

DOOR COUNTY FOLK FESTIVAL 2009

Cultural session presented by Dr. Daniela Ivanova-Nyberg



Bulgarian Folk Dance Revival?

Introduction

For the period before 2000 one could say that there were no recreational folk dance activities in the Bulgarian urban environment at all; only very few unaffiliated attempts had been made in that direction. In my interviews with choreographers conducted in 2000-2002 they shared the opinion that there is a need for recreational folk dancing for everyone and this is something different than rehearsing for stage presentations where only young people are involved. In 2005-2006 this situation began to change toward an increased popularity of recreational club folk dancing and this is the topic of my presentation today. What happened? Why? To whom is this important?

I am going to share my observation on “Horo Se Vie Izviva” [The Dance Line Is Curving] Festival for recreational folk dancing held in 2007 and 2008 in Sofia.¹ I will follow the very first curves and turns of that festival and will also outline some reasons for the “boom” of recreational folk dance activities in Bulgaria during these years, raising some hypotheses, and drawing some conclusions as well.

¹ In its first part the cultural session projects video materials from the first and the second “Horo Se Vie, Izviva” festival for recreational folk dancing, recorded in Sofia in 2007 and 2008. The implementation of this festival is in response to the “boom” of the new-born clubs for traditional dances in Bulgaria which is the main topic of this cultural session.

Signs of change

In the 1990s the economic situation was still unstable after the fall of communist's government in 1989, and most people were neither in a mood to dance nor able to pay monthly dues for their leisure activities. By contrast, in the period 2007-2008 one may observe not only remarkably heightened participation in folk dance groups (recently called more often "clubs") but also well developed club activities from one side of the country to the other.

In the first "Horo Se Vie Izviva" festival held in the spring of 2007 in Sofia, there were about 20 folk dance clubs competing. One year later – in March 2008, there were 37 clubs with nearly one thousand participants, club members of different ages, each presented four traditional dances (following the obligatory program) plus two dances chosen by their leader.² The jury members (three choreographers and one musician) were invited to decide which groups were to receive first, second and third prize and small grants. This remarkably increased interest compelled me to conduct further investigation.

2008 "Horo se vie izviva" Festival field notes/snapshots

Range and average number of the smallest, mid-sized and larger clubs

The smallest groups taking part in the festival had only 8 or 9 participants (Slaveya and Mesemvria folk dance clubs). There were several groups with 13 to 20 participants (Zhiva Voda Dance Club from Elin Pelin, Nyuans Dance Group from Sofia, Vyara, Nadezhda, Lyubov at The United Kinder Garden, Gorna Malina, etc. Next category has 25-40 dancers (Folk-Palitra Dance Club from Sofia, for example, as well as Detelina Folk Dance Club from Plovdiv), Gaytani Dance Club from Sofia, etc., and the larger had 50-60 dancers (Igraorets and Chanove Folk Dance Clubs from Sofia, to mention a few). The most crowded was Folklorika from Sofia that had 87 people (See www.folklorika.com). The majority of participants were women. For example one of the groups had 19 women and a solitary man (Svetlina Dance Group at Svetlina Narodno Chitalishte [Cultural Center] from Sofia); others had no male-dancers – Body Folk Dance Club from Sofia for example.

The repertoire

The variety of the dances in the festival's program was small if one bears in mind the existing material. The predominant dances were *Daychovo*, *Paydushko*, *Chetvorno*, *Maleshevsko*, *Selsko Shopsko*. Most of the people had very limited experience in folk dancing, so the leader usually started his/her first lessons with easy, popular dances. At the same time the clubs which were founded three or four years earlier had a few complex dances in their repertoire. There were club members that were former

² The data was provided by Eva Delinesheva – the main organizer.

dancers of folk dance ensembles who returned to dancing after years of non-participation; they not only loved to dance but truly enjoyed challenges in complex steps and figures.

Dance compositions: One example from the festival program

Many group appearances demonstrate compositions borrowed from the choreography principles for stage performance. Folklorika Folk Dance Club performed with 87 participants and their performance is a good example. Their program was composed in the manner wherein dancers appeared on the “stage” (gymnasium floor designed as a stage), line by line, in a particular sequence and manner of presentation. Dancers made a variety of figures. All were well prepared to move from one figure to another, building a straight line for the final bow, and gracefully leaving the “stage”.

The musical accompaniment

Many clubs used same recordings and some dances. Maleshevsko and a few others were performed several times with identical musical arrangement. The reason for this is more or less the lack of efforts to find alternative music. Very few groups presented live music to support their performances. There were also examples where the music did not correspond to the dance, as it was announced and presented.

The dresses

In the festival regulations there weren't any requirements for uniform dresses but all the participants of the festival were dressed in particular uniforms. Uniform clothing makes clear the differentiation and at the same time makes apparent the identity of each club (*kolectiv*). A common outfit observed during the festival was: T-shirt in a bright color (some designed in a stylized folk manner) having the club's logo and black spandex pants for men as well as for women. There were also dancers wearing highly stylized stage costumes or folk ensemble's rehearsal dresses. Some of the women wore stage necklace (*pendari*), while dressed in short black skirt and black tights with artificial flowers in their hair.

Why such interest now? Data from my 2008 survey

I would like to quote answers from my survey (189 attendees) that suggest some reasons for the folk dance clubs popularity. According to my respondents, there is no doubt that there is an increased interest in Bulgarian music and dance. (*There is interest and the interest is pretty big; this interest is not only among the middle-aged people but also among the younger generations.*)

A few main assumptions were made about causation for such interest:

Finally, folks became aware that we are Bulgarian and it is a shame that only chalga is that is listened to.

There is an increased patriotism and more sensitivity to Bulgarian identity.

Yes, there is an increased interest because the Bulgarian dances are unique.

Yes, definitely, because dance is never-failing source for emotional stimulation.

Yes, there is an interest because our national consciousness was changed.

Yes, we get tired of chalga.

Yes, there is an interest because Bulgarian music and dance reflect our spirit and we have to retrieve these Bulgarian values.

Yes, there is new interest because of fitness and because of the music.

Hmm, good question... "Healthy spirit – in a healthy body" I would say.

There is a re-birth and it is evident. According to me, this is stemming from the re-birth of our interest and love to the rhythms of Bulgarian dance. We all have this love inside which was sleeping until now. Second, there are many taverns and restaurants where they play Bulgarian music and you could enjoy both music and dancing. And also nowadays it is affordable to pay the monthly dues for your leisure activities. Some of us during university study barely succeeded in payment for their books...

The chosen club was defined by the participants as “the best club”. It has “the best leader”, who, is as well, “the best choreographer”; his/her classes provoked great satisfaction both emotionally and spiritually. The classes are classified as related to both psychological fulfillment and pleasant physical exertion.

Personal reasons for participation

A variety of personal reasons were exhibited. Part of the people enquired answered that they participate for self-satisfaction and pleasure only. Others added that they have no objections to dance for the audience, quite opposite; they enjoy performance before an audience. There are also people who simply marked: *The club is close, the instructor is good, the atmosphere is nice and friendly.*

After the class ended people are in *high tonus; great spirit, so exited; fun; “I feel as if I am about to fly”*. For most of the participants this great enthusiasm comes from the need for dance – this is “physical effort which allows (provokes) psychological “discharge”. The satisfaction comes also from the established friendly relationships among the people dancing together, joining hands. People share the opinion that there is a strong connection between all the aspects of this activity. Many classify the dance club as a “second home” or a “second family.”

Educational background of participants in the 2008 “Horo se vie, izviva”

Dominant here was remarkable number of people with higher education. For example:

Beli Brezi Folk dance Club (Sofia): 40 people participated, 29 filled out the questionnaires, 4 of them – men. Among them – 26 with bachelor or masters degree, one college graduate, one educated at a specialized high school;

Detelina Folk Dance Club (Plovdiv): 42 people participated, 38 filled out the enquiries, one man only. Among them – 23 with bachelor or masters degree, two college graduates, two students, two – no indication;

Lyubiteli Na Folklor (Haskovo): 13 women participants. Among them, nine with bachelor or masters degree, one educated at a specialized high school, three with high school education.

Analytical commentary

The dance club is a place where, presumably, anyone who would like to dance is welcomed and dance has a recreational purpose. At the same time the people in Bulgaria who are leading the clubs are professional choreographers, not amateurs, and this festival clearly shows more or less the influence of their professional experience. The uniform (“ensemble” like) clothing is the first thing that attracts audience’s attention (the dress “speaks” before anything else). Both choreographers and participants actually have already an established understanding (apprehension) what folk dance performances are supposed to possess; many years (several decades) in choreography education are behind this process of educating the audience. If we would say that the Bulgarian dance club is a child of tradition, this tradition could be taken in two ways:

- First – as related to the folk heritage;
- Second – as a model more or less based on the Bulgarian choreography school.

Some of the dance classes observed before to the festival were highly influenced by the style and manner of the folk dance ensemble’s rehearsals where the very first part is taken by the Bulgarian character exercise (See Yanakiev 2000). Often these classes are named “repetitsia” [“rehearsal”] (as well as “trenirovka” [“training”]).³

Almost without exceptions all the leaders have choreographic education from the National School for Dance Art in Sofia or from the high institutes with choreography programs (Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts – Plovdiv, Neofit Rilski South-West University – Blagoevgrad), or from the newer private universities established after 1990 in Varna (Chernorizets Hrabar Varna Free University) and Sofia (New Bulgarian University).

If the folk dance ensemble may be considered as a hybrid, crystallized in the symbiosis between folklore and classical ballet dance, then the folk dance club may be considered as a special type of hybrid too.⁴ Here the combination is between dance group for recreational dancing, as it exists as a pattern in other parts of Europe and the U.S.A., and the folk dance ensemble model established during the socialist period.

The participants in folk dance groups/clubs may be qualified as people from two main categories (bearing in mind their ages and preliminary dance experiences):

- People whose age doesn’t allow participation in folk dance ensembles

³ The apprehension of that activities both as *repetitsia* [rehearsal] and *trenirovka* [training in sport] – one related to the art and second to the sport mirror the fact that the hall which provide the floor for that dance festival is a sport hall (Triaditsa” Sport Hall in Sofia).

⁴ The topic about the “hybrid” and hybrid forms were highly discussed during The Fourth Meeting of the ICTM Study Group “Music and Minorities in Varna, Bulgaria 2006. For further discussion see Stavelova et al (2008).

- Young people whose ages qualify them to be candidates for any folk dance performance group but who have no preliminary “folk” dance experience (the common background of all the performers in folk dance ensembles). The folk dance ensemble is not for people who would like to dance and perform only, but is for dancers who are well trained and the training process lasts for years. It is relatively unusual for a newcomer to achieve the skill level of the others.

In comparison to the folk ensemble the folk club is more open and the stage performance (if there is any) is demanded from only those who desire to perform. The only requirement is comfortable shoes. Some of the participants in the festival mentioned have as a dance experience only a few months or weeks. The dance line may include three, thirteen, or thirty participants, so there is no “danger” that the composition would be destroyed if someone decided to leave the dance line in the middle of the dance. The music is traditional where many different arrangements may be chosen. Here there are no unexpected transitions in meters as there are in the ensemble’s suites. Dances performed with such accompaniments are considered as much better than artless fitness and aerobic exercises. The club provides opportunity for dancing traditional dances where folk dancing is associated (consciously or unconsciously) with village celebrations, leisure time and pleasant childlike feelings.

The group (club) of nowadays is a newborn urban phenomenon. At the same time there were folk dance groups performing on the stage very successfully in the very first decades of the 20th century. (See Dzhudzhev 1945, Tzoneva-Kusitaseva; Tsonev 2000). The appearance of clubs today seems to be in a sequence from a fully drawn circle in the development of amateur folk dance activity – from the very first groups performing traditional dances a century ago, through the high achievements of Bulgarian choreography (when choreographies made by Margarita Dikova, Kiril Dzhenev and few others are considered as Bulgarian classics) up to the present day’s return to basic folk dance forms that reflect the choreographic background of the leader. My research here raises the hypothesis that the contemporary Bulgarian dance club has become to some extent a descendent of the folk dance ensemble. Here the ensemble may be considered as a center which radiates its lower level dance peripheral forms (the folk dance club). The “democratic character” of the lower level forms actually presupposes their popularity and also breaths new life to folk dancing. What unifies the “center” and the “periphery” today is the shared love toward Bulgarian folklore, the desire for an emotional stimulation provoked by the music and dance shared among people who have similar feelings and preferences.

The early groups that performed on the stage with great enthusiasm discovered that the stage “box” is something obviously different than the village square’s “openness”. But while the leaders of the first groups were enthusiastic dancers who were still memorizing many village dances, the leaders of the groups nowadays are professional choreographers that grew up in the rehearsal hall. They have passed through different training schools but all these schools are branches of the same well-established Bulgarian choreography school/tree. All the knowledge received is gathered in the rehearsal hall. If they have learned any traditional dances their number is usually small. Many of the choreographers

have never been in the field even though some universities encourage and require students to gather stage material through field research. The university gives opportunities to master many skills – method of teaching, dance composition, creation of stage programs, etc. This educational background of the choreographers–leaders of the clubs that participated in the festival, was actually something which was easily recognized. In many appearances the difference between the folk dance ensemble’s performance and the folk dance club’s program was as thin as cigarette paper.

The notion of the revival

The Bulgarian folk dance club is a phenomenon which brings Bulgaria somehow and in some aspect nearer to countries such as Norway for instance, where folk dance has been resuscitated and brought back to life. “In our philosophy – wrote prof. Egil Bakka from Trondheim University, the revival of folk dance is of greater scholarly and humanistic value to contemporary culture than postmodern critics of tradition would allow.” (Bakka 1999: 80). According to the philosophy of the author here to dance traditional dances absolutely possesses positive humanistic value. Regarding the scientific contribution the situation in Bulgaria is different than the situation in Norway, however In Norway all these activities are initiated by the ethnochoreologists and their university departments. There the main focus and accent are placed on research, recording, classification, and revival, bringing back to life the recorded but almost-forgotten dance patterns. In Bulgaria the main initiators are specialists in choreography. This fact by itself that the initiators are the choreographers who need jobs and realization already made the assumption that the direction will be mainly practical – teaching what was taught to them and much less – what was discovered in archives or as a result of fieldwork. I am not saying that it is something that couldn’t be achieved – quite the opposite, but I am saying that this wasn’t observed during the festivals held in 2007 and 2008.

From a technical aspect, at the present days, there is possibility and potential for such clubs to be established in every place that has a dance floor. This opportunity and the relatively stable economy (in comparison to the 1990s) supported this growth. It is both interesting and paradoxical that the folk dance ensembles picked the club route to survive during the upheavals of the 1990s, when participants were requiring to pay monthly dues in order to sustain the ensemble. Years later – in the beginning of 21st century, one may recognize that some clubs behave as dance ensembles – striving to perform and to compete.

Conclusion

Turning now into a democratic society has offered more personal choices and initiatives but has also forced one to be more creative and entrepreneurial in finding one’s own way toward professional realization. To many Bulgarians, participation in such clubs is a “mass sport”, “fitness”, something “fashionable”. But at the same time many mentioned the word “roots” while answering the question about their motivation to participate. To me this implies the need to satisfy the eternal and deeply human need for beauty in one’s life, beauty that has been embedded from the very origin of traditional music and dance, patiently waiting for rediscovery by new generations.

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