

## **Greece, a living museum.**

**A unique theatre is preserving a nation's folklore.**

**The Unesco courier, 01/1996, pp 34-35.**

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**The theatre is unique in many ways, not least in the way it recruits its dancers. Every year in January, dancers from all over Greece come to the theatre and rehearse alongside the older members of the company. They continue to do so for about three months, by which time the ones who don't make the grade will have left, a process which brings the numbers down to around thirty. From this group a final selection of new dancers can be made before performances begin in May.**

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Since they are paid only a small fee for expenses, it is obvious that for the dedicated core of dancers this is a labour of love.

What the audience sees on stage each night is the result of months of painstaking work—not only in the form of rehearsals but also research. Every step a dancer performs has its roots in history and village culture.

The process begins when the theatre decides on a particular village or island it wants to include in its programme. A team of folklorists is sent to gather information about the history and folk customs of the area. Then a team from the theatre, often joined by a few dancers, goes to the village and stays there for at least a few days in order to make contact with the local people and study their culture.

They conduct informal interviews with the older members of the village, who are encouraged to play traditional music and dance for their guests. The music and dances are recorded and the recordings are taken back to Athens to be studied by musicians and dancers from the theatre.

A group of villagers is also invited to Athens, where members of the company have the opportunity to dance and play music with them and absorb their particular style of execution.

As unofficial "goodwill ambassadors" for their local culture the villagers are usually filled

with pride, and feel a renewed interest in keeping it alive at home. At present the company has eighty different villages in its repertoire and each year one or two more are added to the list.

The principle used for dance research is applied to music as well. Special attention is given to the unique style of singing and playing in each village and the particular instruments that are popular there. The theatre has two singers and fifteen permanent folk musicians who play for rehearsals and performances every day. No recorded music is used, in order to maintain the personal rapport between dancers and musicians which is inherent in folk culture.

Great emphasis is also placed on the performers' attire. The theatre houses the country's biggest collection of traditional Greek costumes—2,500 at the last count—half of which are between fifty and a hundred years old. The costumes cannot be bought in shops and are either sold to the theatre by elderly villagers or else the villagers are asked to make them, using traditional weaving, dyeing and embroidery techniques.

As the "preserver of traditional Greek dance" and a cultural centre for Greek folk-lore, one of the most important of the theatre's activities is spreading the dance message via courses for beginners, advanced dancers and children. Regular weekend workshops are held featuring

dance, music and costumes from a particular region. The Theatre also holds summer courses for non-Greek dance teachers from other countries who want to incorporate Greek traditional dance into their teaching programmes; this is a particularly good way of ensuring that the traditions of Greek dance are kept alive the world over.

Finally, the Theatre acts as a publishing house. It has produced forty-five records and cassettes, as well as numerous ethnographic books, all dealing with the different aspects of Greek dance, costumes and music.

Alkis Raftis is a Greek sociologist who is president of the Dora Stratou Theatre of Greek Dances, in Athens. A member of the International Dance Council, he has published several works on dance, including *The World of Greek Dance* (1987).

tradition and renewal

GREECE

# a living museum by Alkis Raftis

*A unique theatre  
is preserving  
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A carnival dance from Náoússa, northwestern Greece.

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© The Dora Stratou Theatre of Greek Dances, Athens

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## The International Dance Council (IDC)

"Dance," wrote the French philosopher Roger Garaudy, "is a way of existing." By changing with the times and being receptive to a wide range of cultures, it can express life in all its richness and diversity. Studying dance in other cultures than our own does not involve copying but enriching the vocabulary of dance by asking new questions and giving new answers to prepare the body to translate our relationship with the world into movement.

The International Dance Council, which was founded with UNESCO support in 1973, has taken this concept of dance as a total art and a universal language as the framework of its activities. The Council seeks to promote all forms of dance by safeguarding it as part of the intangible artistic heritage, and by encouraging choreographic and choreological creation and research and their integration into general education. In collaboration with UNESCO, it also encourages the creation of specialized documentation centres, the setting up of national committees, the organization of congresses, festivals and competitions and the training of dancers.

IDC-UNESCO, 1 rue Miotte, 75015 Paris, France. Postal address: 75732 Paris Cedex 15.  
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© The Dora Stratou Theatre of Greek Dances, Athens

**ALKIS RAFTIS** is a Greek sociologist who is president of the Dora Stratou Theatre of Greek Dances, in Athens. A member of the International Dance Council, he has published several works on dance, including *The World of Greek Dance* (1987).

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