

## **Bulgarian Folk Dance Ensemble as a Cultural Phenomenon**

I was born and raised in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, and started folk dancing at a very young age. My grandmother, a native of the Shope region near Sofia, held my hand, and step by step, at age four and five, I learned from her most of the popular traditional Bulgarian dances. As a young, small, and enthusiastic dancer, I caught people's eyes at every wedding my family went to. Every band had a varied repertoire, among which were many popular line dances. At that age I had no intellectual understanding of symmetrical and asymmetrical meters, but I felt all these rhythms inside me and got up for every dance. Watching me jump along with the adults in the line, many wedding guests asked my parents: "Where does this kid practice? She should join a children's performance group." For a couple of years, no one was available to drive me to rehearsals. Then, in 1974, my parents finally brought me to Rosna Kitka, at the Palace of Pioneers, Folk Dance Ensemble—one of the most prestigious children's dance ensembles. At ten, I was already too old for the beginning groups. I was allowed, however, to join my age group only because of my tear-filled eyes and the choreographer's good heart. The choreographer warned my parents that I had practically no chance of competing with hundreds of talented children who had been dancing regularly since the age of six. "It will be awfully difficult," she said, and she was right. I had no idea I was about to start a long journey in learning literally thousands of steps while also adopting completely new-to-me elements of Bulgarian character exercise (based on the classical exercise). Thanks to my parents' love and support, I didn't give up, although I must confess, sometimes I was very close. As a result of my efforts, and with a great bit of luck (and blessings), at age 12 I was chosen for a month-long concert tour in France. This was the beginning of my folk dance ensemble experience, with its many stages of study and practice that all brought to my life professional and personal fulfillment and joy.

"Why am I researching the folk dance ensemble?" is the very first question in this book and the autobiographical introduction and foreword expose the personal connection to my subject. My research interest, however, reaches far beyond my involvement as a folk dancer and choreographer. Cultural-anthropological research reveals the depths of this phenomenon if we apply the methodological tools of the discipline. *Why a folk dance ensemble?* then led to a series of questions under the rubrics of what, who, when, where, and how. These applied to the beginning and development of the Bulgarian choreography school up to the present, including historical, political and cultural circumstances. The periods here are: the beginning of the 20th century, the mid- and late-20th century, and the situation following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 through the first decade of the 21st century.

The second half of the 20th century saw an increase in migration from Bulgarian villages to the cities, an important factor when discussing the increase in folk dance performance groups in the urban environment. There were opportunities to establish performance groups in every factory,

school, and professional or cultural associations. Because of its roots in folk tradition and because of its role as a “safety valve”—an emotional and psycho-physiological release—folk dance activity in the urban environment expanded gradually nationwide. The government, i.e., the Communist Party, saw in this amateur activity an opportunity to engage the proletariat in a controlled, beautiful and harmless folk art form that also served as an ideological tool. Properly “saddled” from above, this activity became well organized, entirely centralized, controlled, fully-supported, dressed in newly crafted stage costumes, and, in the late 1960s and ’70s, thoroughly professionalized and developed as a stage form of a specific genre. This genre, in both professional and non-professional ensembles, was meant to serve as a frame and “garnish” for every Party Congress and parade, and history shows that it successfully did so. Bulgarian scholars, intellectuals and artists who had not been “in love” with the previous regime reacted to this development of stage folk dance with a specific attitude. The adoption of folk dance activity by the Party, close to their “brotherly” Soviet Union, and directed toward the masses—predominantly workers—caused many scholars within or outside academia to primarily associate folk dance performing groups/ensembles with the taste and aesthetic needs of the “comrades,” with what they had seen as arranged, uniformed and disciplined. Moreover, although there were numerous talented and artistic people engaged in this genre, there were many who did not fit this category.

The use of folk dance performance group as ideological tool, however, is not the whole picture. One may ask, “What about the dance and the dancing, the need for movement, the instinctive response (‘gut’ feeling) to Bulgarian folk music?” “What about the joy of involvement in art and the artistic, whatever your profession, or the joy of performing for an audience, the satisfaction of success affirmed by applause? What about the shared joy of dancing with other people and the attraction to touring abroad, the excitement of cultural interaction and competing at international folklore festivals and contests? For most Bulgarian dancers touring abroad, especially under socialism, if there was anything to be proud of, it was the quality of Bulgarian music and dance and the value of Bulgarian cultural heritage in general. This feeling remains true. There is also a significant component of creativity, and there is a lot of love and passion involved.

Many of these non-ideological aspects of the folk dance ensemble phenomenon came to the fore after the fall of the Berlin Wall, after which folk dance activity lost its governmental support. The very fact that the Bulgarian socialist political system became history, but the folk dance ensemble—a product of socialist cultural engineering, as it is recognized today—continued, says something of significance related to these aspects. Urban folk dancing groups during this first and critical decade of democratic changes, although severely diminished and neglected under the new multi-party system, survived and found their way anew.

How were these reflections upon the *folk dance ensemble* phenomenon followed in organizing this text?

While the **Autobiographical Foreword** describes my personal involvement in folk dancing, the **Introduction** delineates the complex reasons for choosing the subject—“Bulgarian Folk Dance Ensemble as a Cultural Phenomenon”—as a dissertation thesis initially, and as a book theme later.

The introduction first describes the process of seeking the appropriate research method. If the dance and dance group were viewed as interrelated “texts” in the larger context of a changing society, how can one properly define or identify what they are by themselves and the ways in which they relate to one another? A review of two significant dance research publications (*Dance in the Field: Theory, Methods and Issues in Dance Ethnography* (1999), edited by Theresa J. Buckland, and *Researching Dance: Evolving Modes of Inquiry* (1999), edited by Sondra Horton Fraleigh and Penelope Hanstein) offer help in answering this question. In addition, clarification of the extent to which the anthropological method is applicable for this work facilitated the decision to integrate anthropological and ethnochoreological research methods, as suggested by Anca Giurchescu (1999). The scope and nature of the investigation prompted the use of historical, philosophical and sociological approaches, along with biographical and autobiographical research methods. Placing the folk dance group in both diachronic and synchronic perspective requires that the research be based on fieldwork and thick ethnographic description, as well as historical data. In my case, “being in the field” could be easily replaced with growing (“coming of age” in the field (dance hall). Besides the inner experience and knowledge of the body gained in this way, my years of study of humanities and professional experience as a folk dance ensemble choreographer became crucial. The data from interviews and surveys with choreographers, folk dancers and folklorists across all regions of Bulgaria, and my more conventional fieldwork conducted in Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia provided a broad base for my Bulgarian investigation and enabled the making of informed and vital comparisons.

**Chapter One** begins with the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the period of the socialist regime in Bulgaria (1944-1989). It provides data about the first folk dance leaders, repertoire and performances. The primary source for information about folk dance group activities from the beginning to the middle of the 20th century is *Bulgarska Narodna Horeografia* (Bulgarian Folk Choreography) (1945), written by Stoyan Dzhudzhev. A second source of data for historical reconstruction is *Bulgarski Tantsov Folklor* (Bulgarian Dance Folklore 1955), written by Rayna Katzarova. For the period after 1944 (part two) an official document is cited extensively, *Lectures* 1947, published by the Ministry of Information and Arts and edited by Kiril Maslarski. These lectures discuss the organization and development of amateur activities among workers. The document *per se* is a government plan for the development and role of folk dance activity in the cultural politics of that time. While it relates the ideological scheme, another publication cited is primarily methodical. This is *Tantsovata Samodeynost* (Amateur Folk Dance Activity 1958), by Margarita Dikova and Kiril Maslarski. Margarita Dikova is a highly-respected choreographer of the Bulgarian State Folk Music and Dance Ensemble, founded by Maestro Filip Kutev in 1951. Dikova, in this practical book, provides direction from A to Z for organizing amateur folk dance activities and stage performance. This document, however, also includes an ideological layer provided by co-author Maslarski.

After tracing the early choreography steps of the 1950s and '60s, the investigation is built on three pillars: **the choreographer, the rehearsal, and the repertoire**. It emphasizes the role of the Bulgarian character exercise and more generally the role of the Bulgarian folk choreography

school, established in the 1960s and developed on a national scale. It discusses the influence of the choreographer as a leading figure in creating a specific Bulgarian folk dance stage repertoire and style. Data collected from interviews with choreographers all across Bulgaria provide a foundation for understanding the established Bulgarian folk dance ensemble model in its complex relations with traditional roots, principles of stage performance and production, and the politics of the time. It also raises a question for further examination, namely, “to what degree is the Bulgarian ensemble model similar or different from other national dance schools of the former Socialist Bloc?”

“People don’t feel like dancing” sums up the first subtheme of **Chapter Two**. The phrase was borrowed from my interviewees and represents the most common expression of people’s struggles during the first years after 1989. The overall data reveal a significant decline in folk dance activity due to lack of governmental support and because of a population that was facing clear existential imperatives in a time of economic collapse. Interviews with choreographers, all respected professionals, were conducted in the period 2000-2002. By this time a decade had already passed since the dramatic change of the political and economic systems. This distance, although only a decade, allowed my interviewees some degree of objectivity and perspective about “before/after 1989. Most of them expressed deep regret that the new democratic politicians in the government associated folk dance ensemble activity with the previous regime: “They do not consider our activity pertinent to Bulgarian culture.” The predominant mood and tone of the interviews introduced a topic related to a new phenomenon in post-communist Bulgaria, i.e., nostalgia. I discuss this sentiment but do not personally identify with it.

Widespread closure of folk dance groups was an overwhelming reality in the early 1990s. Those amateur ensembles that realized the need for change, however, survived. Under the new economic rules this change meant “self-support”—a monthly fee collected from the ensemble members. Despite the closures a new process was observed: massive adoption of folk dance activity by the Bulgarian public and some newly-established private schools. In the mid- and late 1990s, elementary, secondary and high schools all over the country gradually developed programs in Bulgarian choreography. It was up to each school to decide and to apply for permission from the Ministry of Education. Significant was also the fact that there were a number of capable and unemployed professional choreographers ready to take newly established faculty positions in these schools.

The new Bulgarian choreography classes differed from the classes in folk dances that had been part of physical education programs since the beginning of the 20th century. Choreography classes (two or three per week, developed in addition to the obligatory school program) were now taught by professional choreographers affiliated with art, not sport. These classes required accordion accompaniment by professional musicians who were also school faculty members. Specialized training in these classes in many ways resembled folk dance performance activity, while also providing theoretical knowledge about Bulgarian music, dance, and folklore. From this point the text traces the following lines:

- Choreography school programs and repertoire for all levels.

- University programs with bachelor degrees in Bulgarian choreography (including those that existed before 1989 (in the cities of Plovdiv and Blagoevgrad) and the private universities, newly established in the '90s (in the cities of Varna and Sofia).
- Extracurricular folk dance education from early childhood.
- Current trends in repertoire of children's folk dance ensembles, and comparison to such trends in adult folk dance ensembles.

This process of adoption of folk dance activity by Bulgarian schools appears to have been crucial for continuity of the genre of “stage-arranged” folk dancing.

Investigating further the folk dance ensemble as a cultural phenomenon, **Chapter Three** examines the overall life of the group: the main, visible, official activity (stage production) and the supplemental, behind-the-scenes, unofficial, purely recreational activities. **Subthemes** are:

- 1. Stage production**
- 2. Folk dance ensembles off-stage: the social aspect**
- 3. Newly-born clubs for recreational folk dancing**

First in the **Stage production subtheme** come the characteristics of the repertoire on the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the ways in which democratic changes influenced new trends in folk performance repertoire. Next is an outline of the emergence of experimental forms that interpret Bulgarian dance patterns (traditional and arranged) in combination with other genres and with artistic gymnastics. The data from surveys with choreographers, dancers and non-dancers show a range of opinions about and evaluations of these experiments. A choreography conference discussion (“Folklore and Stage” 2000, Varna) raised issues regarding stagnation of the ensembles’ repertoires. Lack of governmental support and the drive for increased recruitment of participants (due to the need for payment for rent of the hall, etc.) diminished the quality of the repertoire; there were no funds for new choreographies, musical arrangements, or costumes. Stagnation of repertoire was the result. On the other hand, freedom to establish new dance companies and lack of censorship gave birth to an exciting new phenomenon: folk dance experiments. The influence of the experiments upon choreographers is discussed extensively and a description of the problems of the genre nationwide is provided.

**Folk dance ensembles off-stage: the social aspect is the second subtheme.** The focus is on “free” off-stage repertoire — the opportunity for every group, besides its fixed, obligatory “folk” stage program, to create its own off-stage repertoire, which is folk by its very nature. Under discussion are also the reasons that make a particular dance group attractive to its members.

Folk dancing in Bulgaria, in its cathartic, psychotherapeutic and emotional character, corresponds also with other issues. One of these is dancing in a community with people who share similar attitudes and tastes toward folk music and dance, as often stated in a survey: “I wouldn’t dance in any other group.” The ensemble is often considered by its members to be a second family. Supplementary to this is respect for the group’s choreographer (“I picked my choreographer myself”); beyond dancing itself, the kind of dance practiced is significant (who chooses what and

how to dance). The dances of a particular folk dance ensemble's repertoire are beloved and preferred by its dancers above all others because they represent a meeting point of the past (tradition) and future (creative stage interpretation). Dancing in such groups (a heart-to-heart talk via dancing) often develops into heart-to-heart talks outside of dance and dance hall, especially emotional while touring abroad. Varieties of activities (mutual celebrations) are investigated to document and analyze manifestations of the so-called free repertoire. It appears that for most of the dancers the two activities (official and unofficial, i.e., on and off-stage) are related to a high degree; they are part of the complex characteristic of the folk dance group/ensemble as a venue and activity that belongs to leisure time and play. Both activities—dancing that finds its fulfillment and satisfaction within, and dancing as hard work devoted to high-level artistic achievement—are accepted and welcomed by the dancers; they both bring psychological relief and emotional and physical satisfaction. Some choreographers consider rehearsals to be of psychotherapeutic character, especially because of the impact of Bulgarian music and the richness of Bulgarian folklore in general.

**The Third sub-theme of Chapter Three discusses the “boom” of newly-established clubs for recreational folk dancing in Bulgaria.** Here the data come from observation of folk dance club activities in the first decade of the 21st century, in addition to surveys, interviews, classes and recreational folk dance competitions. Delineation of this blooming activity raises many questions besides the rediscovered charm of Bulgarian folklore: the emergence of a wave of patriotism in the country, the new economic system encouraging independent entrepreneurs, the great number of professional choreographers looking for a job, the degree to which today's recreational Bulgarian folk dance club resembles the folk dance ensemble's “classical” pattern, and more.

**Chapter Four** is analytical. The analysis was conducted predominantly in the theoretical categories of “**play**”, following Johan Huizinga (*Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play Element in Culture*, 1982), and of “**text.**”

Positioning of rehearsal (the main activity of the ensemble), performance (striving to compete with others and to receive the greatest recognition/prize) and supporting actions in the category of play, reveals important reasons for the vitality of the folk dance group. This also delineates some characteristics of the folk dancer in the Bulgarian cultural and social milieu. Analyzing the concept of “text”, as it was adopted by Bulgarian folk choreography, led to outlining the writings of the first theoretician of the Bulgarian choreographic genre, Georgi Abrashev. Abrashev, educated at the State Institute for Theatre Arts (GITIS), Moscow, was a specialist who embraced Yuri Lotman's theory of the structure of a literary text. Abrashev developed in his own writings (which serve nowadays as the main methodological tool for undergraduate folk choreography education) the concept that choreography as an art can be described as a secondary language, and dance—as the text of that language.

To some degree, folk dance choreological terms are related to traditional dances but, de facto, they are newly created terms—the terms of Bulgarian folk choreography. This terminology, first established in the late '50s and later developed further, came to function as a specific language.

Every Bulgarian “urban” folk dancer was introduced to a specific folk choreography vocabulary—elements of the Bulgarian character exercise and stage-arranged folk dance movements. As a rule the dance elements are taught in order from simple to complex—dance elements are to be learned as a specific language (choreographic “words,” “sentences,” “phrases,” and choreographic text).

“There is a connection between verbal language and body movements, and these two should not be investigated as separate languages,” stated Kaeppler (1993) and Williams (1999b). Drid Williams’ application of the Saussurian linguistic categories of *langue* and *parole* to dance found a specific implementation in the Bulgarian case:

- *langue*: a specific folk choreography genre
- *parole I*: an individual choreographer’s work, shaped by his or her vision of ways to interpret traditional dance for stage
- *parole of parole I*: folk dance performer style, a combination of personal dance style, shaped by choreographers’ influence (particular folk dance choreography school).

This scheme reflects and underlines the role of choreographer as a mediator and cultural hero who disseminates his/her own cultural messages.

The repertoire mirrors (“seals”) the spirit of social life. Dancers are introduced to specific dance language with its own alphabet and vocabulary, established in, and stabilized by, elements of the exercise—a process similar to the process of learning a spoken language. This interrelation becomes a powerful vehicle for cultural education, while creating texts, the subject of cultural memorization (after Lotman).

Approaches that are essential to ethnomusicological analyses, following John Blacking, are also applied here, addressed to dance. Among the analytical issues are: “Who makes dances and in which social context (how choreographers make dances and how they describe what they make), performance situations, and dance-makers’ and audience’s evaluations of the dance ‘product.’” A few controversial statements from interviewees about the place and reputation of folk dance performance art in Bulgaria are juxtaposed briefly with viewpoints of scholars, who discuss dance-body relationships, today’s rejection of mind-body dualism, and the concept of the embodied mind.

My concluding look at the phenomenon is inspired by the Malinowskian concept of “contact diffusion,” i.e., the transition from a higher to a lower level, as it reflects the decline of a particular culture. When this occurs, the group-under-regression begins to adopt the pattern of the more efficient cultural form that emerges. In turn, certain achievements of the higher cultural level are adopted by the lower. Here the “higher” could be applied to the ensemble’s highest achievements from the “golden age” of Bulgarian choreography (mainly the 1970s and ’80s); “lower” could be referred to the open-to-everybody, “democratic” recreational folk dance club. The first requires years of training a dancer to become part of a performance, the second—comfortable shoes and enthusiasm.

After losing their government support, folk dance ensembles nationwide adopted the “club” mode of existence and management, i.e., collecting a monthly fee from their members. This means descending from quality to quantity, although there are exceptions. Simultaneously, recreational folk dance clubs (the new, active form) adopted the ensemble mode, although associating themselves with sports and fitness. The leaders of both ensembles and recreational clubs are professional choreographers, not amateurs, and are not necessarily folk dance researchers. Dancers—not only members of ensembles, but also of recreational clubs—also strive to perform and compete.

Classes in choreography in state and private schools are another new “active” form.

When looking at folk dance activity embracing a period of a century, one can observe a revolution, “enriched” with new phenomena:

- At the beginning of the 20th century, **folk dance groups associated with sports organizations and performing mainly village dances**; first classes in folk dancing at schools were part of physical education.
- In mid-century, Bulgarian folk dance choreography schools, established and highly developed after 1944, especially in the '70s and '80s, due to political imperatives of the time.
- In the first decade of the 21st century:
  - classes in choreography associated with art, in parallel with classes in folk dancing at schools as part of physical education
  - **clubs for recreational folk dancing, inspired by the village repertoire; a form associated with sports but also adopting Bulgarian folk choreography features**
  - “classical” folk dance ensembles
  - folk dance experiments seeking a new art perspective, undertaken by high-level performance groups and private dance companies.

**The Conclusion** summarizes my understanding that the folk dance ensemble is a significant cultural phenomenon that requires research attention. As with every cultural phenomenon, this subject presents the complex and interrelated picture of the society and its dynamics. Observations of the folk dance phenomenon in two political and economic contexts show how state cultural politics initiate and generate processes and/or cultural products according to the goals and priorities of the government. In today’s changing Bulgarian society, the observed democratization of folk dance activities seems to be logical—the recreational folk dance “boom” not only appears to be caused by a need for fitness and dancing but corresponds with many other factors that are under investigation in this book. The key word for the folk dance group/ensemble phenomenon appears to be “vitality.” It has the ability to adjust to circumstances and environments that are different from those in which this art form was established. Its power far exceeds the ability to survive, however. This vitality descends from its internal nature and roots embedded in folk music, folk dance, play, and a need for movement and dancing—all of which are “as apolitical as rain.”