

Dance in Ancient Greece

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REVIEW ARTICLE

INTRODUCTION

Dancing has traditionally been one of the most ancient forms of community entertainment and, indeed, has been true throughout the history of the Greeks even as it is today. References to dance in ancient Greece have come down to us through the writings of Homer, Lucian, Plato and Socrates as well as others. Dance scenes are also depicted on many ancient ceramics.

One should not assume, however, that the dances of the Greeks today are the same as those of their ancient forefathers. As Tsatsou-Simeonidi states, "We do not have detailed descriptions of dances in archaic texts and the paintings which we see, especially on ceramics, cannot give us the rhythm or the movement of a dance." [1] There is, nevertheless, a thread of continuity seen in the types of dances and occasions at which both ancient and modern Greeks dance. Dora Stratou elaborates on that thread at length in her book but nevertheless concludes that, "When we say that our popular folk-dances embrace our entire history, obviously we do not mean that they are danced exactly as they were danced 2,500 years ago. One would be mad to even consider such a thing" (1966:13).

As to the ancient Greeks, Lawler tells us "...the dance was a social activity in the truest sense of the word. By means of it the Greek expressed his personal and communal emotions of joy and sorrow, marked all the great events of his own life and that of his city—and thoroughly enjoyed himself" (1985:121). Consider the events associated with dancing in the lives of the modern Greeks: baptisms, betrothals, weddings, pre-Lenten and Easter celebrations, feast days honoring patron saints, national holidays, etc. All are occasions similar to those celebrated in antiquity, either personal or communal. Anyone who has had the good fortune to observe Greeks dancing, or better yet, to dance with them cannot help but understand that they are still thoroughly enjoying themselves!

Some of the above occasions require dances peculiar to that celebration that may not be performed at other times.

Many such are performed during the pre-Lenten and Easter celebrations. Not all are "dances" in which the community as a whole takes part, but performances that may require dance movements usually connected with soil fertility rituals, rainmaking or the warding off of evil spirits. Usually only a few take part in the actual performance, but the community as a whole participates as onlookers and beneficiaries of the particular ritual "dance" being performed.

While it is true that Greeks dance on a variety of occasions, what they dance may differ greatly not only from one region to another but frequently from village to village even though they may be separated by only a few kilometers. Particular dance names are heard over and over and some in every geographical region, i.e., Syrtos, Hasapikos, Karsilamas, Tsamikos. These are sometimes referred to as pan-Hellenic dances. The assumption should not be made, however, that the same name is necessarily the same dance. The Syrtos is a good case in point.

The general concept is that the Syrtos is a dance performed by all Greeks and at all dance events. Indeed, a dance motif exists which, with minor variations here and there, is performed throughout the country and which will be danced at least once on almost all occasions. Some Greeks, such as those from the island of Crete, refer to that motif as Kalamatianos. In some parts of the country the two names—Syrtos/Kalamatianos—are used interchangeably. However, when a Syrtos is requested by Cretans they will perform an entirely different motif.

On another island, Kythnos, couples, a man and a woman, always dance the Syrtos although there may be many couples dancing simultaneously whereas in most of Greece, the Syrtos is an open circle dance for as many as wish to take part. The Kalamatianos of Kythnos is also a dance for couples, not particularly dissimilar to the Syrtos of that island except in rhythm; the Kalamatianos is performed to a $\frac{7}{8}$ rhythm while the Syrtos is danced to

music of 2/4 rhythms. Tsamikos is just as varied if not more so than the Syrtos.

In its most common form it is really a solo for the lead dancer even though there may be many more in the danceline. In the past in some villages, only men may have danced it. Elsewhere men and women performed it in separate lines or in one line with the men first followed by the women with a handkerchief linking the last man and the first woman who were usually relatives. The first dancer does his/her variations as he/she feels it in the music and according to that individual's particular skill.

Usually one person will lead for a time and then join the line of dancers while another person demonstrates his/her skill. Because the Tsamikos is such a personal dance for the leader with others in line taking a few steps right or left from time-to-time, it is often considered "boring" by non-Greeks. Not so for the participants, as those in the line are often relatives or good friends of the leader and vicariously experience his/her joy in the dance, knowing they will have an opportunity to demonstrate their own skill at another time.

Technically it could be said there are as many ways to dance Tsamikos as there are dancers to lead it. In fact, there are more. Inhabitants of some villages, perhaps in addition to dancing Tsamikos in the free-style as described above, also perform a motif to music in a tsamiko-type rhythm (6/8 or 3/4) that is executed by all. There are hundreds of Tsamiko songs from which to choose, some quite localized others known throughout the country. At times it may be a dance for one gender only. In such instances it is often referred to simply as the Women's Tsamikos or the Men's Tsamikos.

Variety and improvisation are key words in describing the traditional dances of the Greeks. From north to south, from east to west there are hundreds of dances in this relatively small country. Because of the tendency to use the same names again and again it may seem like less but it should be remembered, as pointed out previously, that one name used in different places might mean several different kinetic motifs. The repertoire was considerably greater in the past but has been diminished by emigration from the villages to the cities, the rise of performing ensembles and dance teachers in the villages, as well as foreign influences via television and film.

In addition to the previously mentioned pan-Hellenic dances, included in the repertoire of most villages is any number of dances that may be done in only that village, in a few nearby villages or in several of the surrounding villages. Within the various geographical regions of Greece similarities in the dances are often found that allow them to be classified in fairly broad

categories such as mainland, island, mountain, plains or urban dances.

Some are of the opinion that the geographical surroundings are reflected in regional styles or have influenced them: the stately steps with high leg lifts of inhabitants of the high mountainous regions, the running and stamping step with lifts close to the ground of the villagers of agricultural or plains areas as well as the undulating flow of island dances emulating the sea. There are exceptions, of course. Where one region borders on another there will be definite influences in both music and dance as well as trading with or borrowing from one another. Regardless of regional differences, they are, nevertheless, bound together by a common thread making them identifiable as Greek. The majority of traditional Greek dances are in open circular formation moving counter-clockwise. A few exist, however, that are open circular moving clockwise. They frequently bear the name "Zervos," meaning to the left. There are even a few dances that were traditionally performed in closed circles with no apparent leader; Pontic Greeks and some from Eastern Thrace mainly perform these. Today most of those dances are now done in open circular formation. Serpentine forms as well as free-form configurations (dancers placed wherever they choose on the dance floor) are also found.

There are several dances throughout the country for couples. In most instances many couples perform simultaneously with each executing their own particular variations of the dance. While today most couple dances are performed with mixed genders, in many regions in the past members of the same sex mostly danced them together. The only exceptions were with immediate family or close relatives. A few solo dances exist and are almost always traditionally danced by men, although gender lines are rapidly disappearing.

In most regions there were dances that were performed only by one gender or the other. While other dances may have been performed by both sexes, they were either in separate lines or with the last man and first woman joined not by their hands as with the other dancers but with a handkerchief. Today throughout the country, both men and women usually perform the majority of the dances and it is acceptable for women as well as men to lead. Exceptions to the above still exist in various villages. In Olympos on the island of Karpathos dancing must begin with the men. Women gradually join afterwards to the right of a family member or close relative. A man must lead the dance as well as close it at the other end. This system also exists on several of the other islands in the Dodecanese group.

Improvisation is one of the most characteristic features of Greek dances. It is the option as well as the obligation

insome instances of the lead dancer. The improvisations area means of self-expression and executed according to the skill as well as the mood of the performer. Because one's mood is not always the same, improvisations may be more or less dynamic from one execution to another and may not always include the same variations.

As Drandakis writes in his excellent work on improvisation, each time the leader "...re-composes a pre-existing dance, but this recomposition also bears his own stamp"(1993:66). This "pre-existing dance" has been handed down from generation to generation, and while each lead dancer interprets it in his/her own manner the execution of variations must conform to local stylistic and kinetic standards developed by previous generations.

"The performance of variations in the lead position is, along with the perfecting of different regional styles, one of the most difficult elements of Greek dancing. The difficulty does not usually lie with the execution of the variations... Most skilled dancers will be able to master these with a little practice. The problem is not so much what to do as when to do it. A good dancer is not measured by the number of variations he performs or by the difficulty of the variation. Rather it is how well it is executed, whether relatively easy or difficult, and, most importantly, how well it relates to the music" (Hunt 1996:35, 36).

The relationship between the dancer and the music is extremely important. Using Cretan dances as an example, it can be said that the variations of lead males may be quite spectacular as they execute high leaps, dizzying spins, foot slapping, etc. However, all of these sensational moves are merely gymnastics if not performed in keeping with changes in the music. These dazzling variations should be executed when the music has reached an exhilarating level, a "high." If not, then what may appear to be spectacular dancing to an observer from outside the village or ethnic group may not be perceived that way at all by the dancer's peers.

Cowan relates an interesting conversation among villagers of Sohios in which they discuss the relationship between the lead dancer and the drummer (daoultzis) wherein the drummer tries to help an unskilled leader find and keep the beat (1990:127, 128). I have frequently observed musicians alter the tempo to conform to the leader's movements and even verbally inform him/her when he/she is off the beat. The lead dancer and the musicians share a special relationship when all are skilled. In this harmonious situation the dancer anticipates changes in the music while the musicians keep an eye on the variations the leader executes and attempt to foresee where he will make a break or stop as punctuation or for emphasis. In the very best of this type of situation, the

musician and dancer literally become one, anticipating each other's performance.

Variations are not limited to the lead dancer although certainly the most energetic and spectacular are reserved for that position. In many, if not most dances, dancers within the line are free to perform a variety of steps that fit within the general kinetic motif. In some instances one might think everyone in the dance line is performing a different dance because of the many variations being simultaneously executed. In one sense they are, and yet, they harmoniously fit within the dance motif.

Music is found in every region of Greece and is an inseparable part of village life. Many events, not just dancing, are accompanied by vocal or instrumental music. Each region has its own peculiar style of music and particular instruments used to achieve that style. Even though the same instruments are used in several areas, the combinations in which they are played create a distinctive sound in each of those areas. An instrument may play a dominant role in one region and a supportive or second-ary role in another.

An extensive assortment of instrument combinations represents the music of Greece. There are two basic combinations: the *ziyia* (ζιγιά), composed of two different instruments and the *kompania* (κομπανία), an ensemble. At times an instrument will be played solo, but today for most there is some type of percussion accompaniment. Some combinations are better suited for outdoor celebrations while others are more suitable for enclosed spaces. However, amplification has greatly modified their capabilities and several instruments initially used indoors are now also played in outdoor celebrations. While amplification has provided the opportunity for various instruments to be used in more settings than in the past, that same amplification is often so intense that it distorts the sweetness of sound made by some instruments in non-amplified situations.

The geographical position of Greece, being both a Balkan and a Mediterranean country, has played a major role in shaping its traditional folk music. Within the country there are no precise musical boundaries; therefore musical styles and songs often spill over from one region to another as well as from one country to another in border areas. As the borders are more open now than they were

a decade or so ago, especially with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, there has recently been an influx of both music and musicians.

Those rhythms are frequently referred to as "asymmetric"; *aksak*, a Turkish word meaning to limp, is also often applied to these rhythms. This diversity of instruments and

rhythms combine to form the unique sound that is Greek music. An understanding of and a feel for them are basic to the execution of the dances. One of the most marvelous things about Greeks and their dances is that they still perform them on most, if not all, celebratory occasions. Shay, in reference to the Dora Stratou Dance Theatre, leads one to believe that the traditional dances of the Greeks are a thing of the past, "The repertoire reflects, to the best of the company's collective ability, the dancing of fifty years ago when it was a living tradition" (2002:186). Fortunately for both Greeks and non-Greeks this is incorrect. It is still very much a living tradition, alive and well in villages throughout the country although undergoing changes.

One change is the village performing group, now standard in many villages. This "necessitates" a dance teacher, all too often one who is a graduate of the physical education department of the university. In many instances the instructor is not from the particular village/region in question and either teaches "foreign" dances, i.e., from other regions, or stylizes the local dances. Even when villagers, without external instruction, construct performing groups utilizing only local inhabitants, someone becomes the "director" and almost invariably they "rehearse" the dancers until they, too, resemble the well-known ensembles of Athens and other large cities losing the spontaneity and individuality with which they dance in their own village celebrations.

Not a great deal of information on the traditional dances of the Greeks has been published in English. However, the works listed in the following bibliography will provide a basis for approaching the subject from various points of view. These divergent views will, hopefully, enable one to have a better grasp of the multifaceted subject of Greek dance. One might note a definitive lack of "how-to" books instructing the dances. Although several exist, mainly in Greek, I have yet to find one from which anyone can truly learn to dance.

The translation of Lucian's essay on the dance along with Lawler's book provides the best works to date on Greeks and their ancient dances. While a few dance names and commentary regarding them are provided in both, no actual descriptions of the dances have remained. They are of great value, however, in understanding some of the types of dances and the occasions for dancing that were important to the ancient Greeks and the role dance played in their lives. It may not come as a surprise to find that many occasions and events are not that far removed from modern Greek society.

Stratou attempts to make the leap from the ancient to the more modern world of Greek dance, not through kinetic motifs and the dance repertoire of which we have so little

knowledge, but through "...their expression and movement and musical rhythm—we find the thread linking them with the ancient texts, the ancient musical scales, the ancient poetic meters, the vase-paintings, the Byzantine frescoes and Byzantine music" (Op.cit: 14). The founding of her dance theatre in the late 1950s was her attempt to present this to both her fellow Greeks as well as to foreigners (See Op.cit: 16).

The Dora Stratou Greek Dances Theatre is the subject of the chapter on Greece in Shay's work on state folk dance companies. While he gives an interesting account of his first encounter with the group in its very early years, he wrongly assumes it is a state ensemble in the sense of the other groups portrayed in his book (2002:167, 169).

Fortunately for the sake of its living tradition Greece has no state ensemble. There are, indeed, hundreds of performing ensembles throughout the country and many of them receive some amount of funding from the Ministry of Culture just as does the Dora Stratou Theatre. There are several inaccuracies in the account of the theatre, its operations and its presentations in this work. A more accurate picture of the situation in Greece in general as well as the Dora Stratou Theatre in particular might have been portrayed if Mr. Shay had not largely limited his interviews to the current director and his staff. Nevertheless it does provide an interesting look into the organized performance of traditional dances in Greece.

A general overview of the traditional dances of the Greeks, the variety and regional style as well as the role dance plays in the lives of the Greeks is provided in Hunt's work. Ethnomusicologist, Markos Dragoumis, director of the Music Folklore Archives of the Centre for Asia Minor Studies in Athens, writes in the foreword that the book "...shows a good balance between practical and theoretical information..." and "...whets the appetite of the novice to take the first step towards becoming a dancer and allows the knowledgeable to acquire a deeper understanding of the subtle art of Greek dancing" (1996:11).

Essential to the understanding of Greek dances is the role of improvisation. Drandakis' work on that subject is excellent. He leads us through the art of improvisation, the relationship between dancer and musicians, between lead dancer and others in the dance, even informing us how one's ability to improvise influences his standing within society. Understanding the intricacies of improvisation is indispensable to understanding the way Greeks dance.

Dance and social experience are deeply examined in Cowan's work pertaining to the village of Sohios in Macedonia. Although the work is concentrated on one par-

particular village much of what is presented is true of Greek village society in general. The accounts of the various types of dance events—weddings, formally organized evening dances, ritual events, etc.—present a good picture of the variety of occasions at which dancing may occur and the social interaction underlying the actual dancing. It is also helpful in understanding the role gender plays in village society and how it relates to dance events.

There are many ritual events in Greek culture in which dancing may play either a major or minor role. Danforth's book reveals several underlying aspects of one ritual event, the firewalking of the Anastenaria. One such feature is the role dance plays both during the actual event and otherwise in the lives of the celebrants. To them it is both a form of suffering as well as one of joy. We are given the opportunity to view the ritual both through the eyes of the participants as well as those of the outsiders through this work. Perhaps one's view of what constitutes "dance" will be changed or broadened through the reading.

Music, sung or played, provides the accompaniment to the dance in most instances. A great variety of musical instruments and playing styles exist in Greece. Fivos Anoyanakis' work is the most complete and comprehensive on their variety and use throughout the country and is essential reading for one wishing to become acquainted with this rich assortment. Information is included concerning instrument making, musicians and different types of music. Excellent color photographs of the instruments accompany the information.

While there are disagreements among both scholars and Greeks as to whether or not the music and dance known as "rebetika" are part of the traditional or folk repertoire, there can be little doubt that they are a definite segment of modern Greek culture. Two books provide a picture of the sub-culture from which they came. Both works give several of the songs of this genre with translations in English.

In the book edited by Butterworth an article on the dances by Petrides and one on the music by Dragoumis allow us a glimpse into the music/dance associated with the world of the "rebetes." Holst, in her work on the subject, not only supplies us with music and dance information but also recounts the history of the movement and its beginnings.

There are obviously many ways from which to approach a dance or dancing. Multiple factors contribute to every dance and dance event, and the combination of those factors can create a favorable or unfavorable state. For a Greek to give expression to his emotions via the dance he not only needs to feel the music, but also needs good *parea* (παρέα), his companions. The atmosphere of

the moment plays a major role, including the food and drink served.

Most Greeks do not feel the need to express themselves in dance until they have drunk several glasses of wine. When the *parea*, the music and other factors are all present in the right amount and combination, the situation may become electrifying, magical. At that point the Greeks dance in an outpouring of joy that is virtually unstoppable until either the music ends or the dancers become too exhausted to continue. To witness such an event, or better yet to participate in it, is a great privilege and a look into the Greek soul.

The dances have a deep personal significance for the people who dance them as can be seen from the suggested readings. The history of Greece and her people are written into them as well as into the music and songs. They have been perpetuated and preserved over the centuries because of the deep pride and spiritual attachment that every Greek feels toward his country. The bond between the Greek and his village is very strong no matter where he is living; it is the place that gives him his identity. His village dances, although they may not vary significantly from those of surrounding villages, are a vital and living element that helps to reinforce and perpetuate this identity.

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