*

Yes.

*He has to leap while the bull is standing still.*

Yes.

*There’s not much time!*

No.

*The leap must be done quickly.*

The bull will drop his head if you walk up close.

*Really?*

Yes. He’s watching the dancer.

*Really?*

The dancer right in front of him.

*Right.*

He’s a bit uncertain.

*He’s not sure what’s going on.*

He’s thinking about charging, or tossing.

*Which is why his head drops.*

Yes, and that’s when the dancer has to leap.

*He’s got to think the way the bull is thinking.*

He’s got to leap when the bull is still.

*Head down. Watching. Uncertain.*

Then the dancer runs forward and leaps.

*Right between the horns.*

He leaps forward and upward.

*His hands grip the bull’s horns and he swings up and over.*

As soon as the bull sees the dancer move, he brings his head up.

*Really?*

He’ll bring it up fast.

*He’s trying to catch the dancer!*

Exactly.

*So his head is swinging up as the dancer leaps.*

A good dancer will use this swing of the bull’s head.

*To help him somersault up and over.*

He can use the bull’s head to swing him up and over.

*I suppose that’s possible.*

If he gets it right.

*If he gets it right!*

The dancer lands with both feet together.

*Behind the bull?*

No.

No?

The idea is to land on the bull’s rump.

*On the bull’s rump?*

Yes.

*Really?*

The rump of a bull is wide and flat.

*Well, yes, but…*

 And it’s not moving. Just at the moment, anyway.

*No, I suppose not.*

So the dancer can land on the rump.

*I suppose he can.*

Then jump down and run off.

*Wave to the crowd and all that.*

If the leap was good.

*Yes. If the leap was good…*

Girls probably did the Bull Dance too.

*It wasn’t just boys?*

No.

*Really? Girls did the Bull Dance?*

Probably as many girls as boys.

*I wonder how they trained?*

Pardon?

*I mean you only get one chance, don’t you?*

If you make a mistake, the bull will get you.

*Mmmm…*

Gore you. With its horns.

*Not nice.*

No.

*Some Bull Dancers must have been caught.*

There is a statue of a dancer being gored.

*So it must have happened.*

Yes. It must have happened.

*And the crowd wants real danger.*

I’m afraid so.

*Must have been beautiful, though.*

Yes. When it went well.

*It’s amazing, though.*

The Bull Dance?

*Amazing that anyone would do it.*

Well, people have always shown off.

*With bulls?*

Well, there’s still bullfighting.

*Is there?*

I think so. Some places.

*Mmmm...*

And then there’s Bull Runs

*Where they let bulls loose?*

Yes.

*And people tease them and then run.*

Yes.

*People sometimes get caught.*

And gored.

*Yes.*

Not nice.

*Shall we start a Bull Dancing school?*

Here?

*Why not?*

Learn the Bull Dance, you mean?

*Why not?*

Get some bulls?

*Not too frisky.*

Not too big.

*Not too bad tempered.*

We’d need to give it a name.

*Like “Grab the Bull by the Horns”.*

We could have Bull Dancing every summer.

*Dance around the bulls.*

Leap over their heads.

*Show everyone how brave we are.*

Right!

*Let’s do it!*

*Yes! Let’s do it!*

*After you.*

Oh no. After you!

*No, really. After you!*