**Greek Traditional Dance And Its Presence In Contempory Greek Society**

By Catherina Stavrou

This presentation is the issue of a long personal living in the world of Greek dance. It does not have the ambition to be exhaustive. It is meant only to give a general idea of what is Greek dance today and its process of transformation, may be to attract you to come in acquaintance with that from a closer distance.

THE TERMS

It seems to me necessary to point first out the difference between ‘’traditional’’ and ‘’folk’’ dance, since they are the terms which are often used to indicate indigenous dances. I’ll adopt the definition given by Alkis Raftis in his book ‘’The world of Greek dance’’.

Traditional is a dance that goes from generation to generation, a dance learned automatically by mimetism during one’s permanent life in the same place, when one is shaken since one’s babyhood in one’s mother’s arms in the rhythm of the local melodies or when one participates since childhood in the dancing circle during the village’s feasts. Dance in this case is not ‘’an object of choice’’ as it is pointed out by A.R. but a social obligation, since dance in a collective society as it was the agricultural society in older times, was strictly connected with everyday life, a common practice in whose morphology was reflected in its plenitude the local society itself. On the contrary, a formerly traditional dance danced today in the cities by the mediation of a teacher, or a dance performed on the stage, cannot be considered traditional since traditional society does not exist any more. This kind of dance is an object of choice, carried forward through a reproduction mechanism and this is what I will call ‘’folk dance’’.

TRADITIONAL DANCE RESEARCH CONGRESSES IN GREECE AND THE PROCESS FROM TRADITIONAL TO FOLK DANCE

Tradition presupposes a collective way of living - in Greek reality that was the agricultural society until the Second World War. The traditional process of dance maintenance suffered a strong shock during and after the 2nd World War and the Civil War that followed because of the intervention in the Greek affairs first of the British imperialism and second of the American one. So, after those two wars, the country was devastated and the lack of means of living as well as the political persecutions that followed the defeat of the Greek Left, caused a huge wave of migration directed either to the big cities or abroad, to the USA, Germany, Australia, South Africa and the then socialist camp.

As a consequence, villages were deserted, links of local societies broken, local feasts reduced to the minimum, held mainly in summer, when migrants met their relatives in the big feast of August that made them confirm their identity. That process of alienation from one’s own culture was reinforced by the introduction of new music technologies, such as the gramophone - which reduced the role of local musicians - as well as the introduction of American way of life. And finally came the dictatorship, with another political migration again, during which period the dictators, animated by ultranationalistic ideas, were often shown in the TV dancing some of the most common Greek dances, so people, particularly in towns, identified that dancing culture with the junta, hating and despising not only those classical few traditional dances but also all what was traditional!

In consequence there was a time after the 1950’s that Greek traditional dance started fainting, while Greek folk dance had not had yet found its way.

But as it happens in nature, where any action brings a reaction, the same happened fortunately in our case. Brilliant minds in the field of music and dance appeared and saved what was about to disappear. Already much earlier, from the 1930’s, a Greek musicologist and church chanter, Mr. Simon Karras, had recognized the need to save musical tradition. He travelled all over Greece with the equipment he could have at that time, collected and registered music and songs from the villages. His task was continued by Ms. Domna Samiou in the 1950’s.

In the field of dance the brightest one was Ms. Dora Stratou, founder of the only permanent theatre of folk dances that exists in the world. D.S. originated from an upper class Athenian family and she set off to collect dances and costumes from all over Greece with the purpose to prove the continuity of the actual Greek nation from the ancient Greeks, continuity that had been disputed by some foreign scholars. Originating from a family of politicians she convinced the then minister of culture to grant her the space of the actual theatre at the foot of Philopappou Hill, opposite the Acropolis of Athens, in order to create a permanent theatre of Greek dances. As it was necessary for her purpose to obtain the maximum dance fidelity, here is what she did: She created a group of dancers that she took around Greece, in the local feasts of the villages, to learn from the older ones or she invited ordinary people from the villages to come and teach their dances to her group in Athens. After she died in 1987, long after the fall of the Junta, the direction of the theatre was taken over by the actual director and president of the CID, Mr. Alkis Raftis, who did one more clever step forward: He first founded in Athens an annexe of the IOFA and inaugurated the first international conference on traditional dance anthropological research. The idea was to demonstrate that traditional dance was not just a question of steps put one after another but a whole social phenomenon, strictly connected with the society in which it was practiced, that it was an everyday practice which had its codes and ritual. To prove one’s identity through one’s dancing culture it was not enough to dance a number of steps, but to know what is what one dances and what is hidden behind it.

Those first annual congresses devoted to traditional dance lasted almost 20 years and attracted people from all over the world. They were in purpose held, most of them, in provincial towns surrounded by villages. Highlight of these congresses were dance performances that took place in the evening in the theatrical spaces of each town, but the novelty was that participating groups were not folk groups but the villagers themselves who were invited to present their own dances.

That return to the sources made local people from the villages feel again proud of their traditions which were in a way despised and forgotten and so they started practicing older dances. As far as research was concerned, at the beginning few were the researchers that had done already field research and presented it to the congress. Some of them worked in the frame of the Lyceum of Greek Women, originally a feminist organization that existed in Greece from the beginning of the 20th century. On its way it embraced the entire Greek culture and contributed also a lot in the maintenance of dancing traditions. Nevertheless, little by little a strong movement around preservation of traditional dance arose. Many people originating from the villages, young students of the Academy of Physical Sciences, where there is a qualification on Greek dances, threw themselves to field salutary research of Greek traditional dance, both as a form and as a social process through which one can draw much information for society itself. And all that, before the last bearers of the traditional society would pass away. That exchange between researchers and the older village dancers mobilized one another and the ‘excavation’ of the ‘dancing past’ enriched the congresses with an immense dance wealth, both quantitative and qualitative.

We cannot say exactly what is the number of dances discovered but there were at least 1000! The Dora Stratou Theatre repertory includes at least 500 dances and we consider that each one of its dancers knows at least 300 dances. This is not strange if we take in account that every village in traditional society dances only its own dances with its own musicians. Novelties to be adopted have to pass through a long and difficult process in order to be accepted into the common repertory of the village.

Alkis Raftis idea found a fertile soil and gave a strong push to the anthropological dance research, which went on and acquired a more international character since the congresses continued under the International Dance Council CID, although CID does not concern only traditional dance but any form of dance.

These congresses gave also guidelines for the training of dance teachers who started teaching dances based upon research, which had also as a result to maintain a certain fidelity of the dances. So, one could notice an ever growing popularity of Greek dance. Today there is a large number of dance schools, associations and groups which are believed to have reached the number of about 4000. But in this case we talk about folk dance in a different social frame.

THE DANCE LANDSCAPE TODAY

Today there is a lot of mobility:

- There are very few lively villages, the most isolated ones, where people still learn to dance traditionally in local feasts and weddings (such as Elympos in Karpathos island). In general, although there were many dancing events throughout the year, now they are limited in basic feasts, mainly in summer.

- There are villages which are deserted in winter and get alive in summer, when all the co-villagers meet in the big feast and dance in a circle following the traditional order as they used to do. Some of them learn to dance for the first time in that circle, but they might also have learned to dance from the dance teacher of the cultural association of their village or of the association of their village in Athens or by a teacher of some association where dances are taught in general and who may not have any relation with their own village.

- There are cases where they may dance traditional dances on the main square of the village incorporated in the main circle of the big feasts, but in the weddings they may hire orchestras from the town, mixing traditional with popular urban dances.

- One may see the youngsters of a village dancing in the Western way in coffee bars of the neighboring town and at the end of the night they may also dance basic dances of their village. Of course the traditional style is strongly alienated with the introduction of modern instruments in the orchestra such as synthesizers, electric guitars, drums or bouzouki.

- Finally there are villages which have revived thanks to the return of migrants from the former Soviet block.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DANCE-MUSIC-SONG STYLE

* Greek dances have a big variety as far as dancing form, dancing order, course of movement, holding of hands, dancing steps, body stature and movement, rhythm, song, music and style are concerned. Every geographical region has its main characteristics as far as music and dances are concerned, but it happens that the same dance can have a different style in two neighboring villages, from which one could even understand the origin of the dancers. The style has to do with small details of the dance. The style is also what happens when a dancer touches the earth even one second earlier or later, because this fact creates a different vibration to the body, which is transmitted through his hands to the body of his next and is felt by a foreigner dancing in-between.

It also happens, because of the innumerous migration waves of Greek people from their very ancient Eastern motherlands around the Black Sea and in Asia Minor, to find inside a more or less homogeneous area, islets of completely different dance cultures, particularly in Thrace and Macedonia (Pontic or Asia Minor villages,) which are closer to the Eastern borders. One can find also different dances even in the same village, which may be inhabited by 3 different populations that keep their own dancing style, often though participating in the dances of their co-villagers (such as in the village Kerkini in Central Macedonia).

- Dances may be named after the songs they accompany them, after the seasons, the crafts… etc.

- There are dances accompanied only by songs: epic songs, songs sung at the table before the dance starts, mantinades (improvised couplets), mourning songs, on special occasions (matchmaking , wedding, baptism, praising, mocking ones, lullabies)

- There are dances accompanied by musical instruments, for example:

Zighia composed of two zournas (a kind of flute) and a big drum (daouli) in Macedonia and Messolongi.

- Lyra and lute (in Cretea and the Dodecanese islands)

- Lyra and dahires (in Macedonia)

- Compania : Orchestra including violin, lute, clarinet or other blown or stringed instruments), santouri, daouli or defi (drums), sometimes a gaida (bagpipe) instead of a clarinet (in Continental Greece)

- Isolated instruments (or in combination with rhythmic instruments): bagpipe, tsabouna, kementzes, accordeon.

Most of the instruments are already known from the byzantine and ancient times.

- The music is monophonic, going back to the ancient Greek music, with the exception of the Ionian Islands during the 2 last centuries because of the Italian occupation and the influence of the Italian music. An ancient type of polyphony exists in Northern Epirus, which remains an ethnological mystery. The only accompaniment in Greek music is the so called ‘’ison’’, that is a constant sound in the background. There is no harmonic accompaniment as it is the case in Western music.

- Another peculiarity of Eastern music are the ‘’makamia’’ or ‘’dromoi’’ or ‘’tropoi’’ of the ancients. The musical intervals have a different width. Different succession gives a different feeling according to ancient Greek theory of the ‘’ethos’’ developed by the Pythagorians and later by Plato and Aristoteles and then by the ‘’Peripatetic’’ and ‘’Stoic’’ philosophers, which supports that sound phenomena are closely connected with the mental spirits and that a series of sounds can cause a precise feeling.

The ‘’ethos’’ of music depends on the rhythm, the ‘’tropos’’, the instrument, etc. So, they used to say that every ‘’tropos’’ has its own ‘’ethos’’, exactly as it is the case in architecture.

- The basic rythms are : 2/4 Hassapikos, Sousta

4/4 Karagouna, Pogonisios

5/8 Tsakonikos, Zagorisios, Baidouska of Thrace

7/8 Kalamatianos, Mantilatos, Kori Eleni

9/8 Zeibekika, Karsilamades

To conclude my lecture: In Greece, modernization has not deleted yet the last traces of particular body language. No matter whether it is traditional or folk, collective dance in Greece is still a living process. Collective dance, traditional or folk, brings people together in the common joy, helps them understand each other, abolishes frontiers, drives away fear and in this sense it is a revolutionary process in a larger meaning.

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