

Choreographer as a Culture Hero?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of the Bulgarian folk dance choreographer in creation and dissemination of cultural knowledge. The overview of the period 1944-1989 (with the foundation and development of folk choreography institutions and folk dance ensemble activities) is followed by remarks regarding the folk dance activities in the post-socialist era. Attention is drawn to teaching methodology and the general impact of professional choreography training on both stage ensemble and recreational folk dance activities. As either an ensemble leader or recreational folk dance instructor the choreographer became the figure responsible for introduction of traditional dances (old “texts”) and choreographies based on folklore. These became new texts for cultural memorization.

Introduction

In order to underline the importance of the choreographer’s work I have adopted the concept “culture hero,” used here metaphorically and even poetically.¹ By providing a personal note at the beginning, I intend to more precisely clarify what I mean by this title, where I stand in my research, and what my thesis and perspectives are.

About thirty years ago, when I was a Bulgarian Folk Choreography student at the Institute for Music and Choreography in Sofia, I was introduced to a book entitled “Ballet Over the Centuries,” written by Bulgarian ballet specialist Ana Alexandrova. This book included a quotation from the second century A.D. writer, Λουκιανός ὁ Σαμοσατεύς [Lucian of Samosata], related to dance. In Bulgarian the term ὄρχησις [orchēsis], used by Λογκιαν, was translated as dance-chain leader [“vodach na horovoda”], (Alexandrova 1983: 24). In English, as I discovered later, it was translated as “pantomime” (a dance or pantomime performer, associated later with the ballet-dancer).² Lucian states:

You will find that his is no easy profession, nor lightly to be undertaken; requiring as it does, the highest standard of culture in all its branches, and involving a knowledge not of music only, but of rhythm and metre...³

One who creates steps and figures, according to Lucian, must have universal knowledge: must know geometry in order to construct figures, philosophy and rhetoric in order to depict characters and to arouse passions, the art of painting and of sculpture in order to compose groups and ensembles. As far as mythology is concerned, he/she is obliged to know perfectly well the events from antiquity to the present days.

I won’t go as far as claiming that this description set the standard that I have faithfully pursued in my own choreographic work. It stood up, however, as a strong reminder that a dance-creating person is indeed a world-creating one. This is especially true when one works on a grand scale by involving many people and consequently, steadily disseminates

one's own knowledge and interpretation of the past, with one's ideas, sense of beauty and proportion, dance mastery, style and more. Every choreographer, as we named this profession centuries later (and I will skip the history of the term), is responsible for transmitting specific cultural messages; he/she is, in a sense, a culture hero.

We may recall many philosophers and thinkers from antiquity to the present who discuss the influence of music one listens to in one's youth, paintings which surround us, books one reads, and arts in general (from the 20th century philosophers Susan Langer comes to mind right away⁴). To this series I will add later, with a bit of underlining, "the dances we grew up with."

Returning to my example, Lucian's thoughts caught my realization that knowledge of steps, figures and choreographic principles is only the first step of a long journey, one which I was already eager to undertake. Another realization of my twenties was that, due to the 1950s and later Bulgarian urbanization, learning traditional Bulgarian dances in their traditional contexts was not part of the 1980s reality. If a city child wanted to learn folk dance his parents would send the child to one of the city's folk dance ensembles. Here the child met the choreographer, was introduced to the Bulgarian character exercise (adopted from the Soviet Union ensemble model, although with Bulgarian character elements), and learned the repertoire. As a result, a child with several years of dance ensemble experience would have in its body and mind dozens and dozens of dance combinations but would not be able to name or dance more than a few traditional dances. These early realizations coalesced and sent me on the path toward my future studies and professional work.

In my paper I want to discuss the impact of the folk professional training along with showing a few 2013 video examples that I find illustrative. One of them is a YouTube recording of a men's dance during a Bulgarian wedding. This post probably broke all records of visiting somebody's' private wedding, ever. I will also share some examples from this year's large Bulgarian Festival in Chicago.

The possibility to conduct fieldwork in the States since 2003 now provides ground for comparative studies of Bulgarian dance both inside and outside the homeland and offers a whole new array of research opportunities. But before introducing my examples let me first provide few brief contextual notes.

Establishment and development of the Bulgarian folk choreography profession

Although one may find the emerging figure of the folk dance teacher in the first half of the 20th century,⁵ it wasn't until the early 1960s that Bulgaria sent several of the State's most prominent folk dance talents to the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts (GITIS) in Moscow to receive professional choreography training.⁶ At that time, building a network of amateur folk dance groups all over the country was one of the acts illustrating the Bulgarian communist government's strategy to use this activity as a means for propaganda and control.⁷ From its very early stages both professional and amateur folk dance ensembles became part of a phenomenon of great complexity: the child of the cultural politics of the time but at the same time, a thoroughly apolitical human expression, one that unified people of different interests and professions, lovers of Bulgarian music and dance, eager to learn, to dance with others and to perform.

What was the role of the choreographer? From the above perspective choreographers were meant to be the workers who would help in building the image of a prosperous, happy

state and society—co-creators of an art that was socialistic in form and national by its content. The government’s needs met the talent of the first folk dance masters and, in 1960s, the so called “First Generation” of professional choreographers became the creators of a new genre—“Bulgarian Stage Dance Art Based on Folklore.” The First Generation set the standards in choreographing suites from different Bulgarian folklore regions and this became a model for the next generations of choreographers.⁸ In the 1960s and 1970s many good dancers, faithful to the Party or apolitical, undertook professional choreography training. The most talented choreographers produced a number of folk dance ensemble masterpieces, introduced folk dancing to thousands of people, toured all over the world with their troupes, and lived productive professional lives.

As a result of building strong professional choreographic institutions, in the 1980s one could no longer find a dance ensemble led by someone not professionally trained.⁹ Every choreographer, usually personally involved in a performance group since childhood, studied principles of stage arts, folk dance arrangements and dance genres; everyone, in order to build a high level performance’s skills, incorporated into one’s own practice the Bulgarian character exercise. Every professional had also studied folk dance methodology.

The democratic shift in Bulgaria led to an inevitable transition in the folk dance scene due to the politico-economic severity of the period. Despite closures of many ensembles in the 1990s, at the threshold of the 21st century, small Bulgaria had two state and two private universities that offered bachelor degrees in folk choreography.

The recreational folk dance movement became a new 21st century phenomenon in Bulgaria. Initiated and directed by professional choreographers seeking work, although oriented toward recreational dancing, folk dance clubs inherited, to varying degrees, the state folk dance ensemble model. Today professional choreographers produce DVDs and online tutorials and these serve as a conduit for folk dance learning. Enabled by new technology and internet access, these resources are widely used by the growing Bulgarian folk dance community in the United States.

Excerpts of interviews with Bulgarian choreographers

In my many interviews with Bulgarian folk choreographers, my question, “What do you mean by the concept “choreographer,” was often answered: “The choreographer is a person who creates his/her own dances.” Or:

The choreographer is a person for everything - he/she must be universal. As you like it— as an organizer and as everything, from alpha to omega...

For me a choreographer is a person who creates dances that are planted on solid ground with respect to the ethnographic regions. But today things are blurred— everybody proclaims to be a choreographer...¹⁰

In spite of the differentiation between the choreographer-dance composer and choreographer-dance coach, which is informally made, in practice the term “choreographer” (quote) *combines both*, including pedagogic skills and more.¹¹

A few things I want to outline from these excerpts, besides the self-confidence of Bulgarians as professionals:

- emphasis on creativity
- the wish that new creations will have genuine Bulgarian roots
- pedagogic work

Teaching methodology: the “syllabus method” in practice

The so called “syllabus method” has been practiced for decades by the most prominent dance educators working with children. In this method the elements of the Bulgarian character exercise are associated with the alphabet; it is informally named “The Dance Alphabet of a Child Studying Bulgarian dance.”¹² Dance elements are combined in sentences and sentences into dance phrases. In this methodology children not only imitate the movement of the dance teacher, they in fact learn repertoire as one learns a new language.

The rhyme-speech, narrated according to the meter of the melody (verse, song, recitative) enables the rhythm-melody-steps unit to penetrate and to be remembered at a deeper level. “If the culture is a sum total of uninherited information, then the question, how has this information been introduced to man and community, make sense”, states Lotman (1990: 273). According to him, learning of one or another human language could be conducted in two ways: by learning one’s own native language at an early age or by learning another language. In the first case, there is no introduction of rules in the learners’ consciousness; they are replaced by the texts one adopts. The second case is when there are rules that are set in the learners’ consciousness on whose base the learner can create his/her own texts. (Lotman 1990: 273, translated by the author, D.I.N.)

One may recognize similar processes (introduction of rules in the learners’ consciousness) in Bulgarian folk dance choreography training. This is a key point for understanding and analyzing choreographic processes. It also serves as the core for improvisations by experienced folk dancers.

Professionals who are producing YouTube Bulgarian dance tutorials today also use terminology established in the profession for decades.¹³ A dance scholar who is familiar with Adrienne Kaeppler’s dance anthropological writings will probably recognize this “broken-down” movements as kinemes and morphokines (Kaeppler, 1993: 112-113). Kaeppler’s work (with her analogues of phonemes and morphemes) is not well-known in Bulgaria. Every Bulgarian choreographer, however, is familiar with the concept of “dance text” [tanzov text], as it was introduced by Georgy Abrashev, the first theoretician of the Bulgarian choreographic genre. During his study in Moscow’s GITIS in the 1970s, Abrashev embraced Yuri Lotman’s theory of the structure of a literary text. He developed the concept that choreography as an art can be described as a secondary language, and dance—as the text of that language¹⁴; this concept serves today as the main methodological tool in Bulgarian folk choreography education.

Video examples

My first video-example—a wedding in Bulgaria in 2013—shows a dance performed by young men who graduated a few years before the wedding from the Bulgarian National Choreography School.¹⁵ The surprise for the bride, groom and guests was a dance that they learned as students. The dance named “Men from Thrace” was a choreography of one of the most prominent Bulgarian choreographers, Todor Bekirski. Bekirski, with whom I conducted a long interview in 2001, stated:

Everything in the world in the life of man undergoes development. Once we had turned folklore dance into a profession, we had to develop it. In the past there was the plough and now, it is again the plough... It just cannot be like that; the plough is no more.”¹⁶

People who have been involved in professional or amateur folk dance ensemble activities have absorbed their own ensembles’ repertoire. Repertoire becomes a cultural memory and is often brought to life from current or former ensemble dancers for private parties and celebrations.

From my attendance and observation of the 2013 Vereia Bulgarian Festival in Chicago¹⁷ I want to mention two things:

- A. All choreographers leading a Bulgarian group in the States were people with professional training in Bulgaria
- B. By watching the repertoire of the performances one may well recognize manifestations of previous ensemble experience, including bringing back choreographies from the 1970s and 1980s that they learned as students.

Conclusion

The choreographer reflects the cultural environment that created him/her, but choreographer also creates a new cultural environment. Therefore it is natural—in fact, mandatory—to account for the past and current political, economic and cultural climate, as well as for the effects of the changes on the choreographic profession as a whole. Regarding creation of a new environment, Todor Bekirski, mentioned above, stated: "Similarity gives rise to similarity," i.e., the choreographer teaches, (moulds), and educates dancers while taking himself as a model".

So, is a choreographer a culture hero?

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Notes

1. In the 1980s, as an undergraduate student at the Sofia University Slavic Department, I was first introduced to this concept by Eleazar Meletinsky's "The Poetics of Myth" (for the English version see Meletinsky 1998).
2. The H.W. Fowler & F.G. Fowler translation note states: 'Pantomime' has been chosen as the most natural translation of ὄρχησις, which in this dialogue has reference for the most part to the ballet-dancer (*pantomimus*) of imperial times. On the other hand, Lycinus, in order to establish the antiquity and the universality of an art that for all practical purposes dates only from the Augustan era, and (despite the Greek artists) is Roman in origin, avails himself of the wider meaning of ὄρχησις to give us the historic and prehistoric associations of *dance* in Greece and elsewhere; and in such passages it seemed advisable to sacrifice consistency, and to translate ὄρχησις dance (The Works of Lucian of Samosata, 2012:276).
3. See Langer on Cultural Significance of the Art, 1993.
4. Ibid. p. 281.
5. In his Bulgarska Narodna Choreographia Bulgarian musicologist Stoyan Dzhudzev provided data about several groups that started recreational dance outside the traditional village context and also performed before an audience and on a stage. Some of these groups were affiliated to the city's sports union; others – to community or factory unions (See Dzhudzev, 1945). In 1955 the noted musicologist Rayna Katzarova, in her book on Bulgarian dance folklore, pointed out the processes of disappearance of many traditional dances, outlining also a few trends in dance teaching styles and folk dance arrangements that she observed on the emerging urban folk dance scene (See Katzarova, 1955).
6. Among them was Margarita Dikova, the first choreographer of the National Music and Dance Folklore Ensemble, founded by maestro Philip Koutev in 1951.
7. See for examples Lectures, 1947.
8. Ivanova-Nyberg, 2011.
9. This is quite different from the situation in former Yugoslavia, for example, as noted by Elsie Dunin, (See Dunin 1995:8).
10. See Ivanova-Nyberg 2011: 105-116.
11. Ibid.
12. It was described to me as such by Latchezaria Pavlova who is a noted Bulgarian dance specialist and with who I worked closely in the period 1992-2000. Pavlova is also an author of methodological literature that is used at public schools with choreography education and children ensembles.
13. The professional jargon was already developed in the 1960s (See Haralampiev and Dzhenev, 1967).
14. See Abrashev, 1989, 2001.
15. See Festival Verea 2013 video link.
16. See Ivanova, 2001.
17. See Bulgarian Wedding link, 2013.

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