

MARTOR

30/2025



BODIES IN MOTION: DANCE, MOVEMENT, GESTURE

The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Journal / Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain

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Romanian Peasant
Anthropology Journal

Revue d'Anthropologie
du Musée du Paysan
Roumain

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— 30 / 2025 —

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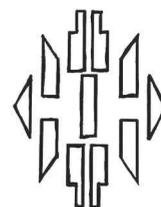
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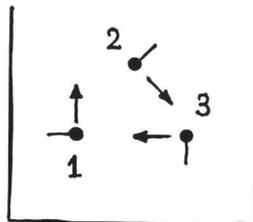
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Bodies in Motion: Dance, Movement, Gesture

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ABSTRACT

In pursuit of this interest and broadening its methodological complexity, this present issue of *Martor* proposes a group of studies on the theme of bodies in motion, hence the focus here on dance. This subject brings, in addition to theoretical challenges that arise in scholarly discussion and analysis of the moving body, a discipline-specific prerequisite (a feature shared with ethnomusicological research) that adds an extra level of theoretical and analytical construction, notably that of movement notation.

KEYWORDS

Body in motion; movement; dance; local cultures; ethnic identity; shadow theater.

The study of human motion as both a socio-cultural practice and product is the main focus of ethnochoreology. Emerging comparatively recently as a scientific discipline, ethnochoreology has developed through interdisciplinary research that draws primarily on ethnology, anthropology and folklore studies, making it a particularly fitting subject for our journal. It is not a

subject, however, in which most ethnologists have been schooled, given both its late arrival on the academic scene and requiring, as we note below, special investigative skills. Text books and articles from the later twentieth century distinguished two broad scholarly approaches.¹ These viewpoints were rooted in historical and geopolitical circumstances: North American anthropological perspectives that emphasized contemporary performance and socio-cultural context, and the longer-established European tradition that focused upon dance history and structure.² Although traces of geographical and disciplinary affiliations linger as, for example, in terms such as dance ethnology, folk dance studies, anthropology of dance and ethnochoreology—today, these once strict distinctions have largely dissolved. Consequential mutual influence, inspiration and innovation have resulted in an enriched dynamic field of ethnochoreology that embraces all culturally patterned modes of movement produced by the human body.

Martor journal has already demonstrated interest in the cultural and historical construction of the human body in a previous issue (no. 20/2015), entitled *Bodies / Matter: Narratives of Corporeality* (see Ion and Dobos 2015). This brought together several articles, field notes, exhibitions and book reviews to examine the ways in which the “human body has been visually and narratively represented in different historical and scientific contexts.” As the issue coordinators note in the introduction, it is not a simple topic to approach: “Mediated through language, disciplined by sciences, placed under political control and the medium of social relations, the body continues to escape the rigors of discourses and representations.”

In pursuit of this interest and broadening its methodological complexity, this present issue of *Martor* proposes a group of studies on the theme of bodies in motion, hence the focus here on dance. This subject brings, in addition to theoretical challenges that arise in scholarly discussion and analysis of the moving body, a discipline-specific prerequisite (a feature shared with ethnomusicological research) that adds an extra level of theoretical and analytical construction, notably that of movement notation. In order to conduct scientific analyses of dance, transformation of the dynamic and complex image of movement into a graphic, static image, is essential and choreological research typically requires the researcher to have this additional specialization.

Our editorial choice to focus on dance and movement analysis might be considered risky for a journal of ethnology and general anthropology, perhaps limiting our readership from the very beginning. Our goal, however, is precisely to facilitate broad scientific access to one of the specialized fields of ethnology, that of ethnochoreology. We assume the (editorial) difficulties of this task, knowing the cultural importance of framing the issue of traditional dance among the main themes of contemporary anthropological reflection, of cultural studies and beyond.

Mediated by methods of notation and analysis that date back, practically, to the first half of the 20th century, the scientific study of local, peasant, ethnic dances, generically called “traditional,” “folk” or “popular,” becomes either highly specialized methodologically, when it emphasizes the analysis of movement; or remains on the borders of the field of ethnochoreology, when it focuses more, for example, on the sociological, political, or community dimensions of dance.

The coordinators of this issue wanted to offer a nuanced understanding of some of the aspects of dance in traditional communities/societies and of choreographic practices, whether these are reproduced through community practices, through stage performance, or almost exclusively through media practices. Each of these aspects are themselves fields of ethnochoreology, and, in general, of ethnology. It is impossible to deny the importance that dance, especially traditional dance, has today in the processes of cultural identification or self-identification, (be it related to ethnicity, nation or group).

Through our editorial project, we aim to cross these two research directions by making the theoretical approach to traditional dance more flexible so that it can be naturally integrated into anthropological studies across diverse themes. To our advantage, the four initial coordinators³ of

this issue have experienced long-term scholarly collaboration, each being members of the International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance (ICTMD)⁴ for more than 30 years. An additional factor connects not only the editors of this issue but also some of its authors. Several of the contributors teach or have taught on the Choreomundus international MA programme, which investigates dance and other movement systems (ritual practices, martial arts, games, and physical theatre) as Intangible Cultural Heritage within the broader contexts of Ethnochoreology, the Anthropology of Dance, Dance Studies, and Heritage Studies.⁵ The studies included in this issue were written on a similar topic.

In this issue, we interpret our theme broadly, encompassing studies of moving bodies in both the past and present, as well as representations of human movement culturally embodied in three- and two-dimensional forms, such as puppetry and graphic imagery. In accordance with the basic structure of the journal, to which our readership is already accustomed, issue 30 is composed of four sections, preceded by an introduction: I. *Dance and cultural practices*; II. *Different bodies in motion*; III *Dialogues and images*; IV. *Book reviews*. The first section is reserved for scientific studies. These are grouped into two parts: one is organized around cultural-choreographic practices, the second is reserved for correlations between dance movement and the diversity of bodies in motion. The studies that make up this first section are extensive and address the problem of dance and movement both from the point of view of the cultural systems in which they are embedded and of the diversity of relationships between corporeality and movement.

In the third section, usually reserved for museology, our journal privileges narratives and visual exhibitions/display, while in previous issues a fifth optional section has hosted texts with a freer structure, interviews, essays and the results of works in progress. The coordinators of this issue have brought together these two editorial objectives into a single section. Under the title *Dialogues and Images*, it focuses on the idea of the graphic and narrative representation of the dancing body. The third article in this section includes the presentation and analysis of drawings of traditional dance included in a genuine visual diary of rural life.

The last section, dedicated to reviews of recently published books on dance and related topics, is testimony to the wide scope and scientific rigour with which dance scholarship is conducted today. The selected volumes for review embrace a variety of perspectives and foci: movement documentation and analysis, choreomusical relationships, historical studies and ethnographic description, analysis and interpretation. Overall, this issue underlines the importance of dance in contemporary society, its continuing, often challenged, and sometimes renewed relevance in rapidly changing societies. In particular, it demonstrates the wider value to scientists of conducting research into the various manifestations of embodied transmission.

In light of the global cultural impact of the 21st century, local inspiration, local knowledge, and cultural heritage are increasingly valued. People living together within globalisation and local cultural influences, in virtual and physical reality, are searching for answers to social and cultural questions that define their identity, both spiritual and physical. The undeniable positive effect of the Covid pandemic has been to reinforce cultural and artistic phenomena placed in online environments, while at the same time the demand for living, person-to-person, “offline” encounters has increased significantly. In this respect, dance culture is considered a priority field.

The first section of our volume moves from theoretical and historical concerns of traditional dance analysis, with a strong focus upon issues of movement notation and dance structure, to studies in which the personal experiences of the dancer are brought to the fore, relating them to larger socio-cultural frameworks. From a theoretical perspective, Csilla Könczei’s opening article (“Can We Find Reason in Dance? Embodied Thought: Exploring Analogies between Dance and Speech Articulation”) is perhaps the most intensive. Its central question is whether meaning or “rationality” can be found in dance, or whether it is merely an instinctive, body-bound activity.



In addition to presenting the historical and philosophical background of this question, the study discusses the results of classical, formal-structural folk dance research. It also introduces the author's earlier research concepts relevant to this topic, in which the structure of dance is compared to linguistic structures, emphasizing that dances are most similar to "poetic language." Könczei argues that recent theories underlining the unity of body and mind (such as António Damásio's [1994] theory of the "embodied mind") open up the possibility of viewing dance as a form of thinking. Some theories—such as Lindblom's (2000) emergent phonology or Browman and Goldstein's (1989) articulatory phonology—describe speech itself as movement-based. These models can also be applied to dance research.

Continuing this vein of formal and structural questions related to the study of traditional dance is the subsequent article, "Dance Syntax in Practice: The San Felipe Dance Group Performs the Cumbia *Cienaguera*" by Marisol Limón Silicéo and Juan Felipe Miranda Medina. The authors present an analysis of one of the favourite choreographies of the Colombian San Felipe Dance Group—the folk dance piece *Cumbia Cienaguera*. Their aim is to examine how the variety and combinations of dance movements can be described by focusing on dance forms, particularly within a community where participants have diverse physical abilities (such as elderly individuals or dancers with prosthetics). The study is grounded in the concept of dance syntax, which the authors define as the rules and sequences by which dance movements can be combined. They model this system using the Finite-State Automata (FSA) theory—a computational method well suited for modelling movement sequences. The authors first recorded the movements using Labanotation, then simplified them using Motif Notation, which captures the essence of movements rather than their exact details. From these motifs, they built automata to describe the possible movement modes and transitions within a given choreography. The movements were categorized into three main types:

- Travelling movements (mM) – when the dancer moves through space,
- In-place movements (mP) – where the dancer stays in one spot,
- Turning movements (mT) – rotational movements performed in place.

The combination of FSA and Motif Notation offers several advantages: it allows for the systematic comparison of different movement variations and enables us to see not just an "ideal" version of a choreography, but also how individual dancers adapt it to their own physical condition. Furthermore, the combined use of these methods makes it possible to visually represent potential movement variations and their combinations—clearly showing that not everyone dances the same way, even when following the same choreography. The study demonstrates that this analytical method can represent the diversity of dance, emphasizing the inclusivity of dance communities, where each participant contributes to the performance according to their own capabilities. Additionally, the integration of FSA and Motif Notation provides a new tool for the study of folk dance, community dance, and dance anthropology. One of the study's most important messages is that dance is not merely the execution of predetermined steps, but a meeting point between individual bodies and communal creativity—and now, this can also be represented through formal and structural analysis.

In studying the junctures between individual and society, traditional dance may also reveal past and present embodied issues of cultural identity, social gender roles, politics and power,⁶ which may often be played out in the personal lives of dancers and researchers. Raymundo Ruiz González's article, "That Which Remains: The Role of Fonadan Notation in the Establishment of the Mexican Field of Folkloric Dance and its Terminology," is closely connected to such topics. His study examines Fonadan, an important yet now forgotten institution in the research and teaching of Mexican folkloric dance. Fonadan was established in 1972, as a result of the then Mexican government's populist policies. Its aim was the systematic research, archiving, and teaching of traditional Mexican dances. The creation of Fonadan reflected the cultural populism of President

Echeverría's administration, which sought to preserve and promote "authentic folk culture"—often also for tourism purposes.

The article is a compelling example of an embedded researcher's perspective, as the author recounts how he first encountered Fonadan's legacy through his personal life story and explores the role it played in shaping his career as both a dancer and a scholar. Fonadan collected, recorded, and documented dances. It employed the Laban notation system for formal and structural classification, which later had a significant aesthetic impact on how traditional Mexican dance was perceived. Fonadan played a key role in the development of dance schools. The curriculum and notes it produced, along with direct connections to informants (indigenous dancers), helped incorporate folkloric elements into a professional educational framework. Although the institution and its associated archive were dissolved in 1985, its dance notations, terminology, and methodology still live on in educational institutions and in the embodied knowledge of dancers. The author reflects on his own experiences and how these movements and expressions continue to manifest in contemporary dance practice. Fonadan's work contributed to the establishment of Mexican folkloric dance as an academic discipline, though it has also been criticized for "staging" authentic traditions and centralizing cultural heritage. The main questions and insights raised by the study are:

- Can traditional dance be preserved through documentation?
- What happens to communal knowledge when it is institutionalized?
- What does authenticity mean in folkloric dance?

These questions are not unique to Mexican or even South American concerns. Similar questions arise worldwide in the context of rapidly changing traditional cultures under modernity. The author encourages a re-evaluation and further exploration of Fonadan's legacy, emphasizing that this knowledge still exists—not only in books, but in terminology, bodies, movements, and educational practice.

Traditional dances are significantly represented both in the global and local cultural scene: traditional movements, gestures and dances associated with ethnic groups are circulated on the web and take on new meanings in new contexts. At the same time, traditional dance culture is also important in the construction and re-shaping of personal, local, regional and national identities (Liebsch 2001). In her study "Dancing over Crossed Swords: An Ethnographic Case Study on Competitive Solo Highland Dancing," which explores the teaching of Scottish Highland dance, Bethany Whiteside emphasizes the significance of this dance form, often regarded as a key element of Scottish national identity. Through the analysis of a dance class, the author examines the social and cultural roles of the dance. Whiteside employed ethnographic methods: she participated in the classes, observed and interviewed the teacher and students, and used Erving Goffman's theatrical model to analyse social interactions. Whiteside's findings suggest that Highland dance functions both as an art form and a sport, operating within a highly regulated, competition-oriented system.⁷ Based on her observations, the group studied can be divided into two: the older students and the teacher, who support the regulated structure, and the younger students, who grow weary of the repetitive exercises and seek a more creative experience beyond the standardized forms. According to the study, Highland dance in its current form has reached a kind of "dead end": while the strict regulation provides identity and legitimacy for the time being, it also hinders renewal and deters deeper engagement from the younger generation. Goffman's dramaturgical analysis reveals that multiple "realities" coexist simultaneously: alongside the visible rules of the dance class, there are also underlying personal conflicts, desires, and critical perspectives held by the participants.

In the subsequent section *Different Bodies in Motion*, we include essays which present examples of embodiment which may challenge received notions of traditionality and of the dancer. In her study of the invention of a dance tradition ("Pamporea: Emergence of a New Vernacular. Dance

and Identity Performing with Aromanian (Vlachs) from Romania”), Georgiana Vlahbei builds a problematic that lies at the intersection of three major themes in contemporary anthropology: the dynamics of local cultures, their mediatization, and the phenomenon of migration. These themes are explored through ethnological perspectives on traditional dance—an ambitious and complex undertaking. The author sheds light on the case of the Aromanians, a transhumant European population, speaking a language of Latin origin, but which has never had its own state, nor national culture. Some Aromanians—originating from different territories of the Balkan space—emigrated between the two World Wars to Romania, to form a distinct community, the focus of this present study. The originality of this research lies in analysing the process of creation of a dance now regarded as “traditional”: *Pamporea*. From its very inception—its authorship remains disputed—*Pamporea* achieved worldwide circulation and remarkable popularity within Aromanian communities across the globe. In this essay, Vlahbei illuminates the contexts, behaviours, practices, and techniques that establish, validate and reinforce the dance’s identity value and, implicitly, its classification as a “tradition.” She shows how these processes are amplified through intensive media exposure. Her analysis is supported by significant excerpts from interviews conducted with members of the Aromanian community in Romania.

Moving on to the theatrical form of modern contemporary dance, Márton Hajnal’s study, “Disability and Dance. Possible Theoretical Approaches to Analyse CandoCo’s First Guest Performance in Hungary” presents the findings of an ethnographic research project conducted in an inclusive dance class (where people with and without disabilities learn together). The author used interviews and journaling as methods to explore the practical, social, and emotional impacts of inclusive dance. Additionally, his embodied experience as a participant observer allowed for a deeper understanding of the process. Notably, Hajnal reflects on his own position as a researcher, writing openly about his assumptions and the discomforts he encountered during the study. One of the key insights of the study is that inclusive dance classes are not only artistically valuable but also beneficial from both health and social perspectives: they foster acceptance, empathy, and a shared sense of human experience. Within the context of teaching, disability is not presented as a disadvantage, but rather as part of human diversity. Moving together helps build emotional connections, increases empathy, and creates community. Inclusive dance is not merely art or sport—it is also a social space that facilitates the understanding of “difference.” The study also highlights how dance can dismantle social barriers surrounding the body and notions of normalcy.

Our volume also explores contemporary dance forms that draw on traditional elements. These traditional forms, when placed in new environments and contexts, can often exert a similar emotional and aesthetic impact as before. This is evident, for example, in Ștefana Pop-Curșeu’s study “Le théâtre d’ombres : danse magique de l’imagination. Des traditions orientales au théâtre roumain contemporain” [“Shadow Theatre: A Magical Dance of the Imagination. From Oriental Traditions to Contemporary Romanian Theatre”]. This comprehensive paper explores the history and cultural significance of shadow theatre, from its Eastern ritualistic origins to contemporary Romanian theatrical examples. The author argues that shadow plays should not be viewed merely as spectacles for children, but as complex, symbolic art forms capable of bridging the visible and the invisible, the present and the past, life and death. Shadow theatre has roots in India and China, where it served ritual and spiritual purposes, such as invoking the spirits of the dead. These traditions are especially strong in Indonesia (*wayang kulit*), Cambodia, and Thailand, where performances are accompanied by dance and music. In Europe, shadow theatre gradually lost its ritual character and was primarily used for children’s entertainment or satirical performances. However, contemporary theatrical examples—including Romanian ones—are also discussed in the study. While Western shadow theatre may have lost its sacred dimension, the study argues that it still has a unique aesthetic and emotional impact on audiences. Shadows do not merely survive as nostalgic childhood amusements, but in the

hands of contemporary artists, they gain new, multifaceted meaning and artistic potential—becoming one of the most powerful forms of making the invisible visible, revealing and empowering the motion of the human body in its absence.

Related to this, in the third section entitled *Dialogues and Images*, is the conversation between Romanian ethnologist Laura Jiǵa Iliescu and contemporary dancer and choreographer Silvia Călin (“On Being Available. Conversations with Silvia Călin”), which centres on the relationship between dance, the body, and the mind, as well as the parallels and differences between contemporary and traditional dance forms and their social and spiritual roles. One of the key messages of the conversation is that dance is simultaneously an art form, a path to self-knowledge, and a means of social and spiritual communication. The necessary “accessibility” for this—meaning inner openness, bodily awareness, and presence—can be learned and is essential for an authentic performance.

Approaches previously considered as typically cultural anthropological began to make their impact felt in “classical” circles of dance folklore in the 1980s. Alongside the earlier geographic-historical and the related structural approaches of European dance studies, the questions above have now become important fields of investigation for ethnochoreology.

Incorporating emic sources can offer a new perspective on ethnographically tracking changes in traditional dances. An example of this is the study “The Devil’s Images: Dance Scenes in Naïve Paintings.” The two authors, Beáta Gatti and Sándor Varga, examine the visual memory of a Hungarian inhabitant of a village in Transylvania, Romania, particularly through the depiction of dance culture. The self-taught artist’s paintings and manuscripts present traditional dance scenes from a unique, internal perspective. Created in a naïve style, the works intricately combine autobiographical elements, local history, and communal memory. These paintings function as memory narratives, simultaneously serving as visual stories, historical dance documents, and personal testimonies. The images act as alternative historical sources for understanding local lifestyles, clothing, social roles, and dance life. While they provide rich information, the authors emphasize that, due to their idealized nature, these depictions should only be used in historical dance folkloristics with appropriate caution.

Our final section in this issue fittingly opens with an incisive review of a ground-breaking publication by our late colleague János Fügedi. As an internationally esteemed dance notator and ethnologist, the reviewer is particularly well positioned to appraise this monumental guide to the system of Kinetography Laban in which Fügedi reveals his sterling skills as dance educator, analyst and innovative documenter. This reviews section brings to wider attention recent monographs dedicated to the specific genres of Argentine tango and the English Morris dance, an edited collection of essays on various dance practices in north-east India, and a longitudinal study on the dance culture of a village in Romania.

In this issue of *Martor*, we have aimed to publish a diverse yet coherent body of knowledge related to traditional dance, which, at the same time, is able to respond to the social, cultural, and artistic issues of our time. We intend, nonetheless, to preserve our specific scientific image, established by our predecessors and matured in the European scientific and social context: we also want to present our approach based on evidence from analysis of social context, functions, and dance movements. We hope that we will contribute to developing a sensitive scholarly approach to the problems of dance, which is capable of interpreting contemporary cultural processes without losing sight of historical explanations, and which draws its conclusions from analyses based on a thorough knowledge of the material. We want to make it possible for ethnochoreology with a focus on historical and formal issues and for the dynamically transforming dance anthropology to meet in a way that allows them to maintain their specific identities, to avoid falling into the traps of fashionable populism, while respecting precise scientific criteria, and to be able to provide important impulses for each other and other disciplines.

NOTES

1. See Royce (1977); Giurchescu and Torp (1991); Kaepler (1991). For contrasting approaches to fieldwork in dance, see Buckland (1999). For a retrospective survey and analysis of the literature and field, see Grau and Gore (2006).
2. The East European formal-structural approach does not refer to the type of structuralism used in social anthropology (see Kóncei 2020), nor do those devised by the American anthropologist Adrienne L. Kaepler and by the Norwegian ethnochoreologist Egil Bakka. For an overview see Kaepler and Dunin (2007).
3. Unfortunately, this project was completed by only three of the editors who initially formed the team, the fourth, the ethnochoreologist János Fügedi, passing away on 31 January, 2025.
4. A scholarly organization which aims to further the study, practice, documentation, preservation, and dissemination of music and dance of all countries.
5. The Choreomundus programme was established by four Universities: Norwegian University of Science and Technology Trondheim, Norway; Université Clermont Auvergne, France (coordinator); University of Roehampton London, United Kingdom; University of Szeged, Hungary. In 2025, the National

and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, joined the consortium, while the University of Szeged and the University of Roehampton were granted associated partner status. The programme is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. The programme aims to provide practical skills to observe, analyse, document, and evaluate dances. It equips students to analyse dance as knowledge, practice and heritage and to promote different modes of knowledge transmission adapted to local contexts. A broader aim is to equip students for global challenges and cultural encounters. For more information see: <https://choreomundus.org/consortium/> Two of the studies in our volume were written by alumni of the Choreomundus programme (Juan Felipe Miranda Medina and Raymundo Ruiz González).

6. The relationship between dance, identity, and politics has increasingly come into the focus of dance researchers recent years. A thematic section of the 2020 issue of *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* was specifically dedicated to these topics (Rakočević 2020; Iosif 2020; Varga 2020; Mellish-Green 2020; Eitler 2020).

7. Sándor Varga articulated similar problems in one of his writings concerning the stage folk dance movement in Hungary (Varga 2024).

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I. Dance and Cultural Practices

Can We Find Reason in Dance? Embodied Thought: Exploring Analogies Between Dance and Speech Articulation

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ABSTRACT

After the corporeal turn, the unity of mind and body has been recognized by many. This includes articulatory phonology, which no longer views phonemes as static, disembodied units, but brings in a gesture-based approach, conceiving the articulation of sounds as sound-producing speech movements, or articulatory gestures. This recognition makes it possible to search for closer analogies between spoken language and dance. From this perspective, abstract knowledge and bodily action in dance and speech are nothing but interconnected endpoints of a body-mind continuum, which shape and reshape each other being impacted by the individual differences, imperfections, innovations, and lapses in memory, occurring during the processes of production and perception. I argue here that there might be substrata in dances which are built of "primitive units" comparable to the phonological structure of speech, due to the body-mind unity of sensing and controlling motion. To demonstrate that the articulation of sounds is based on principles similar to how movements are generated in some dances, I present the example of a traditional dance from Romania, *Alunelu înfundat*.

KEYWORDS

Body-mind unity; articulatory phonology; syllable; transgressing structuralism; evolutionary dance anthropology; kinetography Laban; "kinemology."



The Banishment of Dance from the Eden of Reason

Can we find reason in dance? In the 16th century, renowned Reformation theologian and founder of Calvinism Jean Calvin firmly answered "No"! In 1546, under his pressure, Geneva's city council totally banned dance for two months, a decision confirmed by Calvin in his sermons of 1554-1555:

once upon a time (1546) a law was passed here in Geneva for the general prohibition of dancing [...] I admit that the intention was right, since *it would be difficult to find reason in dancing*, except as an invitation to whoredom. (Magyar 2015, 67 [*my emphasis*])

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Calvin, though even stricter than earlier reformers, continued the long-standing ecclesiastical practice of considering dance to be a sin. In tracing these moral and moralising debates on dance from 1200 to 1600, cultural historian Alessandro Arcangeli (1994) concluded that dance has been strongly and profoundly discredited in Christian thought. In company with other scholars, Arcangeli argues that the explanation for this can be found in the historically-developed negative and derogatory attitude of the Western churches, and most strongly the Reformed ones, towards the physical body.

Similarly to the Church's influence, public opinion in Western and Central European societies has been shaped by the dualistic ancient philosophical tradition, in which the body and the soul are two sharply separable and qualitatively different principles. Dualism culminated in the philosophy of Plato in European antiquity, and then became well-known in the early modern period through the rational philosophical construction of René Descartes. Descartes, who as a Jesuit was himself close to the Church (Winterton 1887) imagined that the mind was an immaterial, static principle of thought: the "thinking thing" (the *res cogitans*) which could be separated from the "nonthinking" body (the *res extensa*) which had a three-dimensional extension, a mechanical structure, and was incapable of thought (Bremer 2014; Damasio 1994).

According to Cartesian philosophy, the sole repository of creative thought is the mind, which is completely independent of the physical environment, i.e. the body and the outside world. Soul and body, reason versus emotion, language and movement, the duality of static and dynamic: there are multiple examples of the tough survival of these oppositional pairs. Neuroscientist, psychologist and philosopher Antonio Damasio (1994, xi) underlines the persistence of the belief that reason and emotion are two strictly separated principles:

I had grown up accustomed to thinking that the mechanisms of reason existed in a separate province of the mind, where emotion should not be allowed to intrude, and when I thought of the brain behind that mind, I envisioned separate neural systems for reason and emotion.

Furthermore, this theoretical frame has become a fertile hotbed for the supposition that disembodied and creative thought is expressed and communicated exclusively in verbal language. Mind and thought, as well as rational thought and language, therefore constitute close and exclusive conceptual pairs in this view, excluding sensations, emotions and passions, the latter being bound to corporeality. Noam Chomsky, one of the most influential linguists of the twentieth century, who himself based his philosophy of language on Cartesian foundations, emphasized that language as a species-specific human possession with its "generative ability that is revealed in the normal human use of language" is "a free instrument of thought" (Chomsky 2006 [1968]). Chomsky was sceptical about the existence of any other "language-like" system in human communication (2006 [1968]), although he was well aware of Claude Lévi-Strauss's research, in which the anthropologist had revealed the similarity of the deep structures of various systems, such as mythologies or kinship relations, to linguistic structures. Polish philosopher Adam Schaff, who had a close ideological relationship with Chomsky is even more radical on this subject. The main question of his book is: "Can thought (in the sense of conceptual thought) exist without language?" Or, in other words, "Can language exist without thought?" (Schaff 1979, 102). His answer—also narrowed down to conceptual thinking—is the following:

Thinking, or more precisely, human thinking [...] always takes place in some language, since without the signs of phonic language (or without some transcription of these signs) conceptual thinking is impossible. (Schaff 1979, 142)



Classical Theoretical Models in the Formal Analysis of Dance

Is conceptual thinking “without the signs of phonic language” really impossible? Or if we apply the question to dance, we can ask: “When we dance, do we think?” Is the cognitive process of dancing similar to that of speaking in some way? Can we put aside our reluctance, rooted in dualistic traditions, to seek reason in dance? And shall we put aside the misconception that dance belongs entirely to the sphere of instinctive actions and can be contrasted with abstract thinking?

It is common knowledge that the perception of dance as a bodily phenomenon and belief in the inferiority of the body in relation to the mind contributed to the prolonged persistence of dance’s low status: in everyday life and in the academic sphere, both in artistic and scholarly terms. Although this question of the relationship between mind and body has rarely been discussed in ethnochoreology, the formal structure and characteristics of traditional dances have long been a focus of research. My aim here is to highlight pioneers who identified formal traits in dance, developed analytical tools, and began to connect dance scholarship with established fields, especially in the discipline of linguistics.

Among these, the example of György Martin looms large. Beginning with the publication, together with Ernő Pesovár, in 1960 (Martin and Pesovár 1961, 2000) of a methodological foundation, he worked on revealing the formal structure of traditional dances until his premature death in 1983. Following this, in 1964 Martin used explicit linguistic analogies for the segmentation of dances into formal units: he applied the terms of *phrase* on the model of sentence, *motif* on the model of *word*, and finally the kinetic element, considered to be the smallest particle, comparable to *sound*. (Martin 1964; Kürti 1980) Martin’s method followed the disciplinary categorization of classical linguistics. When describing the architecture of the formal units and defining their special position in the succession of movements, as well as deciphering the construction of higher compositional segments, he implicitly took inspiration from *morphology* and *syntax*. His impressive motif catalogues of the most elaborate Central Transylvanian solo *lads dances*, published posthumously, are reminiscent of lexicography (Karsai and Martin 1989; Martin 2004). Though frequently referring to his method as *structural* (Felföldi 2007) Martin did not follow the structuralist theoretical frame developed by Lévi-Strauss based on the phonology of the Prague Linguistic Circle: consequently, he did not operate with the concepts of *deep structure* and *surface structure*. As such, Martin did not take into consideration the connections between the formal units stored in the consciousness, that is at the memorial level, which presuppose an associatively organized system in which all elements are interrelated in complex ways. In Martin’s approach, the concept of structure is allied to the organization of *the physically realized form of dances in their linear dimension*, without reference to mental processes (Könczai 2020).

From 1962 to 1976, Martin collaborated with the *Working Group on Folk Dance Terminology of the International Folk Music Council (IFMC)* known later as the *ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology*. (Giurchescu 2007; Giurchescu and Kröschlová 2007) Scholars within this group defined two planes of dance analysis: the *vertical* and the *horizontal*.

By *vertical* or *systematic* plane, they meant the segmentation of concrete dance performances at different hierarchical levels, from the top to bottom, that is from the largest units to the smallest ones. Following their terminology: *a dance (T)* can be segmented into *Parts (P)* or *Strophes (St)*, sometimes into *Sections (S)* or only into *Phrases (Ph)*, which in their turn can be deconstructed into *Motifs (M)*. *Motifs* can be further broken down into

distinctive subordinate units, the *Motif-cells*, and finally into *Motif-elements (Me)* (Giurchescu and Kröschlová 2007).

The *horizontal*, or the *syntactic* plane actually corresponds to the linear structure of the formal units, or syntax, which according to the authors “deals with the progression of dance in time and space through irreversible combinations of dance elements governed by compositional rules” (Giurchescu and Kröschlová 2007, 24). Although the group borrowed the concepts of *langue* [language] and *parole* [speech] from general linguistics (Saussure 1959 [1916]) to distinguish between the *knowledge* of a dance system, and its *actual realization* in a given dance performance, they did not inquire further into theorizing the whereabouts of the “abstract models” laying behind the particular practices, placing them into the territory of “genres” or “types.”

This auto-limitation can probably be explained by the rather generalized assumption about the singularity and uniqueness of the dance, leading to the limitation of the quest for larger explanatory frames. As they put it: “Although dance has structural features similar to other artistic means of expression (especially music and speech, with which it shares the temporal dimension), it has particular traits, a particular structural makeup, and proper rules of grammar, *because dance is an expressive system of its own, independent and self-sufficient*” (Giurchescu and Kröschlová 2007, 22 [*my emphasis*]).

Parallel to the work of these East European dance scholars, North American anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler was conducting long-term research (1964-67) on the structure of Tongan dance. This culminated in her 1967 doctoral dissertation and a pioneering publication on her method and theory (Kaeppler 1972). Kaeppler also used linguistic models as a basis for her analysis, sharing the common premise with the European members of the IFMC Study Group, that dance and language are analogous. Both she and other researchers recognized the similarities between the two methodologies (Grau and Wierre-Gore 2005; Kaeppler 2007; Köncei 2020) in, for example, the segmentation of dance into constituent units. Overall, the segments of the two systems overlapped with similarities and differences summarized by Kaeppler herself, the differences consisting mostly in terminology (Kaeppler 2007).

There were, however, differences in their respective approaches. The linguistics and anthropology disciplines in which Kaeppler’s method was rooted considered language to be an organic part of cultures, always conceived and used in plural and seen as holistic entities, appearing in unique forms, each of them having a particular pattern. This perspective was mainstream in 20th century North American anthropology and Kaeppler was inspired by its ramifications as developed in the ethnoscience of Kenneth Pike and the so-called “post-Bloomfieldean” school of linguistics. Perhaps one of the most significant achievements of this approach was the creation of the *etic-emic* distinction of the classificatory systems structuring cultures, including language, and—as an extension in the case of Kaeppler—dance. Following this frame, the utmost aim of *ethnoscience*, that is the science established for understanding the “thought of a people,” a Boasian concept (Kaeppler 2007, 55), is to transcend the conceptual categorizations of the external observer, the *etic* viewpoint, and to grasp the classificatory systems of the particular cultures, as functioning through their internal use, and conceived by the members of the specific traditions: that is, to learn the grammar of a culture through the *emic* lens of the “natives.” Implementing the ethnoscientific method in her field research, Kaeppler aimed to discern the building elements of Tongan dance, interacting with the local dancers, verbally and kinetically, in order to identify the minimal constituent units considered by her to be analogous to the *phonemes*, which she named *kinemes*.

Though using the concepts of phonological *contrast* (Kaepler 2007), or *minimal contrasting units* (Kaepler 1986, 2007), which are included in the basic vocabulary of classical phonology, Kaepler places them in totally different interpretative contexts. In phonology, as elaborated by the Prague Linguistic Circle, the contrast between phonemes derives from their relatedness in a system, understood as a linguistic phenomenon. Kaepler's approach, which follows post-Bloomfeldean linguistics and ethnoscience, does not intend strictly to apply linguistic analytical concepts to dance, and implicitly to culture, but she handles these concepts as—we could say loose—analogies. Thus, the essential characteristics of contrasts between the *kinemes*, conceived as the minimal constituents of dance, are not to be looked for in the structure of a movement system in itself, but in the recognition of the actors (see Kaepler 1986).

The knowledge of recognition conferred to a certain culture is regarded by Kaepler as an underlying structure below cultural manifestations, an abstract entity frequently also named *deep structure* (Kaepler 1986). Although she does not entirely elucidate this concept, it can be deduced from the context, and in this way points at a collective essence shared by the members of a given culture. This collective essence is clearly understood in a totally different way from the concept of *deep structure* rooted in the concept of *langue* in the general linguistics of Saussure.

In summary, the basis of the methodologies of these pioneers remained classical folklore studies and cultural anthropology, approaching traditional cultures as collective products: in Europe, of the peasantry of national states, and in the US, of tribal societies in the former colonies.



Applications and Developments

Subsequent application and experimentation with these established methodologies have resulted in new pathways, a couple of examples sufficing here to indicate fresh directions. László Felföldi (2007) notes a new generation, including himself, who followed in Martin's footsteps during the 1980s. The most consistent of these was Zoltán Karácsony, who meticulously continued to process the monumental motif repertoires of middle Transylvanian solo dances (Karácsony 1990, 2007), begun by Martin. The main preoccupation of Karácsony has been motif-analysis. Moving away from the static presentation of the motif corpuses of regional dance types, he has also tried to reveal the mechanisms of construction in dance, showing their morphological combinatorics (Karácsony 2019).¹

János Fügedi, to whom not only the "Hungarian School," but also the international community of dance researchers can be grateful for his consistent contribution to the application and spread of Kinetography Laban and motion analysis, both in academic research and education (Fügedi 2016, 2023) represents a separate way of theorizing formal analysis. Critical of Martin's methodology—as well as of the foundational modes of interpreting movement as discussed here—he was primarily sceptical about the applicability of linguistic methods in dance research. Fügedi considered that dance movement has its own rules because of the anatomical specificities of the dancing body and the possibility of realizing synchronous events with several body parts. He also formulated the concept of *contrakinesis*, by which he meant the immediate successive spatial opposition of consecutive movements (Fügedi 2019). In his theoretical work, Fügedi relied on a limited linguistic bibliography, so that he could not realize that, as I believe, some of his suppositions about

dance and movement are actually compatible with recent linguistic models. Because of his tragic early death, unfortunately there will be no more possibilities to continue the exciting theoretical debates we had to confront and share differing ideas and knowledge.

Two significant examples of detailed and in-depth formal dance analysis, adapting the methods described above, including the mapping of the inventories of the building elements, whether they were called kinetic elements or kinemes, are Irish ethnochoreologist Catherine Foley's study of Irish step dances (Foley 2007, based on Foley 1988) and Greek dance anthropologist Irene Loutzaki's modelling of traditional dances from northern Greece (Loutzaki 2007, based on Loutzaki 1989). Evident in late 20th century studies is a shift from a generalized and static conceptual framework towards more dynamic models (see Kaeppler and Dunin 2007). Interest in individual cases, variations, principles of creation, creative processes has been sparked. The closest approaches to the mind-body question though, in European discussions, have been the thought-provoking dialogues initiated by Egil Bakka about "the gap between realization and concept" in the form of witty debates with Georgiana Gore (Gore and Bakka 2007) and Gediminas Karoblis (Bakka and Karoblis 2010). The two published discussions were situated on philosophical grounds, both emphasizing the primacy of perception over some underlying invisible invariant. Gore introduced epistemological perspectives, taking into consideration the role of the researcher-observer in the research situation, and her impact on the "realization" of dances, while Karoblis implemented a phenomenological stance, referring to the philosophy of Merleau Ponty (see Bakka and Karoblis 2010).



Personal Pathways

My own path towards the present inquiry began in the 1980s, with my search for structural characteristics in middle Transylvanian traditional solo and group dances, the so called "lads" dances, which are performed dominantly by men. A second generation follower of the Hungarian school, I had also studied linguistics, and so approached dances as more or less conventionalized formal systems from the beginning. I noticed in my early work that dances which were also performed communally, revealed more conventionalized structures, and more resemblances with spoken language (Könczei 2007b). Martin continued to remain a source of inspiration for me but, already in my youth, I deviated from his theoretical bases. Undertaking long-term research on the Borica dance, a ritual from the Seven villages in Braşov county (Könczei 2009), I observed its formal construction not only at the linear level (that is on the syntactic level as practised by Martin and his colleagues), but also on the paradigmatic level, which emerges between associative connections in the memory (Könczei 2007a; see also Gell (1979), whose work I was inspired by). Though at the time, I did not have access to the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss in its complexity, I applied a model very similar to his theory on surface and deep structure (Könczei 2007c). In my earlier works, I illustrated dance analysis with Laban scores (Könczei 2002), and much later I also experimented with Laban Movement Analysis in a new interpretation of the Borica ritual from the Seven Villages. In this, I demonstrated the sharp contrast between the movement qualities of the dancers who perform attuned to each other within the group, and the individual improvisations of the masked figures. I found the character of the previous realisations to be trance-like, and the latter's ecstatic-like (Könczei 2023).

With respect to analogies between language and dance, I pointed to the limitations of possible comparisons. I formulated the proposition that not all dances can be compared



with language, and those which can, should be paralleled with poetic not literal language, because of their structural specificities, such as, for example, repetition (Könczei 1995). The criterion of searching for similarities, I thought, was firstly a formal one, which referred to the segmentation of dance and language, as both needed to be broken down into “discrete elements.” While all verbal languages are compounded by discrete elements, not all dances are. (Könczei 1994) Surveying the specialist dance literature, and looking for examples, I found it more convenient to distinguish between two ideal types: the “abstract” or “pure,” and the “narrative”/ “expressive”/ “mimetic,” although I am conscious, that not all dances fit into these two categories, and some, indeed, have a hybrid character (Könczei 2015).

In the last couple of years, besides using conventional phonology in my research, I have begun to investigate theories which transgress the duality of body and mind and which might make it possible to conceptualize a common cognitive base for language and (abstract) dance. I started to study emergent phonology (Lindblom 2000, 2011), which challenges the „inescapable dogma” of the 20th century, a phrase used by Chomsky to refer to the priority of abstract mental structure over bodily gesturing and perception (Lindblom 2000). Subsequently, I have experimented with articulatory phonology (Browman and Goldstein 1989a, 1989b, 1992) a gesture-based approach to phonetic and phonologic structure.



Transgressing structuralism. The quest for origins

In recent decades, it has become an established practice, and to some extent even fashionable to talk about the “thinking body,” the “embodied mind,” or even “body memory.” All these concepts that have been offered by philosophical, psychological, and cognitive theories are frequently and collectively referred to as the corporeal turn. Most acknowledge and recognize the unity of mind and body, intellect and emotion, and that cognitive processes do not only take place intracranially, i.e. inside the skull, but also extend to the body, just as the realm of emotions and sensations is not limited to the headless body. A relevant formulation of this idea is Damasio’s (1994, 226), who argues against “Descartes’ error”:

I am not saying that the mind is in the body. I am saying that the body contributes more than life support and modulatory effects to the brain. It contributes a content that is part and parcel of the workings of the normal mind.

Structuralism helped greatly in understanding linguistic and cultural phenomena, most of their results remaining valid. The need for the search of further paradigms came from the recognition of its limitations, which in particular, are rooted in its static character (Buckland 2007; Könczei 2020), probably stemming from Saussure’s neglect of the origins and the evolutionary aspects of language change. Saussure possibly was influenced by Durkheimien sociology, his contemporary, about the “social facts,” which always are supposed to pre-exist the individual and appear as objective givens for the newborns in any society (Santos 2023).

No society, in fact, knows or has ever known language other than as a product inherited from preceding generations, and one to be accepted as such. (Saussure 1959 [1916], 71-2)

New paradigms bring new questions, such as those of Swedish linguist Björn Lindblom on the origins of the units of speech: “The limitations of the structuralist approach become

abundantly clear when we ask: ‘Where do these units come from?’” (Lindblom 2011, 1). Although classical linguistics, especially phonetics, had long recognized that sound is inseparable from the motion of the vocal organs in speech (Saussure 1959 [1916]), it was articulatory phonology, developed by Catherine P. Browman and Louis Goldstein, which induced a shift in the understanding of the nature of speech, shining a light on the foremost importance of motion in this complex phenomenon, as well as evidencing the shared role of the brain and the speech organs in verbal communication. Their theory is a gesture-based approach to phonetic and phonologic structure which conceives the articulation of sounds as sound-producing speech movements, or articulatory gestures. They no longer view phonemes as static, disembodied, purely abstract units, but as the results of interconnected mental processes with dynamic movements of the sound-forming organs.

This recognition makes it possible to search for *closer analogies between the sound-forming acts of spoken language and the movements of dance*. In order to demonstrate that the articulation of sounds is based on principles similar to how movements are generated in some dances, I now present the example of footwork in a traditional abstract dance from Romania, *Alunelu înfundat* (Giurchescu and Kröschlová 2007). There is enormous potential in this recognition, which—with sufficient empirical support—can bring us closer to answering the question of whether it is possible to find reason in dance. Speech and dance—in this setting—can no longer be seen as opposites of each other, but as related phenomena embedded in a common cognitive basis: we could also say that dance can be speech-like, and speech can be dance-like. Louis Goldstein, one of the founders of articulatory phonology, had an intuition about this supposition: “My approach ... has been to view the vocal organs during speech as engaging in a kind of dance and to decompose the dance into primitive actions (like dance steps)” (Goldstein 2008, para. 2).



Returning to an Old Question: What is the Minimal Unit in Dance?

According to articulatory phonology (hereinafter AP), the differences between individual sounds come from the differences in movements of the sound-forming organs—the tongue, the lips, and so on—executed towards different directions and in different degrees along the vocal tract, or from changes of the location of the constrictions between them. This is similar to how we move the individual parts of our bodies in different directions while dancing, or touch different spots with our limbs. Viewed from this perspective, speech is therefore not primarily a phonic phenomenon, but a kinetic one. The elementary source of its materiality is not mere sound, but the sound producing movement.

Once we recognize that body movement is a basic congruence between speech and dance, we can continue our inquiry as to how and to what extent we should utilize the theoretical findings of AP in dance research. We must acknowledge the dissimilarities which derive from the anatomical peculiarities of the speech-producing organs in the vocal tract and of the body as a whole, which induce/allow different movement possibilities (as, for example, in space usage, the existence or lack of symmetrical body parts, opportunities for plurikinetism and so on). Then, I think, essential analogies can be traced between the two. As far as I see, there are at least two themes that can be explored here. One of them consists in the possible analogies of the gestural systems of speech and some dances, and the other is the interactive social model applied in AP which has an explanatory value in understanding the dynamics of variety and historical change of speech and probably of dance too.

We should first compare the minimal units of both communicational systems, and examine the possible analogies between them. In AP, the minimal building blocks of speech are the “speech production events” (Hall 2018, 1) or “phonological events.” The generic name for the “atom” of speech is “*gesture*”:

Gestures are units of action that can be identified by observing the coordinated movements of vocal tract articulators. That is, repeated observations of the production of a given utterance will reveal a characteristic pattern of constrictions being formed and released. The fact that these *patterns of (discrete) gestures are similar in structure to the nonlinear phonological representations [...]*, leads us to make the strong hypothesis that gestures themselves constitute basic phonological units (Browman and Goldstein 1989, 202 [*my emphasis*]).

It is necessary to clarify here that the concept of gesture in AP differs in two ways from how it is used in the motion analysis of dance research. First of all, in AP the concept of *gesture* indiscriminately refers to all the array of movements of the speech-producing body organs, whereas in the motion analysis applied in dance research, especially in Kinetography Laban (hereinafter KL), the term *gesture* has a more restricted meaning. In the latter, the movements are classified into two different categories according to the criteria of whether they are performed by body parts which carry the body weight, or by body parts which are “free” from the body weight. In the case of leg movements, for example, Laban kinetographers differentiate between movements of the “supporting leg,” and of the “gesturing leg,” implying that only those movements that are not performed by body parts which “support” weight can be called gestures. (Fügedi 2016, 54). Thus, within this frame, movements associated with a step or a jump are not called gestures, only movements such as a leg or an arm swing (see Fügedi 2016).

The other difference derives from the size attributed to the building units in the two fields. The articulatory gesture is considered to be the smallest constitutive element of speech, which in itself is not necessarily analogous to a phoneme. In my understanding, the phoneme in AP is much more seen as a target, which can be achieved through one or more gestures, called also “a set of gestures,” produced by different parts of the speech organs in synchronicity. Furthermore, not all simultaneous gestures produce a single phoneme, as gestures contributing to articulate different sounds can also overlap in time. For instance, vocal and consonantal gestures can occur at the same time. For this reason, the notation of a constellation of gestures articulating a word or a syllable is represented by a “gestural score.” The structure of the gestural score can be compared, by the way, to the kinetographic staff, as both of them have separate columns for representing the gesturing of different body parts. The main differences arise from their positioning, the gestural score in AP being horizontal and the kinetographic staff vertical, and from the fact that the latter represents the lateral symmetry of the body, unlike the gestural score which represents the special structure of the vocal tract.² (See Figure 1. Figure 2.)

What about minimal units in dance? In the scholarly tradition discussed above, in spite of the terminological variations, a consensus has developed in the understanding of what a minimal formal unit is. In the Hungarian scholarly practice, which has been developed relatively early, the usual denominations of this unit were *movement phase* (Szentepl 1954) and *movement element* (Martin and Pesovár 2000; Martin 1964), often translated in English as *kinetic element*, which coincided with the term *Motif-element* used by the IFMC, (IFMC 1974, 128, 129; Giurchescu and Kröschlová 2007) The *kinetic element*, as introduced by Martin and Pesovár, corresponded to the *sound*, following the phonetic definition of the minimal vocal

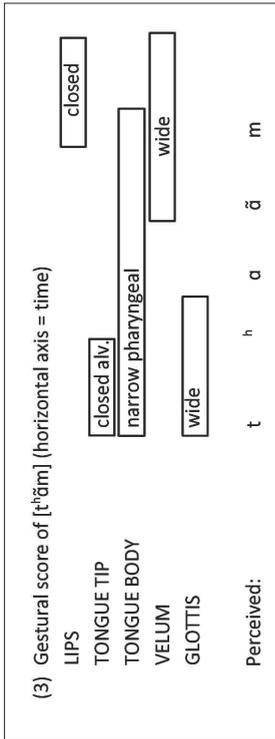


Figure 1. Gestural score of “them.” (Hall 2018, 3)

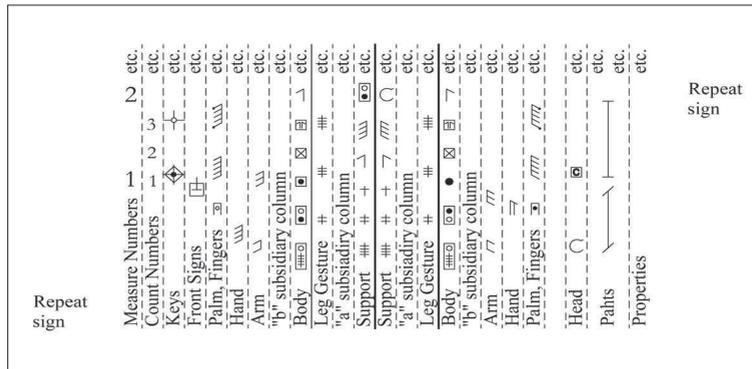


Figure 2. Kinetographic staff. (Hutchinson 1970 [1954], 491)

utterances in normative linguistics. (Bárczi 1951, 1957 [1953]; Martin and Pesovár 2000; Fügedi, Quigley, Szónyi and Varga 2020; Könczei 2020) In this perspective the *kinetic element* is the smallest unit of dance, which cannot be further broken into more individual pieces. The terms *kinetic element* and *Motif-element* have been used alternatively with *kineme* in the literature, being identified much more contextually than by definition, referring to it as a unit which is recognized as a separable element by the native dancers (Kaepler 2007), respectively through examples:

Individual movements such as a step, hop, swing, turn, leap, stamp, clap, finger snap, hand grasp, movement of the head, arm, or hip, a gesture, and so on, are considered *kinetic elements* (Giurchescu and Kröschlová 2007, 27 [my emphasis]).



The Question of Consonantal and Vowelish elements of Dance

We need to consider whether the kinetic elements exemplified by the movements mentioned above are formally analogous or not to the phoneme. One aspect of this question generates another one: while in speech, phonemes are classified into two categories—into consonants and vowels—do we have anything similar to this in dance? In the given examples, such as the step or the hop, if we were to consider them as kinemes, would they be more analogous to a consonant or to a vowel? To be able to decide this, first we should look at the fundamental characteristics of the two categories to see what makes the basic difference between consonants and vowels.

Both conventional phonetics and AP deal with consonants and vocals firstly from a

phonic perspective. The peculiarities of the sounds are described in accordance with the place and extent of the constrictions produced in the vocal tract, conceived as a resonating tube, much like how a wind instrument functions. Thus, in conventional phonetics the consonants are those sounds, which form the most obstacles in the way of the air flow. Surely, the sounds belonging to the other category meet the least obstacles during their production, so they are articulated with a free flow (Roach 2011).

AP works with more quantitative data, measuring the degree of the constrictions and recording the shape of articulatory organs during articulation with computational methods. As most of the movements are continuous, the whole dynamic process is monitored, the gesturing being segmented according to the moments of “damping”: that is, to the observable lessening of the flow of energy, and to the “stiffening” of the movements, that is to the brief instants of rigidity, as the specific gestures reach their target. In the case of consonantal gestures, the reference is the distance of the gesturing speech organs to the peculiar points of the surface of the vocal tract:

Each gesture is a critically damped oscillator that is characterized by a target and a stiffness. In the transitions from vowel to consonant, the gestural target is defined as a distance (constriction degree) between an active and passive articulator. [...] In the transitions towards vowels, the target is the complete midsagittal shape, as represented by an array of control parameters. (Alexander et al. 2019, 4458)

Motion analysis as applied in KL, on the one hand, is familiar with the concepts of decreasing or increasing the distance in relation to a fixed point of reference, which is usually the floor (Fügedi 2016). This, however, is a marginal approach besides the attention given to the indication of the space directions targeted by the moving body parts. On the other hand, what really can be a productive idea for tracing analogies between speech and dance, is that both conventional phonetics and AP make a difference between the so-called active and passive articulators. Active articulators are those speech organs, which can be and are moved during the speech act, and the passive ones are those which are fixed in place, and can be only touched or approximated by the active parts:

The principal articulators are the tongue, the lips, the lower jaw and the teeth, the velum or soft palate, the uvula and the larynx. It has been suggested that we should distinguish between active articulators (those which can be moved into contact with other articulators, such as the tongue) and passive articulators which are fixed in place (such as the teeth, the hard palate and the alveolar ridge). (Roach 2011, 6)

The distinction between the active and passive articulators allows us to rethink the analogy of the gesturing of the speech organs with the dancing body. What if we reverse the hierarchy between the phonic and kinetic components of articulation? What if we regard the motion of the active articulators as a primary factor of speech, as initiated, incidentally, by AP as well, and consider the phonic side of it as an outcome developed over a long period of time? This would be a totally admissible questioning from the evolutionary point of view of the Gesture to Language (G to L) theory (Heyes 2012, Sterelny 2012), or of anthropologist John Blacking's hypothesis about the emergence of conceptual thought from the collective sensory-motoric experiences of early humans (Blacking 1976). If we follow this path, we might be able to compare the kinetic elements of both phenomena on their own, of course without forgetting that speech operates mainly through its phonic realization, and that to a certain extent dance

can also possess important phonic traits. Though the concrete coordinates of the immediate bounded spaces in which speech and dance occur differ from each other, the first one being constituted of the limited space of the vocal tract, the other being the kinesphere of the dancer, striking similarities can be discovered between them in other aspects, probably because of the shared kinesthetic and proprioceptive perception, control and feedback.

Detailed descriptions of conventional phonetics stress the kinetic components of the articulation, in the case of consonants the elements of contact or touching. For example, when we pronounce alveolar consonants like t, d, s, z, n, l..., the tongue comes into contact with the alveolar ridge (Roach 2011); when we produce fricatives, like f, v, the lower lip touches the upper front teeth (Roach 2011), and so on. In the case of vowels, what is most commonly taken into account in their classification, is the height of the position of the tongue in the mouth. When producing vowels, they can be “high” or “low,” front-like, central or back-like, depending on the movements of the tongue. If we complement these positions with the spreading and the rounding of the lips, we actually arrive at the main spatial directions guiding the movements in the analysed dance as well: up and down, forward—backward, lateral, and central.

If we take dance by analogy, then the mechanism of a “consonantal” movement would be described as contacting (or touching) the ground (a passive factor) or a body part with the limb(s) (an active “articulator”). The danced “vowels” then would be those movements, which are targeted towards predetermined directions and point of the kinesphere with body parts taking on a certain shape. So, returning to the initial question, the answer would be: a spring or a step is analogous neither to a consonant, nor to a vowel, as they contain elements which can be compared with both.



Discrete clustering of movements. The case of the step.

Though the kinetographic verbal description of the step gives a detailed account of the smaller components, in the formal analysis of dance it is taken for granted that a step is a single kinetic element. Let us consider the analysis of a walking step from KL:

The leg from which the step is initiated is called the *previous supporting leg*. The movement of the leg which leads into new support is the *preparatory leg gesture*, and the leg that takes the weight is labelled as the *new supporting leg*. While walking forward, the leg contacts the ground on the heel before taking weight. In our analysis, the *moment of floor contact* is regarded as the start of a step—this marked moment is often referred to as the step’s *rhythm factor*. (Fügedi 2016, 35 [*my emphasis*])

A step can be indeed analysed as a continuum, as in a physical manner the flow of motion in dance is continuous, that is one movement gradually melts into the next one, without a detectible caesura. Still the motion-flow of a step, as well as of a part of dances can be separated into discrete elements, the same as speech.

I suggest two explanations for this phenomenon. First of all, the discreteness is related to the systemic correlations of the “kinemologic” elements,³ probably very similar to the phonological structures, which organize the minimal units into categories on the basis of similarities and differences between them. These relations emerge and are sustained in a non-linear fashion, or using a more traditional vocabulary, at the memorial or paradigmatic level. Applied to AP, the categorical distinction of movements is clarified as such:

Although the location and degree of the constriction formed by a given articulator set are, in principle, physical continua, the differentiated gestures can be categorically distinct. The partitioning of these continua into discrete categories is likely aided by quantal (i.e. non-linear) articulatory-auditory relations [...]. In addition, Lindblom (Lindblom, 1986) has shown how the pressures to keep contrasting words perceptually distinct can lead to discrete clustering along some articulatory/acoustic continua. (Browman and Goldstein 1989, 205)

Goldstein and Fowler (2003) discuss the “failure” of early trials in their approach to isolate “discrete, re-combinable units in the acoustic record,” as it was only possible to observe “continuous, context-dependent” flows. According to them, this failure explains why for a long time “phonological units (segments) have been removed from the domain of publicly observable phenomena, and have been hypothesized to be fundamentally mental units that are destroyed or distorted in the act of production, only to be reconstructed in the mind of the perceiver” (160-1). Later, with the shift to paying attention to the motions of the speech articulators, they became aware of the fact that discreteness has to be searched for in the actions which lead to the sound production, which are separable from each other. In this way, it also became possible to link the abstract mental entities with the bodily motions:

Articulatory Phonology [...] has proposed [...], that the failure to find phonological units in the public record was due to looking at too shallow a description of the act of speech production, and that it is, in fact, possible to decompose vocal tract action during speech production into discrete, re-combinable units. The central idea is that while the articulatory and acoustic products of speech production actions are continuous and context-dependent, the actions themselves that engage the vocal tract and regulate the motions of its articulators are discrete and context-independent. In other words, phonological units are abstract with respect to the articulatory and acoustic variables that are typically measured, but not so abstract as to leave the realm of the vocal tract and recede into the mind. They are abstract in being coarse-grained (low dimensional) with respect to the specific motions of the articulators and to the acoustic structure that may specify the motions. (Goldstein and Fowler 2003, 161)

This is equally true, when in a dance we have recurring similar movements in a non-linear fashion, such as a leg gesture to the side, or a stamp with the full foot: we will perceive them as the same, that is, belonging to the same kinetic category. The other explanation for the discreteness of the building elements of speech and (abstract) dance can be the task-oriented character of the performed phonemes and kinemes. Browman and Goldstein stress the fundamental abstractness of the gesture in its drive to achieve its predetermined goal, no matter the concrete physical realization of the movement which leads to it (Browman and Goldstein 1989). As Nancy Hall summarizes:

It is important to understand that a gesture, in AP terms, does not refer to the articulatory movements themselves. It specifies a goal, not a means of achieving the goal. The same gesture may cause different movements in different contexts, and possibly even involve different articulators, depending on factors such as what position the articulators start in. (Hall 2018, 3)

Returning to the case of the step, our initial example, we can raise the question: while with an articulatory gesture we must accomplish a single task, do we carry out a single goal when we make a step? In my understanding we do not achieve one, but two. When stepping, I think we need to make two decisions: one defines the direction, and scale/dimension of the

step, the other one the characteristics of the contact with the ground/floor, that is, which part of the foot is contacting the ground or floor, what is the quality of the touching, that is how strong, how long it is, etc. So, in my interpretation the motion analysis of a step contains two kinetic elements, not one, and it can be described in the following way:

As while walking the “new supporting leg” always becomes the “previous supporting leg” during the next step, a step actually contains two different actions: 1. a free movement of a leg in the air, which determines the direction and the length of the step, and 2. a motion performed with the same leg contacting the floor and taking over the body weight, most commonly continuously rolling from heel to the whole foot.

In this interpretation, a step cannot be analogous to a phoneme, be it a consonant or a vowel, as it compounds elements from both categories: the “free gesture” is vowel-like, and the floor-contacting movement is consonant-like. The composition of the step becomes more obvious, when it is performed in other directions than the usual forward walking step is, or when it takes different stylized forms. An excellent example to demonstrate the component parts of a step is the so-called military “goose-stepping” of the Wagah Attari guards in the border ceremony between Pakistan and India. During the vowel-like “introductory” free gesture, the leg forms a bent shape, as the thigh is raised forward high and the lower leg forward low, and the floor-contacting movement is performed with force on the whole foot, both gestures being emphasized to the extreme (see Vora 2017). (See Figure 3.)

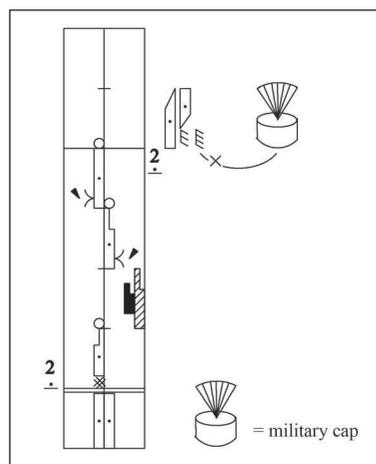


Figure 3: Goose-stepping and Saluting at the gate. Laban score notated by Urvi Vora under the guidance of János Fügedi (Vora 2017, 22).



Kinemes or Syllabic Units?

Common sense conceives syllabic structures to be the smallest building blocks of speech and dance as well. In the popular approach, a syllable is understood first of all as a rhythmic element, articulated on one beat. Saussure himself recognized this phenomenon: “they still do not devote enough attention to the reciprocal relations of sounds. These relations are not immediately discernible; [...] *syllables are easier to identify than their sounds*. We have seen [...] that some primitive systems of writing noted syllabic units; only later was the alphabetic system devised” (Saussure 1959 [1916], 50). Similar to Adrienne Kaeppler, many of us could also have experienced in fieldwork situations that dancers, while demonstrating which are the smallest movement elements from the “native point” of view, usually picked syllabic units. Kenneth Pike also emphasized the importance of the syllabic segmentation as the simplest way of describing the architecture of speech. (Pike 1947)

Overall, linguists recognize that syllables have an important phonological role in the gestural organization of speech. One reason for this is that the architecture of syllables influences to a great extent the phonological distribution and gestural realization of the phonemes. Abstract gestures are not performed exactly in the same way in all instances.

Movements leading to the achievement of the same target can differ from each other depending on their place in a syllable (onset or coda).

Some allophony, however, is not merely a matter of blending, but reflects differences in the magnitude or coordination of sets of gestures when they occur in different positions within a word or syllable. For example, English /l/ is described as having a “clear” quality in onset position and a “dark,” velarized quality in coda position. This is more than a blending effect; the gestures that correspond to /l/ have a different timing relation in different positions. [...] *Findings like this have led to a strong focus on the role of syllable structure in gestural organization.* (Hall 2018, 11 [my emphasis])

Another reason for the significant role of the syllable in gestural organization might be its function in the metrical and rhythmical construction of speech, which is repeatedly mentioned in the vast literature on the syllable. In his historical overview of the study of the syllable, Goldsmith states that “there are few languages in the world whose prosodic systems can be adequately and compactly characterized without making reference to the syllable.” He goes on to draw attention to the occasional fusion of language and dance in regulating the rhythm of speech: “Prosodic or suprasegmental regularities involve a wide variety of linguistic phenomena, including timing, other rhythmic effects (such as clapping and dancing), and tonal structure” (Goldsmith 2009, 2). Pike classified languages into “stress-timed” (e.g. English) and “syllable-timed” (e.g. Spanish) types. By “syllable-timed” he referred to a tendency of a language to have equally timed (or isochronous) syllables. (Goldsmith 2009, 8)

Finally, Goldsmith concludes that “the syllable is ultimately best regarded as the lowest level (or one of the lowest levels) of rhythmic reoccurrence of possibilities in language” (Goldsmith 2009, 27). Although he does not entirely agree, that this is “the reflection of gestures made by the articulatory apparatus” he acknowledges the importance of this research issue:

The most important question to answer is how to develop a model that is suited precisely to capture the rhythmic character of syllables, and the striking asymmetries of onset and coda. (Goldsmith 2009, 28)

Surprisingly or not, the recognition of the rhythmical character of syllabification overlaps in scholarly research and popular knowledge, and it also probably explains to a certain extent why the formal analysis of dance has focused so much on syllabic units. It is possible that in future, accumulated knowledge of dance research might also contribute to the elucidation of the rhythmicity of speech.

Taking syllabic units of motion as minimal elements in dance research, in addition to the factors mentioned above might be also connected to the nature of KL, the most well-spread kinetographic notational system in the international practice of the formal analysis of dance. As KL itself is, in great part, a syllabary writing system, it is not totally appropriate for noting all the kinemes separately. According to the writing conventions of KL, multiple elements can be merged into one single symbol. There are several solutions for using simplified and abbreviated representations, in which some motions or gestures are not signalled at all, as the notation relies on the reader’s implicit knowledge of movement (Fügedi 2016).

When, for instance, we want to represent contact of the floor with some part of the foot (tip of toe, ball, whole foot, heel), in principle we apply one of the “contact hooks” symbols. (Fügedi 2016; Hutchinson 1970 [1954]) When we want to notate touching the floor in the continuation of a “free leg gesture” (which is a marked movement of the leg in the air), the

hooks can be attached to the direction symbols, indicating the direction and the shape of the gesturing leg. So, the vowel-like “free” leg gesture and the consonant-like touching gesture are not represented separately, but in one single condensed sign, a joint sign of a direction symbol and a hook.

When we notate touching the floor with the whole foot carrying the body weight, as in a stamp, we do not even have to use the “hook,” as writing the direction symbol in the support column represents in itself the contact. So, in this case one simple direction symbol signifies both the vowelish (preparatory) leg gesture and the consonantal touching gesture.

Another example is the simplified notation of a jump. When the physical and anatomical conditions of a jump are considered to be known, the “free” leap gesture, which thrusts the body into the air before touching the sole, is represented by an empty space, the length of which signals the amplitude and the duration of the propulsion. In this case, only the ground-contacting act is notated with the help of direction symbols. So, here we do not have either a separate representation of the vowel-like kineme from the consonantal-like.

The syllabary character of KL probably owes much to Laban’s inspirational sources. We know that during his preparatory work Laban researched old writing systems, looking for symbols of movement. He studied and was influenced by the mantic Tibetan script, the Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform writing-system, as well as the ancient Egyptian and Chinese scripts (Laban 1970 [1954]), all of which being logographic, or syllabary, or a mixture of them.



The Kinetic Inventory of *Alunelu înfundat*. Testing a New Methodology

To test my hypothesis, according to which steps, hops, stamps are not the minimal units of dance, because they are analogous to syllables, and can be further broken down into smaller vowel-like and consonant-like gestures or kinemes, the equivalents of phonemes, I analyzed the Romanian circle dance *Alunelu înfundat*, as published by Anca Giurchescu and Eva Kröschlová (2007). *Alunelu* is appropriate for a “kinemologic” analysis for several reasons. It is a good example of an orally created and transmitted abstract dance, which can be clearly segmented into formal units. All the movements are performed solely by footwork, the body weight is supported continuously by one foot at a time in the form of dance steps and stampings, and the dance lacks body rotations and whirling. Each movement performed with the right foot is also performed with the left one, mirroring each other in a sagittal (lateral) symmetry. Coronal symmetry⁴ is also present in the dance, as the forward gestures are counterbalanced by backward ones. When listing the movement elements and arranging them in the form of a chart, non-linear systemic relations can be revealed, which are comparable with the phonological systems of speech. For all these reasons, *Alunelu* is an ideal choice to initiate experimentation with this methodology at the first stage of testing.

The notation of this particular dance also favours demonstration of the proposed methodology, because it helps to easily perceive the formal structure of the flow of motion. The Labanotation of the dance, realized by Jean-Philippe Van Aelbrouck in 1984, is a simplified representation of the movements, showing their abstract essence in a homogeneous manner, omitting the allokinemes, that is the tiny deviations from the normative standards of the dance steps. This characteristic also stems from the circumstances of Aelbrouck’s notation which was actually a transcription of Anca Giurchescu’s manuscript, originally recorded in Ronotation (Warner 1988), a script developed by Vera Proca-Ciortea as a national notational system. Ronotation itself is built up from a set of stylized symbols, suitable for a sketchy

representation of the movements, without fine details, as the notators relied on readers' pre-existing dance knowledge. (Proca 1956, 1957). Since the notation in question does not capture the full nuances of an actual performance, it is not suitable for representing the precise articulation of gestures. However, its simplified form is well-suited for identifying the minimal units and compiling their inventory, as it makes the analysis more transparent. The notation of *Alunelu înfundat* is based on Vera Proca-Ciortea's collection from 1951 in Bechet, district Dolj (Oltenia), Romania. Anca Giurchescu carried out an exhaustive formal analysis of the whole dance, on different hierarchical layers (Giurchescu and Kröschlová 2007), from which I will refer here only to the level of the "Motif-elements." In Giurchescu's analysis, these are the smallest units and are grouped into "Motif-cells." In her methodology, the Motif-elements are represented by Greek letters as the smallest kinetic elements of dance. Below I list an inventory from her analysis (Giurchescu and Kröschlová 2007, 44-6) with my additional comments in rectangular brackets:

Kinetic content of the Motif-cells of Alunelu according to Anca Giurchescu:

α = "forward step" / "lateral" step [conceived as differing elements of the spatial variation of Motif-cells a' and $a'1$]

β = "close," "closing" step [in the logic of Labanotation this is identical with the "step in place," signalled by ϵ]

γ = "step backwards" [backward fifth position / behind the other foot]

δ = "step backwards (right—left)" / "diagonal step" [conceived as differing elements of the spatial variation of Motif-cells b' and f']

ϵ = "step in place" [identical with β]

η = "crossing step" [forward fifth position / in the front of / across the other foot]

π = "stamping"

φ = "stamping step"

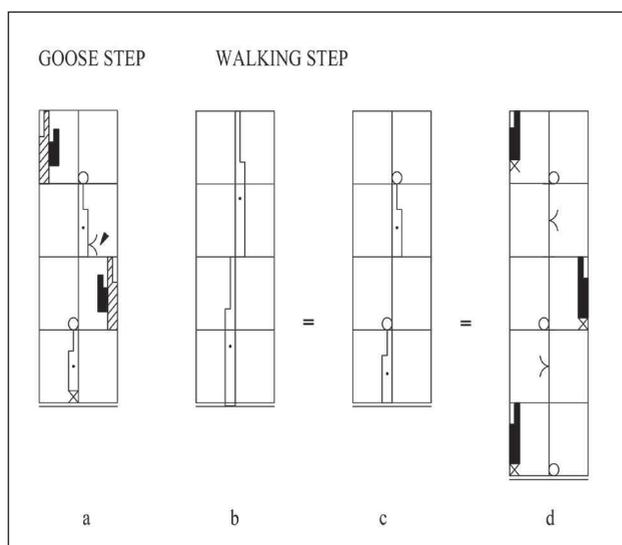


Figure 4: Examples of possible conventional and alternative notations of the walking step. a) Notation of goose-stepping. b) Conventional condensed notation of walking steps. c) Another possible conventional notation of walking steps. d) A proposed alternative notation of walking steps, separately signalling the "vowelish" gestures from the "consonantal" movements.

In my understanding, the units listed above are analogous to syllables. A reinterpretation of the smallest constituent elements of the dance results in a set of kinemes, which can be classified into the categories of "vowelish" and "consonantal" movements. To separate the "free gestures" from the "contacting gestures" we have to dissect the condensed signs, and represent the directional gestures performed in the air in their own right. As noted above, this is different from the practice of KL which usually does not signal them separately, considering that they are only "introductory leg gestures" of a step, and a matter of common knowledge. A comparison of conventional notations of walking

steps with a proposed alternative way of notation envisions how the “vowelish” gesture can be hidden or revealed. (See *Figure 4*.)

The representation of the kinetic elements on the following chart with the help of kinetography and in parallel with visual illustrations makes the hidden non-linear relationships between them discernible. The vowel-like kinetic elements can be arranged in oppositional pairs on the array of the main spatial directions (forward—backward, lateral), similar to how the articulating gestures are oriented in speech. In the case of consonant-like stampings, adapting the conceptual frame of AP, the body part which can be seen as the active articulator is the whole foot contacting the floor, which plays the role of the passive articulator. The insertion of stamps in the performance is a widespread practice in oral popular dances, producing different sound effects depending on which part of the foot is touching the ground, for example a “knock” with the heels or toes, or a “tap” using an eighth of the ball of the foot. Referring to stamps and heel clicks, Fügedi (2016, 70) discusses these movements as “audible accents.”

VERBAL EXPLANATION OF THE CHART OF MINIMAL KINETIC ELEMENTS IN *ALUNELU ÎNFUNDAT*

VOWEL-LIKE KINETIC ELEMENTS / FREE LEG GESTURES

As a general comment which is valid for all movements: the leg is slightly bent, and probably approaching the ground.

1. lift right leg low in place—lift left leg low in place;
2. lift right leg low in front of (“crossing”) the other leg (in fifth position)—lift left leg low in front of (“crossing”) the other leg (in fifth position);
3. lift right leg low in the back of the other leg (in fifth position)—lift left leg low in the back of the other leg (in fifth position);
4. lift right forward low—left forward low;
5. lift right backward low—left backward low;
6. lift right side low at a small distance—left side low at a small distance;
7. lift right side low—left side low;
8. lift right leg to the side slightly backwards diagonally (in fifth position)—lift left leg to the side slightly backwards diagonally (in fifth position);
9. lift right leg to the left side crossing the left foot in the front diagonally—lift left leg to the right side crossing the right foot in the front diagonally.

CONSONANT-LIKE KINETIC ELEMENTS / FLOOR-CONTACTING MOVEMENTS

1. touching the floor with the foot (right and left), while taking over the support of body weight;
2. forcefully touching the floor with the whole foot, “a strong contact of the foot with the floor” creating a sound effect, in motion analysis often called “a stamp” (Fügedi 2016, 70)—while taking over the support of body weight;⁵
3. the same—a short contact with the floor of the whole foot of a free gesturing leg, without supporting the body weight.

Summarising the “kinemologic” analysis of *Alunelu înfundat* we can confirm that the non-linear organization of the minimal units shares the properties of the phonological structure as a combinatoric system (see below). Its inventory consists of a limited number of kinetic elements, altogether 12, from which 9 are “vowelish” and 3 “consonantal.” These can be combined in different ways as in speech communication:

The most fundamental property of speech communication is its phonological structure: it allows a small inventory of primitive units to combine in different ways to form the vast array of words that constitute the vocabularies of human languages. It shares this combinatoric property with just a few other natural systems, such as chemical compounding and genetic recombination. [...] In all such self-diversifying systems [...] the atomic units are discretely distinct from one another, and they retain their discreteness when they combine to form new objects. This appears to be a necessary property of such systems. (Goldstein and Fowler 2003, 160)

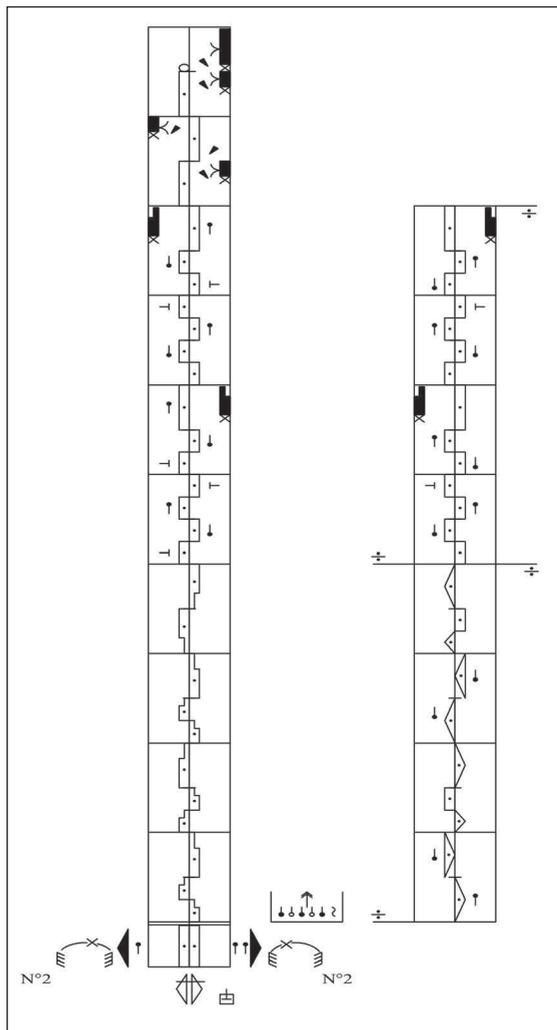


Figure 5: Laban score of *Alunelu înfundat*.



Some Conclusions and Further Questions

In seeking analogies between the articulatory gestures of speech and dance, I do not intend to suggest that we should seek exact equivalences. The anatomical differences of the speech organs and the whole dancing body, the symbolic distinctions of speech and dance would make it impossible to find one-to-one correspondences between specific phonemes and kinemes. *What I mean is that there might be a substratum in dances which are built of “primitive units” (Goldstein 2008) comparable to the phonological structure of speech as a result of the unity of body-mind sensing and controlling motion.*

Further testing of the method of “kinemologic” analysis could reveal to what extent and in which way dance and speech share proprioception in generating gestural actions toward abstracted space directions such as up and down, forward and backward and so on or in the realization of varied points of contact and differentiated qualities of the touching gestures.

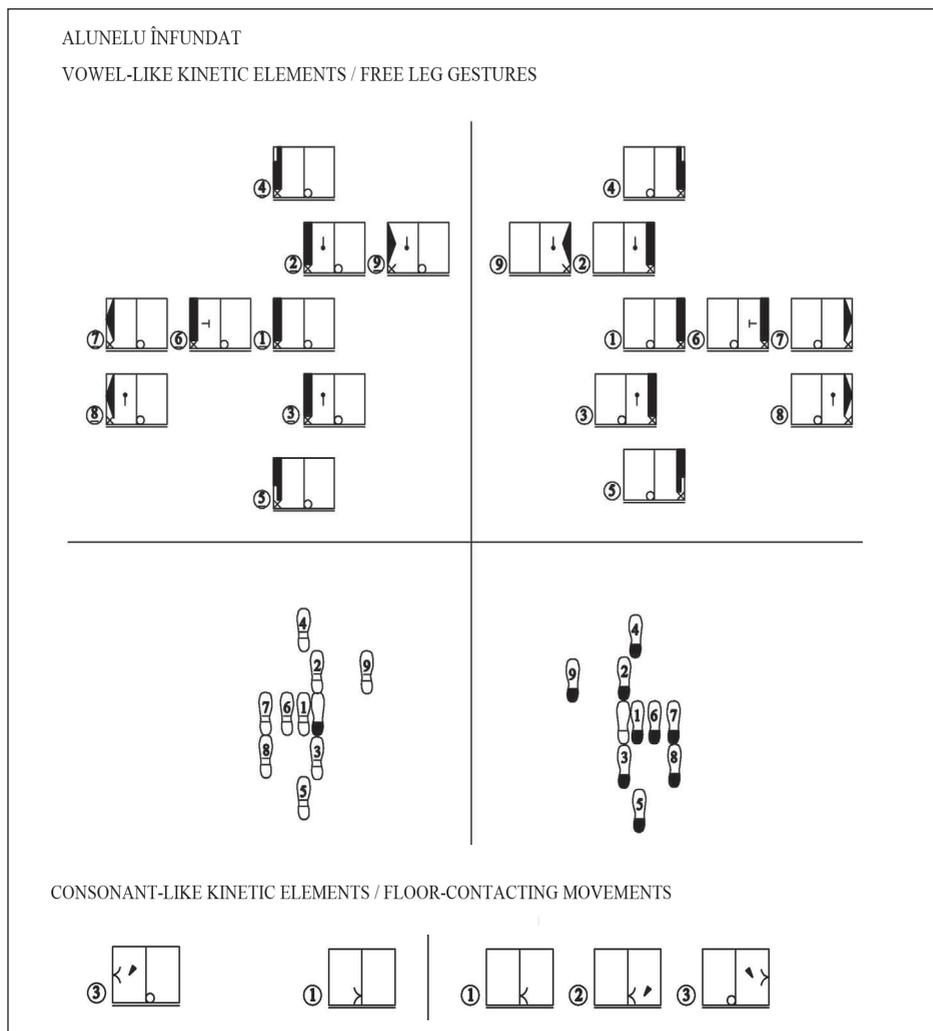


Figure 6: Chart of minimal kinetic elements of *Alunelu înfundat*.

Are plosives, for instance, such as t, k, p, d, g, b, etc. based on the same kinesthetic sensing as with stamps, knocks and taps? Or would fricatives, like f, v, s, z, etc. feel similar to sliding or gliding movements in dance? Is anything common between the differences of the tactile and auditory outcomes depending on which part of the foot or the tongue touches surfaces? There are many questions which can be raised in further investigations, but in the meantime, we can also foresee the limitations of the methodology proposed in this paper.

Dances to which a “kinemologic” analysis would be best suited, paralleling phonologic analysis, would be those that have been orally created, transmitted, and collectively shared. Most of them are usually labelled as “traditional” dances. The basic eligibility requirement for such an analysis is that they should be “abstract,” that is they are built of separable, distinctive minimal units. As I suggest, in the first stage the testing could be extended to dances which are prominently or exclusively based on footwork. This could be followed by experimenting with the analysis of dances containing meaningful and controlled gestures of other body parts as well. In later stages, one could investigate when overlapping gestures of

multiple body parts form a single kineme and when they constitute polykinetic phenomena. The biggest challenges are probably hidden in the interpretation of rotational movements, and in the whole category of spinning / whirling / turning dances, some of them being couple dances. I am not sure at this point whether spinning is suitable at all for a comparative analysis with speech articulation, or maybe it belongs to a totally different mode of kinetic creation and communication from language. Finally, the so-called “narrative” or “expressive” pantomimic motions in dance would certainly not fit into the methodological frame of “kinemologic” analysis, as they are composed of continuous gesturing. These lack stable inventories of identical and repetitive discrete units, as well as drawing upon a wide range of diverse contemporary motion culture, which exponentially expands the borders of the concept of dance.

Comparative research of dance and speech, including experimentation with the methodology of AP, has not to be done necessarily only for its own sake. The theoretical foundation of AP can help with developing ideas which offer explanation of the dynamism of dance, as it aims at a “realistic understanding of language forms as language users know them, produce them and perceive them” (Goldstein and Fowler 2003, 159). Eschewing the assumption of the primacy of innate mental templates over bodily realization, AP examines abstract knowledge through production and perception in concrete interactive settings. Goldstein and Fowler see language forms as public actions which emerged and could have possibly been preserved and/or changed during infinite communicative interactions:

[Language forms] are kinds of public action, not the exclusively mental categories of most theories of phonology, production and perception. A theory of phonology, then, should be a theory about the properties of those public actions, a theory of speech production should be about how those actions are achieved, and a theory of speech perception should be about how the actions are perceived. A theory of the emergence of phonological structure in language, from this perspective, is about how particulate language forms emerged in the course of communicative exchanges between people. (Goldstein and Fowler 2003, 159)

From this perspective, abstract knowledge and bodily action in dance and speech are nothing but interconnected endpoints of a body-mind continuum, which shape and reshape each other being impacted by the individual differences, imperfections, innovations, and lapses in memory, occurring during the processes of production and perception. This envisioning also resonates with the idea of the dynamic relationship between concept and realization in dance (Gore and Bakka 2007; Bakka and Karoblis 2010).

This train of thought takes us to another most exciting topic: the evolutionary emergence of speech and dance. In linguistics, both AP and emergent phonology deal with the “where do these units come from?” question, referring to syllables and phonemes (Lindblom 2011, 1) aiming to understand “how the [linguistic] forms might have emerged in the evolutionary history of humans and how they arise developmentally, as a child interacts with speakers in the environment” (Goldstein and Fowler 2003, 159). The bio-cultural perspective of these theories, which transgresses the structuralist stance, hypothesizes the pre-existence of already-developed motor mechanisms, as fundamental and a necessary condition for the emergence of speech articulation. In the conclusion of his study, Lindblom states that:

The goal of this paper was to demonstrate the feasibility of a non-structuralist approach to the basic units of speech. Accordingly, we reversed structuralist priorities starting from substance (performance-based factors) in a quest for possible behavioural causal factors underlying sound

structure formation. We found that a strong case can be made for the claim that the combinatorial structure of sound patterns has behavioural origins. (Lindblom 2011, 16)

In the anthropological study of music and dance, the issue of the emergence of dance in evolutionary terms was raised by Blacking, being further developed by his disciple, Andrée Grau, and later debated by Gediminas Karoblis, Georgiana Gore and Marie-Pierre Gibert (Blacking 1976; Grau 2016; Karoblis, Gore and Gibert 2021). Blacking thought that social interactions like dancing and “musicking” had a great contribution to the development of interpersonal cooperation and cognitive skills, necessary for the appearance of speech (Grau 2016). Being anchored in the structuralist assumption of the innateness of underlying cognitive frames, he thought that dance encompasses “an innate, species-specific set of cognitive and sensory capacities which human beings are predisposed to use for communication and making sense of the environment” (Blacking 1984, 6. Cited by Grau 2016, 234).

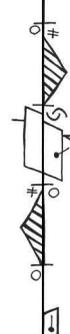
Grau (2016) supports Blacking’s idea about the fundamental evolutionary significance of dance with an impressive corpus of historical, paleo-anthropological and anthropological references, opening the topic towards the evaluation of the special “power” of dance in creating and strengthening social bonds through heightened states of consciousness emanated by communal dancing, all over the world. Gore, Karoblis and Gibert, reflecting on Grau’s article, see the cognitive and sensorial skills supposedly evolved through dancing as tools for the societal construction of humanity. They focus on dance’s relational dimension, highlighting its potential to generate “soft political” power (Karoblis, Gore and Gibert 2021).

Beyond this, another avenue would be to explore the origins of the cognitive capacities necessary for speech through dance, expanding on Blacking’s idea:

In order to emphasize the non-intellectual basis of conceptual thought, I would prefer to call the first kind of association generalized sensori-motor communion [...] I hope to show why music (which begins with dancing) provides an explanatory model of the process of transformation from sensori-motor communion to conceptual thought, and also throws light on the origin of man. (Blacking, 1976, 4-5)

Further support for Blacking’s proposition may be found in relatively recently elaborated theoretical fields, such as evolutionary archaeology, which postulates the cognitive fluidity of the brain as being based on the overlapping and interconnectedness of its specialized domains (Mithen 1996); and in the “new thinking” wave, which suggests switching from the modular (Swiss army knife) model of the brain to a more flexible (hand/palm) one.⁶ Their most promising conceptual frame for comparative research of the emergence of dance and speech might be the so-called gesture to language (G to L) theory. This attributes the foremost important role to bodily gestural communication as an ante-chamber in the development of phonic language (Heyes 2012, Sterelny 2012). This perspective allows us to reconsider Blacking’s hypothesis that conceptual thinking has non-intellectual roots in the generalized sensory-motor experiences of early humans through emergent music and dance.

Blacking and Grau introduced the appearance of dance as the missing link between the two scholarly accepted major shifts in human evolution: the emergence of bipedalism and fully articulated language (Grau 2016). To refine the hypothesis regarding the importance of dance in the formation of language, we might consider slightly reframing the question from “What was the role of dance in the emergence of language?” to “What was the role of dance in the process by which language became digital?”⁷ or “What was the role of dance in the process by which language became phonological?” It might well have happened that



the accuracy of gesturing, formed and polished through the “multi-corporeal enactment of rhythmic, synchronous and correlated movements” occurring in the dance of early humans (Karoblis, Gore and Gibert 2021, 261) is one of the “causal factors of the formation of sound structure” of speech and a necessary prerequisite of the emergence of the “discrete positional control of precision talking” (Lindblom 2011, 15-6).

The mainstream view supports the idea that practical motor activities, such as chewing or tool making could have contributed to the formation of speech whereas alternative suppositions favour non-practical foundations. If so, “Is it possible that speech articulation became digital thanks to the motor skills and mental abstractions evolved through dance?” And in the end, we can ask the question: “Is it possible that reasoning stems not so much from practical survival skills, but from the search for pure aesthetic pleasure?”

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NOTES

1. In Karácsony’s perspective, combinatorics “is a frame to follow the formal morphological laws or to renew them, to combine creation with pursuing traditions, the morphologically simplest forms with the most complicated ones” (English abstract of Karácsony’s doctoral dissertation 2019).
2. For the sake of comparison, we have turned the articulatory gestural score from horizontal to vertical.
3. I propose here the introduction of a new term, “kinemology,” as a possible derivation of “kineme.” The concept of “kineme” was introduced by Ray Birdwhistell (1952) and adapted by Adrienne Kaeppler in dance anthropology (1972). I consider that “kinemology” would be a more appropriate denomination for a branch of dance research analogous to “phonology” deriving from “phoneme,” then the generally used “kinetics” or “kinesiology,” which have more general meanings.
4. In human anatomy the sagittal symmetry exists between the right and left halves of the body, while coronal symmetry refers to the split between the front and back parts divided by the coronal plane.
5. This is the single kinetic element, which according to the score is not repeated symmetrically. Though, due to the simplified notation, we cannot be sure, whether this was an intentional exception, or not.
6. The “new thinking” wave offered an alternative vision to the previously accepted modular model of human mind, the central metaphor of which was the Swiss Army knife envisioning “the evolved human mind as a set of cognitive gadgets, each specialized to learn, remember, and reason about particular types of information.” The new model is instead comparable to a hand, which is like a multi-purpose instrument, which “can strip the defensive spines from a piece of fruit ..., but in Thai dancing it can also signal the smallest nuances of emotion” (Heyes 2012, 2092).
7. In semiotics “digital” is used as an opposition to “analogue,” referring to the discontinuous, discrete quality of the constituent elements of a semiotic system in opposition to the continuous nature of analogue ones. Phonemes are the best examples of this (Barthes 1977 [1964]).

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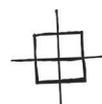
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Dance Syntax in Practice: The *San Felipe* Dance Group Performs the *Cumbia Cienaguera*

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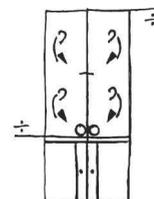
ABSTRACT

This study builds upon the theoretical proposal of *dance syntax* introduced by Miranda and his colleagues (2023), which defines syntax as the set of principles governing the spatio-temporal sequencing and the variability of dance movements. Central to this approach is the application of Finite-State Automata (FSA), a computational model adapted from computer science, used to formalise the structural and combinatorial possibilities of movement sequences within a choreographic practice. In the present work, we extend this method by integrating FSA with Motif Notation—a symbolic system derived from Labanotation—to systematically document and compare motif variants within a traditional Colombian folk dance.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with the *San Felipe* dance group in Cali, Colombia—an intergenerational community ensemble of older adults—we examined 23 instances of the choreography of *Cumbia Cienaguera* across rehearsals and performances. Five participants with diverse mobility profiles served as case studies. We classified motifs into three categories according to their function: traveling, staying in place, and turning. Movement analysis of the video recordings revealed that each of the participants performed the same kind of motif consistently. Therefore, we transcribed a total of 15 motif variants into Labanotation (five participants and three kinds of motif) and subsequently abstracted them into Motif Notation. We then constructed FSA models to represent the structure and permissible transitions among the three categories of motifs. This methodological integration enables a formal representation of movement variants as an inherent and systematic component of dance syntax. Our findings demonstrate that combining symbolic documentation (Motif Notation) with computational modelling (FSA) offers a robust framework for capturing the adaptability, inclusivity, and creative potential embedded in community-based dance practices. This approach contributes to ethnochoreology and dance anthropology by providing a novel analytical lens to foreground the syntactic richness of embodied movement.

KEYWORDS

Cumbia Cienaguera; dance syntax; finite-state automata; Motif Notation; ethnographic dance analysis; dance grammar.



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1. Introduction

The first author of this work, Marisol Limón Silicéo, spent the summer of 2023 conducting field research for her Master's degree in Choreomundus, International Master in Dance, Knowledge, Practice, and Heritage. She conducted her research in the Floralia neighbourhood in Cali, Colombia, with the dance group of the Artistic and Cultural Foundation *San Felipe Apóstol*.¹ This group of older adults forms the core of a community organization dedicated to developing programs for seniors in one of Cali's districts. While we initially believed the group followed the format of national folk ballet companies, this assumption later proved incorrect.²

The researcher accompanied the group during their performances, rehearsals, and daily activities, gradually becoming part of their community. During these sessions, the enthusiasm for the performance of the musical piece *Cumbia Cienaguera* was undeniable. As the most exhilarating piece for both dancers and audience, it was consistently chosen to open the group's performances and rehearsals.

In the first two rehearsals Marisol attended, she carefully observed the steps, sequences, and choreographic designs of the piece, transcribing them using her expertise in movement notation and analysis. She identified basic movement motifs that, when combined, formed the larger sequences used by the dancers to perform the piece. These sequences aligned closely with specific musical phrases, establishing a structured choreographic design. However, notable changes compared to rehearsals were observed during the first public performance:

- The performance space was significantly larger than the rehearsal space;
- A greater number of group members participated, including individuals whose physical abilities might have been perceived as limiting for dancing. Nonetheless, adjustments to the choreography facilitated their participation;
- The music track ended before the rehearsed choreography was complete, and the group director restarted the music from a mobile device, allowing the ensemble to continue seamlessly.

With increased attention to the *Cumbia Cienaguera* during subsequent rehearsals, it became clear that this piece held a special value for the ensemble due to its versatility, adaptability, and inclusiveness. Although the group director was responsible for teaching specific movements and choreographic motifs, in this piece the dancers were allowed to mix, match, alter, and reformulate these elements in response to variables such as individual physical abilities and autonomous decision-making. This adaptability reflected the inclusive atmosphere of the ensemble and positioned the group at the intersection of national folk ballet and traditional dance practices as experienced in their original cultural contexts.

After completing her fieldwork and while organizing the collected data, Marisol sought a method to effectively capture and convey the movement possibilities that the group had accepted and encouraged.

This work is the result of a collaborative effort between the two authors, Marisol Limón Silicéo and Juan Felipe Miranda Medina. It combines the Finite-State Automata (FSA) method—originally developed by Juan in collaboration with Miranda and others (Miranda et al. 2023)—with Marisol's fieldwork and her analytical insights into dance movement. Together, these contributions enabled a structured exploration of the possible movement patterns during dance, or more precisely, the *dance syntax*. This paper applies the method of FSA to study the *Cumbia Cienaguera* as practiced by the *San Felipe* dance group.





Figure 1. The *San Felipe* dance group in the *Cumbia Cienaguera*'s starting position during a rehearsal in the Caseta. 19 July 2023. Photo by: M. Limón Silicéo.



Figure 2. The *San Felipe* dance group in the *Cumbia Cienaguera*'s starting position during a performance in Sevilla, Colombia. 15 July 2023. Photo taken by M. Limón Silicéo.

An advancement presented in this work is the integration of Motif Notation with FSA to describe with greater precision both the movements performed by the dancers and their possible concatenations in time. We show that the method we propose is different from Laban kinetograms that can only provide individual notations for each realisation³ of the same dance. In addition, Labanotation as a method does not systematically compare notations of different dance realisations. In contrast, the combination of Motif Notation with FSA proves very effective in developing such comparison, as it can express a range of *possibilities* that accounts for the variety of realisations of every dance.

This paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the context of the fieldwork, describing the background of the *San Felipe* dance group and their rendition of *Cumbia Cienaguera*. Section 3 presents the key methods employed in this work, namely Motif Notation and FSA for the representation of dance syntax. Section 4, examines the movement structures of *Cumbia Cienaguera*, offering first-hand Labanotation transcriptions that express the different syntactic structures that integrate Motif Notation and FSA. The FSA method is explained using examples of increased complexity. Section 5 discusses our key findings. Finally, Section 6 concludes by reflecting on the implications of our research and the extension of the method to other traditional dances.



2. The context

2.1. A dance group of elderly adults in the capital of Valle del Cauca

The community studied in this research lives in the Floralia neighbourhood, a warm and tropical area in the Andean region of Colombia, located in Santiago de Cali, the region's third most important city and the capital of Valle del Cauca department.

According to data provided by the Cali Mayor's Office (AC 2020_1 and AC 2020_2), Floralia emerged on the banks of the Cauca River in the 1960s as part of a housing project for low-income families. In its early years, the neighbourhood was characterised by rudimentary infrastructure and a lack of essential services. However, community organization and the collective effort of its residents have been crucial in its transformation.

The community regularly organises events and festivities that not only celebrate local traditions but also promote social integration and a sense of belonging. Cultural life in Floralia encompasses a variety of artistic and cultural expressions. Community organizations play an essential role in managing cultural projects and promoting initiatives that enrich the social life of the neighbourhood. The Artistic and Cultural Foundation *San Felipe* is one such community-based organizations, whose main objective, in the words of its president, is "to create safe environments and spaces for coexistence, exchange, care, and recreation for the older adult population of the Floralia neighbourhood in Cali" (Orlando 2023).

The group's history began in 2010, when a group of friends came together to form a dance ensemble. The dance group is the heart of the *San Felipe* Artistic and Cultural Foundation. It is the centre around which many of the organization's activities and decisions are made.

2.2. The favourite dance of the *San Felipe* dance group

Among the group's repertoire, the *Cumbia Cienaguera* stands out as a favourite. It is cherished by the dancers and consistently elicits strong reactions from audiences. Known for its

vibrant energy and choreographic richness, it features the largest number of performers on stage and sustains visual interest through a dynamic variety of movements. This piece is widely performed by ensembles dedicated to Colombian music and dance and has become a hallmark piece in both national and international contexts.

Musically, *Cumbia Cienaguera* belongs to the tradition of accordion-based cumbias within Colombian folk music. Adolfo Pacheco, a celebrated Colombian composer and folklorist, describes its style as a fusion of vallenato and cumbia, and maintains that “it stems from the meetings and exchanges between musicians from the banana-growing zone in the department of Magdalena, the epicentre of musical activity in the Colombian Caribbean, around the beginning of the 20th century” (CumbiaPoderPorro 2014 [original in Spanish, translated by the authors]).

As part of the fieldwork conducted for this research, 23 performances of the *Cumbia Cienaguera* by the *San Felipe* dance group were observed and documented through video recordings and field notes. Of these, 16 took place during rehearsals, and the remaining seven were public performances.⁴

The rehearsal realisations had essentially the same characteristics: about 20 dancers would perform in the main hall of the *Caseta* (the group’s meeting place), wearing everyday clothes and following a musical track that had been shared with them beforehand, as shown in Figure 1.

For the performances, the realisations were performed in different ways. Most performances were in open-air spaces. Sometimes, the stage was clearly defined, like in an Italian-style theatre. Other times, the space was not well defined, like in the case of public squares or parks, where the audience could gather around the stage in an arena-like setup. As depicted in Figure 2, these performances involved at least 30 dancers wearing specific costumes for their public appearance. Women wore two-piece outfits: a blouse with a ruffle on the chest and long skirts, typically in black or white and adorned with colourful ribbons that alluded to the colours of the Colombian flag—red, blue, and yellow. Women wore flower ornaments on their heads. Men wore white shirts and pants and two yellow linen cloths—one as a sash around the waist and the other around the neck. Men also wore a hat and sometimes a backpack. Both men and women wore a specific type of footwear the group calls *cotizas*.



3. The theoretical methods

As stated in the Introduction, our aim is to understand the different movement possibilities that stem from the various bodily abilities of the dancers of the *San Felipe* dance group. To do this, we rely on three theoretical methods: analysis of the dance into motifs, Motif Notation (which requires Labanotation of several realisations of the dance) and Finite-State Automata. This section explains the fundamentals of each of these concepts and methods.

3.1. Motifs, motif variants and Motif Notation

3.1.1. *Motif*

In this work, the *motif* is the fundamental unit of analysis used to compare different realisations of the same piece. We adopt the definition proposed by two pioneers in movement analysis, Martin and Pesovár, who describe a motif as “the smallest unit whose rhythm and kinetic pattern forms a relatively closed and recurring structure” (Martin and Pesovár 2020, 357). Moreover, motifs “exist in the consciousness of the dancer, can be remembered

by the dancer, and recur in his dance, mostly in sequences” and are “the smallest organic units of dance” (idem). We adopt this definition both for its formal clarity—that emphasises the motif as a repeatable kinetic-rhythmic pattern—and its focus on the dancer’s subjective perception. This latter aspect aligns with our field observations, as the dancers in the *San Felipe* dance group regularly rehearsed and recognised motifs as identifiable segments within their performance of *La Cumbia Cienaguera*.

It is not within the scope of this work, however, to analyse the internal complexity of motifs—as Martin does, for example, with his concept of roots (Fügedi 2020)—or to distinguish motifs based on their structural function (predominant, subordinate, or sporadic), as Martin and Pesovár propose (2020). Since our aim is to understand the movement possibilities that arise from the dancers’ own abilities, our categorization is based on their use of space: traveling, in place, and turning, as detailed in Section 4. Moreover, even though the *Cumbia Cienaguera* is danced to a musical piece, we do not study the relation between music and dance for each motif, as the main purpose of the music is to set the meter (2/4) and tempo of the dance movements.

3.1.2. *Motif variation vs motif variant*

It is important to distinguish between a *motif variation* and a *motif variant*. We define both terms using the work of Martin, Fügedi and Pesovár (2020) presented in the compilation edited by Fügedi et al. (2020), the research of what was the Folk Dance Dance Study Group (1974) and later became the International Council for Traditional Music and Dance, as well as the work of other scholars (Nahachewsky 1992, Kaeppler and Dunin 2007). As explained in the opening of this section, motifs are recurrent meaningful structural units composed of other smaller structural units (e.g. kinetic elements). A motif can be modified according to factors such as rhythm, structural composition (the order of its elements), dynamics (intensity of movements), and spatial use of the body (movement amplitude or operations such as twisting, spinning, and directional changes). These modifications may yield a new motif, a variant of the original, or reflect degrees of variability—collectively referred to hereafter as *variation*. Whether the variation of the motif is regarded as a new motif or not, depends largely on the dancing community. The community may consider a variation a new motif if it differs significantly from the original motif in its objective features (e.g., rhythm or bodily use of space) or if it serves a different function within the dance (e.g., the original motif was used to open the dance whereas the variation closes the dance). Hence, we define a *motif variant* as a variation of a motif that the community does not recognise as a new, distinct motif.

In Section 4, we examine how the physical abilities and individual intent of five dancers lead each to perform distinct variants of the motifs proposed by the group director. Even when the original motif is significantly altered, both the dancers and the director perceive each version as the same motif—provided its core purpose remains unchanged (e.g., to travel, to stay in place, or to turn).

3.1.3. *Motif Notation*

The primary goal of movement notation is to understand movement. Experts in movement research (Ruiz 2014, Van Zile 1999) value the practical uses of notation as a recording tool to document and preserve choreography and to assist in the transmission of knowledge and technique. They also emphasise how movement notation supports the analysis and understanding of movement through the use of abstractions in symbolic systems. In this context, Motif Notation, also known as Motif Writing or Motif Description, is a system for

graphically recording movement concepts using symbols derived from Labanotation. Ann Hutchinson Guest and Valerie Preston-Dunlop were pioneers of this system. Both developed symbols in addition to Labanotation in response to the need to “allow freedom in the performance of a movement concept, for instance, the choice of any direction, any part of the body, any kind of transference of weight, etc.” (Hutchinson Guest 2016). This notation system includes a series of symbols representing the body and body parts, as well as symbols for common movement actions (e.g., jumping, turning, or changing support). The purpose of Motif Notation is “to offer a graphic depiction of the essence of a single movement or a group of movements, without the specificity required with Labanotation” (UM no date). This graphic depiction allows the symbols to be used “out of context”⁵ (Hutchinson Guest 2016), for it “pinpoints the motivation of a movement, its idea, aim or intention” (Hutchinson Guest 2005, 9).

Responding to the needs of this research, we chose to use Motif Notation as an integral part of our method. Although we first produced a Labanotation score with movement variants corresponding to different realisations performed by different dancers, we then took the signs out of that context and integrated them into FSA diagrams to express the freedom in the dancers’ choices when performing the *Cumbia Cienaguera* and to highlight the different movement possibilities that arise. In this work, our main reference for Motif Notation is the book *Your Move – The Language of Dance Approach to the Study of Movement and Dance*, written by two of its pioneers, namely Ann Hutchinson Guest and Tina Curran (2008).

3.2. Dance Syntax

We understand *dance syntax* as the set of principles underlying possible combinations and variations of movement sequences over time. Drawing on the work of Asano and Boeckx (2015), Miranda et al. (2023, 284) identify five key points concerning dance and movement syntax more generally:

1. Syntax requires the existence of a set of discrete elements (derived from structural analysis);
2. Some combinations of these elements are possible, while others are not;
3. Syntax itself is defined as the set of principles that determine which combinations are possible or impossible;
4. The combination of discrete elements produces new elements, which in turn can be combined with each other;
5. This series of combinations results in a hierarchy of levels of combination (this hierarchy is well studied in movement analysis, e.g., from motif element to the *totus* of the dance).

Miranda and his colleagues argue that dance syntax aligns with the structural analysis of movement proposed by several scholars, particularly during the 1970s (Miranda et al 2023, 284). For example, Adrienne Kaeppler (1972) draws an analogy between dance and the components of language (phonemes and morphemes), identifying morphemes and kinemes as minimal movement units. A similar approach is described in the book on structural analysis edited by Giurchescu and Kröschlová (2007). The authors propose a method for movement segmentation alongside a formulaic notation (that had been developed since the 1970s) to specify the composition of a dance piece after identifying the main constituent units.

Nevertheless, while structural analysis is a useful tool for understanding the movement units that compose a movement system (e.g., motifs and phrases), Miranda et al. (2023) convincingly argue that movement analysis alone is not enough to understand the richness

of *possibilities* arising from the various allowed combinations of movement units and the restrictions from movement combinations that are not used by dancers. Therefore, the researcher should aim to understand the principles that guide these combinations, that is, the syntax of the dance. This process of understanding calls for an appropriate method. In the case of the *San Felipe* dance group, possibility, and hence diversity in movement, stem from the different bodily abilities of each dancer. This leads different dancers to perform choreographic motifs in different ways.

3.3. Finite-State Automata

Following Miranda et al. (2023), in this work we apply the method of Finite-State Automata (FSA), borrowed from computer science, to characterise the syntax of a dance, as it allows for a flexible representation of different possible combinations of movement sequences.

Let us illustrate the FSA method with a simple example. Imagine performing a dance that consists only of the following movements:

- Step with left foot (L)
- Step with right foot (R)
- Jump on both feet (J)

These three movements are, in technical terms, the *alphabet* of the automaton. In the context of dance, they represent all the movement sequences available to the agent in a given dance. However, we also need to define the possible *transitions* between movements. Suppose that in this dance the following principles apply:

1. You have to start the dance with the right foot (R)
2. Once the dance starts, you must always alternate steps (e.g., R, L, R, L, ...), but you cannot repeat a step (e.g., you cannot perform R, R, or L, L)
3. You can only jump after performing an R
4. After a jump, you must resume the dance with R
5. The dance must end with R.

This set of principles constitute the transitions of the automaton. Moreover, the requirement to begin the dance with R (Principle 1) corresponds to the *initial state* of the dance. On the other hand, the requirement to end the dance with R (Principle 5) corresponds to the *final state* of the dance. The entire system composed of alphabet, states, transitions, initial state, and final state fully determines the finite-state automaton or FSA. Figure 3 illustrates the FSA encoding the possible and impossible combinations of movement elements in this simple dance. Examples of possible sequences consistent with the five principles and represented in the FSA include {R}, or {R, L, R, L, R, J, R}, or even {R, J, R, J, R, L, R, J, R}. (Fig 3.)

This example helps us understand that a state simply represents all the movement possibilities

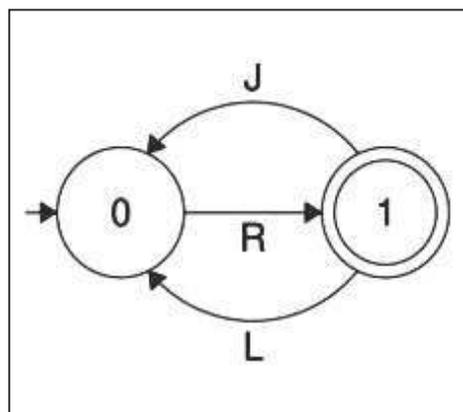


Figure 3. FSA diagram for a simple dance. There are two states (0 and 1). State 0 is the *initial state*, that is, the dance starts necessarily with R. After performing R, the dance may end, or the dancer may take a jump (J) or perform a left step (L). Both L and J must be followed by R. State 1 is the *final state*, as the dance must end with R.

available to the dancer or agent at a given moment. For example, in State 0 the dancer can only take a right step (R), whereas in State 1 the dancer has two possibilities: either a jump (J), or a left step (L).

It is important to point out that the FSA method must address a specific structural level of the dance. That is, the FSA that represents how the *motifs* of a dance can be sequenced one after the other will differ from the FSA that represents how *motif elements* are sequenced to form motif cells.

In what follows the FSA method will be applied to the *Cumbia Cienaguera* at the level of motifs. For a more detailed discussion of dance syntax and its application to dance research, see Miranda et al. (2023).



4. *Cumbia Cienaguera*: analysis and syntax

The empirical foundation of this study stems from fieldwork conducted by Marisol Limón with the *San Felipe* dance group in Cali, Colombia, during the summer of 2023. Focusing on the *Cumbia Cienaguera*, a dynamic folk dance performed by older adults, the research combined ethnographic observation, movement notation, and computational modelling to analyse the dance's syntactic structure and adaptability.

Fieldwork encompassed 23 performances (16 rehearsals and seven public performances), documented through video recordings and detailed field notes. From these, 12 recordings (including both live performances and rehearsals) were selected for systematic analysis, with 10 providing sufficient clarity for in-depth movement study. From all the participants in the dance company we focused on five dancers with different bodily abilities to conduct movement analysis from the video recordings. This analysis yielded two key findings. First, each of the five dancers adapted the motifs they were taught by the choreographer to their own bodies, yet they performed these motif variants with remarkable consistency across performances, exhibiting only minor variations in execution (such as subtle differences in step length or degree of knee flexion). Second, all the observed movements could be classified into three distinct types:

- *Motifs for traveling/moving (mM)*: motifs through which the dancers move from one point to another on the stage.
- *Motifs to remain in place (mP)*: motifs performed while the dancers remain in place.
- *Motifs for turning (mT)*: motifs performed while the dancers remain in place but execute a turn.

The discovery of this consistent patterning directly informed the notation process. Because each dancer reliably reproduced their distinctive version of these motifs, it became possible to create precise Labanotation transcriptions of each individual's variants. With five dancers and three motif categories, this process yielded 15 distinct Labanotation scores that collectively captured the full spectrum of movement variants within the group's practice.

These notated scores were further abstracted using Motif Notation, which emphasised the essential qualities of movement rather than prescribing rigid forms. This dual-notation approach proved particularly valuable in documenting how dancers adapted movements to accommodate physical differences (such as hip prostheses or reduced mobility) while maintaining the dance's core structure. Analysis and notation, complemented by individual interviews with each of the five participants, identified both physical constraints and

personal intent as factors shaping motif variants. This study, however, deliberately avoids quantifying their relative influence, as doing so would require a different methodological approach. Performance variability also relied on contextual factors, such as stage size, audience engagement, and group coordination. Front-row dancers played a pivotal role in cueing motif transitions and ensuring synchronization despite individual movement differences. This dynamic highlighted the dance's inclusive ethos, in which adaptability fostered collective cohesion.

Next, FSA were paired with Motif Notation, the study's main contribution. FSA diagrams were developed by comparing the motifs with one another, which allowed the authors to map permissible movement sequences. In other words, FSA capture variants and possibilities within the *San Felipe* dance group, illustrating how motifs can be combined, varied, or repeated. This approach provides a visual and systematic means to compare different variants of the same motif within the same dance, demonstrating its inclusivity and adaptability. Together, these methods—ethnographic documentation, movement notation, and syntactic modelling—provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing dance as a living, flexible practice rather than a fixed form.

In what follows, we present the analysis and Labanotation score of a sample motif from each of the three categories (traveling/moving, remaining in place, and turning) as performed by the five dancers. The remainder of this section focuses exclusively on the syntactic structure of traveling or moving motifs. We then introduce FSA diagrams for all five variants in this category, using Motif Notation to represent the alphabet symbols (Figures 5–9), followed by combined FSA diagrams that illustrate the full range of movement possibilities emerging from all five variants (Figures 10–12). This progression moves systematically from empirical observation to notation to syntactic modelling, culminating in comparative insights into movement variability. For equivalent FSA diagrams of the other two motif categories, please refer to Limón Silicéo (2024).

4.1. Movement abilities and notation scores

After identifying the three motif categories mentioned above, we conducted the movement notation of five case studies, considering that the difference in physical abilities and life histories of each of the subjects involved lead to the spontaneous creation of variations in movement. These variations yield specific motif variants for each dancer. In the following table, these characteristics are presented in general terms.

Carmen	elderly woman with reduced mobility
Isabel	woman with hip prosthesis
Guillermo	man who adds movement variants
Luis	man executing the movements as they were taught at the rehearsals by the group director
Élida	woman with occasional low back pain

Table 1. Case studies and main physical traits that cause individual mobility particularities.⁶

For example, Mrs Carmen, one of the oldest members of the group, has reduced mobility compared to the other members. In her daily movement, her actions (such as walking) cover shorter distances and take longer to execute. Mrs Isabel's movements are conditioned by her hip prosthesis. She carries her weight more often on the side without the prosthesis and makes momentary weight shifts to the operated side, where she feels less secure. Mr Guillermo usually adds more actions to the main motifs of the movement: he turns his body a little more than the others, takes longer steps, and adds secondary gestures. On the other hand, Mr. Luis, one of the founding members who has followed the group's entire trajectory, is very careful to follow the exact instructions for performing the motifs, sequences, and choreographies. Mrs Elida introduces variations involving greater hip movement, which she says helps to release the pain she constantly experiences in her lower back.

Movement notation scores were created based on the motif variants arising from the participants' different physical traits and abilities, as listed in Table 1. For each type of motif described at the beginning of Section 4, eight bars were notated (i.e., one musical phrase).⁷ In this section, we compare five different realisations of each of these motifs, which were observed to be predominant in the participants' performances. Although other variants exist, the notated forms were generally the most frequent and repeated. The use of an eight-bar format aims to make motifs visually clear.

In the scores created, and for this study, we have considered only the recording of movement motifs performed by dancers when supporting their bodies on their lower limbs. The symbols and conceptual framework adopted here are drawn from *Your Move* (Hutchinson and Curran 2008), specifically the section addressing changes in support, with particular attention to the transfer of weight from one foot to the other. Our notation combines the foot-support symbol with directional and level indicators.

It should be noted that the performance of this dance piece is not limited to a single motif, sequence, or movement pattern. These examples show that, for the same piece, the *San Felipe* dance group admits/ accommodates movement variations while retaining the idea of a communal dance.

4.1.1. *The movement score for the Motifs for traveling (mM_s')* (Figure 4)

These scores record the traveling or movement motifs that five members of the *San Felipe* dance group perform (i.e., movements from one place to another) in the choreography of *Cumbia Cienaguera*.

The mM_4 motif in Figure 4 is the one most people performed in this section of the *Cumbia Cienaguera*. The motif is performed by Mr. Luis, one of the group founders, who pays attention to reproducing the movements as taught by those responsible for teaching the dances. It consists of three alternating forward steps, followed by a leg flexion on the foot that completes the last step, after which the alternating pattern is repeated. Each action occurs on one of the quarter-note beats of the 4/4 measure.

In this same section, Isabel, the woman who has a hip prosthesis, performs a variant consisting of a step forward, bringing both feet together in place, and bending both legs. Motif mM_2 in Figure 4 is continuously repeated. Isabel explains the reason for moving her body only to one side: "The thing I have here on my hip sometimes hurts me and I cannot move it [the hip] in that way [she gestures to the left with her hand], so I better move forward with this one [she points to her right leg] so it does not get out of place." This is an example of how someone adapts the movement to their abilities and how having a different bodily ability does not exempt them from participating in the dance group.

Carmen, a lady with reduced mobility, offers another example. She sometimes arrived

at rehearsals using a cane for support, but during this dance she did not. “I want it to look nice and I want to look like the group, like the others [...] I want to move well,” Carmen says. The motif she performed, notated in mM_1 (Figure 4), consists of alternating forward steps, but taking one full bar for each. She moved forward with the ensemble, supported by the dance partner or other women dancing beside her.

The movements made by Mrs. Elida are recorded as mM_5 in Figure 4. She takes a step forward with her right foot on the first beat. On the second beat of the first bar, she keeps her weight on the right foot while flexing the leg. She alternates and repeats this motif.

The variant performed by Mr Guillermo reflects what was mentioned earlier, namely that he is one of the group’s youngest members, with a background as a dancer and musician. He performs variants that include accents or additional movements. In mM_3 (Figure 4), the core structure matches that of mM_4, except for a variation on the second beat of the second bar. At this point in mM_3, the dancer makes contact with the floor using the toes of the left foot, accompanied by a strong accent.

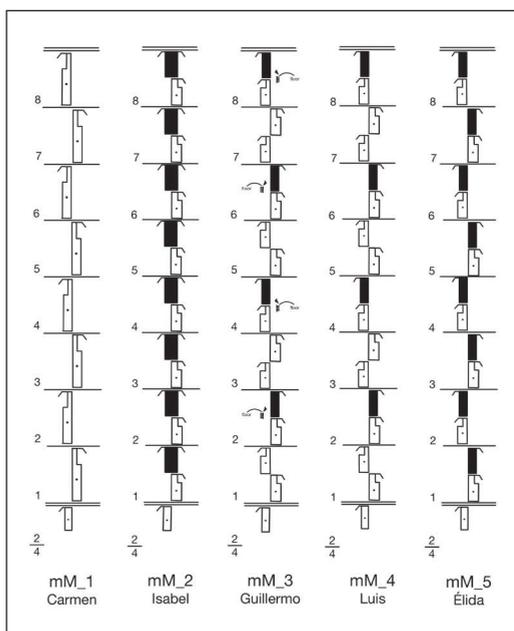


Figure 4. Scores of variants of motifs for traveling/moving (mM) in the *Cumbia Cienaguera*.

4.2. Diagrams of the variants of the Motifs for moving

In Section 4.1, we introduced the motif variants performed within the same dance piece by five members of the *San Felipe* dance group, along with their corresponding Labanotation scores. This section presents graphic representations of the syntactic structure of these variants using FSA. Because the motif variants are intended to be repeated multiple times throughout the performance of *Cumbia Cienaguera*, we first use FSA to model the internal syntactic structure of each variant within its respective category, based on the sequence of movement elements previously documented in Figure 4. Subsequently, a general diagram for each of the three categories is provided at the end of the section to visualise the broader range of movement possibilities accepted and enacted in the performance of *Cumbia Cienaguera*, as shaped by the motif variants executed by the dancers of the *San Felipe* dance group.

4.2.1. mM_1

In Figure 5 we observe two states marked as circles 1 and 2 and specific transitions (arrows) to reach each of those states. The left-hand side arrow indicates the transition to reach state 1. This first state is the initial position of the movement, which in the score (Figure 4) marked before the double horizontal line. It represents the transfer of body weight to the left leg, leaving the right foot free (without weight) so that the following movement can be performed. This motif may be preceded by stillness, as at the beginning of the dance, which would mean the body weight is distributed between both feet. It may also start with a motif that ends with

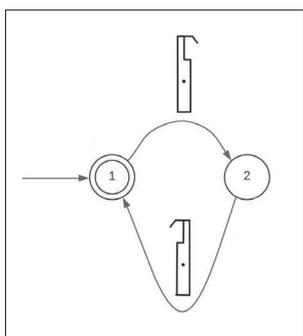


Figure 5. FSA diagram corresponding to movement motif mM_1 (notated in Figure 4).

the body weight on both feet or on the right foot, or it may be a repetition of this motif. In all these cases, it is necessary to specify this preparatory transition in order to execute this motif.

The transition from state 1 to state 2 is a step forward with the right foot at the middle level. State 2 refers to keeping the body weight on the right leg and leaving the left leg free to execute the next movement. The transition from state 2 to state 1 is a step forward with the left foot at mid-level, returning to state 1, with the body weight on the left leg and the right leg free. This forms a cycle that can be repeated several times. The cycle may depend on the change of music, choreographic evolutions, communication between the dance group to make a change, or the choice of each dancer. During fieldwork, up to 32 musical phrases were observed repeating this motif, as it is the one used to move forward and cover large distances on stage.

The double circle in state 1 indicates that this is where the motif ends, regardless of the number of repetitions performed. In this example, the motif ends in the same state in which it began, with the body weight supported on the left foot and the right leg free to execute another movement.

The logic of the diagrams always follows the same rules that correspond to the general rules of FSA:

1. Circles represent *states*.
2. Arrows represent *transitions*.
3. A set of possible *actions* (dance movements) enables the dancer to transition from one state to another.
4. An arrow with no origin pointing at a circle represents the *initial state*. There can only be one initial state.
5. The double circle in a state symbolises a *final state*; it is where the dance should end. There can be several final states.

An innovation to the FSA method in this research is the deployment of Motif Notation. Thus, the action that leads to a transition from one state to another is represented using a Motif Notation symbol. The size of the symbols is in proportion to their duration. In Figure 5, therefore, the symbols appear twice as long as those of most of the transitions. In addition, the transition arrows reflect the decision to provide an overall diagram at the end of each section, bringing together the five different motives and providing a visual representation of the possible movements.

In the following diagrams, we explain only the states and transitions, as the underlying logic remains the same. For a clearer understanding of the FSA diagrams, we suggest reviewing them simultaneously with the score in Figure 4.

4.2.2. mM_2

The distribution of transitions and states in Figure 6 is as follows:

- *Initial transition*: preparation to support the body on the left leg only.
- *State 1*: body weight supported on the left leg and the right leg free.
- *Transition from 1 to 2*: right step forward at mid-level.
- *State 2*: body weight supported on the right leg and the left leg free.
- *Transition from 2 to 1*: stand on both feet in place, with flexion.

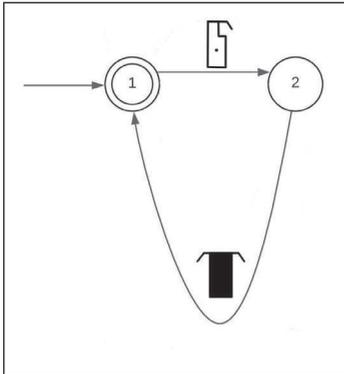


Figure 6. FSA diagram corresponding to movement motif mM_2 (notated in Figure 4).

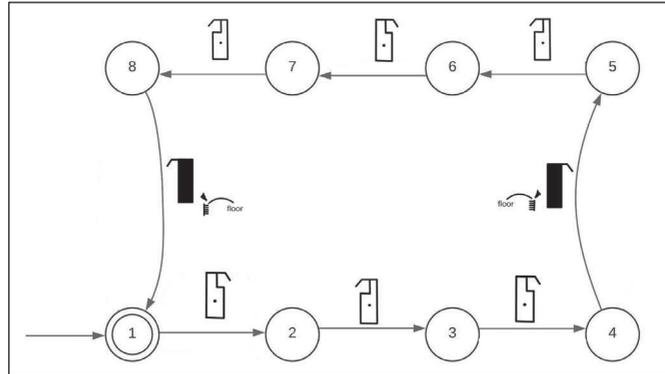


Figure 7. FSA diagram corresponding to movement motif mM_3 (notated in Figure 4)

4.2.3. mM_3

The distribution of transitions and states in Figure 7 is as follows:

- *Initial transition*: preparation to support the body on the left leg only.
- *State 1*: body weight supported entirely on the left leg.
- *Transition from 1 to 2*: right step forward at middle level.
- *State 2*: body weight supported on the right leg and the left leg free.
- *Transition from 2 to 3*: left step forward at medium level.
- *State 3*: body weight supported on the left leg and the right leg free.
- *Transition from 3 to 4*: right step forward at medium level.
- *State 4*: body weight is supported entirely on the right leg.
- *Transition from 4 to 5*: flexion of the right leg supporting the body weight.

At the beginning of this flexion, the toes of the left foot contact the floor with a strong accent.

- *State 5*: body weight supported entirely on the right leg.
- *Transition from 5 to 6*: left step forward at medium level.
- *State 6*: body weight supported entirely on the left leg.
- *Transition from 6 to 7*: right step forward at medium level.
- *State 7*: body weight supported entirely on the right leg.
- *Transition from 7 to 8*: left step forward at medium level.
- *State 8*: body weight supported entirely on the left leg.
- *Transition from 8 to 1*: flexion of the left leg while supporting the body weight.

At the beginning of this flexion, the toes of the right foot contact the floor with a strong accent.

4.2.4. mM_4

The distribution of transitions and states in Figure 8 is as follows:

- *Initial transition*: preparation to support the body weight on the left leg only
- *State 1*: body weight supported entirely on the left leg.
- *Transition from 1 to 2*: right step forward at medium level.
- *State 2*: body weight supported entirely on the right leg.
- *Transition from 2 to 3*: left step forward at medium level.
- *State 3*: body weight supported entirely on the left leg.
- *Transition from 3 to 4*: right step forward at medium level.

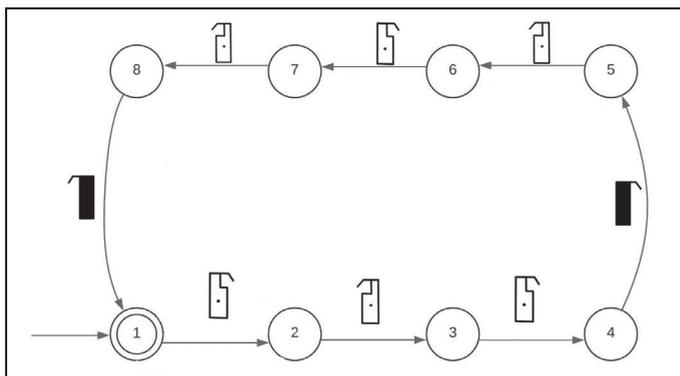


Figure 8. FSA diagram corresponding to movement motif mM_4 (notated in Figure 4).

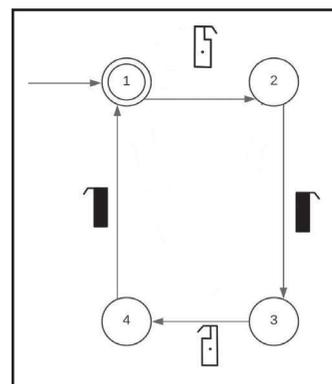


Figure 9. FSA diagram corresponding to movement motif mM_5 (notated in Figure 4).

- *State 4*: body weight supported entirely on the right leg.
- *Transition from 4 to 5*: flexion of the right leg that supports the body weight.
- *State 5*: body weight supported entirely on the right leg.
- *Transition from 5 to 6*: left step forward at medium level.
- *State 6*: body weight supported entirely on left leg.
- *Transition from 6 to 7*: right step forward at medium level.
- *State 7*: body weight supported entirely on the right leg.
- *Transition from 7 to 8*: left step forward at medium level.
- *State 8*: body weight supported entirely on the left leg.
- *Transition from 8 to 1*: flexion of the left leg that supports the body weight.

4.2.5. mM_5

The distribution of transitions and states in Figure 9 is as follows:

- *Initial transition*: preparation to support the body on the left leg only.
- *State 1*: body weight supported entirely on left leg.
- *Transition from 1 to 2*: right step forward at medium level.
- *State 2*: body weight supported entirely on the right leg.
- *Transition from 2 to 3*: flexion of the right leg that supports the body weight.
- *State 3*: body weight supported entirely on the right leg.
- *Transition from 3 to 4*: left step forward at medium level.
- *State 4*: body weight supported entirely on the left leg.
- *Transition from 4 to 1*: flexion of the left leg that supports the body weight.

4.3. Finite-State Diagram of Traveling Motif Variants (mT) in *Cumbia Cienaguera*

FSA diagrams are designed to represent the full range of movement possibilities available to a dancer, while also excluding combinations that are either unperformed or unperformable (e.g., sequences not typically enacted by dancers). In the context of this research, however, each diagram corresponds to a specific motif variant performed by a particular dancer. Accordingly, the diagrams are drawn separately, as each circuit (i.e., sequence of states) is unique to the individual performer. Moreover, during the observation, documentation, and analysis of *Cumbia Cienaguera* as performed by the San Felipe dance group, participants consistently repeated the same movement motifs and their associated circuits. Nonetheless, a deliberate

decision was made to combine all observed possibilities into a single diagram at the end of the section, in order to provide a comprehensive graphic representation of the full range of movement options enacted across performers.

Figure 10 combines the representation of five of the variants that the dancers of the *San Felipe* dance group perform to traverse the stage when dancing *Cumbia Cienaguera*. In each case, the transitions have been marked with a different colour to facilitate visual recognition. Each circuit corresponds to one of the movement scores recorded in Figure 4 and to each of the diagrams shown above.

Having this combined Figure allows us to compare the different variants of movement or traveling motifs and draw specific conclusions:

- All the variants start and end in the same state, with the body being supported on the left leg, while the right leg is free to perform the next movement.
- The first transition of the five variants is a step forward with the right foot at mid-level.
- The difference is that four of these variants perform this motif in one beat, while one variant performs it in two beats.
- Forward steps at medium level predominate across the variants. This is expected since we are comparing variants of a travelling motif, but it is useful to have a systematic confirmation of this fact.
- Observations about the movement of Mr. Guillermo (mM_3) and the adaptations and additions he makes to the motifs are evident in the circuit; it is the only one that includes additional gestures in addition to the changes of support.

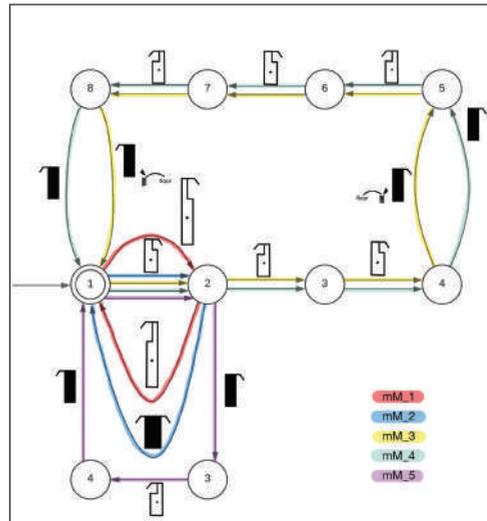


Figure 10. Combined FSA diagram of possibilities for the motifs for moving/traveling in the *Cumbia Cienaguera*.

The same syntax process was applied to the other two categories of movement motifs performed in the *Cumbia Cienaguera*. For clarity and brevity, we present only the final FSA diagrams in the following sections. For a more detailed analysis, please refer to Chapter 3 in Limón Silicéo (2024).

4.4. Finite-State Diagram of Remaining-in-Place Motif Variants (mP) in *Cumbia Cienaguera*

Figure 11 presents a combined representation of five variants of remaining-in-place motifs (mP) as performed by members of the *San Felipe* dance group. In each case, the transitions for each circuit corresponding to different variants are marked with a different colour.

From Figure 11, we conclude the following:

- All the variants start and end in the same state, with the body weight being supported by the left leg, while the right leg is free to perform the next movement;
- In this case, the predominant motifs are alternating support between the right and left feet, which are in place at the middle level;
- Some steps forward, backward, or sideways appear, but they are immediately compensated by the opposite movement in order to maintain the position in space;

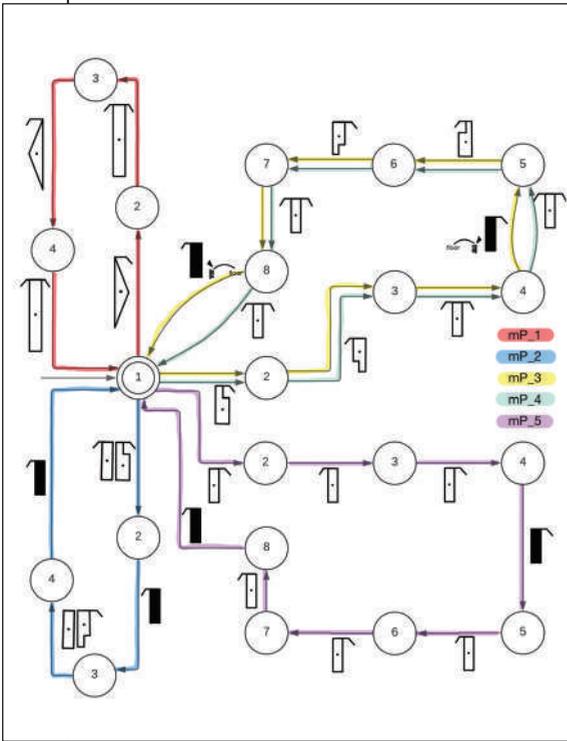


Figure 11. Combined FSA diagram of possibilities for the motifs of remaining in place in the *Cumbia Cienaguera*.

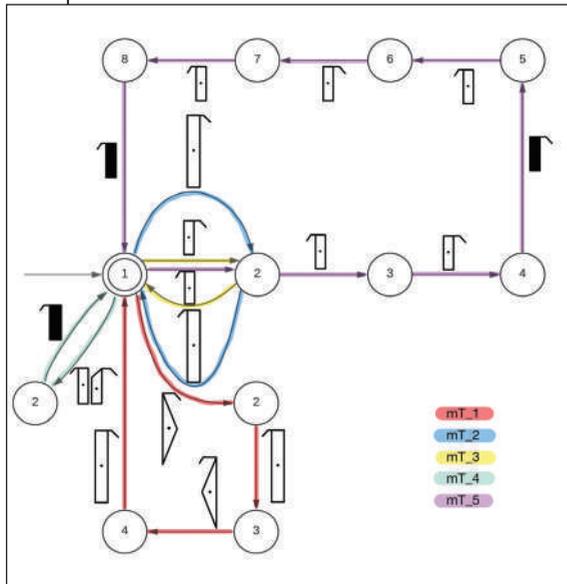


Figure 12. Combined FSA diagram of possibilities for the motifs of turning in the *Cumbia Cienaguera*.

- Once again, the circuit in yellow is the only one that includes leg gestures in addition to the supports;
- Compared to Figure 10, only two circuits share the transition from state 1 to state 2. The other circuits are executed without sharing elements to a significant degree.

4.5. Finite-State Diagram of Turning Motif Variants (mT) in *Cumbia Cienaguera*

Figure 12 combines the representation of five of the variants performed by members of the *San Felipe* dance group while turning in the *Cumbia Cienaguera*. In each variant, the transitions are marked with a different colour.

From Figure 12, we conclude the following:

- All the variants start and end in the same state, with the body weight being supported by the left leg, while the right leg is free to perform the next movement;
- The predominant motifs are alternating supports between the right and left foot, performed in place at the middle level;
- In three of the circuits, the transition from state 1 to state 2 is made with a support on the right foot support at middle level. Two of these circuits alternate this motif to complete the phrase.
- Figure 12 presents the motif elements that constitute turning motif variants (mT), but it does not include turning symbols. Identifying an appropriate notation convention for this action remains an open task for future work.

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

5. Discussion

We consider that FSA diagrams combined with Motif Notation offer a clear and precise representation of the variety of movement motifs, as well as their potential connections as possibilities for differently abled bodies and improvisational options in the performance of the *Cumbia Cienaguera* dance. The diagrams become useful tools to present essential information regarding the movements in this dance at first glance.

5.1. Reflections from the analysis of each individual FSA diagram.

Temporal duration: The FSA diagrams provide information about the temporal duration of the traveling or movement motifs at first glance.

In each diagram, many of the symbols are of the same height, which indicates a similar temporal duration. For example, in diagram mM_1 (Figure 10), the blue, yellow, green, and purple circuits have symbols of similar height. Referring to the corresponding scores (Figure 4), we notice that each movement motif is executed in 1/4 time (equivalent to half a musical measure, since the piece of music is executed in a measure of 2/4). But in the same diagram, the red circuit has longer symbols because their duration is 2/4, as notated in the score.

Predominance of a movement type: The FSA diagrams give information about the predominance of one type of movement symbol at first glance, giving information about its particular direction and level.

For example, in Figure 10 the prevalence of forward symbols at the middle level is clear, which shows that the motif is used to move forward. In Figure 11, place symbols are predominant, which shows that these movement sequences are used to remain in place.

Ornaments and variations: The FSA diagrams provide immediate insight into ornaments and movement variations that enrich the dance sequences.

In two of the three diagrams, additional symbols appear alongside the base motif. These are displayed in smaller size and placed next to the main symbol, suggesting a movement action that functions as a subtle variant, accent, or expressive highlight within the sequence. This can be seen in Figures 9 and 10, particularly in the yellow circuits, and corresponds to the execution of a dancer who enjoys incorporating technically complex variants.

Variety of possibilities: The FSA diagrams allow us to understand the variety of movement possibilities for different bodies in a dance piece—a variety that is often notated as if there was only one way (possibility) of executing the movement, thereby implying that all dancers move identically and in synchrony.

This point is crucial because folkloric dance performances are often characterised as sequences of identical movements performed uniformly by all participants. At first glance, ensemble execution may appear perfectly synchronised, suggesting a loss of individual expression in favour of uniformity. However, the diagrams provide strong evidence to the contrary. The colour-coded differentiation reveals meaningful differences in the three cases we analysed. These visualizations highlight the subtle richness and variability in execution, affirming that personal interpretation and bodily specificity persist, even within highly coordinated group performances.

5.2. Reflections from a comparison of the three combined diagrams for different motif categories.

Variety comparison: FSA diagrams reveal which motif category exhibits greater variety.

When examining the diagrams corresponding to the three types of motifs—traveling (Figure 10), remaining in place (Figure 11), and turning (Figure 12)—it becomes evident that the diagram for the “remaining in place” motifs displays the greatest variability (Figure 11). This is visually apparent in the four distinct paths shown, compared to only two in Figure 10 and three in Figure 12. The increased variety is also confirmed by the number of times state 2



is deployed in the FSA: once in Figure 10, three times in Figure 12, and four times in Figure 11. These state transitions, marked by the circled number 2, provide a quantifiable indicator of the degree of variation across motif categories.

Individual patterns. The FSA diagrams make it possible to identify consistent movement patterns performed by the same individual across different motif categories.

In terms of movement variation, all three diagrams show additional movements in the yellow-coloured circuit, which stands out from the others and corresponds to ornaments added to the basic movement motifs. Regarding movement duration, the red circuit consistently features longer symbols, indicating that this dancer performs movements over a longer span of time. A third observation comes from the blue circuit, which in Figures 9 and 11 includes only two traveling motifs that are repeated frequently. This may reflect a preference for repetition, but when considered alongside the dancer's personal context—shown in Figure 4—it corresponds to a performer with a hip prosthesis and reduced mobility. Finally, comparing the green and yellow circuits in Figures 9 and 10 reveals a similar path that diverges only in a few transitions. According to Table 1, the green circuit belongs to one of the group's founding members, who aims to reproduce the sequence as originally learned. In contrast, the yellow circuit corresponds to a dancer known for incorporating embellishments into the choreography.



6. Conclusions

Consider the case of the *San Felipe* dance group, where Carmen is an elderly woman with reduced mobility, Isabel is a woman with hip prostheses, Guillermo is a man who tends to add variants to the movements he performs, Élida is a woman with occasional low back pain, while Luis is a man who executes the movements as they are taught by the choreographer. How would you notate a motif from any dance in their repertoire—say the *Cumbia Cienaguera*—given that each of these five dancers performs the motifs differently?

At first, we might believe that Labanotation offers a solution, but it would actually produce five different scores, each corresponding to a different realisation of the dance motif for each of the dancers. How, then, could we arrive at a unified understanding of the motif? One option would be to choose one of these five scores—the one we believe is “correct” according to some criterion—but this would fail to capture the diversity of movement present in the actual performance. Another option would be to create a single score that functions as a kind of “average,” incorporating features from each dancer's motif. However, this option would result in a score that none of the dancers in the *San Felipe* dance group actually performs. Moreover, how would we decide what features of which score to include in our “average”? Besides, we would need a systematic method of comparing the different scores of the different realisations. This leads us to propose the method of Finite-State Automata (FSA) combined with Motif Notation, for it enables a comparison between different realisations. The method does not reduce dance variety, it represents it. While the method does rely on movement analysis and notation, these serve as departure points for a comparison that produces a nuanced understanding of movement possibilities and variability within a dance.

More specifically, this study highlights the importance of studying dance syntax and demonstrates its fruitful application to the *Cumbia Cienaguera*, a Colombian folk piece performed by the *San Felipe* dance group, composed of older adults. The research is grounded

in fieldwork conducted by Marisol Limón, the lead author of this work, during her fieldwork in Cali, Colombia. Additionally, it builds upon prior research conducted by the second author, Juan Miranda, who developed and proposed the application of the FSA method to characterise the syntax of a dance. This interdisciplinary collaboration enabled the integration of rigorous empirical data with an innovative theoretical approach. By employing FSA diagrams in combination with Motif Notation, the study captured and represented the variants in dance motifs performed by dancers with diverse physical and creative capabilities. The graphical and conceptual tools make it possible to visualise and understand how diverse movement possibilities emerge from an apparently uniform context (the performance of a single motif), revealing a diversity that enriches collective performance.

The inclusion of participants with diverse physical abilities underscores the value of the *San Felipe* dance group as an inclusive and creative space, where individual limitations are not only respected but also integrated to enhance the artistic and communal experience. Thus, the primary contribution of this study lies in its ability to analyse and interrelate the possibilities of movement within a choreographic context, highlighting how factors such as space, individual abilities, and group decisions influence the execution of dance.

When it comes to the import of our method to ethnochoreology, the discussion in Section 5 shows that FSA diagrams combined with Motif Notation provide valuable insights into movement structure and variation. First, they yield information about the temporal duration of the motifs and the predominance of a particular movement at first glance, which also makes it possible to retrieve information on movement direction and level. Second, they allow us to understand the variety of movement possibilities available for different bodies in a dance piece—a variety that is often notated as if there was only one possible execution, implying that all dancers move identically and in synchrony. Third, they enable us to identify which motif category has a greater variety (i.e., traveling/movement motifs, motifs to remain in place, or turning motifs). Fourth, the method enables the researcher to identify consistent movement patterns performed by the same dancer across different motif categories.

The approach proposed in this work takes movement analysis only as a point of departure. Its primary concern is *syntax*, understood as the interrelation and comparison of the variety of movement patterns in a dance in order to identify the principles that underlie the combination of movement sequences. The FSA method combined with Motif Notation is a versatile tool that researchers can apply to study other dance forms, exploring the structure and possibilities of movement. This methodology opens new perspectives for research in ethnochoreology, enabling a deeper understanding of dance dynamics as a form of diverse cultural and social expression.

Acknowledgements

We dedicate this paper to the memory of János Fügedi, an outstanding ethnochoreologist, a world-class movement notator, and a kind teacher who inspired both authors of this work and many generations of younger scholars. We are also grateful to the two reviewers for their insightful and rigorous feedback.

NOTES

1. Henceforth, the group's name *San Felipe Apóstol* will be abbreviated to *San Felipe*, to reflect the colloquial way in which its own members refer to it.

2. National folk ballet companies are ensembles that stage dance works rooted in the folkloric cultural identity of

specific contexts—whether local, regional, or national. These companies emphasise synchronised movement and precisely defined choreography, meticulously crafted to align with structured musical patterns.

3. Bakka and Karoblis (2010) maintain that dance has two



dimensions: realization and concept. They explain that “the realization is the actual dancing of a dance. The concept for the same dance is the potential of skills, understanding, and knowledge that enables an individual or a dance community to dance that particular dance and to recognise and relate to each particular realization of it” (Bakka and Karoblis 2010, 172–3).

4. An example of the realisation of this dance, recorded during fieldwork can be found on the YouTube channel of the San Felipe group: (FACSFA 2023).

5. This refers to the fact that in Labanotation symbols must be placed inside a staff (score), which provides specific information about their direction, level, time of realisation, and which part of the body is being moved.

6. All informants consented to the inclusion of their first names in this work.

7. The musical meter of the *Cumbia Cienaguera* is in 2/4, and 8 bars make up a musical phrase in almost the entire piece.

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That Which Remains. The Role of Fonadan Notation in the Establishment of the Mexican Field of Folkloric Dance and its Terminology¹

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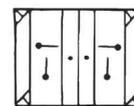
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ABSTRACT

In 1972 the Mexican government established the *Fondo Nacional para el Desarrollo de la Danza Popular Mexicana* (Fonadan) as the first institute focused on the research of the nation's traditional dances. The Fonadan implemented a notation system for floor plans and later another system for "steps," both Laban-based. During the two decades, both systems were used in several important publications; however, almost half a century later, very little has been written about Fonadan. After its closure in 1985, the whereabouts of the complete Fonadan archive remain unclear. Nonetheless, the dance research and recording practices established by Fonadan had a substantial impact on the professional dance schools in Mexico City and laid the foundations for traditional dance research throughout the country. This article navigates the fields of Mexican traditional dance and the history and anthropology of dance. The methodological approaches used here are autoethnography and notation analysis. Through this research, I aim to elucidate Fonadan's role in the establishment of the Mexican field of folkloric dance by investigating how dance notation was used to consolidate a terminology that is still in use. The notion of "popular" dance employed in the creation of Fonadan during the so-called Echeverrista populism of the 1970s allows me to question the research and preservation practices that Fonadan established in the field. Finally, through this essay, I intend to provide a better understanding of the history of Mexican dance and the importance of dance notation in the field.

KEYWORDS

Keywords: Fonadan; dance notation; Josefina Lavalle; popular dance; archive.



Introduction. My first encounters with the *Fondo Nacional para el Desarrollo de la Danza Popular Mexicana*

At a young age, I realized how much I enjoyed Mexican folkloric dance, but I did not imagine it would become my profession. Like many Mexicans, I encountered dance as a way of representing *lo mexicano*² during end-of-the-year elementary school recitals.³ During middle school, I continued this practice in one of the after-school clubs. Later, I joined my high school's *grupo de danza folklórica* [folkloric dance group] and then the *Compañía de Danza Folklórica Yumari* [Yumari folkloric dance group]⁴ that was organized by my hometown. After that, I began to accompany my teacher to dance courses. Finally, I attended national dance conferences on my own.

During my second year of high school, the Section 5 of the *Sindicato Nacional de los Trabajadores de la Educación* [National Union of Education Workers] (SNTE) organized a diploma course in folkloric dance in my hometown, Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila. This course, aimed at the teachers of the National Education System, was directed by José Guadalupe Villegas, professor at the *Escuela de Artes* [Arts School] of the SNTE Section 5. Within this course, I encountered for the first time the so-called “dance notation,” a system of symbols for recording dance. As part of the theoretical content of the Diploma, Villegas shared with us a collection of photocopies bearing a logo in the shape of a face. That face was composed of two hands which served as eyes, and a snail-shaped mouth with a forked tongue. Beneath the logo was the word “Fonadan,” an acronym for the *Fondo Nacional para el Desarrollo de la Danza Popular Mexicana* [National Fund for the Development of Mexican Popular Dance]⁵ (see Figure 1). Being young, I was only interested in learning a new repertoire and did not foresee the importance of those handouts or the role they would play in my professional future.



Fig. 1. Fonadan Logo in *Los Moros* (1983).

According to the Mexican dance researcher Hilda Rodríguez (1988), the Fonadan was created with the purpose of “systematically studying and recording the traditional dances of our country, to preserve, revise, disseminate and make them available to teachers, students, dancers, choreographers and researchers in the social sciences” (576). Apart from my early encounter with the Fonadan photocopies, I first became conscious of the existence of the Fonadan in 2008, during my professional training in Mexican folkloric dance at the *Escuela Nacional de Danza Folklórica* [National School of Folkloric Dance] (ENDF).⁶ I frequently heard my teachers talking about the institution that had deeply influenced their careers during the 1970s. They recalled the golden era when traditional dance was researched and when there was a rich contact between the *Academia de la Danza Mexicana* [Academy of Mexican Danza] (ADM) and the indigenous dancers brought by the Fonadan to the ADM. Throughout the four years of my training (2008–2012), the Fonadan became a sort of mythical institution for me. In this way, the stories of my teachers fueled my curiosity about that institution and hence shaped this research.

In order to allow two sorts of repertoires—the traditional one and the versions reworked by the folkloric dance community—to coexist, Fonadan employed a particular dance notation and implemented mechanisms of collection, research, and publication. A few Mexican researchers have written about the Fonadan. For example, the anthropologist Amparo Sevilla (1990) criticized Fonadan’s pretension to “develop” indigenous knowledge by using popular dance for tourism. Others, such as the musician Carlos Emilio Sosa (2015), have mainly listed Fonadan’s publications and collaborators, but without differentiating between publications and pedagogical materials, without examining the cultural policies of the time, without investigating the research practices of the period, or without analyzing Fonadan notation systems. To comprehend the role of Fonadan and its notation system in the establishment of the Mexican field of folkloric dance and its terminology, I highlight the institutions under which Fonadan was created. I also review the implications of political populism during Luis Echeverría’s presidential administration in the creation of the Fonadan. I investigate how the 1985 earthquake influenced the demise of the Fonadan and what changes in cultural policies during the period meant for the institution. Finally, I analyze how Fonadan notation

contributed to the development of Mexican folkloric dance terminology in a way that continues to this day.

The present research takes a qualitative approach to the realms of dance studies, history of dance, and anthropology of dance. The main methodological approaches used here are archival research, autoethnographic accounts, and notation analysis. In response to the scarcity of material available on Fonadan, I navigate the academic field of Mexican folkloric dance, and I examine its process of institutionalization in the specific context of the Fonadan. Here, I attempt to understand the notions of dance identity expressed in Fonadan notation, and their consequences for the terminology used in Mexican folkloric dance. With this research, I hope to contribute to the historicisation of the Mexican folkloric dance.



Studying folkloric dance in academia: The institutionalization of Mexican traditional dance education at the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature

During my first years in Mexican folkloric dance, it never crossed my mind that the *maestros* of this discipline had formally studied in any school. It was not until my encounter with Joel Rentería, director of the *Compañía de Danza Folklórica Yumari* [Yumari folkloric dance company], that I became aware of the professionalization of folkloric dance. During that period, Rentería's teachings became my guiding principles in dance. When the time came to begin my professional studies at the ENDF of the *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura* [National Institute Fine Arts and Literature] (INBAL), in Mexico City, I became aware of different theoretical and embodied approaches to dance, as well as the historical and social complexities of professional folkloric dance training in Mexico.

Throughout their 80 years of existence, INBAL professional dance schools have undergone various changes. Some of these changes have triggered ruptures within the institutions and, consequently, the creation of new schools. In this section, I outline the trajectory of professional training in dance in Mexico City, from the 1930s to the 1970s, the decade in which Fonadan was created. Since professional dance training in Mexico was centred in Mexico City, I focus here on the INBAL schools.

In 1930, Hipólito Zybin, a Russian classical dancer, presented to the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* [Secretariat of Public Education] (SEP) the project that gave rise to the professional path of dance education in Mexico. According to journalist and dance researcher César Delgado (1985), Zybin arrived in Mexico in the late 1920s. It was not until 1931 that the SEP launched its project, named the *Escuela de Plástica Dinámica* [School of Dynamic Plastique] (EPD).

With the creation of the *Departamento de Bellas Artes* on 15 January 1932, the EPD closed its doors. Nevertheless, the EPD was a watershed in the later development of professional dance schools. Although, in practice, the EPD did not offer a professional career in folkloric dance, it did include the subject of "Mexican Dances" (Delgado 1985). The arts and education researcher Irma Fuentes Mata (1995) states that during this period the teachers at this newly established school drew on their experiences as "cultural missionaries"⁷ a role in which they were in contact with indigenous communities.

After the closure of the EPD, the newly created Department of Fine Arts founded the *Escuela de Danza* [School of Dance], with the painter Carlos Mérida as director and the dancer and choreographer Nellie Campobello as his assistant (Ramos 2009a). Mérida's relationship with a select group of influential artists in the country led the school to follow the nationalist



trend promoted by the post-revolutionary government. According to dance researcher Roxana Ramos (2009b), a characteristic of *Escuela de Danza*'s proposal was "recovering the dance and musical work of the indigenous people to work it plastically and technically in order to take it to the stage" (38). While the *Escuela de Danza* offered classical dance as its central training, the transformation of traditional dance for stage performance became a common practice, later repeated in other dance institutions.

In February 1947, a group of dancers, alumnae of the *Escuela de Danza*, brought together by Carlos Chávez, founded the *Academia de la Danza Mexicana* (ADM) as a professional dance company whose objectives were to experiment, create, research, and disseminate Mexican modern dance (Tortajada 2005). These dancers had been expelled from the School of Dance due to a conflict with the director, Nellie Campobello. This conflict became one of the catalysts for the creation of ADM, with Guillermina Bravo as director and Ana Mérida as subdirector. Furthermore, Chávez attempted to reconcile the two factions of Mexican modern dance: the "Waldeenas," guided by the American-born choreographer Waldeen von Felkenstein, Bravo's teacher, and the "Sokolowas" led by the American-born Anna Sokolow, Mérida's teacher, through the creation of the ADM.

Although initially conceived as a modern dance company, from the 1955-1956 academic year, the ADM began to focus on educational work. In response to this shift, two programs were created: 1) "Modern Dance Performer," a five-year programme; and 2) "Regional Dance Performer," a three-year programme (Ferreiro 2009a). It should be noted that in the 1950s, the training in regional dance was the first programme specialized in folkloric dance offered by the INBA schools in Mexico City.

With Josefina Lavalle⁸ as principal, the first modification of the ADM's syllabus came in 1959. At the request of the classical dance community, the ADM decided to develop three professional programmes: classical dance, modern dance, and regional dance – each a nine-year programme. Nevertheless, a little more than two decades later, in 1972, also under Lavalle's administration, the members of the Technical-Pedagogical Commission proposed the notion of the "Integral Dancer," with two programmes: *Bailarín de Danza de Concierto* [Concert Dance Performer] (classical and contemporary dance), an eight-year programme, and *Bailarín de Danza Mexicana* [Mexican Dance Performer] (modern and folkloric dance), a six-year programme.

In addition to the curricular modification at the ADM, in 1972, the Fonadan was created to support the Mexican Dance programme. Josefina Lavalle, recalls:

There was still a program in Mexican Dance, and I always disagreed with the way the folkloric dance area was handled. I felt that it was very bad, that we had to give it a booster shot because we could not go on like that. We didn't really know where the traditional was and where the theatrical began. The important thing was to return to the real sources of popular dance in our country. (Lavalle quoted in Tortajada 1998, 101)

The support that Fonadan provided to the Mexican Dance Performer programme was well received by the students, who met with and learned from the indigenous communities. The dance researcher Elizabeth Cámara, then a student at the ADM, notes:

the activities of the Fonadan would give me the opportunity to get to know the dances and dancers that week after week arrived from different parts of the country, treasures that were shown on the esplanade of the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* [National Museum of Anthropology]. (Cámara 2017, 112)

In addition, Ferreiro, also an ADM alumnus, recalls, “the creation of Fonadan stands out, thanks to which we folkloric dance students learned new dances directly from the informants” (Ferreiro 2009b: 97). However, the Concert Dance programme was not well received by the classical dance community. This disagreement led to the creation of another educational institution in dance, the ENDF, and the ADM itself was closed for a period of four years.

In 1978, the INBAL created the *Sistema Nacional para la Enseñanza Profesional de la Danza* [National System for Professional Dance Education] (SNEPD). Thus, with the establishment of the SNEPD, three schools were consolidated: *Escuela Nacional de Danza Clásica* (ENDCI), *Escuela Nacional de Danza Contemporánea* (ENDC), and *Escuela Nacional de Danza Folklórica* (ENDF) (Ramos 2009b; Tortajada 2006). With this proposal, the INBAL established its first school specifically dedicated to Mexican folkloric dance.

Regarding folkloric dance within the SNEPD, the ENDF took and adapted the content and programmes of the ADM Mexican Dance program to form the syllabus for *Ejecutante de Danza Folklórica* [Performer in Folkloric Dance], a six-year programme, and for *Maestro de Danza Folklórica* [Folkloric Dance Teacher], with an additional year. Thus, despite the Mexican classical dance community distancing themselves from the ADM’s proposal, the field of folkloric dance continued, while, through the work of the Fonadan, the ADM heritage represented a guide for the ENDF (ENDF 1979). This is the institution where I began my professional training in folkloric dance in 2008.

Given the simplification that I must make in this abbreviated historical account of professional dance training in Mexico, I am aware that I do not fully present the historical and political complexities that influenced the discipline of folkloric dance. This remains to be studied elsewhere. However, given the lack of literature in English on the professional education for Mexican folkloric dancers, I find it important to provide some context for Fonadan’s place in the institutionalization of Mexican folkloric dance. In the following section, I address the Echeverrist era populism, the political movement that gave rise to the Fonadan.



The politics of the Echeverrist populism movement: The government protects the indigenous people and their dance culture

Populism, described by historian Enrique Krauze (2016, 15) as an “endemic evil of Latin America,” is considered by the sociologist Jorge Basurto (1969) as a mechanism designed to control the population, particularly marginalized groups. According to political science professor Soledad Loaeza (2001), the three characteristics of populism are: a vertical relationship between the leader and the masses, the idealization of the people as victims of power, and hostility towards hegemonic institutions and classes. Thus, despite the difficulty of defining the various populist movements (Basurto 1969; Entrena 2001; Hermet 2001; Jingsheng 2018), Loaeza insists that populist movements attempt to vindicate the authentic traditions of the people and protect them from the dangers of external forces, while being “anti-elitist, anti-capitalist, anti-liberal and xenophobic” (2001, 366).

In Mexico, with the presidential triumph of Luis Echeverría Álvarez in 1970, the government official reinstated populism.⁹ This political approach, based on indigenism and intense nationalism, sought to favor the idea of a “people” made up of the marginalised classes. Loaeza (2001) indicates that this type of populism corresponds to economic populism, which was characterized by an excessive use of public funds for the sake of political control. In his

inaugural speech, Echeverría (1970) convincingly expressed that, “for the Federal Executive, governing will be to distribute equitably the fruits of redoubled efforts; to make the most fortunate regions and groups contribute to the development of the most backward ones.” However, his concern for the “most backward,” already present in his presidential campaign, could be considered either a smokescreen for his alleged responsibility in the massacre of the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* during the student protest of 2 October 1968, or a way to restore the image of the federal executive power that was exhausted during the six-year term of the authoritarian President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970).

Echeverría’s inaugural speech connected him genealogically and ideologically with the Mexican revolution and with the populism of former president Lázaro Cárdenas and therefore with the indigenism celebrated by Cárdenas. Regarding the latter, ethnomusicologist Sydney Hutchinson asserts that indigenism “first appeared during the presidency of the populist Lázaro Cárdenas, who championed Indian rights” (2009, 210). According to Hutchinson, the anthropologists of this era elaborated a romanticized idea of indigenous people, which contributed to the construction of a national identity—a concept that Hutchinson describes as slippery and insubstantial.

Echeverría focused on domestic tourism to provide “a vehicle for Mexicans to travel more frequently and show their children the roads of their homeland” (1970). He intended Mexicans to become connoisseurs of indigenous culture and to ignore the “foreign,” which he cataloged as “manifestations of bad taste.” Indeed, some authors highlight the way in which the president and the first lady, María Esther Zuno, wore traditional clothing—such as guayaberas and huipiles—and colorful clothes in official events, seeking to portray an indigenous, colorful, and happy Mexico. Dance researcher Patricia Salas (2019) also highlights the interest in traditional knowledge shown by the presidential couple, although according to Salas this demonstrated their commitment to Mexican culture and positioned them as patrons of traditional and folkloric dance.

According to Salas, the motivation beyond the creation of Fonadan was Zuno’s concern that, “all the dances that were performed in different regions of the country should be registered, preserved and disseminated” (2019, 244). Faced with the need to create an institute dedicated to the study of traditional dance, Xóchitl Medina, a collaborator of Zuno, prepared a document to support the creation of Fonadan. Medina (quoted in Salas 2019) argued that:

There is a gradual and progressive deterioration of the classical Mexican forms and a constant mixture and personal additions to these expressions.

Due to the phenomenon of mass media, we notice [observe] a deformation of national styles, cultural colonial subordination to commercialized expressions outside our reality.

There is an urban concentration of the existing resources; on the other hand, there is an abandonment and marginalization of the rural sectors and smaller populations. [...]

The maintenance and conservation of materials and material expressions have been neglected, and consequently the dissemination and communication of the national cultural wealth are almost non-existent. (246-7)

In view of these premises and the political framework of populism, the Echeverría administration created Fonadan. As I will demonstrate, Fonadan’s notion of popular dance that originally was a practice of the subaltern classes in opposition to Western concert dance became an instrument of Echeverrist populism.



The creation of Fonadan in the epicenter of Mexico: Mexican popular dance enters into the conversation

“Relax your body, you are holding it as dancers do in *ballet folklórico* [folkloric ballet]!” More or less, those were the words that Nazul Valle addressed to me while I was learning *Montesón*.¹⁰ Nazul was the teacher in Traditional Dances 1 during my first semester at the ENDF. At that time, rather than thinking about changing the organization and the way of moving my own body, I was used to focusing on learning dance steps. I can still remember that embodied experience: my legs were parallel, slightly bent and separated diagonally; my somewhat tense torso leaning backwards; in my right hand I held a *sonaja*¹¹ [rattle] and in my left, the *palma*.¹² My torso was twisting to the right and to the left while I was making an effort to maintain my centre of gravity in that unstable position. The moment I heard my teacher’s words, I wondered what I was doing with my body. At that precise moment I understood that at the ENDF it was important to value the indigenous knowledge rather than the staged version performed by the *ballet folklóricos*. During that semester with Nazul, I first heard about Fonadan, whose work had a definitive impact on the careers of many of my teachers.

Throughout my time at the ENDF, most of the teachers referred at least once to Fonadan. They spoke about a golden era when traditional dance was researched and when there was a rich contact with indigenous dancers. I heard those stories of how, as students at the ADM, my teachers would sneak in to listen to the dancers recording in the classrooms on the third floor or in the infirmary area of what is now the ENDF. I also remember the time when my teacher, Itzel Valle, who taught us Labanotation, brought a few Fonadan booklets that she and her sister, Nazul, had bought when they were teenagers. Itzel handed them to us as if they were national treasures, while sharing her memories as a young student. We passed the booklets from hand to hand with extreme care, contemplating glimpses of the past among the pages full of notation symbols. In this section, I contextualize the creation of the Fonadan in relation to the ADM, and I describe the methodology used at Fonadan to investigate Mexican traditional dance.

In 1972, the Echeverría administration launched an Educational Reform initiative that led to a significant change in the nation’s dance education.¹³ The syllabi of the ADM were modified to focus on an educational model of the “Integral Dancer”¹⁴ rather than on dance genres. The Fonadan was established to support the Mexican Dance program. The then director of the ADM, Josefina Lavalle, stated:

Fonadan was created to support the ADM, particularly its Mexican dance branch that was very weak at that time. Each teacher had his or her own truth about a certain dance, and the truth lay in the original places of dance, in the indigenous communities. That is why we reached out to those villages and their teachers, who were the primary source (Lavalle, quoted in Camacho 2009, 62).

To financially support the creation of Fonadan, the Mexican government instituted a trust fund. According to Lavalle (1973), the justification for Fonadan funding lay in the importance of recording and researching Mexican dance to disseminate it to the public, to preserve original traditions, to create a national identity through dance, to reintegrate the authentic value to Mexican folkloric dance, and to revitalize urban centres by bringing them into contact with the expressions of popular art. Thus, the Credit Department of the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit set up an initial trust fund of 3,000,000 Mexican pesos for the



creation of Fonadan (Lavalle 1973). Lavalle served as executive secretary of the Technical and Administrative Committee of Fonadan, while also holding the position of director of the ADM.

The initial directives of Fonadan were the study of “the basic characteristics of the dances and their distribution by regions” (Lavalle 1973, 21) and the elaboration of an atlas of Mexican dance. To accomplish these tasks, Fonadan produced descriptive cards that collected information on: the name of the most characteristic dances of Mexico’s regions, including linguistic groups, gender and age of the dancers, type of dance, dates on which they were performed, places where they were performed, number of musicians, and types of musical instruments. Originally, Fonadan staff consisted of fourteen members, among whom were the so-called fathers of Mexican folkloric dance, Luis Felipe Obregón and Marcelo Torreblanca. Subsequently, Fonadan’s multidisciplinary team increased to about twenty specialists, including dancers, ethnomusicologists, choreographers, ethnologists, musicians, photographers, and filmmakers.

After the initial data gathering, Fonadan selected a traditional dance to study by analyzing four aspects: the choreography, through the notation of the dance; the music, through musical analysis, audio recording and notation; the visual, through still photographs and motion picture recordings; and finally the paraphernalia, through the drawing and description of the costumes and objects used in the dance. The various publications produced by the Fonadan addressed these four aspects, accompanied by general ethnographic data on the communities that performed the dances. In addition, as Ferreiro (2009b) and Cámara (2023) describe their student experiences, the kinetic transmission of the dance by the indigenous dancers to ADM students was considered a significant part of Fonadan’s research and dissemination process.

Fonadan’s relationship with the ADM was reflected in the 1972 syllabus. This new programme, the Mexican Dance Performer, was intended to bring students closer to the “authenticity” of traditional dance through four aspects: first, working with informants; second, drawing on Fonadan’s documentary and audiovisual research; third, following Fonadan’s theoretical and practical advice; and finally, introducing the Choreography and Notation course that was considered “essential for the correct understanding, interpretation, and recording of dance forms” (ADM 1982, 13).

Fonadan implemented two different notation systems in choreographic analysis. The first proposal, used in *La danza del Tecuán* (1975), contained floor plans accompanied by the Labanotation symbols for the paths of the dance (see Figure 2). The second system was presented almost a decade later in smaller booklets, such as *Los Moros* (1983), *Los Sonajeros* (1983), and *Danza de las Varitas* (1985). This system, elaborated by Josefina Lavalle,¹⁵ contained some symbols from Labanotation and Yolanda Fuentes¹⁶ systems to describe the steps of the dance, as well as the paths of the dance (see Figure 3).

At the *Encuentro Nacional de Investigación* [National Research Meeting] held at *Cenidi Danza*¹⁷ in 1987, Lavalle presented the terminology used in Fonadan’s second system. This terminology had been developed at the ADM during the 1970s, when Yolanda Fuentes’ notation was tested experimentally with a group of students. These students later used this notation in other institutions, such as the *Colegio de Bachilleres* and the *Centro de Educación Artística* (Cedart). Lavalle wrote:

I have used and developed, to a certain extent, a terminology based on that initiated by students who graduated from one of the most brilliant groups produced by the *Academia de la Danza Mexicana*. I am referring to Alejandra Ferreiro, the current Principal of that school; Elodia Straffon,

who directed, the after me; Luzella Rodríguez, who currently directs them; María Isabel Jiménez, and Ana María Jiménez (1987, 13).



Fig. 2. Fonadan first notation system. *Danza del Tecuán* (1975).

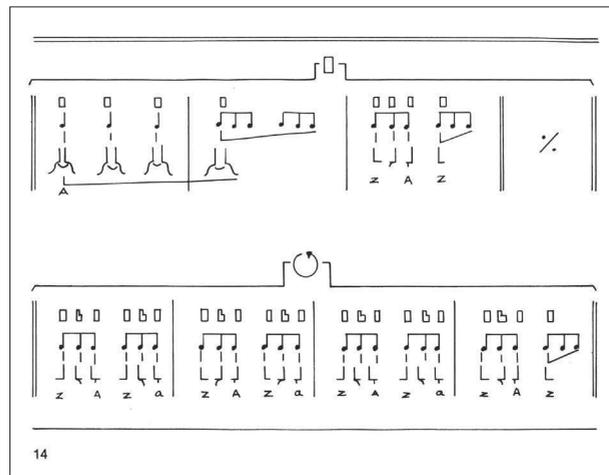


Fig. 3. Fonadan second notation system. *Los Moros* (1983).

The use of Yolanda Fuentes' notation system by the ADM students led them to develop their capacity to analyze repertory, to improve their performance, and in a certain way, to establish a terminology that allowed them to name the movements of traditional dance. That is to say, the use of notation empowered them to improve their *zapateados* and later to systematize their teaching, as Ferreiro (2014) asserts.

Fonadan used its two systems of dance notation in a series of booklets published by Fonadan, the SEP, and the *Dirección General de Culturas Populares* [General Department of Popular Cultures]. These publications were aimed at teachers in the national education system and had didactic and dissemination aims. Fonadan used notation to disseminate traditional dances that it had studied. These publications typically presented the dance terminology used to analyze and notate the dance. Thus, by including this information, the scores contributed to the systematization of a folkloric dance terminology at the national level and to the institutionalization of this genre of dance in different regions of Mexico.

Outreach was another important aspect of Fonadan's activity, although it was related to the tourism promoted by Echeverría. The internal tourism aimed to entertain mainly the residents of Mexico City. Mexican Folkloric Dance teacher Xóchitl Medina was the person in charge of Fonadan's outreach department. The outreach programme aimed to present to the public in Mexico City the dances investigated by Fonadan. These performances took place mainly on the esplanade of the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* [National Museum of Anthropology] and in other public spaces.

On this matter, poet and dance researcher Patricia Camacho (2009) suggests that Fonadan "supported indigenous groups to revitalize, promote, and further develop their traditional dance art" (61). However, anthropologist Amparo Sevilla (1990) argues that the populist character of Fonadan's work created problems among the dance groups performing in Mexico City. Sevilla argues that Fonadan's invitation caused the traditional groups to limit their number of participants in order to comply with the established budget, which led to confrontations among the dancers.

The decontextualization of traditional dance caused by Fonadan—transporting it from the traditional context of the villages to a performance context in Mexico’s capital—promoted capitalist values that influenced the creation of performances designed to appeal to the cosmopolitan public in Mexico City. Due to the lack of documentation, it is almost impossible to know what changes the traditional dances underwent. Although it would be simplistic to assume that indigenous groups had no agency in decision-making about their dance heritage, it could be said that their contact with the epicenter of academic dance in Mexico led to the commodification of the relations between the worlds of traditional dance and Mexican folkloric dance. In fact, the dance research and teaching practices established by Fonadan had a substantial impact on the professional dance schools in Mexico City and laid the foundations for traditional dance research and teaching throughout the country. This was the case for the ADM, the ENDF, and the *Escuela Nacional de Danza Nellie y Gloria Campobello*. These institutions continued the practices established by Fonadan, including fieldwork, work with informants, and the analysis and recording of dance.

Fonadan carried out its work from 1972 to 1985. After thirteen years of operation, the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* [Official Journal of the Federation] (DOF) of 18 February 1985, announced the closure of Fonadan. Yet its work remains rooted in the memory of the members of the folkloric dance community. The important role played by the earthquake of 19 September 1985 in Mexico City in shaping the teaching and training in traditional dance has also been overlooked.



The aftershocks of the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City: The downfall of the Fonadan and Mexican popular dance

After Itzel Valle showed some of Fonadan’s booklets to my cohort, my curiosity about the Fonadan flourished. The impression that those booklets left on me, with their extensive collection of handmade dance scores, musical scores, ethnographic research, and beautiful drawings led me to become more interested in the whereabouts of the Fonadan archive. I repeatedly searched for publications from and about Fonadan, with very little success. Camacho (2009) claims that the archive was abandoned in one of the warehouses of the *Dirección General de Culturas Populares*, but no serious research has been done on the remains of Fonadan.

After the economic disaster caused by the two populist six-year administrations of the 1970s—the first under Echeverría and the second under José López Portillo—the president elected in 1982, Miguel de la Madrid, introduced radical neoliberalism in response to the economic crisis. His austerity policy, as documented in the DOF (18 February 1985), contributed to the dissolution of Fonadan. Thus, what was then called popular dance as a commercial product—which had occupied a central place in the cultural life of Mexico City during the populist administrations—came to be regarded as an unnecessary expense under the new political and economic regime.

According to Basurto (1969), the imprecise ideological policy of populism, together with its opportunism and corruption, implied that the institutions created during these regimes failed to achieve stable consolidation. It was in this context that Fonadan ended its activities. However, the work of Fonadan, both innovative and ambitious, had a lasting impact on the professional training in folkloric dance within the INBA schools, as reported by Ferreiro (2009b), Cámara (2017), and the curricula of these schools in the 1990s. In other

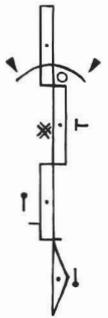
words, as Sevilla (1990) suggests, Fonadan consciously or unconsciously contributed to the spectacularization and academization of traditional Mexican dance.

Its archives, however, continue to be elusive. According to musician Carlos Emilio Sosa (2015), the archive contained: 16 long-playing records, documentation of 28 dance courses, 58 dance monographs, and 150 dance study projects. However, according to Lavalle (quoted in Salas 2019), the Fonadan archive comprised the following items 1,144 location cards, 134 dance files, 1,800 audio tapes, 470 radio programs, 20,000 slides, 270 black-and-white videotapes, 2,000 feet of color film, 55 videocassettes, 12 documentaries, 15,000 negatives, 4 books, 16 records, 12 cassettes, and 10 pamphlets. There is a large discrepancy between Lavalle's inventory in the 1980s and Sosa's listing in 2015, but the reason for it remains unclear.

Although the DOF indicates that Fonadan was closed down with the approval of the President of the Republic, Miguel de la Madrid, the musicologist Enrique Jiménez López (2014) suggests that it was the Secretary of Public Education who decided to dissolve Fonadan. In addition to the lack of clarity about the end of Fonadan, the catastrophe caused by the earthquake of 19 September in Mexico City led the government to focus on the people and areas affected by the disaster. Thus, traditional dance was set aside, regarded as unimportant in the view of the government. In a certain way, it seems as if the earthquake not only collapsed buildings, but also, as a *coup de grace*, buried the work of cultural institutions such as Fonadan. It shook the foundations of research in traditional dance. To date, no governmental effort of comparable magnitude dedicated to the research and documentation of Mexican traditional dance has re-emerged.

In 2013, seeking a deeper understanding of Fonadan's work, I interviewed Professor Antonio Miranda, who studied at the ADM with the cohort who had a meaningful notation experience. He also worked at Fonadan dealing with the informants, and in 1978 he became a professor at the ENDF. His experience teaching traditional dance and notation, and previously working at Fonadan led us, his students, to gain a deep respect for and interest in traditional dance. According to his firsthand account, after Fonadan's disappearance in 1985, the teachers at the ENDF rushed to the INBAL authorities to claim Fonadan's archive, but as Miranda said, "They gave us the finger."

Following the account of Miranda, I searched in the library of *Centro de Información y Documentación Alberto Beltrán* [Center of Information and Documentation Alberto Beltran] in the *Museo de Culturas Populares* [Museum of Popular Cultures] in Mexico City. Fonadan's archive was restricted at the time, but I was able to access only ten of its publications, nine of which contained dance notation. As elusive as Fonadan's material became after 1985, the accounts of my professors inspired me to research the work of that institution and motivated me to reflect on how to access the dance knowledge contained in Fonadan's publications.



My embodied experience: Dance notation, terminology, and repertoire

While writing my dissertation for the *Maestría en Investigación de la Danza* (Master in Dance Research) at the *Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación e Información de la Danza José Limón* [National Centre for Research, Documentation and Information José Limón], I came across the book *El Jarabe... El jarabe ranchero o jarabe de Jalisco* (1988) by Josefina Lavalle. The book was published only a few years after the disappearance of Fonadan (see Figure 4). To my surprise, it contained the score of the *Jarabe* in the notation used by Fonadan. I was thrilled.

Some years later, Professor Sándor Varga invited me to give a lecture for the Choreomundus International Master in Dance Knowledge, Practice, and Heritage. I set myself the task of reading and incorporating the first phrase of the *Jarabe* in order to teach it to the students. To my surprise, I found that the same terminology I had learned at the ENDF had been used by Fonadan. This inspired me to look more closely to what the score contained, to reflect on how Fonadan notation changed in order to adapt to the nature of different dances, and to understand how the notators' approach to the diversity of traditional dance led them to develop a specific folkloric dance terminology.

Fig. 4. *El Jarabe... El jarabe ranchero o jarabe de Jalisco* (1988).

Some authors have discussed dance identity and how dance knowledge is accessed (e.g. Bakka and Karoblis 2010; Van Zile 1985-1986, 1999; and Anderson 1987). While these scholars have examined the context of the Global North and Western concert dance, dances from the Global South have rarely been studied. According to ethnochoreologist Egil Bakka (Bakka and Karoblis 2010), the two dimensions through which dance knowledge can be accessed are Concept and Realisation. While the former refers to the body of knowledge that allows one to dance and recognize “a dance,” the latter notion concerns each particular performance of a dance. On the other hand, the dance critic Jack Anderson (1987) questions whether the identity of the dance lies in the ideas or in the specific movements or instructions for a given piece. Given these discussions, the question arises as to what is written in a dance score.

In the case of Fonadan, its second proposal for notation focused on the analysis of the feet and legs, as shown by the scores produced in the 1980s. This system distributes the information across five rows: 1) the direction of the paths; 2) the direction of the feet; 3)

the duration of the movement; 4) which foot and which part of the foot moves; and 5) the type of movement (see Figure 5). The first, second and fifth columns use a terminology represented by signs, such as *zapateo*, *apoyo*, *zapateo con cambio de peso*, *apoyo con cambio de peso*, *golpe con cambio de peso*, *giro*, *elevación*, and *desplazamiento* (see Figure 6); but the notation assumes the reader's tacit knowledge of how to execute most of these movements.

Choreographer and dance historian Mark Franko (2011) suggests that the notation has historically influenced what we think of as dance and how we experience it. I thus consider that in this context the use of notation transformed the professional education of Mexican folkloric dance. In the following decades, a structuralist approach resulted in this education focusing on the use of terminology. The scores elaborated by Fonadan could help answer the question of what dance is in kinetic and etymological terms, but the question of what the score itself represents remains.

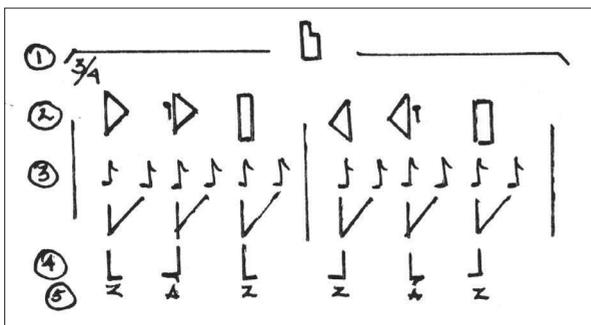


Fig. 5. Fonadan's Step Notation system. Lavalle (1987)

Fig. 6. Fonadan's Terminology. Los Moras (1983)

- J Indica el uso del pie izquierdo.
- L Indica el uso del pie derecho.
- Z Zapateo con cambio de peso.
- 3 Zapateo sin cambio de peso.
- A Apoyo de toda la planta del pie con cambio simultáneo de peso.
- o Apoyo de toda la planta del pie sin cambio de peso.
- Avanzar hacia adelante o simplemente avanzar el pie indicado hacia adelante.
- Avanzar hacia atrás o simplemente avanzar el pie indicado hacia atrás.
- No moverse de su lugar, es decir no desplazarse.
Si se refiere al movimiento del pie, indicará que éste no se desplaza o que vuelve a su lugar.
- ∕ Indica que se repite exactamente igual el trozo señalado entre las líneas dobles del compás.
- L El talón derecho toca el suelo.
- J El talón izquierdo toca el suelo.
- L Indica que el metatarso del pie derecho hace contacto con el piso.
- J Indica que el metatarso del pie izquierdo hace contacto con el piso.
- LJ Indica que sosteniéndose sobre los metatarsos, los talones hacen contacto para golpear uno contra otro.

For her part, the ethnologist and teacher of notation Judy Van Zile (1999) argues that notating dance involves addressing questions about what dance is for both the dance community and the researcher. Regarding the process of notation, in an interview with

Van Zile (1985-86), notator Jane Marriett emphasized the importance of recording what is happening in every precise moment of dance. Furthermore, Marriet asserts that the most important information in the score is who transmitted the dance, to what audience, and who recorded it in notation. According to Marriet, the notator accesses knowledge through the Realisation dimension, i.e. through observing and recording what happens in each rehearsal. Marriet clarifies that her score is not Balanchine's *Stars and Stripes*, but rather Balanchine's *Stars and Stripes* as taught by France Russell. Although Marriet accesses the Concept—community's agreement on what constitutes a *Stars and Stripes*—she makes it clear that, through the Realisation dimension, what she records is a specific version: Russell's.

Given these notions, one can reflect on the relationship between Fonadan's notation, the folkloric dance community, and the notators/researchers at the time. It should be noted that the Choreographic Research department at Fonadan was coordinated by Luis Felipe Obregón, advised by Marcelo Torreblanda, and included by Evelia Beristain¹⁸ and Josefina Lavalle.

The notion of repertoire also comes into play in a discussion of the identity of dance. Lavalle argues:

My interest is that the dance teacher knows that he is not dancing the authentic *jarabe ranchero*, but that he is following the choreography of a master [...] Where does the popular, the anonymous, begin, and where does the recreation of the masters begin? (Lavalle quoted in Tortajada 1998, 104)

Ferreiro states that the creation of Fonadan modified the notion of repertoire as it relates to the ideas of "authenticity" due to the "direct contact with 'informants-indigenous masters of the dance' who, in general, acted as captains or masters of the dances and knew the forms of traditional transmission" (2009, 202). In a way, the contact between Fonadan and ADM students, together with the publication of dances in scores and the identification of some of these dances as authentic versions from indigenous groups and from specific communities, reshaped the paradigm of folkloric dance teaching. Fonadan used a specific terminology to allow the coexistence of two types of repertoires: the traditional repertoire and the repertoire re-worked by the larger, often urban, folkloric dance community. Ferreiro notes: "it became a common practice to focus the teaching on the formal aspects of the dances: steps and movements in space" (2009b, 82).

Upon discovering the score of *Jarabe* written by Lavalle, I could not believe how familiar it felt to embody it. Not only was this because I had learned different versions of this piece, beginning when I was six years old, but because the terminology I found in the score was very similar to what I have learnt during my training at the ENDF: *zapateo*, *apoyo*, *cepilleo*, *escobilleo*, *deslizado*, *volado*, *quebrado*, *gatillo*, *rebotado*, *golpe*, among others. Although there is a short description in the terminology section of the book that enables those unfamiliar with Mexican folkloric dance to understand the movement, my implicit knowledge of this discipline informed my interpretation. The logic of the movement depicted in the notation felt familiar. Hence, I became interested in how the terminology and descriptions of the *Jarabe* were similar to what I had experienced as a student at the ENDF. This allowed me to reflect on how Fonadan had impacted the field of folkloric dance.

When I approached Professor Miranda, author of the *Basic Manual for the Teaching of Traditional Mexican Dance Technique* (2002), he remarked:

We went to Morena [the building located on Morena street], we spoke with the authorities, with all the people, and we explained: the School of Folklore [ENDF] is this, it does this, and it has

been nourished by Fonadan. It follows the work that Fonadan has done, it continues bringing in informants, and we are doing work through the School [ENDF] on what Fonadan did. We did not have the published materials, we did not have all the records of the dances. What Fonadan had, we did not have, we were homemade. But they gave us the finger: “Yes, we are going to review it and wait”... “Well sit down, let’s see if you don’t get tired” ... Nothing happened. (A. Miranda, interview, 29 December 2013)

With Fonadan’s disappearance in 1985 and little information about the location of its archive, one might assume that key written records of Mexican traditional dance were lost. I wonder, however, how true this assumption is. As Miranda’s account shows, the teachers at the ENDF tried to preserve Fonadan’s legacy, recognizing its importance. However, there is only partial knowledge of the whereabouts of the Fonadan’s archive. What remains of Fonadan’s work is my embodied knowledge of its concepts of movement, the analytical categories and terminology, which we share within the Mexican folkloric dance community. This knowledge enables me to access what is written in the scores and to transmit it as part of my own heritage.



Conclusions

The institutionalization of Mexican folkloric dance instruction at the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature marked a significant shift in the professional training of this art form, reflecting a complex interplay of historical, social, and political factors. This development underscores the importance of preserving traditional dance and the continuing need for academic inquiry into its educational frameworks and cultural significance. It is undeniable that the populist government of Luis Echeverría engaged in disproportionate expenditure—it pursued an instrumentalist approach to indigenous culture, which affected indigenous groups. It is also evident that economic mismanagement, together with the manipulation of traditional indigenous knowledge to create a forced national identity, led the next government to consider traditional dance as unimportant. Although the 1985 earthquake disrupted research of traditional dances, Fonadan’s practices continued to influence the Mexican folkloric dance community.

Fonadan’s work laid the foundations of folkloric dance training that have been continued over the following three decades: promoting fieldwork to understand the context of the traditional dances, working with informants to learn the dances directly from local dancers, and analyzing and recording the dances as a part of the professional training in folkloric dance. Throughout this research, I have come to understand that Fonadan’s aims of research and preservation were extensions of the tourist agenda of Echeverrist populism, as reflected in the term *popular dance* during the 1970s and 1980s. However, although the Fonadan archive was an important body of knowledge on Mexican dance heritage and the loss of some of its materials has been significant for dance research, some of the Mexican traditional dances studied by Fonadan still survive in the practices and embodied knowledge of indigenous communities in Mexico.

With this first historical and historiographical attempt to examine Fonadan’s notation, I can only raise further questions. Given the need to safeguard traditional dances, how timeless are the archives? If traditional dance resists documentation, can it survive? What are the implications of recording for traditional and folkloric dance? How did rural dancers respond

to the policies of the urban elites in the 1980s? Due to the lack of attention from Mexican governmental institutions and dance researchers to the work of Fonadan, and the consequent lack of documentation, it is impossible to answer some of these questions without sustained fieldwork. This essay is an effort to contextualize the work of the only institution dedicated to dance research and an attempt to understand the field of Mexican folkloric dance. It also represents a step towards valuing the production of knowledge through non-Eurocentric notation systems to trace the history of the academization of Mexican folkloric dance.



NOTES

1. I am in debt to János Fügedi (1953-2025) for his support. As my mentor in Laban Kinesthetics—the Hungarian dialect of the notation system developed by Rudolf Laban—he encouraged me since the beginning of my academic career, which has led me to deepen my research on dance notation.

2. I follow Manuel Cuellar (2022) in his use of the concept of *lo mexicano*, instead of Mexicanness, “in order to signal not only the racial implications of the term but also the gender and sexual inscriptions that it enables” (11) in Mexico’s patriarchal society.

3. The post-revolutionary administrations introduced folkloric dance into the national educational system through the *Misiones Culturales* [Cultural Missions] program. For further research into the role of dance in the *Misiones Culturales*, see Marín (2004). In my experience, the end-of-the-year recitals included a repertoire of Mexican folkloric dances selected because they could be taught to children, such as: the *Jarabe Tapatío* [Mexican hat dance], *Los matachines*, and various “polkas.”

4. Whereas in Eastern Europe such groups are typically referred to as “folklore groups” or “folk dance groups,” in Mexico they are commonly called *grupo/compañía de danza folklórica* or *ballet folklórico*. In Mexico, the use of these categories attends to the aesthetic and political identities of these groups. This distinction corresponds to the typology used in Mexican dance studies, which differentiates between traditional dance, folkloric dance, and *ballet folklórico*, as Elizabeth Cámara (2006) observes. The traditional dance refers to the dance practiced by indigenous or mestizo communities in ritual or social contexts. The folkloric dance refers to dance forms derived from the decontextualization of traditional dances and adapted for stage performance with the aim of promoting a national identity. Finally, *ballet folklórico* refers to the hybridization of traditional and classical dance, exemplified above all by the *Ballet Folklórico de México de Amalia Hernández*.

5. The term “popular dance” was used in Mexico mainly during the 1970s alongside the concept of popular art. In that context, “popular” became interchangeable with “indigenous” and “traditional,” and in some cases was even used for folkloric dance. In this article, I use the word

“popular” when referring to the name of Fonadan.

6. The ENDF was created in 1978 after the dissolution of the *Academia de la Danza Mexicana* (ADM). Both institutions belonged to the *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura* (INBAL). After closure of the ADM, some of its teachers and students were transferred to the ENDF, while others remained on strike, demanding the re-establishment of the ADM until 1984.

7. The *Misiones Culturales* was a programme developed in 1923 during the administration of José Vasconcelos, then head of the SEP. The *Misiones Culturales* were intended to take education to different parts of México. Among the activities included in these missions was physical education that incorporated rhythm and aesthetics. Luis Felipe Obregón and Marcelo Torreblanca participated as missionaries. For more information see Marín (2004).

8. Josefina Lavalle was an outstanding personality in the field of dance in Mexico: a dancer, choreographer, teacher, pioneer of Mexican modern dance, and founder of Fonadan, ADM, and other institutions related to artistic education. She was Director of the ADM and a researcher at the *Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación e Información de la Danza José Limón* [National Centre for Dance Research, Documentation, and Information] (Cenidid).

9. According to Basurto (1969), there were glimpses of populism during the Mexican revolutionary period; however, the defining populist period was the six-year term of General Lázaro Cárdenas, between 1934 and 1940, characterised by nationalism and reformism.

10. Danza Montesón is a traditional dance performed in the Huasteca region of Veracruz, Mexico. The version Nazul taught my cohort during the 2008 academic year was the version performed in Ixhuatlán de Madero, Veracruz.

11. A *sonaja* is a percussion instrument made from a hollow gourd. In Montesón, the *sonaja* is decorated at the top with a small paper fan.

12. A *palma* is a carved wooden object used in many traditional dances in Mexico, usually held in the left hand. In Montesón, the *palma* has a hexagonal shape and is adorned

with tissue paper and a star on each side.

13. In the early 1970s in Mexico, there were two professional dance schools within the *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes* (INBA): the *Escuela Nacional de Danza* (END), founded in 1932, and the *Academia de la Danza Mexicana* (ADM), founded in 1947. Both schools taught traditional Mexican dances, but the latter offered specialized training in this discipline.

14. The Integral Dancer model was intended to train professional dancers in two of the three main dance disciplines in Mexico: classical, contemporary, and folkloric dance. Two programs were offered: *Bailarín de Danza de Concierto* [Concert Dance Performer] (Classical and Contemporary) and *Bailarín de Danza Mexicana* [Mexican Dance Performer] (Modern and Folkloric). This proposal led to the rupture of the ADM community and triggered the creation of the *Escuela Nacional de Danza Clásica* [National School of Classical Dance] in 1977 and the *Escuela Nacional de Danza Contemporánea* [National School of Contemporary Dance] and the *Escuela Nacional de Danza Folklórica* [National School of Folkloric Dance] in 1978.

15. This proposal was registered for copyright by Josefina Lavalle on 6 July 1987, under number 12747-87 and presented as a paper at the National Research Meeting of Cenidi Danza during the same month.

16. Yolanda Fuentes taught at the ADM. She created the *Cursos de Verano* [Summer Intensive Courses] where she developed and taught a notation system to help her students to remember the dances they learnt.

17. Originally named *Centro de Investigación de la Danza* [Centre for Dance Research], the *Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación e Información de la Danza José Limón* [National Centre for Dance Research, Documentation, and Information] (Cenidi Danza) was created by Patricia Aulestia on 14 January 1987.

18. Evelia Beristain (1926-2019) was a dancer, teacher, and choreographer. She belonged to the first generation of Mexican modern dancers. Together with Lavalle, she was part of the Choreographic Research Department at the Fonadan.

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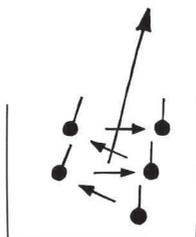
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Dancing over Crossed Swords: An Ethnographic Case Study on Competitive Solo Highland Dancing

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ABSTRACT

Highland dancing may be viewed as a form of dance and sport, as part of a competitive structure regulated by boards and associations (predominantly the Royal Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing (RSOBHD)), and as a link to romantic notions of Scottish history. The practice is entwined with its country of origin and shaped by its historical and contemporary place within Scotland. Through an ethnographic study undertaken with one Highland dancing class in Glasgow, Scotland, I danced and conversed with the teacher and dancers to explore their experiences and opinions of Highland dancing in relation to the practice (the dance), locality (Scotland), and public perceptions (society). Inductive analysis of observations and interviews revealed a confusion and tension, understood through the dramaturgical tools of Erving Goffman (1990 [1959]). A detailed study of the entwined dance and social "performance(s)" suggested that two "teams" were in existence (Goffman 1990 [1959]). One "team" (the teacher and older dancers) 'honoured' the tradition of the regulated and standardised Highland set dances yet sympathised with the other "team" (the younger dancers), who sought a more creative experience. I explore how the historical and performative nature of Highland dancing, for example, certain narratives, and technique required, shaped the "realities" (Goffman 1990 [1959]) within the class intersecting with notions of 'Scottishness' and the place of Highland within the greater field of dance.

KEYWORDS

Highland dancing; ethnographic; Erving Goffman; regulation; "Scottishness."



Introduction: Highland Dancing: A Multifaceted Practice

Highland dancing may be viewed as both a form of dance and sport, as part of a rigid competitive structure regulated by official boards and associations, and as a link to romantic notions of Scottish history. The practice is closely entwined with its country of origin; Highland dancing is shaped by its place and evolution within Scotland and by historical and contemporary perceptions of "Scottishness." However, the practice is not "geographically defined" (Scott 2005, 422), operating both within Scotland and countries populated by the Scottish diaspora (most notably, United States of America, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand).

Two main governing bodies are in existence. The Royal Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing (RSOBHD), formed in 1950 (with the Royal title granted in 2019), accepted

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“by the vast majority of highland [sic] dance associations, competitions, dancers, teachers and adjudicators around the world as the leading, indeed the only truly international, representative body” (RSOBHD website) and the smaller Scottish Official Highland Dancing Association (SOHDA) founded earlier in 1947.¹ They each question the authority and legitimacy of the other (Scott 2005), and persons (dancers, judges and teachers) registered with the RSOBHD are only allowed to perform at events sanctioned by that body (and registration is mandatory in order to perform).² The steps and dances performed in exams and at competitions and championships worldwide are predominantly governed by the RSOBHD which, according to their website, was formed “to lay down quality standards for all areas of Highland Dancing” (RSOBHD n.d.) The standardised and regulated nature of Highland dancing is not only evident through the RSOBHD syllabus performed in class, but in the relationship between this main board and its three teaching partners: UKA Dance (formerly, United Kingdom Alliance), Scottish Dance Teachers’ Alliance (SDTA) and British Association of Teaching of Dancing (BATD) that administer and facilitate the examination, teaching and learning of the repertoire to be performed at RSOBHD sanctioned events. Within the realm of solo competitive Highland dancing, the repertoire is comprised of five key dances: the *Highland Fling*, *Reel (of Tulloch)*, *Seann Triubhas*, *Strathspey* (often combines with the *Reel*) and *Sword Dance*; alongside these are the National dances which include: *Flora MacDonald’s Fancy*, *The Irish Jig*, *The Sailor’s Hornpipe*, *Blue Bonnets*, *Highland Laddie*, *Wilt Thou Go to Barracks Johnnie?* and *Scottish Lilt* among others. The latter are dances that were brought into the repertoire of boards and associations in the 1970’s (Scott 2005).

The history and origins of Highland dancing are uncertain and strongly mythologised. Interrogation reveals “inaccuracies and often, wishful connotations applied to most of the associated stories” (Melin 2018). For example, some stories claim that the dance practice is more than five thousand years old (Scott 2005), and tales of early Highland dancing “relate to clan warfare, celebration, traditional beliefs, and tests of strength, fitness, daring or skill” (Scott 2005, 1). However, Highland dancing as we know it today in its female-dominated competitive format has a largely modern history. Regulation came into being in response to the variations in local styles³ found in dance competitions and Highland Games in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Brewster et al. 2009). Thus, through centering the interests of fairness for dancers, spectators and teachers, and for ease of judging, “the tradition became regulated in terms of organisation, operation and standardisation” (Scott 2005, 3). The RSOBHD “which has since claimed exclusive rights to define dance standards” (Newton 2012, n.p) took an

elite group of dancers (specialists, who were themselves “popular” as world champions or teachers of champions) and agreed with them the acceptable steps and styles, rather than forming an administrative approach towards the systematic collection of tradition (Scott 2005, 3).

Hence, “execution, rather than narration, is the primary aim of the Highland dancer” (Scott 2005, 401). However, despite the rather perfunctory trajectory taken in the mid-twentieth century, a tradition of romantic myth surrounding the origins of the dances promulgates.⁴ Despite the dubiety of some of the supposed origins of dances, the role played by the stories of Highland dancing in giving the practice a sense of history and solidity is a potent one. Thus, members of the Highland dancing community, whether they are dancer, teacher, judge or researcher face the conundrum of supporting, exploring and interrogating a “Scottish” dance practice that is bound up in a paradoxical tandem of tradition and regulation. This contextual understanding shapes the specific focus of this paper: a case study of one small

Highland dancing class, within a private dance school in Glasgow, Scotland. Analysis of the teacher and dancers' experiences and opinions in relation to the practice and its place of locality and origin (Scotland), and wider perceptions outwith the bounded walls of the dance studio, is informed by the dramaturgical tools of sociologist, Erving Goffman (1990 [1959]). Ethnographic data was collected in 2013 as part of a wider PhD study (Whiteside, 2017a).

We now move to consider the key, albeit limited, literature focused on Highland dancing (relating especially to cultural and social analyses of the practice) before presenting practical details about the case study and exploring Goffman's model of dramaturgy (1990 [1959]). We then move on to the main discussion comprised of three key foci: the nature of the standardised and regulated "reality" of this Highland dancing class; a key social repercussion of this "reality," the existence of two "teams"; and, lastly, a more detailed exploration of the cultural and social forces shaping both this "reality" and the potential for a "different" more creative "reality."



Highland Dancing: An Underexplored Practice

In 1955, the RSOBHD lamented the following situation:

Reliable evidence concerning origins and early development is scarce and scattered; in the general neglect of Scottish culture which has prevailed, until recently, in all four Scottish universities, Highland Dancing has been largely ignored by learned men [sic], and as yet little or no serious research has been done (cited in Newton 2012, n.p.).

Fifty years later, Catriona M. Scott in her PhD thesis titled "The Scottish Highland Dancing Tradition" noted this situation had persisted and within the academy "there are barely enough coherent ethnographic threads to weave a garment of identity, let alone a colorful and vibrant tartan that would better represent the nature of the culture" (Scott 2005, 22). As briefly demonstrated in the introductory section, contemporary and future Highland dancing research has the potential to be rich in themes linked to notions of authenticity and legitimacy.

Literature centred on Highland dancing (as opposed to the other forms of Scottish traditional dancing characterised as such during the twentieth century e.g. Scottish country, *cèilidh*, and step dance (Morrison 2003a)) falls largely into three categories. These are social and cultural analyses (e.g. Ballantyne 2016; 2020; Flett and Flett 1956; Morrison 2003a, 2003b; Newton 2012; Scott 2005); historic instruction manuals (e.g. from the works of MacLennan 1950), Peacock (1805), and Taylor (1929)) and more contemporary syllabi guides and guidance (RSOBHD; Wardrope, 1997); and, lastly, dance science studies (e.g. Tan et al. 2023; Watson et al. 2013). The first of these categories is the most pertinent to this paper and the works are significant for the theme of regulation and standardisation that run as a thread between them. The key impetus for another instruction manual was an "increasing scepticism about the stylised modern form of country and Highland dancing" (Flett and Flett 1996, viii) and Morrison (2003b) pays particular attention to the nature and history of the RSOBHD and the regulated nature of Highland dancing technique and competition context (both Scotland and overseas). Until relatively recently, Scott's (2005) PhD thesis was the only known scholarly source that specifically focuses on Highland dancing within its contemporary cultural and social context through interrogating the development and trajectory of the solo competitive practice, focusing on the "lived experiences" and development of its regulated nature within competition arenas. More recent scholarship

by Ballantyne (2016; 2018; 2020), also derived from PhD research, makes a further key contribution through, again, a focus on Highland dancing as a standardised practice. Her scholarship focuses on the Highland Fling in particular, moving from historical sources (originating from Aberdeenshire) to an ethnography involving dancers and musicians in Scotland (2016; 2020) and the professionalisation of Highland dancing through the dancing masters and establishment of boards and associations (2018).

Widening the scope of focus on cultural and social analyses, much literature touching on contemporary Highland dancing practice centers on the Highland Games, with the majority of studies situating these events within the Scottish diaspora and focusing on themes of authenticity, economics, heritage, imagery, and tartan symbolism (e.g. Chhabra 2001; Chhabra et al. 2003a; Chhabra et al. 2003b; Crane et al. 2004). Interestingly, it is a smaller body of literature that considers the Highland Games in their “home country” (see e.g. Bowness 2020; Brewster et al. 2009; Jarvie 1991) with studies also focused on diaspora participation in Highland Games in Scotland (e.g. Sim and Leith 2013).

This paper thus contributes to a limited but existing body of ethnographic work exploring the theme of regulation and standardisation and uses a particular dramaturgical framework (Goffman 1990 [1959]) to understand its interplay with social interaction within one RSOBHD aligned syllabus Highland dancing class.



The Highland Dancing Case Study

Informed by the particular context (social, cultural, historical) within which the practice is situated, this case study on a Highland dancing class, run by a private dance school in Scotland’s largest city, Glasgow, aimed to understand the “reality” or multiple “realities” (Goffman 1990 [1959]) in existence within the class through understanding the particular social and dance “performances” given by the teacher and dancers. Further attention to the specifics of Goffman’s dramaturgical framework, including key criticisms, and how it can be applied to participatory dance scholarship is explored below.

I (a researcher with no prior Highland dancing experience but over a decade’s experience in classical ballet and four years’ experience in Irish step dance) held semi-structured interviews with the class teacher and dancers and danced with, and observed, the class on a weekly basis over a period of circa two months during 2013. This research thus offers a snapshot in time which nevertheless resonates with key scholarly literature discussed above. The limited period of time that I was involved with the class naturally impacted the degree to which I could immerse myself in the setting, however, my previous dance experience meant I had an understanding of the expected and accepted etiquette in the class, which helped me to ease my way into participating and establish trust and rapport with the teacher and other dancers. I had the appropriate dancewear (crucially, not new but worn in), plasters and hair pins to share, if necessary, and ghillies⁵ on my feet. I had good posture, carriage of the arms, and could point my feet and lengthen my legs. As one dancer told me: “You’re good at it for a beginner. You’re able to pick it up.” Thus, I could be viewed as Foster’s (1997) “hired body,” one that was able to use current and previous dance experience even if I could only replicate “movement [and behaviour] as surface gloss” (Jackson 2005, 33). The class I danced with was relatively small, led by the teacher Anne,⁶ and attended by older dancers (aged 18-circa 26: Rose, Kitty and Nicola) and younger dancers (aged between 7 and 14: Lydia, Martha, Hannah and Christie). All dancers were white females and there was a profusion of “Mc” and “Mac” across

the surnames. All of the dancers (bar one) engaged in other forms of dance (ballet, modern and tap), the younger dancers on a weekly basis for each genre with the older dancers engaging in multiple (ballet) classes each week. The Highland dancing class began with the learning and teaching of the easier dances (or rather, shorter and simpler versions of the dances⁷), before the younger girls left and more advanced versions of the dances were the focus.

Data gathered from the ethnographic methods was analysed through grounded coding (Moghaddam 2006) and, as mentioned, framed and interpreted using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework, which is principally concerned with "face-to-face interaction" (Smith 2006, 1), allowing the researcher to examine micro socialisation in a world that is not easily accessed. Goffman's most basic question is: How does social reality sustain itself? Goffman (1990 [1959]) defines reality as "the maintenance of a single definition of the situation, this definition having to be expressed, and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude [sic] disruption" (246). As explained, the nature of the "reality" or "realities" within this Highland dancing class is the primary focus of the paper.

Previous publications have explored the specific applicability of Goffman's model of dramaturgy to dance scholarship (Whiteside and Kelly, 2016; Whiteside 2017a; 2017b) with the latter works detailing a particular framework summarised here. Firstly, Goffman's focus on bounded social establishments aligns with case study research and the often distinct and sometimes "protected" spaces of settings where dance activity takes place (e.g. primary school hall; dance studio; night club). Social establishments are defined as "any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place" (Goffman 1990 [1959], 231). This characterisation mirrors the operation of dance activities and practices that take place behind closed doors; private dance schools could be described as closed "systemic programs of instruction" (Foster 1997, 238).

Secondly, Goffman's dramaturgical model draws on the language of the theatre in its focus on social performance, defined as a period of social interaction that occurs in front of and shapes the impressions of a single observer or group of observers. Notions of "performance" as being both "pre-established pattern[s] of action" (Goffman 1990 [1959], 27) reflect, for example, the established format of the Highland dancing class (barre warm up, teaching of certain dances, cool down) and the type that are "theatrical ... contextual ... non-verbal, [and] presumably unintentional" (Goffman 1990 [1959], 16), for example the quiet chat between dancers waiting to move into the centre. Thus, the dramaturgical concept of "performance" is extended, shaped by dance experiences that are both choreographed and ephemeral. "Front stage" (Goffman 1990 [1959]) constitutes the primary performance space (for example, a dance studio), inhabited by both performers and those they are performing to (in this context, teacher and dancers interchangeably) and "backstage" is a space reserved for performers (dancers) only (for example, a changing room). Across these spaces, "[m]acro choreographed performance[s] (the dancing) merge with micro individual performances" (Whiteside 2013, 53), providing a setting rich for ethnographic exploration.

However, the very focus of Goffman's dramaturgical model on social interaction and impression management is also its limitation. Macro criticisms relating to Goffmanian tradition emphasise a) the focus on micro interaction to the detriment and exclusion of the greater cultural, historical and social context, b) the lack of concern in instigating change within everyday working life, and c) an overriding concern with the negative emotions that govern everyday encounters (Psathas 1980). I focus on the first of these as being the greatest shaping force on this research.

Clark and Mangham (2004) cite Wilshire's (1982) argument that Goffman's theory focuses too exclusively on role playing. Existence comes alive only in the "fluid transient 'encounter'"



(Gouldner 1972, 379); a sentiment that could also read as an analogy of dance spectatorship. In other words, “the dramaturgical approach ignores the macrocosm within which its micro-level concerns are imbedded” (Williams 2001, 350), arguably supporting an insular research approach. For example, I did not seek to understand the social class and backgrounds of the dancers (or how they may have self-defined them) through questions around types of schooling, parents’ occupation, or other extracurricular activities undertaken (all potential markers of class); details that may have enriched the ethnographic data collected and led to additional understanding. However, this study is contextualised through introducing the practice and history of Highland dancing, a review of the relevant literature and, later on, moves outside of this dance studio to explore the potential for a “different,” more creative “reality.”

The class experience of Highland dancing is a world within a world. To reiterate, the national and international Highland dance community is characterised by external competitions and championships for the dancers, and by association and board meetings for the teachers. It is at the “local” level, within the individual Highland dancing classes, that adherence to, and belief in, the codification of the dance form is reinforced through a focus on syllabus (the primary purpose of the case study class). I wanted to understand how the nature of Highland dancing (regulated, romanticised, “Scottish”) as discussed and portrayed in the literature and through boards and associations shaped the social and dance “performances” given within the class. Therefore, the discussion below explores the following questions: What “reality” or “realities” were apparent within the class? How did the teacher and dancers in the class support or disrupt through their social and dance “performances?” Here, core themes of standardisation, creativity, motivation, and physicality come to the fore.

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A Standardised and Regulated “Reality” within the Highland Dancing Class

Anne (teacher) asked Rose (dancer) what steps she was doing for the *Sword Dance*. Rose ran over to check her notebook for the steps. Christie showed me her little green notebook where she had written the steps that she needs to do for each of the dances – her favourite is *Flora Macdonald’s Fancy* (observation session).

A dance syllabus denotes the content that must be taught and the requirement to perform that content in a specific way. However, where Highland dancing differs to the syllabi of other dance forms is in the repetition and presentation of the same relatively small series of Highland and National dances, and through a particular framework featuring different associations working in conjunction with Highland governing bodies, predominantly the RSOBHD. This approach contrasts with the wider facilitation and promotion of developing movement vocabulary of other genres including ballet through, for example, evolving exercises within a graded syllabus as set by the UK-based Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) and Irish step dancing through the embedment by An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha (the leading governing body of Irish step dance) of open dances and, significantly, original choreography by teachers and dancers within competitions and championships.

Kitty (dancer) explained the nature of the dances taught in class:

Dances are always set by the SOBHD [sic]. You do what you’re told. It’s always set in Highland. You’ve got your alternative steps when you get higher up and you do funny wee tricks in the middle but that’s about it to be honest.

During the classes observed, the dances that were rehearsed each week were the requisite Highland dances and National dances. Lydia (dancer) confided that she wanted “more modern stuff. Not just the same dances every single week.” Anne (teacher) explained the extent of the repertoire taught,

You get the odd dance, you get like tribute dances. There was a very famous Highland dancer, his name is J.L. McKenzie.⁸ And when he passed away there was a dance called *Tribute to J.L. McKenzie*.⁹ So, you get new dances like that coming out now and again but the actual, well we have our Highland dances... which have been going forever and then as I say the National dances, we haven't had any new dances for all these years [since the 1970s]. There has not been a lot of changes in Highland at all.

A link can be made here between the finite repertoire and the need to aim to perfect performance of this finite repertoire. Rose (dancer) explained that

Highland has got to be so exact. It's like your knee's got to be flat and your legs straight out to the side, it can't be a bit forward, you've got to have the steps just right plus you've got to be trying to get up your elevation and wow, the satisfaction when you're able to think, “yes, I managed to do eight extended high cuts in a row without holding onto the *barre*.”

Kitty (dancer) elaborated further on the necessary physicality, noting that Highland dancers have all

got amazing, toned legs, flat tummy.... You never see a good fat Highland dancer – there is no such thing. But you never see a good fat ballet dancer either.

The idea that Highland dancing and ballet are comparable, based on shared notions of physicality and technique (which also speaks to the very “construction” of Highland dancing in its history (see Newton 2012, Melin 2018), emerged as a recurring theme in the data. The relationship between traditionally authoritative ballet pedagogy, the aesthetic and technique of the practice, and its injuries, has been extensively researched in sociology of dance and dance science literature (see e.g. Wainwright et al. 2005) and all of the dancers I spoke to recounted, with varying emotions (pride or unhappiness), the ongoing nature of injuries sustained and tiredness experienced:

Halfway through, the window was opened in the far corner letting the January chill in. Kitty leant out of it in between dances before coming over and exclaiming with a hint of satisfaction, “I'm deid¹⁰ at the end of class. Completely deid” (Observation session).

I deck it¹¹ or have really sore muscles by the end of class. You have to go up on your toes all the time and your muscles get strained... *Highland Laddie* is painful (Lydia, dancer).

Interestingly, all of the dancers that I spoke to explained that they primarily defined Highland dancing in terms of its physicality and difficulty (as opposed to its “Scottishness” for example), derived from regulation and standardisation, and that this was the primary motivator for continued engagement. Lydia (dancer), described Highland dancing as a “very strong, energetic, fast type of dancing.” “I think it's great that what I do is coming through as Scottish. But my key motivation would also be the exercise” (Kitty, dancer).

Similarly, to a finding unearthed by Scott (2005), the older dancers were motivated by the competitive aspect of the practice: “I like competition. I just like the ‘Can I win?’ aspect....

I love to be able to go home with the trophy or any medals” (Rose, dancer). Scott (2005) highlights “the apparent lack of artistic expression within the [set] dances” (395) arguing that “competitive performance communicates little other than physical excellence to the audience” (395). Certainly, within the field notes from observations made, incidents of feedback relating to artistry were isolated and limited to the National dances (“you can put a bit of character in here” was an isolated (and telling) comment from the teacher, Anne, offered with reference to the *Hornpipe* rehearsed during one class). Scott (2005) also noted that Scottish Highland dancers were more likely to smile in Highland choreography events, as the pressure to conform and perform in a specific manner was lessened (this in contrast to American and Canadian Highland dancers, who have, according to Scott, a tendency to smile during both types of performances (original choreography and set dances)). It is also worth noting that within Scotland, dancers are actually coached *not* to smile at the traditional competitions and championships (Scott 2005) and Rose (dancer) shared with me that she found it strange not to smile at these events (identifying as a naturally smiley person).

Lastly, it can be inferred that a connection exists between the monetary “cost” of an activity (Highland dancing) and its perceived “value,” relating to, for example, the experience provided by the teacher and the cost of a competition outfit. Kitty (dancer) speaks to the former:

Anne is a really, really good teacher. Definitely. I went to one in a church hall with my friend, it cost £2.50 to go, and it was just a bit rubbish if I’m honest. [The teacher] couldn’t even pronounce the words right.... That really bothered me. The quality (Kitty, dancer).

Rose (dancer) explained the significant (to her) cost implication of being part of a culture with mandatory requirements, with economics a form of control that aligns with a regulated reality: “[O]nce you reach a certain age or a certain level, you’re expected to have either a waistcoat or a jacket, kilt, and socks to match the kilt. And you’re not allowed to dance if you don’t have that.”

[Y]ou’re talking £80/90 for the skirt and £20 for the shirt and another 40 quid for the waistcoat and it’s just like “aaargh”... It’s all handmade, the socks, the kilt and the waistcoat that was made to fit, was £510... (Rose, dancer).

I don’t do the *Hornpipe* because I don’t have the outfit.... The hat’s like 50 quid, and then you’ve got to get the shirt and the trousers, and I’m like “I will wear that maybe twice a year” (Rose, dancer).

Within this Highland dancing class, a standardised and regulated “reality,” characterised by a particular structure and set content in preparation for various assessment modes (i.e. exams and competitions), was discerned. Doing the dancing and feeling the exact and powerful nature of the movement sensation gave me a greater appreciation of its aesthetics and physicality. I felt brave and powerful. The rigid posture necessary, the straight legs, upright arms, splayed fingers resembling “antlers,” and extreme turnout all served to give me a feeling of invincibility when (the easier) dances and sequences felt like they were being “hit.” Noting the patterns and trends in social interaction (explored in the next section) helped me understand a certain protectiveness on the part of Anne, the teacher, and the older dancers.

Returning to Goffman (1990 [1959]), projection of the “reality” aimed for is fostered through “impression management”—that is, the means by which an individual(s) aims to influence the perceptions of others (Whiteside and Kelly 2016). How this “reality” is portrayed is dependent on the assumptions and expectations characterising the social

situation and individual roles (e.g. teacher) inhabited within them. The next section focuses on the way that a standardised and regulated “reality” within the class created two opposing “teams” (Goffman 1990 [1959]): the teacher and older dancers who supported, fostered and protected the regulated nature of the practice, and the younger girls in the class, who rebelled against it.



Two “Teams” within the Highland Dancing Class

The Goffmanian concept of “teams” is pivotal in understanding the dominant pattern of social interactions that existed within the class. Goffman (1990 [1959]) explains that the most basic need for “teams” derives from the argument that “successful performances are usually staged not by individuals but by teams who share both risk and discreditable information” (74). This concept can be extended to apply to a dance “performance.” Consider the need for a line of Irish step dancers performing in *Lord of the Dance* to have their legs at the same prescribed height, or the dancers taking on the role of the cygnets in a classical version of *Swan Lake* to remain equidistant from one another.

The necessary repeated focus on set dances through correct technique (the standardised and regulated “reality”) promoted within the class by Anne, the teacher, and supported by the older dancers seemed to result in rebellious behaviour (potentially exacerbated by their younger age) being repeatedly exhibited by the younger girls in the class.

Lydia seemed bored again, messed about with Hannah [another of the younger dancers] during *Highland Fling*. They left the floor during the dance and Anne crossly called them back. Other incidents included the constant taking on and off of ghillies and doing steps from other types of dance (e.g. jazz) in between dances (observation session).

The constant stream of micro incidents, as recounted above, initiated on a weekly basis by the younger dancers were a feature of the social experience of the class. During one memorable session, Anne revealed and laid bare the constant undercurrent of tension through creating a “scene” (Goffman, 1990 [1959]) more forceful than any generated by her young learners:

During *Highland Fling* when everyone was up dancing, Anne suddenly stopped the music. “This just *isn’t* good enough (her emphasis). Am I going to have to go ballistic like I did just before the exams?” Her voice was raised; she was furious.

As the key figure of authority, Anne was responsible for promoting a “reality” that valued discipline and hard work as necessitated by the exacting nature of Highland dancing. In pursuing her key strategy to achieve this, the giving of feedback, she tended to segregate the younger dancers from the older ones and in doing so aligned herself with a particular “team” (Goffman 1990 [1959]). The majority of Anne’s feedback was directed to the younger dancers and was negative in its nature.

“Second position needs to be right out to the side here. I should not be seeing it in front.”
“You’re rushing it, Lydia. That’s why you are not doing it properly. I want you to do it properly.”
“Your right foot was horrendous Hannah.”

In contrast to the rebellion of the younger girls, the older dancers in the class—Rose, Kitty, and Nicola—actively supported and welcomed Anne’s approach:

It’s a bit sad, because like, there are times when Anne gets frustrated but she needs to sometimes because we’re not working hard enough... I love Anne. She’s a really, really good teacher... She’s not afraid to shout at me, even though she’s known me for so long. The little ones are just lazy sometimes, I think. They just forget that Anne’s put a lot of work into this—when she tells me or Rose to do something, we’ll do it (Kitty, dancer).

Longstanding “dramaturgical loyalty” within the team comprised of Anne and the older dancers was evidence of how “team-mates and their colleagues [can] form a complete social community which offers each performer a place and a source of moral support regardless of whether or not he [sic] is successful in maintaining his front before the audience” (Goffman 1990 [1959], 209). Anne faced a weekly struggle to motivate and inspire the younger girls to *want* to strive for the “ideal” Highland dancing performance, and the older dancers supported her both “front stage” and “backstage” (Goffman, 1990 [1959]); i.e. within the studio as well as the more hidden spaces of changing room and during the semi-structured interviews held. However, despite her disciplinarian approach in the “front stage” space of the studio, Anne expressed “backstage” her sympathy with the younger girls’ frustration, recognising the potential consequences of the strict regulation of Highland dancing. In our interview, she explained:

I do think that children get bored, there’s no doubt, and I think that we probably could do with some new steps, new dances from time to time.... I would say we’re probably really stuck. When I think about that actually, that’s quite dreadful. I think we are really stuck (Anne, teacher).

While Anne seemed to maintain two apparently contradictory perspectives concerning the practice of Highland dancing (promoting and thus perpetuating the rigidity of the practice, while concerned over this very element), her actions can readily be understood in Goffmanian terms. As Goffman explains:

a performer may be taken in by his [sic] own act, convinced at the moment that the impression of reality which he fosters is the one and only reality. In such cases the performer comes to be his own audience; he comes to be performer and observer of the same show... (Goffman 1990 [1959], 86).

In other words, when teaching the class, to achieve the best teacher “performance” possible, Anne perhaps needed to believe, consciously or unconsciously, in this regulated “reality” in order to facilitate and promote this state. Anne did not reveal her concerns about the evolution and appeal of Highland dancing to the younger generation in her class, so-called “destructive information” that would “discredit, disrupt, or make useless the [reality] that the performance fosters” (Goffman 1990 [1959], 141). Interestingly, I did not observe either Anne or the older dancers expressing a concern with the potential “stuck” nature of Highland dancing in front of the younger girls or to *each other* (at least in front of me), but the same concerns over the limited and fixed content of the Highland dancing syllabus were also expressed by the older dancers, “backstage,” even while they, too, continued to support it “front stage.”

I mean it has definitely gone downhill, not many people do it, I mean it’s more popular in places like Canada. I think if it was to become more popular then maybe they’d have to have a modern twist on it... I think it would have to change in order to become more popular (Kitty, dancer).

This mention of Canada, a site of the Scottish diaspora, as being a more popular locale for Highland dancing over its country of origin will be returned to. However, within this Highland dancing class, the teacher and older dancers sought to maintain and protect the precision and physicality of the practice in the face of rebellion from the younger dancers, yet they shared, outwith the classes, certain sympathies and concerns with respect to the future of the practice. In each case, the same “reality” was largely supported “front stage,” during observations, and contradicted “backstage,” during interviews.

This dramaturgical model may not allow for a truly “sincere” performance (in recognising that, all the time, individual “performers” and collective “teams” are striving to make a particular impression), yet Goffman does not seek to demonstrate how we “regularly act falsely” but rather, how “in many of our interactions we do not feel what we are conveying is real” (Raffel 2013, 177). This approach helps us to understand the place and importance of discrepant sentiments that are only shared “backstage” by Anne and the older dancers. A dramaturgical approach does not seek to uncover a true “reality” but to uncover, and understand, the multiple, simultaneously existing “discrepant realities” that are in existence, and that, together, build up a more complete picture of the everyday interactions within a particular setting, in this case, a Highland dancing class. For the teacher and the older dancers, the distinctive “difference” of Highland Dancing practice—its rigid content and the sheer physical challenge presented by the dances—was perceived as “sameness” by the younger members of the class inspiring discord and resistance. This key finding, and the potential for a more creative “reality,” set within a greater context problematised by notions of authenticity and legitimacy are explored below.



Potential for a Creative “Reality” within the Highland Dancing Class

From a content and vocabulary standpoint, there is enormous potential for original choreography to be produced and performed within the stylistic context of Highland dancing but existing opportunities continue to be limited and isolated. Examples of amateur and professional Highland dance companies or groups that perform choreographed dances in a “Highland” style can be found; they include Flings & Things in Scotland, Highland Echoes in South California, the Highland Dance Company of New Zealand, and the Schiehallion Dancers and Change of Step (both based in Canada). Championship-level dancers affiliated with the RSOBHD can apply to be a part of the original Highland dancing displays held as part of the world famous annual Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. Annual events and competitions promoting choreography do take place in Scotland (for example, the annual competition held by the Forfar Highland Dancing Association incorporates a choreography event), but these are relatively small in scale and not comparable in terms of the attention, focus, and support associated with the competitive set dances. Some Highland dancing schools offer performance classes alongside the syllabus classes (for example, Sinclair School of Highland Dancing in Aberdeen) and/or the opportunity to perform original choreography at displays and shows. Outwith the sphere of private dance schools and associated exams, competitions, and championships, but located within Scotland is the Traditional Dance Forum of Scotland (TDFS). A founding member of arts charity, Traditional Arts Culture Scotland (TRACS), TDFS supports the development, diversity, and exchange of Scotland’s traditional dances, including Highland dancing through various initiatives including the annual Pomegranates Festival. In addition, social media, in particular Instagram and TikTok, has been increasingly harnessed

(often by younger dancers) as a means to share steps, sequences, choreography, and short performances, generating conversations and shaping the evolution of the practice. However, there is certainly currently no counterpart in the Highland dance world to the profusion of the hugely successful and commercial touring Irish performance dance shows catalysed by the 1994 Eurovision performance of *Riverdance*.¹²

Notwithstanding her careful adherence to and promotion of the prescribed syllabus, Anne (teacher) recognised the creative and social potential of using Highland steps in innovative ways, and chose to present original choreography at each of the annual shows held by the dance school:

I know teachers who do just put children on to do a *Fling* or a *Swords* or a *Seann Triubhas* but I've always just thought that when it came to the displays, it's boring, you've got to do something different. You know, a couple of years ago, when we did the show we did a fabulous number, but we did the hornpipe steps and that went down so well...

Indeed, understanding the popularity of working on newly choreographed "Highland" dancing, I observed, within class, Anne using the possibility of starting work on the school show as a means of incentivising the younger children to work harder at the set dances. ("Soothing and sanctioning," Goffman 1990 [1959], are the key strategies available to correct a discrepant or challenging "performance." If the latter was exemplified by the constant giving of negative feedback in the class, then the former can be seen as a small act of bribery or reward).

Rose (dancer) explains the appeal of learning and dancing original Highland choreography:

[Y]ou can do really fun things with [Highland]. A couple of shows ago we did a song by the Red Hot Chili Pipers.¹³ ...[Y]ou use the steps but make it creative. But you can still keep it really traditional or make it fun.

Significantly, the final sentiment in the quotation above sets standardised content and engaging choreography as polar opposites.

It may be that the desire to preserve Highland dance as a highly regulated practice was linked to the notion, expressed by some members of the class, that Highland is misunderstood within the greater field of dance and in public perception. There existed a concern that Highland dancing compared unfavourably to other dance forms: the practice is not understood in the same way as other codified dance forms (such as ballet and Irish) that share its focus on technique and physical ability.

You see when you watch *Britain's Got Talent*,¹⁴ and you've got all these Irish dancers on, ballet dancers on, you never see a Highland dancer on. I don't know if it's because they don't understand how much work goes into, it doesn't look, a lot of the dancing looks easy, but it's not (Kitty, dancer).

For the teacher and older girls in the class, it was the physical challenge of performing this syllabus (rather than the variety of its content) (as explored in an earlier section) that was a particular source of pride when comparing the practice to other forms of dance:

I used to do Highland and tap and ballet and as I got older, I did ballroom and Latin American. But it was always the Highland that I loved. I think it was the challenge... to me it was a much harder discipline than the likes of tap. Not ballet, because ballet to me is on a par with Highland (Anne, teacher).

Emphasis on, and pride in, the technique of Highland dancing (aligning, also, its aesthetics and difficulty with ballet) provided a means of distancing the practice from other types of dance that originate from within Scotland, namely Scottish country dancing and *cèilidh* dancing which is “entirely different—that is fun. That is fun” (Rose, dancer). As Anne (teacher) said:

Don't ever confuse [Highland] with Scottish country dancing—that is the worst. Highland dancers hate being linked to Scottish country dancing because it is worlds and worlds apart. I mean I know I detest it when somebody says to me “Oh, you're a Scottish Country dancer.” “No, I'm not.” There's three steps in Scottish country dancing – *pas de basque*, slip step and skip change and that's it.

It is possible that wider confusion and misunderstanding of the “status” of Highland dancing compared to other forms of Scottish traditional dance (particularly *cèilidh* dancing, which is a stalwart of weddings and balls in Scotland—every child learns to *cèilidh* dance at primary school) shaped a concern that Highland dancing was associated with a certain type of “Scottishness”: one that sees Scotland and the Scottish people mocked through cliché images on the supermarket shortbread tin.

As Anne explained,

I think we're almost ridiculed, you know, the Scot, with the kilt and haggis and things like that. And it's a shame because it's Scottish people, who think “oh look at them up there, wearing their kilts, jumping about like idiots.” And you feel like saying “well, you come and try it.”

There existed both a wish to disassociate Highland dancing from this negative stereotype of Scottish culture, and for the dance form to be respected within Scotland, particularly by people defining as Scottish—for it to inspire pride. Rose (dancer) explained “[P]ersonally, I love the Scottish aspect of it. I like being recognised as ‘Oh, I am a Scottish person.’” Anne (teacher) draws on defining “Scottish” characteristics, similar to “the kilts and haggis” above, in explaining “[Y]ou hear the pipe bands and there's nothing nicer. Particularly when you are out at the Highland Games and kids are dancing to the pipers and things. Definitely, it does, it does make you feel so good to be Scottish.” Kitty (dancer) shared her disappointment that “[friends at school] don't seem to understand why I do it, why I love it so much. I'll talk about it and they're like ‘I don't even know what you're talking about.’ It's quite sad.” This pride and mention of the popularity of Highland dancing *outside* Scotland (speaking to an earlier quote from Kitty) and confusion and misunderstanding *within* Scotland perhaps speaks to the multiple definitions of “Scottishness” in existence (Nadel-Klein 1997). Scottish identity has been more readily explained by physical belonging rather than tribal belonging (Smout 1994) speaking to a complicated relationship with “Scottishness” and Scottish identities within this Highland dancing class. Craig (2003) takes a deterministic view in arguing that Scots disparage their culture through a collective viewpoint which, in a small way, is reflected in Anne's comment above about how the “kilt and haggis” are viewed. Stewart and Duncan (2024) note the importance of birthplace and accent as ready markers of “Scottishness” (in contrast to member of the Scottish diaspora) and these markers were certainly audible within the class.

Ironically, owing to a widespread misunderstanding of Highland dancing (according to Anne and the older dancers) about the difficulty and physicality of the practice, embedded elements speaking to its regulated and standardised “reality” may inadvertently be playing into certain unhelpful Scottish stereotypes. For example, dancers position their fingers to resemble the antlers of stags with the story being that this was “created by a young boy when



he was out hunting deer. He watched a buck dancing around in a field and it was so beautiful that he couldn't bring himself to kill the deer. So, he started to dance" (Rose, dancer). In Goffmanian terms, what is important is not whether or not the story is *true* but that it *exists* and can provide comfort and solidity even if it is not believed. The perception shared by Anne (teacher), below, suggests a certain unwillingness, or perhaps a fear, in instigating change owing to the ways in which Highland dancing derives its identity and status (and the governing bodies their legitimacy) from the practice's history.

I think we're too stuck in our ways. I think we have had this syllabus for so long, everybody strives to perfect what we have. I don't know if we feel we will maybe take away from the history if you like of Highland Dancing and what's gone on before. I think that's maybe what it is (Anne, teacher).

This perception seems prophetic in light of the following opinions shared by Rose (dancer):

I think it would be really strange if they changed it. I wouldn't like it if [the RSOBHD] said "we're changing Highland dancing" because I think the whole idea of it is that it is traditional and if they start changing it then it's kind of lost that I think.

Some ongoing incremental changes and development can be discerned through, for example, the RSOBHD periodically substituting one step for another within the set dances. This information is passed on at formal meetings attended by teachers. However,

it really annoys the girls [other teachers] when that happens. You're dancing a step for years and then all of a sudden, they'll come along and say "no, we don't want it to go out to here, we want it here, we want it right to here." It's daft (Anne, teacher).

Such changes, perceived as being made simply for the sake of change, were reported as not favourably received. Certainly, the creative potential of Highland dancing does not benefit and such amendments to the syllabus could be viewed as an assertion of authority. Through championing the regulation of the dance practice and promulgating the set content as "tradition," governing bodies seem to be in the uncomfortable position of being unable to lead a creative (re)evolution of the dance form, for fear of upsetting the very foundations that they created in the last century, and on which basis Highland dancing practice today chiefly derives its legitimacy (see Scott 2005; Ballantyne 2016; 2020 for a detailed narrative and exploration).



Conclusion: Stalemate?

I started this paper through an opening sentence recounting the dominant binary that situates Highland dancing as both a form of dance and a form of sport. The practice may be viewed as the former in numerous ways including the emphasis on a particular aesthetic, the relationship between the movement and the music, and the nature of the key arena for classes: the dance studio. Yet, other more sporting themes also dominate: most notably, the assessment and competitive format that shapes the majority of Highland dancing experiences inside and outside of the studio, inextricably linked to the continual quest to jump higher and extend further. This binary reflects, to some degree, the conflicting desire

for potential creative and actual regulated “realities” in existence. A contribution is made here owing to the continued limited existence of sociocultural analyses of Highland dancing in the literature, the remarkably slow evolution of Highland dancing as a creative practice, and the original focus of the current paper on social interaction within a Highland dance class setting.

Ultimately, use of Goffman’s “sensitising concepts and insightful interactional principles” (Birrell and Donnelly 2004, 50) support an understanding of the “performances” and “realities,” the *experience* and *situation* if you like, within a single Highland dancing class. This study arguably increases our understanding of a practice that is regulated and standardised through its focus on the *how* by which “realities” may be sustained but also challenged. As Clark and Mangham (2004) note: “social reality is a matter of scripts and performances created and sustained by human interaction [mean] changes become possible... social actors can become disenchanted with their lot and seek to change it” (41).

A consistent theme in the above discussion is the sentiment that Highland dancing is “different” and in some sense “needs” to remain so. “I like that all the other classes know us as Highland. I love being thought of as different. Highland dancing is different, unlike any other” (Kitty, dancer). Its multifaceted nature, shaped by a curious history and complex understandings of “Scottishness,” was mirrored within this Highland dancing class through an ongoing quest for legitimacy within the field of dance and within Scotland, primarily by stressing the technical difficulty and physicality of the practice and promoting its tight regulation and the competitive context.

The “team” (Goffman 1990 [1959]) comprised of the teacher and older girls in the class supported this “reality” within the “front stage” studio each week. The set content performed in examinations, competitions, and championships, and the technical challenges of the dancing were seen as the key characteristics of the form and to be celebrated and protected. The younger members of the class were resentful of the highly regulated, standardised, and physical nature of the practice that necessitated an authoritative environment characterised by “performances” (Goffman 1990 [1959]) that were physically repetitive (the steps and dances) and socially repetitive (the continual giving of largely negative feedback). They saw the practice as serious, difficult, and often did not seem to enjoy it. Yet, confusion and uncertainty were apparent within the more authoritative team “backstage”: Anne and the older dancers understood that the very “reality” that they supported might also be contributing to a waning popularity. The very features that they valued so much seemed to militate against retaining the commitment of a younger generation, especially within Scotland itself, without the emotional pull of engaging in a form of “Scottishness” that may be felt by dancers in the diaspora. At the same time, the members of this senior “team” did not share their concerns with one another (again, at least in front of me). In other words, a certain “act” was sponsored, fostered and maintained through “reciprocal dependency” (Goffman 1990 [1959], 88).

The case study, although not generalisable, lends weight to the continued need to interrogate the teaching, learning, and *nature* of Highland dancing practice and demonstrates the usefulness of a Goffmanian dramaturgical lens in uncovering and understanding contradictory “actual” and “potential” “realities” within one small Highland dancing class that reflect, perhaps, a particular and continued situation.



NOTES

1. Other important bodies include The New Zealand Academy of Highland and National Dancing and, in Australia, The Victorian Scottish Union. Significant to this article, both have as a primary aim the desire to regulate and recognise a particular standard of Highland dancing.
2. SOHDA note on their website that dancers not registered with their organisation are welcome to perform at SOHDA events and will not report them to any other governing bodies for doing so. However, RSOBHD may ban dancers registered with themselves if it becomes known that they danced at a non-RSOBHD sanctioned event.
3. See Melin and Schoonover (2020) for explanation of how these local styles developed through the traditions of dancing masters and stage performances.
4. For example, the dance *Seann Triubhas* includes a side-ways movement of the lower leg which supposedly resembles the Highlanders shaking off the dreaded trousers after the Battle of Culloden in 1746 (in which the Hanoverian forces defeated the Jacobite army led by Charles Edward Stuart) when the wearing of kilts were banned (SOHDA website), yet pivotal Highland dancer and author D.G. MacLennan admitted to “inventing” the step in the early twentieth century (Newton 2012).
5. Soft shoes worn by Scottish (Highland and Scottish country) and Irish dancers.
6. Pseudonyms are used in the current study.
7. The levels (primary, beginner, novice, intermediate, premier) of Highland dancing is denoted by the complexity and length of the set dances (including the number of steps within a particular dance).
8. J.L. McKenzie (1905-1992).
9. The dance *A Tribute to J.L. McKenzie* was choreographed by Elspeth G. Strathearn.
10. A Scots word for “dead.”
11. Lydia was explaining here that she had no energy by the end of the class.
12. This contrast (popularity of original choreography) is mirrored in the literature with social and cultural analyses of Irish traditional dance (in all its forms) being comprised of a much larger body of work.
13. Celtic rock band formed in Scotland in 2002 that tour internationally.
14. Part of the global televised Got Talent franchise created by Simon Cowell, with the *Britain's Got Talent* series first premiering in 2007.

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II. Different Bodies in Motion

Pamporea: Emergence of a New Vernacular. Dance and Identity Performing with Aromanians (Vlachs) from Romania

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ABSTRACT

In the mid-1980s, a new type of dance performed by young men emerged in a rural Aromanian community in the Dobrogea region, south-eastern Romania. Later adopted by a folk dance ensemble and adapted for stage performance in the early 2000s, *Pamporea* (Aromanian for "ship") quickly gained popularity in the community contexts and received media exposure far beyond them. Its staged, visual expression was emulated and aesthetically reinterpreted, making it one of the most popular Aromanian dances—and, in fact, one of the best-known Aromanian cultural exports to this day. As it moved across various stages and online platforms, the dance often retained the contested "traditional" emblem of an Aromanian identity marker, while much of its cultural metadata is, in fact, getting lost. Performed live, recorded on video, shared on social media, and taught via digital platforms by actors both inside and outside of the community, the creation and cultural evolution of *Pamporea* testify to the transformations of the living heritage of a declining ethnic group at risk of cultural absorption. *Pamporea* offers a lens to inquire into the propagation and consumption of vernacular dances and folk-derived elements of a minority culture on the internet, where various processes reshape how the dance endures and is transmitted. I write from a situated perspective, as a member of the Aromanian community.

KEYWORDS

Aromanian; performing identity; village dance; stage dance; new vernacular; digital folklore; crossmedia.

When speaking of Aromanians,¹ one cannot refer to us as a single, unitary community, but rather as several groups united linguistically and ethnographically through a consciousness of common kinship and belonging, living across the Balkans and in several other countries. Non-homogenous, shaped by plural identifications across time and space, and of a chameleonic² nature, we resist precise taxonomies, which has led to much controversy in historiography and national policies. We are often characterised as an example of "alternating citizenship," "transborder civic identity," or "extramural ethnicity" (Constantin 2014, 260).³ Neglected in mainstream history, geographically dispersed, and subject to oppressive policies of assimilation by nation states, Aromanians today face the imminent and internalised threat of cultural absorption.

The arrival of the Aromanians in Romania was one migratory process that altered the lives of around 6000 families (Hagigogu, Noe, Muși 2005, 168)—including my grandparents, who were displaced from their homes in northern Greece. From 1925 to 1943, a mixed Aromanian

population arrived in Romania, said to number around 30,000 persons.⁴ Among them, the first group of émigrés came from Albania,⁵ specifically from the village of Pleasa⁶ in the summer of 1925. The Plisoț finally settled mainly in two peri-urban areas of Romania: north of Constanța, in Palazu Mare neighbourhood, and in Pipera (now a neighbourhood of the city of Voluntari), situated north-northeast of Bucharest. Both places nurtured a strong, cohesive Plisot community, one of the most closely-knit among all Aromanians in Romania. The Plisot subgroup of Palazu Mare is the focus of this article, as this community is where the *Pamporea* dance was born.

...On a sunny day, barefoot on the hot stone tiles in front of the old adobe house in Tariverde,⁷ *teta* (aunt) Ița taught us—me and my urban bunch of cousins who were spending the summer in the countryside—the steps she used to rehearse with the local village dance group. Some were heavy and proud, others dynamic and alert. The quick *Paidușca*⁸ was our favourite. Our grandparents watched silently, amused from the porch, as we jumped aimlessly from foot to foot in rapid crescendo, stomping, stumbling into one another, and filling the courtyard with laughter. My first experiences of learning dance bear the mark of my skilled aunt, a geography and history teacher, but also a locally renowned keeper and transmitter of dance traditions. Of course, there was lots of dancing at weddings in my large Aromanian family. The 1994 wedding of my eldest cousin Nana, held in the lavish Constanța Casino with the music band of the time, Vlahos, imprinted in my five-year-old memory the vivid image of a ballroom dance. This time, however, it was performed by people wearing straight, fashionable modern outfits, pressed tightly together, and surrounded by the sumptuous art deco architecture—a peculiar transposition of the *dhipli* (dance rows) of the old village *coru* (circle dance). One after the other, my cousins kept getting married, while I kept ending up a bridesmaid—always an uncomfortable position, since it required me to be suffocatingly close to the bride at all times at the centre of the dance circle... It was much later that I came to understand the innate interculturality behind our beloved *Paidușca* and *Ștraca-ștraca*,⁹ and the fragile nuances one must adopt when making any claims of ownership in the Balkan dance realm—or any other, for that matter...

Thus, my interest in following the *Pamporea* phenomenon directly relates to my position as a member of the community. The perspective is equally shaped by belonging to a revival generation in Romania, marked both by the drive to recuperate dance traditions and by the explosion of information and connections brought by the internet, along with the broader transformations of the 21st century. My initial research aim was to reveal how Aromanian cultural identity is expressed through this dance and cultural phenomenon. In the end, the field carved a slighter different road: that of making sense of the cultural evolution of the dance, as it passes through literal and symbolic stages. Altogether, I argue this particular dance foregrounds a discussion on heritage as a process of continuation, dissolution, and reinvention—a perspective that I hope will be valuable not only to researchers but also as a contribution to greater Aromanian reflexivity.

Methods and frames

I drew on semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with members of the original folk dance ensemble, from the first practitioners to the current choreographer (aged 40 to 74), with the vocalists involved in the musical transmission and configuration of the *Pamporea* hit song (aged 71), and with various members of the community (aged 30-65). The

other part of my investigation involved internet-based research, focusing on video material shared on social media channels. This enabled me to compare the visual expression of the dance as recorded in both family and stage settings (around 80 clips posted by community members, ensemble performances, weddings, and other events), beginning with the first public record of the dance in the 2000s and continuing through to the present day (2025), including its expansion beyond the community.

In discussing *Pamporea*, I adopt the understanding of *dance-as-social expression* that stems from Anca Giurchescu's definition (2001, 109) and Bourdieu's (1977) view of dance as a cultural practice through which a community's past and present are managed and transformed symbolically in a dynamic way. To this, I add the layer of *dance as cultural text*,¹⁰ which have led me to interpret *Pamporea* as a *vehicle for negotiating cultural identity* and ensuring the *survival* of Aromanians under political adversities and strong pressures of identity dissolution. Here, I draw on the dance scholar Scolieri's analysis of how "[d]ance performs multiple and complex roles in refugee communities worldwide—as a form of cultural currency, survival strategy, movement therapy, political activism, and social service" (2008, XII). Likewise, I use Jane K. Cowan's framing of the *dance-event*, as "a temporarily, spatially, and conceptually 'bounded' sphere of interaction" (1990, 4). Ethnochoreological concepts inform the technical analysis, while the subsequent sections draw on cultural heritage and cultural transmission studies, recent digital folklore theories, media ecology, and platform studies to interpret how traditional and folkloric dances are diffused, practised, and consumed over the internet.

Brief literature review

The currently available ethnochoreological literature has important gaps left regarding Aromanian dance practices. To date, there is no comprehensive and integrative scholarly work dedicated exclusively to the vernacular forms of Aromanian dance or that accounts diachronically or synchronically as an updated contemporary perspective. Research in the 20th century relied heavily on ethnolinguistic and ethnohistorical approaches. By the 1970s and 1980s, anthological work began to emerge at the crossroads of Romanian and Greek scholarship. Socrates Liakos (1976) identified seven archetypal Vlach dances¹¹ in his 1976 study *Μακεδονο-Αρμανικά* (Macedonian Aromanians), while ethnomusicologist George Marcu's 1977 volume *Folclor Muzical Aroman* (Aromanian folk music) pointed to rhythms of Greek origin.¹² Achileas Lazarou, a prominent scholar of Balkan folk traditions, authored the only dedicated study, *The Dance of Vlachophones*, published in Thessaloniki in 1979. In the 21st century, analytical and interpretative anthropological perspectives have become influential, with authors such as Kalliopi Panopoulou and Vassilis Nitsiakos, prominent figures in cultural anthropology and comparative Balkan folklore, reframing scholarly debates. At the same time, voices from the first generations of practitioner-intellectuals also entered the debate, among which John Tsiमितros, a teacher of traditional dances.

Dancing in context: continuity and transmission

There can be no doubt that Aromanian dances form an integral part of the broader dancing practices of the Balkan peninsula. While they must always be analysed considering the multiethnic and multicultural context of the daily lives of their practitioners, some structural types of Aromanian folk dances can nevertheless be distinguished.



According to Lazarou (1976), they are recognizable because they have unique rhythmic patterns and step sequences that differentiate “Vlachophone” dances from other regional styles. Among these are the circle dances. Central to Aromanian traditions, these dances are performed in a closed, hand-held circle that testifies to unity and community. One of the earliest film recordings¹³ by Manaki Brothers,¹⁴ pioneers of Balkan cinematography and photography, depicts *corlu mari* (the great circle dance) on a vast plain at the base of the mountains in historic Macedonia—a large open spiral with a visible head and tail. The style of the dancing is frequently characterised as slow, or “movement in place with emphasis on the majesty and the upright build while the heavy foothold underlined” (Tsiमितros 2000). There are also line dances, prominent particularly in Greek and Albanian territories, and solo and soule dances that allow for individual expression and are often performed during specific ceremonial occasions. Lazarou identifies rhythmic signatures common across Aromanian dances, such as 5/8 and 7/8 time signatures, which are shared with other Balkan folk traditions.

By the early 2000s, Aromanian dance began to attract media coverage—first through Aromanian channels, and later at national and eventually international levels. The dissemination was exponential: within just a few years, Aromanian dances were entering mainstream stages, with the community folk ensembles being invited by majority groups to perform in television programmes and pop music festivals with growing audiences.

Where do Aromanians in Romania dance and learn dancing today? Plenty of dancing can still be seen in today’s luxurious ballroom weddings, christening feasts, and coming-of-age parties, especially in Constanța city, which hosts the largest Aromanians community. All of these are family-based contexts. Larger communal contexts include the intensely promoted and carefully organised Aromanian festivals involving community organisations and unions,¹⁵ and characterised by formal formats, such as stage choreographies, set structures, and fixed repertoires. Moreover, *serati* have become customary for urban partygoers, extending beyond the community. Large, renowned terrace bars and concert venues in both Bucharest and Constanța now host Aromanian dance parties with a mixed audience—sometimes predominantly Romanian or multiethnic.

When it comes to in-person transmission of Aromanian dances today (*Pamporea* included), it is important to note that modern dance schools have become the sole facilitators. Whether in rural or urban contexts, these informal dance schools have completely replaced any other agents responsible for passing on the dance. These dancing schools and the folk ensemble rehearsals are now the established institutions, vetoed and entrusted by Aromanian families to instil the spirit of Aromanian-ness in younger generations. It is important to remark that the ensembles active today are direct descendants of the formalised village dance groups of the communist period¹⁶. This continuity is traceable in a number of features, starting with their choreographic formalisation (the *stagification* of the dance), the performative structure they impose on body language, the materiality used (for example recovered or reinvented costumes and props), from micro to macro movement, and the selection of Aromanian “values” they intrinsically reinforce. Within these informal schools, learning of the dance is no longer part of a communal traditional experience, but rather a more formalised classroom experience, where teachers replace elders or family members. “The non-place” of the classroom (Panopoulou 2009, 177) is nevertheless infused with familiarity by imbuing it with an ethnic atmosphere. “Here,” confesses choreographer and dancer Mirela Goga, “it has to feel like a home.” The lived experience is transformed “into spectacle, through invented and revived situations” (Panopoulou 2009, 177). In fact, most of the young people and children attending today’s classes have little to no direct experience of the dance contexts in which their grandparents once participated—except the archived recordings available on the internet. They are, for the

most part, taught “second-existence”¹⁷ dances as if these were family events once witnessed in the village.

Proceeding, *Pamporea*'s context of emergence and its manipulation of the traditional kinetic-rhythmic vocabulary inherited by its practitioners should be understood in close relation to: a) first, the multi-cultural context of its chameleonic producers, shaped by their close contact with other ways of being and dancing both before and after their arrival in Romania; b) discontinuities in the intergenerational transmission of Aromanian cultural heritage (Plisoț included), including dance, across the last century in various socio-political contexts: armed conflict, ethnic erasure, displacement, migration, and political persecution; and c) its character as a product of a diasporic identity, marked by (re)attachment to elements of heritage as a means for grounding, anchoring, and coping with the new environment.

*I tell Cipans:*¹⁸ “We are the ones who created Pamporea, in Palazu!”
“No way, it’s been around since forever!” They don’t believe us!
(Adi Geambazu)

The birth of Pamporea

Almost all my partners in dialogue cite a group of young men in Palazu Mare as the initiators of a new, peculiar form of dancing. This moment is recounted by Adi Geambazu, a first-generation dancer born in 1974, and one of the youngest in the group, who was in his teens around the time the dance started taking shape:

The basis of the dance was created by some lads, *Decreții*¹⁹ or *Ceașeii*, as we called them. It was a prodigious generation, most of whom were born between ‘67 and ‘69. Maybe a few were born in ‘65. Before the revolution, they were not the most schooled, I am not sure they ever pursued jobs like engineer or doctor. But they were really united. And they danced a lot and sang a lot. Their most active period was right before and right after the revolution. One of them was Micu, the ‘mischief.’ He played the accordion and was also fond of books, he knew more about music—even music theory. He left for America right after the revolution. He was famous for his *ritournelles*.²⁰ The one you hear on *Pamporea* (ed. n. the dynamic sequence), that’s Babu/ Babașcu’s *ritournelle*. If that harmonic hadn’t been played, you had no way of dancing it. So around that time, I don’t know exactly how much earlier before the revolution, maybe it was ‘87 or ‘88, they were playing together with Ghiță Caraolani. He had previous connections to Palazu, maybe since ‘84 or ‘85, when he performed for the first time at a wedding there. Ghiță was looking for songs in Palazu Mare. He always asked around for old songs and learned many of them there. Among them, there was also *Treambură Pamporea*. It is a mournful, sad song, and slow-paced. And so, a connection grew between him and the Palazu group. They grew together. I’d say that Palazu Mare would not have been so famous without Vlahos band. That was because Ghiță was playing a lot more *aștirat* [slowly, seated—ed. note]. They used to play at a slower speed, and the Fârșeroț²¹ were able to dance to that. It was similar to our own style—like *Ceamcu*.²² Think about it like this—that generation needed something more jumpy, more alert than what had been danced to in Palazu Mare. I think what made it happen was the need of the young for something more lively. They were in their 20’s then. (Adi Geambazu, interview from February 2025)

Fortunately, the first steps of “proto-*Pamporea*” are vividly recollected:

If you know what the first step is, when you would dance it without putting your feet backwards, you hop on one foot and then jump backwards on the other foot. Starting with the left foot, you would hop

three-four times on the right foot, backwards. Just like *Ceamcu*. Now, that is the simplest form. You can imagine we started with something quite easy. That's how the first steps of *Pamporea* were ever made. No way you would raise the knee up or anything of that sort. That's something they brought later, the youngsters. So, basically it was a speedy variant of *Ceamcu*, a faster *Ceamcu*. We were good at *Ceamcu*, it's ours, after all. So, when you move the right foot, sometimes you can also make a jump on the left foot. If you have more time and the music is faster, you can land on the left foot, two-three times backwards. That was the first step. We did it all together, we were a lot of people, holding arms. But the very first steps we danced to some other song, I don't remember which song it was, maybe that one with "aeroplani multi, le le le"²³ ["Oh so many aircrafts"] and also another one I can't remember. That's the song we initially performed the dance on. How we got to *Treambură Pamporea* is hard to say. Maybe it was easier because the rhythm was similar. But the *Pamporea* song definitely came afterwards. (...) *Pamporea* is not an old dance, it's a new dance. But its fundamental structure lies within the other dances. (Adi Geambazu, interview from February 2025)

Therefore, *Pamporea* is to be understood as a creative act that emerged in Palazu Mare, within a small Plisot group. We also find that the village version—the "Palazu Mare original"—is still in circulation to some extent. Restricted by a slower tempo and to Plisot kin, it is now performed exclusively at family events:

All of us, the guys from Palazu Mare, excluding the ones who are members of Iholu, we all dance it the same way. As if we were an ensemble. If you take those born in the '65, '67, '68, if you take me, 50 years old – we all dance it the same way. And we only come together for weddings, baptisms (...) Me and GP, we always danced together. We still do, whenever we meet at weddings. When we go to Bucharest, my relatives await us anxiously: "the Palazu Mare guys will come and dance." There will be a fight if we don't dance. Sometimes they say we must dance. But what if I don't feel like it? Should I be a clown, dance whenever somebody wants me to? Either way, you have to dance. It's already an emblem: "The Palazu Mare has arrived." And generally, we do dance, because we love it. Nowadays, we could say we dance *Pamporea* 'since forever' (...) There is no wedding, gathering, baptism, Thursday evening without *Pamporea* in Palazu. If you don't dance it, the bride or groom will think you're upset with them. (Adi Geambazu, from interview in spring 2025)

Therefore, the dance is preserved outside of the spectacle and the stage.

My musician interlocutors point out that the lyrics are an adaptation of the renowned poem *Pri-Amarea Lae* [Across the Black Sea] by Nuși Tulliu, published in his 1926 anthology²⁴ The poem was transposed into a singing ballad accompanied by accordion, gaining some popularity and circulation in several villages of Dobrogea as it was performed by local rhapsodes. Hrista Lupci, renowned Aromanian rhapsod himself, encountered it in the '50s, played by an old accordion player from Palazu. The song's prior circulation in the local repertoire is confirmed by Gheorghe Caraolani:

I didn't make up the song, I learned it from Palazu. It was actually in the first years when I started singing. Around the '80s. Before '85. I started singing with them in Palazu. The lads from Palazu—not the old folk, but the youngsters—had already had this *Pamporea* [before him], and this was a top song, it was a big success. But it had another form. I gave the song a new shape. I arranged it in this new rhythm, and I was the one to release it, me and my band Vlahos, we had this idea to put it on some rhythm. But let's make it clear, the song was older. And so, the lads started dancing to it, after we gave it this appeal. It was 1985. Our instruments were *armonica* [accordion], guitar and keyboard, with me as vocalist. So, before releasing it with Iholu, at the community [FARA from Constanța-ed.

note], we had played it at every wedding in Palazu, at every custom. At each custom, *Pamporea* was number one. Then, the lads from Palazu started going to Iholu and we took it and that's where it got cemented. My time with it started heading to an end. Others came to play it. (interview from spring 2025)

The entrance of modern *Pamporea* into wide circulation was marked by its formal release by the in-vogue Aromanian band Vlahos in 1985 under the name *Treamburâ Pamporea* [The rocking ship], led by Caraolani. For nearly twenty years, it was performed on Aromanian stages, before becoming known simply as *Pamporea*.

To conclude, the village form of *Pamporea* was born within a continuum of intergenerational transmission and performance among the Plisoț community, yet it also represented an innovation—an adaptive expression intended to engage with modern times. Therefore, the Palazu Mare group had, in fact, generated what we may call a *dance type*, creatively employing recognizable “stereotype movement sets owned by the social group.”²⁵ The necessity to remain connected to the traditional model—with its strict limits—never disappeared. For the model to remain viable and accepted as a living model, it had to draw on a pre-existing movement vocabulary and adhere to a set of principles through which the community could see and recognise itself.

*I ask you this: do you believe we can still live today
as we once did, up in the mountains?*²⁶

Taking the stage

We have seen that “Palazu *Pamporea*” circulated for almost two decades at private family events and on village and city festival stages—at Aromanian celebrations, community gatherings, and village days—gradually gaining popularity within the community. At the beginning of the 2000s, however, a typical phenomenon occurred: the village version was gathered to be reassembled collectively for stage performance by the newly formed folk ensemble Iholu, a new generation of young people seeking artistic expression. The Iholu ensemble was founded in 2004 under the Aromanian Community of Constanța organisation, with the aim “to preserve and promote Aromanian culture, traditions, and customs.”²⁷ At its inception, the group also included young people from Palazu Mare who had grown up seeing and dancing the “Palazu *Pamporea*”:

The first generation of Iholu brought it to the state of the art. Some of them had this elegance in movement. It's like they were replicas of the lads of '67-'68. They all grew together, just like the old ones, together from kindergarten. It's a pleasure to watch them perform. Why? Because they dance *aștirat*, they individualise themselves, each of them brings his own style. All the others are like machines, they don't invest any soul into it. They dance because they have to. But Iholu—they studied, they looked at how Cypriots, Albanians danced. They took from all over and turned it into an art piece. They made the recognizable *Pamporea*, with the feet up, with the jumping. They took all of these from elsewhere. Our Aromanians did not use to dance like that. Maybe Albanians perform some kind of *Ceamcu* with jumps. I saw them on YouTube, how they bend backwards, how they jump like springs. Nobody else is going to dance it like Iholu, it's like they are the golden generation at the national championship. Their way is nicer. They used to train every day. Us, we know the simple *Pamporea*. But they learned from us and then turned it into art. Good for them! *Chapeau!* If they hadn't brought it there, it would not have become so famous. (Adi Geambazu)

With the inclusion of the dance in the repertoire of a folk ensemble, it was incorporated into a new set of rules and given a new identity. “Palazu *Pamporea*” became “Iholu *Pamporea*.” From its very beginning, the group was invited to perform on a morning show on a mainstream TV channel. From there, the dance grew into a hit phenomenon. In its rise to popularity, *Pamporea* first benefited from television, which gave it visibility and ensured wide dissemination, and later from the internet, which enabled reproduction and transmission. Within a year from the morning show, the dance went viral, moving beyond the community of origin and into the mainstream media and even the international public eye (TV shows, popular electronic music festivals, a victory anthem for a football team, and social media dance training) With its migration from Palazu to Iholu, the dance entered its screen era.²⁸

Graphic expression and some notes on stage arrangement

To outline the visual expression, I will note some particularities of the stage version performed by Iholu folk ensemble (as seen in the YouTube visual archive), since it represents the first stage model that was later disseminated across the Aromanian world and beyond.

The dance is performed exclusively by young men in formal stage performances. The dance is executed in one chain formation, an open circle with the dancers facing inward and moving counter-clockwise. They start the dance by clapping their hands at the beginning of the musical phrase. The dance follows the musical structure: the accompanying music in a 4/4 time signature. The binary rhythm supports the dance’s synchronised group movements and enables the execution of rapid footwork section. Two distinct sequences can be identified: a slower one, known as *sta tria*²⁹ [in three] and an alert sequence having a lively tempo with dynamic steps. The alternation between these sequences creates a dynamic rhythm, engaging both the dancers and the audience. Nevertheless, the rotating slow and fast sequences should not be confused with the pattern of a “classical” *sta tria* dance, such as that in *La valea di Ianina* [In the Valley of Ioannina] performed by Grămusteani,³⁰ where the steps remain the same throughout the musical score but are executed at double speed in some parts of the dance. The slow *sta tria* section may be considered the “traditional” form of *Pamporea*, as it is common to all Aromanian branches and among the oldest dances recorded.³¹ It takes the form of a resting sequence, an *intermezzo* between the alert sequences, with dancers relaxing their postures and breaking hand formation, sometimes clapping to the rhythm. The movement follows a cyclical three-step pattern aligned with the triple-meter rhythm typical of *sta tria*.

This pattern is executed without precise timing, as uniformity across the ensemble is not required in the in-between phases. On the contrary, during the rapid sequence, timing and precise execution are vital. The other sequence is, in fact, the reason for *Pamporea*’s fame, and what has become the recognizable element of the dance. At the beginning of a new musical phrase, dancers place their hands on each other’s shoulders to ensure cohesion and coordinated group movement. In contrast to the “classical *sta tria*,” this passage introduces rapid, spirited movements, increasing the intensity of the dance—an amplified *sta tria*. Dancers execute quick footwork, sharp turns, and dynamic, ample gestures. The second sequence can be performed in two ways: either with “steps to the front” or “steps at the back,” the former having a larger ambitus.³² The movement repertoire includes the equivalent of *pas de bourrée*—a quick, three-step movement executed in various directions that contributes to the dance’s fluidity; hops—small, energetic jumps that add verticality and emphasise rhythmic beats; and the equivalent of *chassé*—sliding steps that facilitate lateral movement and spatial reconfiguration within the circle.

Among the movement and gesture vocabulary, there are occasional “arm flourishes”—stylised arm movements that enhance the visual appeal and expressiveness of the dance—as well as interspersed moments of rhythmic emphasis, such as slight foot stamps or knee lifts. Gestures like facial expressions and eye contact between performers are integral, fostering the sense of connection among participants. Depending on the available performing space, the final position may sometimes end in a straight line, with a final crescendo of steps performed *sur place* and vertical foot movement executed with a large ambitus. Throughout, the upper body posture remains relatively steady, allowing the legs and feet to execute the steps with precision.

In terms of roles, the leader (*caplu*, lit. “the head”) is the first in the circle and stands out through movements specific to his position. He may break off from the formation to perform pirouettes during the alert sections, and do particular gestural improvisations, such as placing the right hand behind his head, using a *șamia* (white handkerchief) for embellishments, or stroking the foot or the lifted heel to add dynamic variation to the performance. During the slower sections of *Pamporea*, there is a switch in the formation, with each dancer taking a turn at the leading position and demonstrating his mastery in directing the group with each new alert phrase. The *coada*, the circle “tail” can augment the dynamism.

Structurally, the “stage *Pamporea*” relies heavily on the “village *Pamporea*”—built on pre-existent types of Aromanian vernacular dances such as *Ceamcu*, or *Featâ-armânâ* [Aromanian girl]. Based on the observed step patterns, rhythm, and formation, it can be assumed that the dance belongs to the family typified as *choros sta tria* dances. At the same time, it shares structural similarities with dances from other Balkan traditions—for instance, other Greek *syrtos* and the Serbian *kolo*, which also feature circular formations and alternating tempos. *Pamporea* can thus be understood as both a choreographic and cultural hybrid of different affiliations, a creative synthesis of structural elements of Aromanian regional choreographic repertoire of the Balkans, enriched with neighbouring Greek and Slavic stylistic and aesthetic influences.

The “cemented” *Pamporea* is synonymous to its stage appearance, which is usually performed on a raised, front-facing platform, with the dancers positioned above the audience. This viewing angle is built into the typical choreography plan. In large Aromanian gatherings (such as Aromanians’ Day), the performance of the dance occupies most, if not all, of the stage space—with the band standing either in the centre or, more commonly, to the side of the stage. On the other hand, on major TV sets and festival stages, the dance typically has the form of a supporting act for the vocal performer(s), who occupy the centre stage. In these cases, dancers provide a sort of “moving scenery” behind and around the singer.³³ The dance is then supportive act, its function being to provide animation and enhance that particular sense of “Aromanian-ness.” With this type of stage setup, the boundary between dancers and audience is clearly marked. On the other hand, in family contexts, the physical and conceptual distance between dancers and audience tends to be smaller. At times, it may even disappear, when wedding guests (only men) join in to dance together with the ensemble.

The dancing costume and its specific aesthetics, used as a “mode of representation” or as an expression of identity, would require a separate chapter. I only note that the choice of costume, styling, materials, and decorations have strong identity connotation and work to enhance the “uniqueness” and particularity of the Aromanian (male) identity. Costumes are typically remade today with close attention to the choice of cut, weight, and texture of fabrics and adapted to allow greater ease of movement compared to the older “authentic” village outfits. Costumes are a constitutive part of a larger training in stagecraft/stage behaviour or “stage dance art based on folklore” (Ivanova-Nyberg 2024, 4).

All of these are political instruments through which *Pamporea* inscribes the Aromanian body into a political arena, where conventionalised movement and visual appearance expressed through dance become an obligatory rhetoric of ethnic hyper-individualisation.

“(...) dance is not the repository of meaning
but produces meaning each time it is performed”
(Giurchescu 2001, 110)

From Plisot Pamporea to an all-Aromanian Pamporea. Variability, creativity, and improvisation.

Dissemination has produced multiple variants generated through the adoption by other Aromanian folk ensembles—the *Vanghilizmo* group of Mihail Kogălniceanu³⁴ being a good example. Although arranged as a rather fixed form, the dance is appropriated by each Aromanian (dance) group, who then claim their own version. With each performance, a new variant emerges, marked by particular stylistic variations. Nevertheless, one could identify a set of recurring features across enactments: the order and sequence of the steps, linkage, body postures, communication between dancers, exchange of the leader role, and some verbal cues such as shouts and calls.

Variability is a, if not *the*, form of existence of popular cultures. The dance has been—and continues to be—subject to transformation. In this sense, it offers ethnologists a rare opportunity to witness a contemporary production of folklore. This dynamic interplay of creativity and variation—central to the production of folklore elements—can be summarised through the insights of a few authors: “The dancing identity does not remain static and unchangeable during time. Dancing as a social phenomenon entails the possibility of readjustment to specific social, economic, historical, and political shuffle of local society.” (Pitsi and Filippos 2014, 207). Schechner suggests that, although over time the overall shape of cultural performances may not be recognizable, performances are “not dead repetitions but continuous erasing and superimposing” (Schechner 1981, 86). Giurchescu (2001, 164) sees aesthetics as a dynamic component of culture, where the influence of fashion brings about gradual, subtle changes:

Each new reproduction demonstrates a creative approach. Therefore, in a broad historical perspective, each actual performance is, in fact, only a “link” in the unbroken chain of all the creative enactments realised in the past by all its predecessors, and which are potentially to be continued in the future by the successors. (Giurchescu 1983, 23)

Therefore, if we zoom out from Palazu Mare and look intra-group, we begin to see a second migration: how a dance of one collective (Fârșerot Plisot) has become a dance *of* the entire Aromanian group in Romania, to speak *for* them. Based on my interlocutors and the overwhelmingly positive feedback observed on media channels (most exhibiting enthusiastic feelings of ethnic pride), it is safe to conclude that the stage composition has largely been accepted within the larger Aromanian community. Its appropriation by most Aromanian folk dance groups in Romania confirms that it has entered the dance repertoire of the entire community. With the professionalisation of folk ensembles and the incorporation of *Pamporea* into their core repertoire, the dance has also entered the arena of economic exchange. Dancing has become a trade, part of wedding service or televised appearance. The remuneration of the dance inscribes it in a new dimension—as artistic currency.

Social functions

Motivations for dancing have naturally differed among the various Aromanian generations performing *Pamporea* over the last four decades. What connects them, however, is the sense of novelty *Pamporea* brings, a break from “older” forms of dancing, which are tacitly or explicitly perceived as obsolete. One reason for *Pamporea*’s quick adoption among young Aromanians is that it is a dance *of the young* and *for the young*. Much like it did for the initial group of Palazu Mare in the 1980s, nowadays it gives shape and presence to young people’s need to individualise themselves, to express “their own artistic personality”³⁵ within and beyond the community, and to reflect on the evolution of the Aromanian world to which they belong. *Pamporea* may be considered, as Anca Giurchescu would say, an “instrument of change”—a choreographic creation that both enables social transformation and is itself affected by it: “A dance system changes because of changes in world view, need of expression, and socio-political and environmental conditions” (2001, 112). In this sense, *Pamporea* occupies a “goldilocks” position between tradition and innovation.

The generic “folk activities” promoted and developed within community associations—such as those of FARA Armânească—continue to provide some of the most important opportunities for social interaction among younger generations. These spaces make folk dances attractive primarily as sites of interaction, where learning dances, attending meetings, and participating in various community activities contribute to the processes of bonding same-age groups. The aggregating role of modern dance clubs is therefore essential to understanding *Pamporea* as both dance and social phenomenon.

On a local scale, *Pamporea* is the pride of Palazu Mare, a pride later translated to all other folk groups that have incorporated it into their repertoire. Because of its perceived difficulty, the dance has become a token of status, a “must have” for the repertoire of any folk ensemble who considers itself Aromanian. From local, community prestige came national and then online prestige. On a subjective scale, then, *Pamporea* is a great vehicle for personal status: any young Aromanian man who learns the dance becomes, to a certain degree, part of a tacit brotherhood of esteemed *Pamporea* dancers. Lastly, *Pamporea* widely serves a recreation and entertainment role, highlighting what John Tsiamitros, teacher of traditional dances, observed: “today, the character of traditional dance has to do more with entertainment than old customs and social function” (Tsiamitros, social media post).

“The fact that dancing is performed in a given context shows that this expressive modality makes sense for the performers and the audience as well.”

(Giurchescu 2001, 110)

Dance and identity

It is relevant that, roughly at the same time as *Pamporea* effervescently spread within community contexts, a rejuvenation of national awareness was taking place among Romanian Aromanians. In 2005, an organised group of Aromanian leaders and activists vocally demanded minority rights³⁶—a coordinated action that attracted considerable public attention. While there is no way in which the dance can be directly linked to the political program of this national re-awakening movement, it was, nevertheless, entangled in the political effervescence of the moment, becoming a cultural and media phenomenon that reinforced it culturally. *Pamporea* thus emerges as a product of the social, cultural, and political pressures faced by Aromanians in Romania and elsewhere. With the notion of heritage only fairly recently adopted into the

preservation vocabulary of activist Aromanians (members of associations demanding political rights and constitutional recognition), dance at large has become part of the rhetoric for urgent identity recognition and subsequent political demands at both the national and international levels. The way *Pamporea* enacts a negotiation of Aromanian identity is better understood within the framework of strategies for survival.

Pamporea offers a great example of how the community thinks of itself through dance, offering revelatory means for self-reflection. Its articulation to memory is illustrative. In discussions with Mirela Goga, the dance is described as an artifact for rekindling “ancestral energies.” This is expressed in one of the fundamental features of traditional Aromanian society: its patriarchal organisation. I remind the reader the movement pattern is ascribed to men only—young, powerful men. The virility of the dance places men at the top of the societal hierarchy. At its core, *Pamporea* preserves indicators of this pre-modern social construct: a male brotherhood of exclusivity, with virility demonstrated through dominance and strength, as other dances once did for earlier generations: *Ceamcu*, for instance. “Stage (Iholu) *Pamporea’s*” admitted intention is the perpetuation and reaffirmation of gender roles (Mirela Goga), as reflected in its staging composition and dynamism: even “the male aggressiveness” as she describes it. When considering the exclusion of women from the dance, *Pamporea* reveals another paradox: although evolution is frequently invoked as a motivation for the creation of the stage dance, this in turn reinforces pre-established community structures. So, *Pamporea* serves as a great social mirror for the processes of selection that the community employs in the present to define itself in relation to its past. Standing at this fertile edge between generations, between fragments of patriarchal society and a slightly more liberalised majority group, and between generational definitions of what folk dance is or should be, it produces confusion and turns out to be a strong stimulus for reflexivity on what Aromanian folklore productions are and even what folklore is supposed to mean altogether:

It’s a musical, artistic phenomenon that is not folklore. I don’t know what to call it. Folklore is that which is nailed down. Maybe that one disappeared. Is folklore a continuous thing? Can we call it as living folklore, even if it was invented 20 years ago? To call it traditional is a stretch. It’s exaggerated to talk about it as a traditional dance. No good. This dance is a commercial success. That doesn’t bother, it’s a good thing it’s performed at weddings, but to perform a new, dynamic dance in Aromanian traditional attire, that is not folklore anymore. It only seems to be. But it’s not. Our old shepherd songs had no such thing. But that’s evolution. With all those old garments, we now perform all sorts of dances, old and new. (Oani Nicolae, Aromanian activist from an interview in February 2025)

Repatching identity online. Community as media

As soon as it could, Aromanian culture found its way on the Internet: first, through chat groups, forums, and blogs in the late 1990s and early 2000s, then via the websites of regional associations and dance clubs in Romania and the Balkans, and later on social media: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and more recently, TikTok. Over the last two decades, internet has become the prevalent medium for debating, exchanging, and promoting Aromanian culture, as well as a much-valued agora for Aromanian communities historically separated by borders, migrations, and internal ruptures. With the rapid adoption of digital communication, testimonies from within the community claim to have rediscovered their

once borderless identity repatched through the internet, which has been described as “a sort of spring for Aromanians” (Pariza, social media post).³⁷ Beyond reconnecting with long-lost relatives across the world, the internet has offered Aromanians everywhere the possibility to expose, display, perform, and negotiate their identity beyond the constrains of national constructs.

A commonly used theory in digital folklore is that of media scholar Henry Jenkins, who in the early 1990s coined the concept “participatory culture” (Jenkins 1992, 24–7). The notion of “convergence culture” (Jenkins 2006, 2) was later supplemented with the concept of “spreadability” (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013) to describe the technological and cultural potential for the circulation of content. “Spreadability” was paired with “stickiness,” a term that shifts attention not only towards the process of spreading, but also towards the ability of content to stick where it has spread and to create lasting change.

Moreover, folklorist Merrill Kaplan’s (2010) observations on how online folklore not only passes on tradition, but also acts as a curating agency—collecting and annotating—is accurate here. “Social media algorithms are actors which simultaneously promote change and continuity, and as such take part in folk culture and the production and transmission of folklore” (Flinterud 2023). Vernacular/ folk dances too are created and sustained within this algorithmically governed communication, though they have received less attention in scholarly debate.

“Composability³⁸ has become an indispensable quality of the current media landscape, in which a community itself becomes a form of media, accessed through various platforms” (Busta and Internet 2023). Being part of this participatory culture, Aromanian folk elements too become processes subject to reinterpretation and reconfiguration by a variety of new actors, “screens through which all platforms are diffracted” (Busta and Internet 2023). This fluidity is something which vernacular culture could not achieve in the physical world alone. With the emergence of new technologies, another migration of folklore elements has taken place, along with a new type of transmission and production on and for internet platforms.

#viralvideos #views #viral_video
#intrend #Pamporea

Dancing in times of algorithms. Pamporea 2.0

Video-dances of Aromanian folk groups and domestic dance events from different parts of the Balkans were among the first media to be posted on the internet-as-archive. In the second part of the 2000s, a proliferation of web sites, forums, and blogs began avidly recovering Aromanian dances worldwide, by digitizing old cassette tapes and other analogue media, as well as by posting recordings of live dance events in an effort to *self-document the present*. Along with digital libraries created by NGOs³⁹ and institutions emerging at that time, the most impressive dance archives remain, nevertheless, the informal ones: family footage shared on social media and the countless YouTube channels.⁴⁰ To this day, the thousands of videos documenting Aromanians dancing over the last 120 years now available on social media represent the largest repository of Aromanian culture—a truly open, participatory digital library.

A recording of *Pamporea* from a 2015 Plisot wedding in Palazu⁴¹ has reached 24 million views and received about 3,000 comments. A single Google search for *Pamporea* yields ten pages of distinct results. There is virtually no social media platform where the dance has not been documented. Analysing *Pamporea* through the lens of spreadability offers valuable

insights. The replication, transformation, distortion, and repurposing of the dance as it passes from one *user* to another is a process of acceleration resembling that of memes and other viral genres ubiquitous in the network culture. As Jenkins (2009) writes, “if it doesn’t spread it’s dead.” In claiming that “content spreads memetically,” Phillips and Milner (2017) allude to a process that goes beyond human agency and echoes the gene–meme analogy. In becoming *content*, the dance first acquires the property of *likability*, which in turn enhances its potential for *shareability*. In this process, the dance relinquishes ties to its original context or any control over where it goes or what it does.

Once in the digital realm, *Pamporea* becomes embedded in new power structures: democratic, open-access processes of circulation, curation, and remixing, but at the same time being shaped by algorithmic hegemony and the ever-growing demand for innovative content. As curatorial practices are becoming increasingly intertwined with choreography, curators—whether human or algorithmic—shape the ways in which dance is presented, experienced, and understood. With each reiteration, the formula, structure, and movement pattern are expanded, simplified, or synthesised, along with the contexts and meanings of the performing event. So much so that online platforms are changing the very nature of the dance itself, as it is filtered and reinterpreted through digital interfaces. This form of *dance-as-content* challenges traditional hierarchies, allowing an expression such as *Pamporea* to become a collective creation, even performed by outsiders. With digital *Pamporea*, the lines between the originating community, choreographer, performers, and audience are blurred, leading to a natural loss of cultural metadata—that is, the embeddedness of the Aromanian cultural context and the erosion of authorship. For example, in a 2023 TikTok video⁴² posted by a young dancer in a German folk ensemble, the caption accompanying a video of *Pamporea* performed in a classroom reads: “Daily dose of cardio #Pamporea #traditional #traditionaldance #dance #timisoara #romania.” No other information is provided, and the example is far from singular.

One recently theorised concept is useful: “trans-platformisation”—the process by which digital artifacts such as memes and even dances move and evolve across different online platforms, often losing their original context and creator attribution in the process. This phenomenon is characterised by the “playful memetics, virality machine, and joyful oblivion” (Betlemidze 2025), which can strip content of its original cultural context, leading to potential appropriation and erasure of its origins. As content moves, it can become detached from its original creators, cultural background, or the specific platform where it first gained traction. And so, the originating community can be obscured or forgotten, especially as the content grows in popularity and acquires new meanings. Another equally relevant notion is that of “tokenisation” that offers both a method for safeguarding digital representations and new ways to monetise and share folk dances globally. Therefore, the movement, displacement, transformation, and translation of *Pamporea* across digital platforms carry political implications.

With trans-platformization, the question of disembodiment⁴³ also arises. The online environment creates a new type of bodily presence and movement, shaped by constraining visual formats (e.g., video length or screen size), all of which play an important role in how dance elements “spread” and “stick.” While performance theories describe and analyse the embodied self moving physically and spatially, in the online environment performers and audiences alike are disembodied entities, “electronically reincarnated” through the digital signs they choose to represent themselves. The receptors are now only “unknown audiences” (Boyd and Heer, 2006) shaped by the architectures of online platforms.

“(...) wrong, this is the more universal *Pamporea* we have started using, the real one is much harder.”
(*Pamporea trainees over TikTok*)

Becoming a learning object in the age of folk tutorial

Around the age of 17, right about the time my eldest *papu* (grandad) started fading away, I was realizing the urgent need to safekeep whatever I had been endowed with. So, I took up keeping a dictionary of my two parents’ Aromanian idioms and started teaching myself old words. Around the same time, in the mid-2000s, I was fervently searching obscure corners of the internet, looking into and listening to whatever Aromanian music and dances from abroad I could find. Days would pass with me hitting pause-repeat obsessively on YouTube, trying to match the folk dancers’ proud posture and elegance, while stomping in our Bucharest flat—to the obvious discontent of the neighbours downstairs. Each rewind got me closer. I was beyond proud when I finally decoded *Pamporea*, the famously difficult men-only dance. In truth, I represent a not-so-infrequent case of what one may call a *cultivated or reborn Aromanian identity*: while living in a profoundly Aromanian household—with reciprocal visits from extended family, stories, communal singing, rites, and glimpses of past lives always around—I had received a very mainstream education, keeping away from the community for most of the time. I only spoke my first Aromanian words at 17. But I had taught myself *the ways of being Aromanian*, with my two-column notebook, exhausting bedroom dancing, and YouTube being the pivotal components of my quest to repatch what I felt was slipping through my fingers, through remembrance, through history.

The number of people interested in folk dance has increased significantly as a result of the development of social networking and video-sharing websites, alongside the emergence of digital tools, new archiving technologies, and dedicated learning platforms (Blackler et al. 2019; Hong, Chen, Ye 2020). New ways of learning folk dances are being explored (Kico et al. 2018). In the age of *#folktutorial*, learning communities aggregate in cyber-based social networks that provide the support needed for individuals to appropriate, from the comfort of their homes, preserved and documented pieces of traditional dancing. This happens within dance groups, among students studying folk choreography (Portnova 2022), or simply among online enthusiasts. These platforms foster a sense of community sustained by an apprenticeship-based identity, connecting individuals across geographical boundaries and “creating a global village of dance enthusiasts” (Panova-Tekath 2022, 86). Such networks also enhance the visibility of marginal communities, small groups, and indigenous dances. All this accounts for a growing disparity between the in-situ and the online consumption of vernacular expressions of culture. What could this gap signify?

Today, *Pamporea* and other examples of vernacular dances that have become disembodied by their transfer into the digital space are experiencing a phenomenon of re-embodiment with the advent of folk dance tutorials. In the current phase of *Pamporea*, the internet dance tutorial itself has become the primary mode of transmission. This has created a novel affordance that would have been inconceivable for any vernacular expression even half a century ago: should *Pamporea* be abandoned by its original carriers in the future, it might still live on in some parts of the world—in a living room, behind a screen, or in a dance classroom halfway around the globe. Within this new paradigm, a noteworthy series of mutations continue to unfold.

First, the shifting of authority: the role of the dance instructor once dedicated to teaching the stage *Pamporea* is now altered, now individuals can learn from multiple sources—second-, third-, fourth-hand—and develop their own interpretations of the dance. This lays the

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groundwork for the multiplication of digital *Pamporeas* found across social media. Moreover, from the perspective of teaching and learning as a process, the original dancers or transmitting agents (community members or folk group) are no longer needed in the act of knowledge transmission—neither in their physical presence, nor even digitally. One important, even revolutionary effect is that dance-meaning is no longer ensured by the community—the traditional entity guaranteeing for the dance-event—but is instead decoupled from it. Second, digital platforms emphasise collaborative learning, which establishes another type of community around the dance – one not bound by kinship, heritage, or memory, but organised around shared interest and practice around a specific topic. Third, the collaboration of video-lesson technology and dance teaching produces the “screenisation” of performance space, the “fragmentation” of performance task, and the “montageisation of linguistic instruction” (Ladra 2024, 369). All techniques required for “tutorialising” a folk dance (use of platform analytics, knowledge of the ideal video tutorial length, viewer hooks, video tracking, and many other)⁴⁴ construct the packaged folk media product. And so *Pamporea* as a learning object cannot be understood outside its marketing dimension and, particularly, the internet economy. At this stage, it can generate revenue through advertising, viewer donations, subscriptions, and sponsorship. It is a living example of how a folk dance becomes an internet commodity.

As we have seen, while online diffusion renders vernacular expressions more accessible to wider audiences, it also creates a distance between viewer or consumer and the original customary context. This results in a disconnection: people may not engage with the dance as deeply or meaningfully online as they would in a physical setting. Yet nowadays, they have gained the ability to step in and configure their own interpretative framework of the dance—an affordance only possible with the advent of the internet. Paradoxically, while the gap between an “original” communal dance expression and its audience seems to widen, it also collapses into a new form of engagement in which the audience becomes the creator and traditional roles and power balances shift. Curators—any user who appropriates *Pamporea-as-content*—gain power over meaning, function, and visual expression by selecting, arranging, and presenting their dance work, thereby shaping public perception and taste.

Another concern emerges when looking comparatively at how other Aromanian dances are perceived or have been taken up by majority culture, if they ever reach the public eye. Stripped down to a meme, I posit that a major factor for *Pamporea’s* spreadability has been fuelled by a combination of the exotic presence of Aromanian men and the spectacular character of the movement pattern (which is exactly the element insiders find most controversial), further enhanced by the rhythm and the spellbinding *ritournelle*. In this sense, *spectacle as perceived authenticity*, is what has been embraced, amplified, and circulated, enabling the dance to carry the controversial emblem of being “traditional Aromanian.” In this sense, *Pamporea* illustrates the community’s relationship with the majority population, specifically the imbalance of power expressed through the selective consumption of the marginal culture’s perceived, or rather imagined, heritage. This process is called by Panopoulou, Papakostas and Douma a “projection of an imagined dance identity” (2013, 638). Nevertheless, the emphasis on the show features (the spectacular display) of dance elements is something that the minority itself constantly feeds, by perpetuating a triple performance: of Aromanianhood, of Aromanian manhood, and of Aromanian tradition—as a strategy for constructing difference. The competitive edge of *Pamporea* is brilliantly summarised by one of its earliest performers:

Pamporea is like Gică Hagi⁴⁵ in the world—that’s how you know there are Aromanians around the world. Like Nadia Comăneci⁴⁶ did for Romanians, *Pamporea* did for Aromanians. Not *Ceamcu*, which is several hundred years old, God knows how old, not other dances, but *Pamporea*. It even reached China (Adi Geambazu, personal communication, spring 2025)

Aligned with consumer economy and galloping capitalism, *Pamporea* needed to accelerate if Aromanians were to remain visible and, indeed, to survive.

Conclusions

From community-vernacular to ensemble-staged and commercial folkloric performance, and then into digital and pastime tutorial, the journey of *Pamporea* follows the sinuous trajectory of Aromanians' living heritage in Romania. It foregrounds the transformations and dynamics of vernacular dance practices as they are permeated by the digital environment. Here, the rules of representation and reception, the relationship between creators and receivers, and the dance expression itself undergo significant transformations. The forty-year arc encompasses a departure from community contexts, traditional movement patterns, and traditional environments of dance performance, towards new digital and hybrid modes marked by the acquisition of new rules altogether. Furthermore, *Pamporea* as a dance-event is unfolding in both physical and conceptual sites of tension: between older and younger generations of Aromanians, between what is perceived as genuine customary practice and its folkloric emulation, and within a political arena where Aromanian identity *must* perform its otherness in order to be acknowledged.

Pamporea shows what the age of *community-as-media* can generate, especially for a small community such as the Vlachs, whose heritage elements are neither sufficiently visible nor benefit from protection or preservation policies, while facing weak intergenerational transmission. Although the online environment offers the most accessible and intuitive means to safeguard such vernacular dance practices, it also changes them—both by distorting their embedded and embodied cultural connotations and by using its creative potential to break down and re-formulate the dance. With *Pamporea-as-content*, the internet as medium alters how this and other similarly emerged dances are perceived, learned, shared, and adapted to user-consumer tastes, aesthetics, trends, and, essentially, to the demands of the digital economy. When communal or folk dances transform into spreadable multimedia hybrid content of plural authorship and mixed affiliation, we enter the realm of another kind of vernacular: democratised, open-access, unrestricted, and free-to-use forms of pre-existing cultural dance material, growing organically across the internet, taught in informal dance classes to individuals of diverse backgrounds, evolving through digitally mediated interaction, and passed from one social media account to another as viral entertainment currency—with just enough sense of *difference* to keep it captivating and in circulation.

Pamporea becomes, therefore, a compelling illustration of how the internet is a vibrant generator of folklore: a hybrid phenomenon consisting of both *communal Pamporea*—instances of vernacular, spontaneous creation—and its digital counterparts modelled by algorithmic rules and consumer understandings and preferences. In this sense, *Pamporea* emerges simultaneously as *content*, *token*, and *learning-object*. Ultimately, it stands as an Aromanian epitome of the ever-shifting, ever-emerging vernacular of the now.

NOTES

1. Along with “Vlachs,” “Koutsovlachs,” “Tzintzars,” and “Macedo-Romanians,” this is an exonym, while the community calls itself *armânu/ armânâ* (pl. *armâni/ armâne*) and uses a collective noun to designate the entire population as *armâname* or *armâniyu*.

2. Term originally used by Irina Nicolau in *Les caméléons des Balkans* [1993], which essentialises the prevalent occult character of Aromanian people—especially in political life, but also across all other areas of social life, where they would blend until almost unrecognisable.

3. It is worth noting that today their minority status is recognised only in the constitutions of two countries where Aromanians reside—North Macedonia and, more recently, Albania.
4. There is still no consensus on the exact number of Aromanians who arrived in Romania during this process (1925-1943).
5. Bațu family, followed by another 70 families from Pleasa (Albania) in August 1925, according to Gica (2011).
6. *Plasë* (Albanian), *Pleasa* or *Pliasa* (Aromanian) used to be a village of large Aromanian population documented since the Byzantine era, situated in Korçë County, Albania, near the Albanian-Greek border. Its inhabitants, later migrants, bear the name of the settlement—Plisoț or Plisots (plural of Plisoț, Plisoatâ). Its history is marked by both cultural resilience and significant challenges during periods of persecution and emigration. Today, like many other Vlach villages in Albania, the village is depopulated. For more information, see the *Vlach map of Albania* published by Thede Kahl on the Society Farsharotlu platform, available online: <https://farsharotu.org/vlach-map-of-albania/>
7. Village in central Dobrogea where *Pruian* (probable descendants of Pindus groups) Aromanian families settled during the population transfer. It was named after the village Poroia, situated in northern Greece, Macedonia province, near the border with Bulgaria.
8. *Paiduško*, *Paiduska*, or *Pajdushko horo* is a dance found in Bulgaria and North Macedonia. It is danced in an open circle with linear forward and backward movements.
9. An open circle dance, popular among Aromanians, of Bulgarian influence/origin.
10. Drawn from Yuri Lotman's foundational concept of culture as a "system of texts," but also enhanced by studies from Roland Barthes, Sally Banes, Brenda Farnell, and Judith Lynne Hanna.
11. According to the author, these are *Armatolikos* (a war dance of the *Armatoli*, military formations in charge with protecting community borders), musically accompanied by *Beratico* (or *Arvanitovlachico*) The pair (male and female) dances *Basha* (*Ballos*) or *Syghathistos* or *Kleftikos* (Gr. *Klefti*, Ar. *Foureskou*: "bandit" or "captain") in the rhythm of *Tsamiko*. These dances are connected to the carnival of the Twelve Days (Christmas to Epiphany): the *Sourouvarikos* (*Rogatsiarikos* and *Iskinarikos*), *Syrtos*, *Tziatzios*, and finally, *Hasapikos*.
12. Namely *syrto*, *sygkasto*, *karapataki*, and *tsiamiko*.
13. Manakis Fund, footage from 1905, pertaining to the Ethnological Archive of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Bucharest.
14. Milton and Ianaki, originally from Avdhela, an Aromanian village in the Pindus mountains.
15. For instance, the abovementioned *FARA Armânească* and its representative bureaus in different cities, as well as *Consiliul a Tinirlor Armanji* [Council of Aromanian Youth].
16. I am referring to one of the most important mutations to occur in south-eastern Europe starting with the '50s, namely the migration of dances from the countryside onto the stage. During communism, a new genre of dance was produced, that of choreographic creations of professional state-run folk dance ensembles, entrusted to represent identity of communities in front of the power. The moment has been given considerable research in ethnochoreography literature. For more see Dubinskas, Frank A. 1984. *The politics of tradition: Two eras of organized "folklore" performing in Croatia*. Research paper presented at the State and Folklore Conference, Bellagio, Italy in Giurchescu (1983).
17. Term coined by Felix Hoerburger in 1968 to designate dances which are no longer customary collective creations. Some of the major points that differ, in his view: a second existence dance is no longer integral part of the community life, as a first existence would have been, they are no longer a product of collective creation, but that of few interested or skilled. While first existence dances manifest as rather spontaneous phenomena, the others tend towards a definitive form, with fixed figures and movements. The natural, functional way of transmission in the first becomes a teaching context for the second, with dance leaders and choreographers influencing. While the view has had its critique (especially for advancing the notion of an "original dance"), it still helps to understand fundamental differences between the two dance models.
18. *Cipan*, *cipană*, pl. *cipani*, *cipane* are names used by Fărșerot Aromanians in Romania to describe Grămustean Aromanians, sometimes with pejorative connotations.
19. A colloquial term used to designate children born as a result of the Decree No. 770 of 1966 that prohibited abortion in communist Romania with the goal to increase the population. These children were considered to have been born out of patriotic obligation and were privately called "the little Decrees" or "little Ceșescus."
20. From it. *ritornello*, meaning an orchestral passage between verses.
21. The ethnonym comes from Frashër (also spelled as Frasheri or Frașa), a village and area in southern Albania's Përmet district. This area is a historic settlement and cultural centre for Aromanians, to which the Fărșerot Aromanians (the Fărșiroț) have strong historical ties.
22. This is an open circle dance for men, led by an individual (the "head"). It is performed in one direction and is known and performed among various Aromanian groups, with the Fărșerot group taking great pride in it.
23. The song is known as *Migidei vrute* [Beloved Migidei], referring to the village of Kefalovryso (Greek name of a mountain village and community in the Pogoni municipality of Ioannina, Greece), which has a significant Fărșerot population.
24. Originally published by Tache Papahagi and reissued by Predania Publishing House in 2012. The anthology is available online: <https://www.predania.ro/pdf/avdhela-nusi-tulliu.pdf>.
25. Lange, Roderyk, quoted by Giurchescu (1983, 24).
26. Mirela Goga, a dancer, dance teacher, and choreographer of Iholu folk ensemble from Constanța, in a conversation from January 2025.
27. Iholu YouTube page available online: <https://www.youtube.com/@iholuansambludedansuriarma7766>.
28. While "screen dance" is a more established term referring broadly to dance works created for the screen, "screened dance" has been recently suggested as a distinct term, to emphasise dances that are primarily transitioned from traditional live performance onto screens, rather than originally created as digital screen works. "Screened dance"

was suggested by scholar Janine Bower. For more, see Anderson (2021).

29. A generic dance found throughout the Balkans, typically performed in groups and involving steps and movements organised around a 3/4 rhythm, reflecting the “in three” timing implied in its name. The dance “choros *sta tria*” serves as a structural prototype for many other Greek folk dances, showing notable homogeneity with over 130 other dances studied. Culturally, it is a significant part of the Greek folk dance tradition and is often seen as a foundational or widespread type that connects many regional dance variations across Greece. In Slavic Macedonia and Bulgaria, it is known as *Lesnoto* or *Pravoto*. The Aromanian *sta tria* involves a sequence of three-step patterns: usually a step to the right, a step back or to the left, and a step forward—creating a cyclical flow that matches the music’s triple meter.

30. Another sub-group of Aromanians, actually the largest group. Its name originates from Grammos Mountain, its ancestral homeland located in modern-day Greece on the border with Albania. Up until the second half of the 18th century, Gramusti or Grammousta was a prosperous metropolis. Its destruction led to Vlachs dispersing throughout Ottoman Macedonia and western Thrace.

31. For the oldest dance forms recorded in the first decade of the 20th century, see archival footage material of Manakia Brothers from the Image Archive of the National Museum of Romanian Peasant or the Macedonian State Archive Funds.

32. The range of movement or action a dancer is capable of.

33. See *Vanghilizmo* group for Elena Gheorghe’s festival performances <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1Agf51yfcU/>

34. Small town north of Constanța city, with a significant population of Fărșiroț origin (distinct from Plisoț, these are *Șopan*).

35. Mirela Goga, personal communication from spring 2025.

36. For more on the recent history of Aromanians in Romania and their political struggles, see Alexandru Gica (2011).

37. An excerpt of the social media post reads: “The emergence of the Internet, e-mail, discussion forums, social networks is providing a valuable impetus, in terms of finding the spiritual and emotional identity coordinates for a community as dispersed as that of the Aromanians.”

38. Term common in crypto circles, where it refers to building “protocols” rather than platforms and the portability of a community across platforms through token-based social graphs. Busta and Internet (2023) re-signify it to describe how communities are perceived in the new mediated interaction schemes.

39. See, for instance, Project Avdhela, Library of Aromanian culture <https://proiectavdela.ro/>.

40. Ippili and Koyye (2024) discuss further how the platform allows for the documentation and archiving of traditional dances.

41. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMzBCdKYfCI>

42. A list of similar Pamporea mentions on TikTok: <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/pamporea>.

43. More recently, it has been argued that disembodiment is not an adequate description. Instead, “shifted embodiment” would better explain how the internet doesn’t eliminate embodiment, but just transforms it. The debate surrounding disembodiment and embodiment in digital/screened dances is not simply about whether the body is present or absent, but rather about how the body’s presence is perceived and experienced within the context of digital technologies. It’s a dynamic interplay between the physical and the virtual, where the boundaries of the body are constantly being negotiated and redefined.

44. For more, see Jiahao, Wang et. al (2022).

45. World renowned football player of Aromanian origin, deemed to be one of the most famous Aromanians, a pride for the community of Romania.

46. Renowned Romanian gymnast, first to score a 10 grade at the Olympics.

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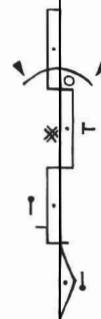
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Disability and Dance. Possible Theoretical Approaches to Analyse CandoCo's First Guest Performance in Hungary

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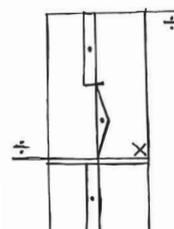
ABSTRACT

In this essay, I outline a few possible points of connection between disability studies and theatrical dance. I then draw on the theories presented to analyse the first performance of the CandoCo company in Hungary. I present two models that can be used fruitfully for the analysis of dance performances. The first, the 'misfit' model refers to an approach that focuses not on the individual but on their relation to the environment. The second model draws on Sarah Whatley's (2007) division of five strategies of inclusion in dance performances, featuring dancers with disabilities. The choice of each strategy may depend on the viewer's initial attitude and prior performance experiences, while any production can elicit either one of them. Whatley considers two viewer attitudes that approach a conservative, solid aesthetic: a view that simply ignores disabilities and a view that evokes new aesthetic approaches.

CandoCo has performed three times in Hungary, first at the Sziget Festival in 2002 with the *Triple Bill* show. Triple Bill included three excitingly different choreographies (CandoCo 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). In *Phasing*, choreographed by Jamie Watton, David Lock performed in his wheelchair appearing as a misfit in the series of scenes that featured three performers, which triggered mainly conservative viewer strategies. Conversely, Javier de Frutos' *Sour Milk* urged the audience to view the seated position associated with wheelchairs in a novel way. Finally, in *Shadow*, choreographed by Fin Walker, we could analyse the relations between disability and choreography through physical contacts between the dancers.

KEYWORDS

Disability studies; theatrical dance; choreography; inclusion; CandoCo.



Introduction

Placing disability and dance side by side, as in the title, seems to define the scope of examining the bodies on scene without question. However, as soon as we open Petra Kupperts's *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge*, a classic in the field, we see that the author consciously avoids defining disability, with the clear aim to eliminate the concept by the end of the book (Kupperts 2013). I discuss the difficulty of defining disability further below. The works of Jérôme Bel, which we examine in this study, show how ephemeral the concept of dance is. Demarcating the field raises further questions. If we assume that bodily otherness comes into existence during the performance, through the breaching of social and theatrical conventions (Hajnal 2020),¹ it means that disability

works differently in everyday life and in the theatre's special, heterotopic space. People with disabilities are a socially constructed minority, encompassing individuals who live with different conditions. To think of them as a homogeneous group is problematic in any context, but it is even more so on the dance stage than in other walks of life.

Nevertheless, as dance studies discourse examines performances through the concept of disability, for "strategic reasons" it is worth taking this as our starting point in examining the ways in which disability is present in various productions. I will, however, not begin my analysis from the perspective of the minority group, but rather from that of dance. As a result, the focus will be on the visible presence of disability from the viewer's perspective. Disabilities that go unnoticed will therefore not be included—for example, I will not discuss the dance of a mute artist whose condition is not apparent for most viewers. Nor will I include performances where disability is visible but is not central, such as in Emanuel Gat's *Sunny* (2019), where Annie Hanauer, one of the dancers, had an artificial arm—a fact that was not emphasised in the performance or in the reviews.

First, I will shortly summarise theories of disability and the relation between disability and dance. Next, I will present the twin concepts of *fit/misfit* used by Rosemarie Garland Thomson and the viewing strategies as defined by Sarah Whatley. These concepts will draft a possible approach to analyse contemporary performances that can be seen live in Hungary. Finally, I will analyse CandoCo Dance Company's² first Hungarian guest performance using the concepts presented above.

I want to state from the beginning that I am only indirectly related to disability; so, when I write about its experienced, real aspects, I primarily rely on the referenced sources. As a result, even though I hope that the external perspective of this study contributes to the Hungarian discourse, it cannot be complete without the reflections of the insiders. Many artists with disabilities engage in reflective theoretical work in Hungary and beyond (for example, Károly Tóth³ who dances in ArtMan Association's Tánceánia Ensemble).



Theoretical approaches

Approaches to disability

Disability allows for a wide array of interpretations, as it relates to countless contemporary discourses, including those on minority movements, identity, posthumanism, cybernetics, essentialism, constructivism, performativity, and situationism. Disability is complex and multifaceted and has been described as "the quintessence of the postmodern concept" (Antal et al. 2018). As I will point out later, these approaches influence how performers with disabilities perform on the dance stage, making the topic worth examining.

I have already mentioned that disability is a constructed concept, as there is not necessarily much in common between a girl with Down syndrome and a man whose leg has been amputated, except for how society treats them (Wendell 1996). The seemingly precise definitions are repeatedly created by the authorities to provide a legal basis for healthcare and government actors to implement the necessary support measures (Goodley 2011). However, the problems of definition are visible in the census results. For example, visual impairment seems to be easier to define than intellectual disability. Nonetheless, surveys employing different approaches have remarkably different results: in Hungary, the number of people who consider to have a disability ranges between 8,000 and 450,000 (Bass 2009).⁴

But equally noteworthy is the fact that recent surveys show a decline in the number of people with disabilities in Hungary, which is probably due to methodological reasons rather than any significant changes in the actual number (Petri and Hruskó 2023). Responding to these uncertainties, contemporary critical disability studies describe disability as embedded in specific situations, merging with many other identities present in a person, and lacking a well-defined outline. Thus, in recent years, disability as a concept has increasingly been reinterpreted as an “alternative quality of life,” while some authors regard disability as another and equal form of the human body’s diversity. This perspective is present in the concept of *dismodernism*—created from the words “disability” and “modern” and theorised by Lennard J. Davis (1997). Over time, everyone will eventually live with disabilities (as reflected in the expression *temporarily able-bodied*). These approaches draw attention to the fact that disability simply makes visible the elusive and uncontrollable nature of our bodies and our constant dependency on various technologies and prostheses (Shildrick 2019). At the same time, critical disability studies emphasise the reality of physical suffering that no social change or theory can fully alleviate (Siebers 2008, 57).

In relation to disability, we can observe certain approaches and topoi which have been associated with people living with bodily or mental “difference” for decades. The concept of disability was created in opposition to the normative “able,” specifically, to make it easier to define what “able” means. Here, I should mention that the term *ableism* describes discrimination based on abilities. The term is less common in Hungary. As Bill Hughes, an influential researcher in the field, points out, there have been two main approaches to disability since the very beginning. Both approaches force people with disabilities into a passive role: they are either mistreated by people without disabilities or treated as subjects of charity. The first approach is linked to abjection, freakishness, dehumanisation, and exclusion, while the second approach evokes the idea of vulnerability, pity, and compassion (Hughes 2019). The topos of disability is a recurring theme in art. One of the best-known theoretical approaches is the so-called “narrative prosthesis,” where disability is used to move the plot forward and make it more comprehensible (Snyder and Mitchell 2001). Classic examples include the villains in the James Bond films, who often have some physical impairment as a distinguishing mark.

Throughout history, various approaches have attempted to make sense of disability, and today’s concept of the term is shaped by the latest ones. The moral approach interprets bodily difference as a sign of certain ethical and spiritual qualities and has been present in our culture since antiquity. This was replaced in the nineteenth century by the medical approach that defined disability as an individual bodily attribute. It is important to emphasise that both models remain influential today. However, disability studies can be traced back to the rise of the social construction approach, developed in the twentieth century and based on the theories of Erving Goffman, Michel Foucault, and other well-known researchers. This approach is still popular today and leads to disability being seen as a phenomenon fundamentally shaped by society rather than as an individual’s private matter (Goodley 2011). Social construction has two main directions: one originating in the United Kingdom, which is more related to the theory of social construction, and one coming from the United States, which emerged as a minority political aspiration (Goodley 2011). The second direction is organised in the footsteps of other minority groups, primarily the black empowerment movements (Skrentny 2009). The social and sociological changes of the 2000s made use of critical disability studies, which led researchers to deconstruct the concept of disability (see the previously mentioned concepts of *dismodern* and *temporarily able-bodied*) and to acknowledge that the very term *disability* is culturally determined.

In this context, a Hungarian speciality is—as Viktor Kiss claims—that the medical discourse was replaced by the social model only in the 2000s. At the same time, the integration of people living with disabilities began (Kiss 2013). What is particularly relevant for our topic is that, as part of these integration efforts worldwide, “equivalents” of certain activities (such as sports or dance) are developed and tailored for people with disabilities—thus, in some sense, relieving society from the burden of a more comprehensive integration. Kiss refers to the legacy of the communist Kádár regime which he characterises as a “caring-hiding” approach because despite the regime’s integration efforts, the general discourse in Hungary remained unchanged. Moreover, while globally the question of disability has increasingly moved towards self-assertion in a political sense, in Hungary it is common to depoliticise people with disabilities and to present them as passive. This passivity is reflected in many social discourses that restrict people with disabilities to certain roles and activities within the Hungarian society. It is important to highlight the compensatory discourse that, according to Kiss, is especially typical in Hungary, and which compensates for the perceived tragedy of disability by presenting people with disabilities as super-humans and role models. This is related to Stella Young’s expression “inspiration porn,” where achievements made “despite” bodily difference become a source of motivation for non-disabled people (Grue 2016).

Finally, it is important to mention discourses about cyborgs and prostheses, which have initiated scholarly debates related to, for example, dancers in wheelchairs (Quinlan and Bates 2014). Even though the concept of a cyborg, introduced in social sciences by Donna Haraway (1985) seemingly coincides in many ways with disability manifested at the boundary between technology and human organism, Tobin Siebers rightfully protests against this interpretation. Instead, he describes the cyborg, well-known from sci-fi, as a form of mystifying disability by turning it into a superpower—a cultural topos that has nothing to do with the real experiences of people living with disabilities (Siebers 2008). Donna Reeve highlights other aspects of a cyborg and describes the inner experiences of people with disabilities. Just like a cyborg which, based on Haraway’s work, questions the boundaries of body and identity, disability can also be understood as a deconstruction of normality. The uncertain boundaries of the body are a daily experience for many people living with disabilities through the experience of phantom body parts and prostheses (Reeve 2012). Another example shows that achievements are traditionally connected to “able” body parts, even though, based on the world record, a Paralympian in a wheelchair can outrun a runner without disabilities. Moreover, Shildrick explains that both a wheelchair and running shoes are prostheses, the only difference being that the former is usually understood to be a replacement for something missing, even though all prostheses are substitutes (Shildrick 2019). In stage dance, which in Europe was dominated for centuries by ballet and the ideal body, the question is not whether a person in a wheelchair or a person without disabilities dances better, but rather what we actually mean by “better.”

Disability and stage dance

The relationship between disability and stage dance can be approached from multiple aspects depending on the narrative we use to describe it. On the one hand, we can start from the fact that exhibiting people with non-normative bodies, putting them on stage, has a centuries-old history (Garland Thomson 1997). Although unusual bodies were in the spotlight of these productions, performers whose presence relied solely on being stared at did not sustain long careers, as audiences soon lost interest. Most freaks entertained the audience with some programmes such as dance (Durbach 2009). Although the freak shows

and medical theatre performances once presented sick and disabled people within a scientific framing that was created apparently within a different cultural register from, for example, the contemporary performances of Trafó House of Contemporary Arts⁵ that also feature people living with disabilities,⁶ audiences often react in strikingly similar ways. For want of space, I can only mention that one of the most graphic examples of this lack of change, according to Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell's analysis, was provided by actor-performer Mat Fraser. In his performance, Mat Fraser confronted the audience alternately with the persona of the personified freak (Sealo) and the actor living with disabilities (Tam). This strategy highlighted the unchanged relationship between the audience and bodily otherness presented on stage (Mitchell and Snyder 2005).

Dance productions staged with performers living with disabilities can also be approached through "external" discourses—for example, when we think of dance as a form of therapy. Two closely related approaches can be distinguished. First, a group of people without disabilities guides the others. In the second approach, equality, mutuality, and exchange are placed in the foreground of the production (McGrath 2012). The converging and divergent ambitions of pedagogy, healing, social work, and aesthetics take shape in applied theatre. I further examine the issue from another perspective: that of dance itself.

In Western culture, stage dance was for decades dominated by ballet, which placed at its centre an ideal, ethereal body image defined in multiple ways. The expectations of both institutions and audiences were connected to this ideal, as were the mirrors placed in front of the students or the distance between stage and auditorium, which was designed to make the unwanted smells and sounds of the body unnoticeable (Thomas 2003). This body image excluded people living with disabilities from dance.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the deconstruction of the concept of dance included interpreting all performers' movements as dance, allowing non-professionals to step on stage and transforming the role of the choreographer and the dancer. Together with the integration of social work, pedagogy, and special education into performing arts it opened new horizons for performers living with disabilities. The emergence of contact improvisation was a milestone in this process because, unlike ballet, dance does not operate with a set body image or a rigorous and closed set of moves. As a result, everyone, including people living with disabilities, can participate in creative processes as equals. Later, internationally acclaimed integrated companies were formed, such as the American Axis or the British CandoCo.

The appearance of people living with disabilities in "official" dance art soon raised two general problems. First, dancers with disabilities were rarely trained as thoroughly as their non-disabled colleagues, as performances "opened up" to them earlier than educational institutions did (McGrath 2012). Of course, the problem does not exclusively lie in the lack of intention to be inclusive on the part of the directors of dance institutions, but rather, as Carrie Sandahl (2005) shows in her paper, in the fact that every classical training system, regardless of the school of thought, assumes a "neutral" body as opposed to the a priori meaning of a disabled body. The second problem concerns the ways in which, and at what cost, people living with disabilities are present on stage. Ann Cooper Albright (2010), for example, uses structural movement analysis to show how performers in wheelchairs often merely frame the dance of non-disabled dancers in supposedly integrated performances.

Dance performances featuring people with disabilities can be placed on a spectrum between two extremes, depending on whether the body in academic discourse is understood as either: 1) a passive surface for social and political inscription, constructed either at the level of stereotypes or at a deeper, pre-linguistic level; or 2) a natural, authentic gift of the performers which escapes construction (Kuppers 2013). Though constructedness has



mostly prevailed over the body's "honesty" today, Cooper Albright (2010), amongst others, argues that this duality can be overcome through dance.

At the "authentic" end of the spectrum, the dancers with disabilities present themselves as they are, which may have a therapeutic purpose both for them and for the audience. For example, the dancers encourage the audience to see disability differently and maybe rethink their views. In a similar vein, there are the accounts that view dance as a more direct form of self-expression for people with disabilities. McGrath (2012), for example, approaches the viewer's experience through attachment theories, arguing that the spectators can experience the physical and mental states of the dancers with disabilities due to mirror neurones, thus creating a "clean" relationship between the two. This kind of relationship would be impossible in everyday life because of prejudices towards disability (idem). A similarly authentic experience is produced when companies like Societas Raffaello Sanzio achieve shock value when featuring performers with disabilities. In doing so, the performances liberate the mythic and instinctive, pre-rational, energies of life (Kuppers 2013). In the case of similar dance companies, performers with disabilities are mostly used as instruments of the director in the sense that the "gut reaction" provoked by their bodily "otherness" is part of an artistic concept and serves, for example, to emphasise physical presence or to unsettle the theatre semiotic interpretation.

From the 1980s onwards, reflecting on the constructed nature of bodies became widespread. From this point, the spotlight shifted away from the physical aspect of the body (Fuchs 2007). The aim of such performances is to question or deconstruct stereotypes. However, they do not replace the stereotypes with a "real" interpretation or a body image. In this vein, Kuppers (2013) analyses Bill Shannon's street performances. The condition of Bill Shannon makes it impossible for him to walk, but his virtuous skills allow for spectacular and acrobatic performances. Shannon often exploits people's prejudices, pretending to be vulnerable and in need of help, thus involving viewers in the creative process. Using Siebers' term, we can call this a form of masquerade, a case in which someone, whether disabled or non-disabled, enacts or exaggerates disability (Siebers 2008). A typical dance example is when a wheelchair dancer remains at some point during the performance without their wheelchair, making the audience wonder about the dancer's vulnerability.

It is important to mention that not every performance created with performers living with disabilities focuses on disability or requires spectators to pay special attention to the disability itself. Thus, analysis methods described below highlight certain aspects of the performances, which could also be analysed from many other perspectives. Moreover, it would be highly desirable if reviews of works featuring people living with disabilities were not focused on disability.

Methods of analysis

The discourses presented provide a wider context in which to interpret dance performances created with artists with disabilities, as well as the theoretical-critical texts—accounts written about these shows. I recommend two further methods for interpretation. The first is Rosemarie Garland Thomson's theory, which builds on the contrast between the concepts of *fit* and *misfit*, describing disability in relation to the environment. This approach, in my view, can help us analyse dance performances, as we frame disability in relation to space, physical gestures, the audience, and other elements of the performance. The second method is Sarah Whatley's classification (Whatley 2007), in which she describes five different viewing strategies related to dancers with disabilities.

Misfit

Misfit refers to a theoretical approach that focuses on the relationship between the individual and their environment, rather than on the individual's traits. The importance of this distinction is well reflected in studies where psychologists examine the effect of individual status in a group. Jack C. Wright and colleagues highlight that for decades after the first research was conducted, popularity and rejection were attributed exclusively to individual characteristics (for example, prosocial behaviour or cooperation), but the studies often found the opposite was true (Wright et al. 1986). For this reason, Wright and colleagues included a third variable in their scope: the similarity of the individual to the group. Examining a sample of 87 and later 79 teenage boys living with behavioural disorders in small groups, they found a significant correlation between an individual's status within the group and the similarity of the individual's certain character traits to the majority of group members. This is not merely about liking those who are similar to oneself, but rather—as one example of the research explains—the way an “aggressive” child sees a “reserved” child depends on the extent to which the group itself is either “aggressive” or “reserved” (533). Garland Thomson recommends a similar approach to disability.

Garland Thomson is one of, if not the, most influential figures in the cultural aspect of critical disability studies. Her writings on freak shows and act of staring at the performers during these shows made her work an essential reference in the field. Even though she usually connects her theories on disability with works of art, in her 2011 article, *Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept*, only a few art references appear.

Garland Thomson joins the leading trend of critical disability studies and considers the lived reality of pain and functional limitations of people living with disabilities, while at the same time combining this perspective with the view of disability as a social construct. In her study (2011), the concepts *fit* and *misfit* reflect how non-normative interacts with the outside world. Garland Thomson illustrates the misfit phenomenon with a child's toy in which a cube does not fit into a round hole. The problem is not the cube nor the hole, but their relationship. In this way, disability is not an inherent and permanent characteristic of an individual; rather, it is created by the situation. Thus, many interactions (or, to reference Judith Butler, performative acts) with a similar outcome result in a disabled identity (Garland Thomson 2011). A typical example is the “encounter” between a wheelchair used and a staircase or between a visually impaired person and a board that only conveys information visually.

Krystal Cleary (2016) uses the concept of misfit by moving beyond the personal experiences of people with disabilities to analyse art. She examines reality TV shows that focus on people living with disabilities or other non-normative bodies. Cleary understands environment not only as physical space but also in terms of genre's conventions. According to her study, the TV series about the life of Siamese twins, *Abby & Brittany* by Beth Glover (2012), aptly illustrates that the protagonists are well suited to the genre of reality shows that aims to amaze precisely because they do not fit into everyday life.

In my opinion, this approach can be applied even more fruitfully to the analysis of stage dance because the interaction is created in a real space within an art form that places the living human body at its centre. In this case, we can look at how a dancer with disability fits with the theatre, stage, genre, role, partners, audience, and many other components. Even though in her 2019 show, Garland Thomson herself analysed a dance production—a ballet version of *Frankenstein* that dealt with disability in an abstract way—I believe this performance provided very limited opportunity to apply her theory, as it did not involve actors with disabilities. To give a hypothetical example, a dancer who uses a wheelchair

participating in a classical ballet performance enters into interaction with the theatre's institutional system, the stairs and ramps of the building, the classical ballet movements, the audience's expectations, and so on. Whereas a normative ballet dancer "fits well enough" into the performance and is thus "visually anonymous" on stage, conveying the choreography seemingly more precisely, this is not the case for their fellow dancer who uses a wheelchair (Garland Thomson 2011). This means that the essence of integrated performances should not (only) be researched by measuring creators and spectators' attitudes (for example, with questionnaires), but also by examining the special, physical aspects of dance itself. Indeed, exclusion and inequality created by social construction ultimately operates on this material level. As Garland Thomson argues, it is possible to imagine an employer who is fundamentally open to hire wheelchair users. However, if the office building has no lift (the systemic, "real" manifestation of the social construct), it makes inclusion impossible.

A further important result of Garland Thomson's theory is that, as it describes disability embedded in a situation rather than in a physical condition, it highlights positive aspects that are "useful" for non-disabled people, for example their capacity to adapt to certain situations. Fitting, for instance, demands a person without arms to manage more daily tasks with their legs or a blind person to orient themselves, while these may support other performers. A favourite example of the author is Monet, who was able to rejuvenate his art by adapting it to his continuously deteriorating eyesight (Garland Thomson 2011). Without falling into the trap of the previously described views of the "supercrip" or "inspiration porn," and while doubting that a non-disabled dancer can fully experience and interpret the movements of a colleague with disability, it is undeniable that the dance of performers with disabilities can inspire the moves of non-disabled dancers. DV8's⁷ dance film *The Cost of Living* (2004) offers multiple great examples of this. For instance, in one scene dancers on their feet imitate the hand-walking dance of David Toole, who performs without legs, in an open field (min. 19:30 – 21:00).

One of the most expressive examples of fitting is Jérôme Bel's production, *Gala* (Bel 2018). In every country, Bel recruits people with different, predefined conditions and qualifications (including, among others, a dancer who uses a wheelchair). These people first reproduce classical and well-known dance moves and then imitate each other's particular dance moves. The audience can witness how certain bodies, conditioned by their physique and the fitness level, as well as other capabilities, fit certain moves—for example, are able to execute a pirouette, to jump, or to perform folk dances. From another perspective, the "failure" of imitation deconstructs what we traditionally think of choreography and dancers who, in this way, do not align with the tradition of "classical" stage dance. At the same time, dancers with different abilities can appear on stage precisely because they fit into the categories of Bel's conceptual framework and the structures of conceptualist dance. The presence of a dancer using a wheelchair implies a stage that is accessible (in this case, it is empty and flat). By placing the wheelchair on stage, it becomes a symbol of the possible variations of the human body, which underline Bel's egalitarian message: the wheelchair dancer is the only dancer who cannot jump in the traditional sense (as shown in one scene), but nonetheless appears as an equal member of the ensemble. As this argument shows, the concept of *misfit* offers a valuable lens to examine the bodies of dancers with disabilities in relation to the "usual" aspects of performance analysis (e.g., the director's concept, movement, set, and genre).

Viewing strategies

As a result of the diversity of the previously presented discourses on disability, the reception of a performance featuring dancers with disability largely depends on the viewer. Some

performances can be interpreted from the perspective of compensatory discourse, social construction, contemporary dance trends, other discourses, or a combination of these. This is true even when the choreography itself suggests certain perspectives by the way it presents disability. For instance, it may aim to shock or unsettle by probing the boundaries between disability and ability— as when dancers without disabilities imitate their colleague who uses a wheelchair in Bel's *Gala*. Finally, it also matters whether we, as spectators, tend to engage with a choreography primarily through interpretation or through somatic experience. Sarah Whatley aptly categorised all these aspects in the second half of her article *Dance and disability: the dancer, the viewer and the presumption of difference* (2007).⁸ Based on the opinions of dancers, as well as the work of Cooper Albright (2010) and Kupperts (2017), Whatley differentiates five viewing strategies (2007, 18-21):

- Passive Oppressive, when emphasis is placed on the disabled dancer's otherness, with attention focused on staring and curiosity, which can stem from prejudices, pity, or aversion;
- Passive Conservative, when the dance of people with disabilities is compared to classical or "able-bodied" aesthetics, thereby accentuating their otherness;
- Post-Passive, when the viewer ignores disability altogether, or as a critic chooses not to write about it;
- Active Witness, when the dance of people with disabilities is approached through new aesthetic and interpretive strategies;
- Immersion, when the viewer relates what they see to their own body, similar to McGrath's previously cited approach based on attachment theories.

As Whatley (2007) emphasises, the individual strategies are not neatly separated from one another, nor do they depend solely on the spectators' attitude; the choreography itself can also intentionally shape them. Thus, the role of the analyst is not to choose between categories, but to reflect on their own viewing experience inspired by the performance, even if this often involves ethically sensitive issues. It is also important to note that the names and order of Whatley's strategies seem to convey judgement, as if the Passive Oppressive strategy was reprehensible and "negative" and the subsequent strategies were increasingly "positive." However, in my view, this judgement assumes that a person with disabilities would always discourage curiosity about the body on stage. Counterexamples prove otherwise, and in fact our experience and discretion suffice: the first reaction to a performer making their disability visible will almost always fall into the Passive Oppressive strategy, as it confronts the viewer to an experience that is unusual in everyday life. On the other hand, the goal of a dancer living with disabilities can be to "overcome their disability" and have their performance judged according to the standards of an "able-bodied" aesthetic. In such cases, it can be problematic if an alternative aesthetic is automatically projected onto their work.

Choreographies influence strategies in numerous manners. In *Questo buio feroce* [This Fierce Darkness] by Pippo Delbono (2009), for instance, we observe a parade reminiscent of a fashion show, featuring performers who are ill or live with visible or invisible disabilities, all framed by the director's surreal, grotesque, and carnivalesque vision. The distinctive qualities of these bodies are emphasised to the extreme, compelling the audience to fix their gaze at the parade. It is no coincidence that Hungarian critics often respond with a sense of wonder akin to the Passive Oppressive strategy, using various topoi and similes to describe the performers' physiques—for example "torsos of David Lynch" (Király 2005), "disrupted, fragile yet alive cadaver" (Kovács 2010), and "bizarre collection of beasts" (Jászay 2009).

Conversely, the Tánceánia Ensemble, a trailblazer in Hungary inspired by the DanceAbility movement,⁹ aims to achieve a sort of psychological accessibility. In their seemingly abstract movements rooted in therapeutic work, “the vitality of the able-bodied and disabled dancers” (Berecz 2017, 12) encourages the Active Witness and Immersion strategies.

CandoCo: Triple Bill

In this section, I analyse the first CandoCo guest appearance in Hungary, mainly using the methods outlined above. Using the *fit/misfit* conceptual pair, I examine how the Triple Bill fits into the social context of the early 2000s and into the specific performance venue. I then discuss the three choreographies in more detail. I examine how disability interacts with other elements of the dance, and how the choreography itself offers viewing strategies. It is important to note that viewing strategies emerge through interaction. Therefore, even if the analysis below highlights, for example, the Active Witness strategy, a spectator may adopt a different strategy depending on their prior experiences or attitudes. For similar reasons, such an analysis ultimately reflects the author’s subjective experience.

In the early 2000s, there was a growing professional interest in theatre performers with disabilities. In Hungary, 1998 marked a turning point in disability issues with a long-awaited and favourable change in legislation. At the same time, several major professional and amateur companies were founded, for example the Baltazár Theatre, Tánceánia Ensemble, MásSzínház, Vakrepülés Theatre Association, and Gördülő Foundation—many of which also created dance performances. In the field of dance, Tánceánia (and its umbrella organisation, the ArtMan Association) received the most significant reception. The group was founded by Ildikó Bóta, initially with a therapeutic focus, but increasingly emphasising stage performances. Among other things, they used Body Mind Centering, psychodynamic movement, dance therapy, contact improvisation, and the Skinner Releasing Technique.

Their performances were familiar to Trafó’s regular audience, but they typically received more serious attention in co-productions. In addition, guest choreographers and directors were also occasionally invited to work with performers living with disabilities, including renowned artists such as Yvette Bozsik (2008), Pál Frenák (2019), or Adrienn Hód (*Harmonia and Idol*) who is the creator of the two most important performances on this topic in recent years. In contrast to companies that regularly produce new works with members who live with disabilities, the vision of guest directors typically focused on “otherness.” An excellent example is *Lélektánc* [Souldance] by Yvette Bozsik (2008), which practically provides an overview of various disabilities, ranging from the use of a wheelchair to audio narration and to a guide dog. At the same time, even though it is worth analysing the individual characteristics of each artist, we should not forget that there are significant overlaps among the staff of the various groups and productions.¹⁰ In this context, it is worth referring to Napsugár Trömböczky’s rightful insight about ArtMenők (a group within the ArtMan Association), which sums up the prospects of similar performances: “Can an ArtMenők performance find a place anywhere other than on the Trafó stage without a renowned director (...)?” (Lőrinc et al. 2025). This thought is instructive even if we consider that another major company, the Baltazar Theatre, owns its own building.

The Hungarian reception of these companies and productions, however, has been rather rare until recently. The performances were typically produced for a single performance. As Benjamin Wihstutz (2015) writes in an article related to the reviews of Bel’s *Disabled Theatre*, theatre is, on the one hand, a form of social encounter, on the other, a special,

aesthetically meaningful work of art. Yet, the critics of *Disabled Theatre* primarily emphasise the social encounter—being confronted with disability, a relatively rarely experienced aspect of everyday life—and less on the aesthetic-artistic aspects of dance. Although Hungarian critics often analyse performances from an aesthetic-artistic perspective (Muntag 2020), the encounter with people living with disabilities remains a recurring and central theme of the reviews, as does the emphasis on the “therapeutic” or “tearjerking” effects of the encounter itself (Wihstutz 2015, 36).¹¹

To sum up, CandoCo's guest appearance in 2002 aligned with a burgeoning professional interest in the field, which favoured social aspects and novelty over analysis, even though the analytical discourse was still in its infancy. To some extent, this is reflected in the choice of the venue and in the reviews published.

In Hungary, CandoCo did not initially perform in a traditional theatre space, but at the Sziget Festival in 2002, in the Theatre and Dance Tent, as part of a colourful programme that featured, amongst others, Compagnie Revolution, TÁP Theatre, Hólyagcirkusz, The Forman Brothers, and Illyés Gyula Hungarian National Theatre of Beregszász (Marik 2002). This was a more experimental, progressive way of presenting the guest appearance.¹² As for their first guest performance, *Triple Bill*, contemporary accounts reported that the audience received the production with great enthusiasm. The organisers provided travel and tickets to the performance for people with disabilities. This was an exemplary gesture that also reflected society's growing attention to disability.

The more difficult question is how well the production fits into the professional discourse on contemporary dance. The critics wrote in a very positive tone about *Triple Bill* and other performances at Sziget. The reviews by Tamás Halász and Noémi Marik are worth highlighting. In a short report published in the daily *Népszabadság* after the performance, Halász (2002b) adopted a rather dramatic tone, searching for the right words to describe the condition of the artists. A month later, he wrote a more serious analysis, covering the three performances separately in the theatre journal *Színház* (Halász 2002a). Similarly, Noémi Marik (2002) wrote about the performances in the journal *Critikai Lapok*. Both authors highlighted the professionalism of the performers, and Halász considered the invitation of CandoCo at Sziget as an event in dance history.¹³

Let's take a closer look at the performances and the viewing strategies they can evoke. First, it is worth noting that the CandoCo production can also be described through different spectator strategies. The company had to work hard to be accepted, as critics were reluctant to acknowledge their shows as “high” art. Instead, their shows were considered by a part of the public and critics as freak shows (in the pejorative sense), spectacles of voyeurism, or at best as disability dance (also in a derogatory sense) (Owen 2005, 80).¹⁴ In contrast, the aim of Celeste Dandeker and Adam Benjamin when founding the dance company in 1991 was that dancers without disabilities would not “dance rings around” people with disabilities, but instead assign them equal and engaging roles, impressing the audiences through virtuoso techniques. For this reason, company members (both those with and without disabilities) continuously train themselves, incorporate various trends of contemporary dance into their performances, and invite renowned professionals to create choreographies (for example, Javier de Frutos, the director of *Sour Milk*, which I analyse below). A few years later, more “professional” criticism recognised exactly this aspect. Critics argued that the performances of CandoCo are comparable to the work of mainstream contemporary dance artists (Cooper Albright 2010). In doing so, they encouraged the spectators to adopt the Passive Conservative viewing strategy. At the same time, audiences indisputably acknowledged the virtuosity of CandoCo.,

Back to Triple Bill, Phasing, choreographed by Jamie Watton, builds on the repetition of shorter and longer sections, for example using just a few notes, continuously restarting tunes, and recurring elements of the choreography, such as slowly crossing the back of the stage. Two non-disabled dancers, Jurg Koch and Stine Nilsen, play in this performance, together with the wheelchair user David Lock, who gradually fits less and less with the choreography's spectacular jumps. At the beginning of the piece, the three dancers mostly dance the same movement sequences with some phase delay. They mostly move their upper bodies, and they rarely interact with each other. When they do interact with each other, they barely "push each other," similar to Newton's pendulum, where the ball at the end of the row hits the next ball, passing on its kinetic energy. As legs play little role in the choreography, Lock is equal to the other two dancers in terms of stage time on stage and use of body parts. What makes him stand out is the fact that his head is lower than his peers', a difference visible from the initial, horizontal setup on. Even though the choreography does not emphasise this difference, Koch's ideal-normative male body and Nilsen's skirt highlight gender differences, which can make Lock an asexual third (a common cultural topos attached to people living with disabilities).

In the second half of the performance, this difference becomes more pronounced: Koch and Nilsen often lie on the ground, and later Lock leaves the stage for a while. When he returns, legs and aerial jumps play a greater role in the choreography, against which Lock's movements—rolling the wheels—seem cumbersome. From this point on, the wheelchair acts as a clear disadvantage, limiting the range of motion. It does not fit in with the airy ease of the other dancers and may prompt the spectator to adopt the Passive Conservative viewing strategy—questioning whether Lock is equal to the non-disabled dancers. If the spectator concludes he is not, Lock can appear to be a mandatory "integration" element in an otherwise professional and fascinating performance, encouraging the viewer to stare and assume a Passive Oppressive strategy instead of engaging in an aesthetic appreciation. Thus, the piece exemplifies the "dancing rings around" dynamic that the artists specifically sought to avoid. In other words, the performance does not fit our expectations of CandoCo.¹⁵

As much as disability and asexuality are evoked in *Phasing*, the overflowing eroticism of Javier de Frutos' *Sour Milk* is the complete opposite. The performance is dominated by intense Chinese drum music, and we see four dancers on stage, all dressed in white: three women (Suzanne Cowan, Kate Marsh, and Welly O'Brien) in elegant nineteenth-century costumes sit on the ground, while a male "chief" (Pedro Machado) stands above his "harem." Movements mimic rituals and intercourse, and the performance radiates energy to the audience, primarily due to the drums, while the movements are small and quick. Regarding viewing strategies, it depends a lot on the background knowledge: two of the three sitting women live with disabilities, and they cannot stand. If the spectator knows this, the fact that the "harem" remains seated for most of the performance appears to be a necessary, "technical" solution, and the audience is most probably curious to see whether the choreography can accommodate this aptitude. If the spectator is unaware of the disable performers, then most of the dance hides the disabilities from them, and therefore, a Post-Passive viewing strategy may prevail. In addition, there is an opportunity for Active Witness and Immersion: the traditionally passive sitting here becomes an active, energetic, and erotic position that the (also sitting) spectator, drawn in by the music, may also experience. In this way, disability integrates with the choreography, even towards the end, when the women change position by sliding on their hips, which may reinforce their subordinate position to the standing man. In this sense, bowing becomes important: during the claps, when the dancers with disabilities appear differently, in their wheelchairs, "naturally" rolling

with ease compared to their earlier sliding. Rather than reinforcing the belief that actors with disabilities can only be “authentic” on stage, this final moment introduces a sense of distance: the wheelchair confirms that sliding on the ground and appearing subordinate was simply part of a constructed role, not a direct result of the performers’ disabilities.

Both *Phasing* and *Sour Milk* operate with bodies that freeze motionless for short periods of time. In the choreography *Shadow* by Fin Walker, motionless practically becomes the central theme. The seven dancers of different constitutions (two use wheelchairs and one has a single leg) first freeze in the choreography and then break the photo-like stillness, creating continuous disharmony. In Walker’s choreography the performers mostly dance in pairs, with their upper bodies and arms wriggling around each other. In contrast to *Phasing*, the large number of dancers and the constant swirl of movement create a diverse dynamic that does not make the dancers’ bodily difference disappear, but rather attenuates this difference compared to when only one wheelchair dancer was present on stage. In this way, the spatial aspect of *fitting/ not fitting* brings an interesting realisation. During the dancers’ seemingly random re-arrangements, we notice that the two wheelchair users almost never dance together—presumably because the wheelchairs would create too much distance between their upper bodies, which would make them ‘stand out’ during the dance. At the same time, non-disabled dancers sit in the laps of their partners who use wheelchairs and lift them out of their wheelchairs, which creates contact between upper bodies.

However, the most attention is drawn to Welly O’Brien, the dancer with one leg. The fact that the audience sees someone who uses a wheelchair in everyday life performing without it (what is more, dancing), is seen as novelty. This can urge the audience to first assume a Passive Oppressive viewing strategy, and later Immersion, as O’Brien’s balance and the wide, original range of her movements evoke the illusion of immersion.



Closing remarks

The theoretical approaches and methods of analysis outlined above could, of course, be further extended. However, I believe that by framing *fitting* in a theoretical manner, it becomes possible to explain why people living with disabilities fit better in certain dance productions than in others. The five viewing strategies I have discussed can provide a useful framework for analysing viewers’ reactions and reviews. Even though I only examined three choreographies by CandoCo in this article, I believe I managed to show that it is possible to identify examples for nearly all the strategies.

The advantage of these methods is that they provide an opportunity to articulate personal impressions. Considering that both disability and dance have blurred boundaries and their perception is greatly influenced by individual perspectives, describing our personal impressions is perhaps the best way to enrich the discourse. Such a theoretical shift has begun in recent years.

The other direction, however, of which we have not yet seen many examples, is the scholarly examination of the history of relevant Hungarian associations. The history of the Tánceánaia Ensemble, the Baltazar Theatre, and other companies goes back several decades, yet few comprehensive overviews of their work exist. A review of their performances could provide a fascinating picture of a rapidly developing field in terms of vocabulary and nuanced analysis. In such a future study, it is hoped that the theoretical tools presented above could be applied successfully.



NOTES

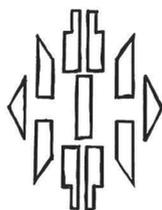
1. Some physical characteristics (for example, age, gender, skin colour, or noticeable signs of certain disabilities) “pass” certain roles under current theatre conventions, whereas an “unusual” cast may place them in the spotlight. I will discuss this further in relation to the concept of *misfit*.
2. Founded in 1991, CandoCo Dance Company is an integrated dance company based in the UK. Its internationally recognised pioneering work and the collaborations with renowned choreographers has made CandoCo a key reference point in their field. The company has been instrumental in challenging the perception that disability and dance/performance are mutually exclusive.
3. Tóth is the author of one of the most original analyses of Bel’s performance (Bel 2013), *Disabled Theatre* (Tóth 2018).
4. If we aim to define dancers living with disabilities, the situation becomes even more complex as they may have access to a limited number of trainings only, so it is questionable who exactly counts as a “dancer” (Whatley 2007, 9).
5. A performance venue in Budapest.
6. The Bel choreographies and CandoCo performances, which I refer to in my paper, as well as the (contemporary) circus production *Extrémítás*.
7. DV8 was a physical theatre company founded in 1986.
8. The first part, on the training of dancers living with disabilities, is also intriguing but less relevant for the current topic.
9. The movement was founded in the 1980s by Alito Alessi. The expression challenges the term *disability* because it conveys limitations, by asserting that everyone who can breathe can also dance and is therefore able to express themselves.
10. For example, one of the choreographers of Baltazar Theatre’s dance performances was Dorka Farkas who works in ArtMan. At the same time, the previously mentioned *Souldance* was created in collaboration with artists from the Gördülő Foundation and ArtMan.
11. It is important to note, however, that there has been significant “progress” in recent years in this aspect. In the Hodworks’ dossier on performances published in *Színház* magazine’s in 2025, performances are analysed in depth and with nuanced by guest experts. Based on my own research, this was not at all the case ten years before.
12. The company returned to Budapest in 2004, this time at Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, where they held a workshop and gave two performances. In 2006, the company held another workshop and gave two more performances at Trafó.
13. Halász also writes in his memoirs of the explosive success of the 2006 performance. His exemplary and nuanced approach is evident when he describes one of the 2006 CandoCo performances as a failure, after analysing the structure of the performance (Halász 2006).
14. Following Owen’s line of thought, “disability dance” implies a form of segregation: it implies that the work of dancers with disabilities is not comparable to “mainstream” dance. CandoCo aims to renew contemporary dance. However, this cannot be achieved if the company’s members are “excluded” in this way.
15. In his cited critiques, Tamás Halász draws the opposite conclusion: he argues that the three characters are of equal importance and embody the essence of CandoCo. His conclusions point to a broader social integration, thus supporting my earlier assertion that the performance was part of a wider social process (Halász 2002b, 46).

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Le théâtre d'ombres : danse magique de l'imagination. Des traditions orientales au théâtre roumain contemporain

Shadow Theatre: A Magical Dance of the Imagination. From Oriental Traditions to Contemporary Romanian Theatre.

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the consideration that theatre is mostly associated with children audience in Europe, the present paper traces back its millennial path from the oriental civilisations to the mediterranean countries and to its nowadays use on stage. When looking back to the origins of shadows as part of performing arts, a few questions arise concerning their relation to rituals, legends and their symbolism, concerning their audience and the transformations they have been subject to on their way to Europe, from India and China through the Ottoman Empire, as well as the constant attraction they exert upon artists and spectators. Always tightly linked to music and choreographic movement in front or behind the screens, large shadows and shadow puppet theatre give shape to a multilevel approach to fiction, magic and subjective relationship with the mysterious side of human existence. Through the examples of a few contemporary Romanian performances, especially Ada Milea's concert performances, answers are proposed to how shadows continue their voyage, reinventing themselves and their creative part in stage dramaturgies, charming all age audiences.

KEYWORDS

Shadow theatre; Ada Milea; animation; ombres chinoises; puppet theatre.

Parler des ombres suppose d'emblée d'accepter l'entrée dans un monde où réalité et fiction se rencontrent sur le plan mouvant et émouvant d'un entre-deux fuyant, paradoxal, du visible et de l'invisible à la fois, du présent et de l'absent, du voilement et du dévoilement, de la trace que l'on perd et que l'on retrouve pour la reperdre à nouveau (Stoichiță 1997). Cet « entre-deux » que le grand penseur du théâtre Georges Banu voyait comme situation emblématique exceptionnelle non seulement pour le critique, chercheur, proche de l'acte artistique, mais aussi et surtout pour le théâtre lui-même en tant qu'art, nous guidera au cours de cette étude, dans le but d'essayer de comprendre l'attrait qu'exerce toujours l'art du théâtre d'ombres, en étroite relation avec la danse, sur les spectateurs de tout âge et de toute époque. En les comparant aux statues, Georges Banu disait que « les marionnettes, en revanche, disposent d'une mobilité qui leur permet de bouger, d'être des objets d'art au repos, tout en préservant quelque chose de la dynamique propre au théâtre. Elles associent la durée de l'art et l'éphémère de la scène. J'aime les marionnettes parce qu'elles se placent justement dans ce gué, dans cet interstice à jamais suspendu » (Banu 2016, 84).

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Nous parlerons ainsi des marionnettes et des ombres dansantes si présentes dans l'art théâtral de toutes les cultures du monde, ombres qui ramènent à la vie, depuis des mondes révolus, des êtres signifiants et significatifs pour les communautés qui les célèbrent, des personnages réels et historiques, bons ou mauvais, des personnages légendaires, mythologiques, divinités, monstres, esprits fantastiques, issus des désirs ou des peurs des mortels dans des moments de transition et de passage : le passage du jour à la nuit, de l'hiver au printemps, de la mort à la vie, d'un âge à un autre, d'un monde à un autre.

Il faut dès le début insister sur l'étroite relation entre le théâtre d'ombre et la danse. Leur origine rituelle témoigne de cette fraternelle coexistence sous le signe de la magie qui harmonise et donne une cohérence aux significations plurivalentes d'un monde qui ne nous est que partiellement accessible par les sens, un monde des apparences que le mouvement, la lumière, les sons et les parfums modulent, transforment, métamorphosent, dans des correspondances infinies. Ainsi, l'ombre et la danse, comme le masque, suggèrent sans désigner, montrent sans dévoiler, permettent à l'être humain de se détacher de la réalité concrète en la dépassant, dépassant ses propres limites dans le même temps. Le corps du danseur qui, aux origines, devenait oiseau ou bison, dieu ou esprit, pluie ou tonnerre, garde même de nos jours une certaine sacralité qui hypnotise par sa fluidité et par le défi lancé à la loi de la gravité. L'ombre qui accompagnait ce corps dansant autour du feu dans la nuit, légitimait son état second, supérieur, et en tant que double qui prend sur lui les mêmes fonctions et s'engage à n'exister que par le mouvement de ce corps absent qu'il reste au spectateur d'imaginer. Voilà pourquoi, dans les arts du spectacle contemporains, une compagnie de danse comme Pilobolus, qui se fait une mission de « tester les limites de la physicalité humaine » utilise aussi le théâtre d'ombres, la danse des ombres qui permet de donner vie, avec le matériau corporel de danseur, à des illusions magiques, en continuelle métamorphose¹. Et si Marcel Griaule disait à propos des masques Dogon qu'on ne peut les dissocier de la danse², nous pourrions dire de même des ombres qui entrent en scène : c'est le mouvement rythmé qui anime, qui donne vie et donc une « âme » à ces corps obscurs, qui ne sont que la trace d'un être dont la présence reste cachée, dont les contours se découpent par cette lumière qui autrefois était celle de la flamme vacillante d'un feu ou des bougies. Car, en effet, « l'ombre [...] découle naturellement du référent, comme si le modèle se glissait, se coulait dans la représentation » (Mauron 2001, 59).

Ces ombres qui ont une histoire peut-être aussi vieille que l'humanité, mais qui ont laissé de traces depuis plus de 2000 ans, ont évolué de manières très différentes au sein des arts du spectacle sur le chemin sinueux du rituel au divertissement et de l'Orient à l'Occident, et une grande partie d'entre elles depuis 2008³ a fini par être reconnue comme représentative pour le patrimoine culturel immatériel de l'humanité UNESCO.

Quelles sont les différences entre les types d'ombres et d'où viennent-elles ? Comment se fait-il qu'en Europe c'est le public enfantin qui est devenu le destinataire privilégié des ombres dites « chinoises » ? Quelle est la relation entre ce théâtre et les autres arts ? Et si la musique et la danse y jouent un rôle important, n'aurait-on pas ici la constante qui relie ces ombres entre-elles, en dépit des distances culturelles et spatiales ? Nous nous proposons de suivre ce fil et de jeter un regard théâtral historique, mais aussi analytique sur l'Orient et l'Occident des spectacles d'ombres, afin d'esquisser quelques réponses et de comprendre, à travers des exemples de spectacles de théâtre roumains contemporains, comment les ombres peuvent renaître et séduire dans un espace culturel qui n'en a pas la tradition, mais qui, comme d'autres espaces européens, a été ouvert à de multiples influences.



Des ombres et de l'enfance en Europe

Le théâtre d'ombres... quels souvenirs ces mots évoquent-ils ? Ce sont surtout des souvenirs d'enfance. Des images qui côtoient celles des spectacles de marionnettes ou qui rappellent les moments créatifs de bricolage à l'école, poupées en chiffons ou en carton découpé... et il y a aussi, peut-être, le souvenir des moments de solitude où, enfant, avant de se coucher, la lampe à côté du lit ou la petite veilleuse projetait des ombres étranges sur le mur, et où notre main, interposée entre la source de lumière et le mur, commençait à danser en prenant la forme de divers animaux, êtres ou objets des plus irréalistes. Pour chasser cette solitude et les incertitudes peuplées de craintes, l'être humain a su donner corps aux êtres qui surgissent de son imaginaire, en les apprivoisant, en s'en rendant maître. Le geste de l'enfant qui, d'une petite main, projette la grande gueule du crocodile prête à avaler le lapin dessiné par l'autre main et l'anéantit en serrant le poing et en retirant la main, n'est-il pas semblable aux gestes rituels et images propitiatoires des peuples archaïques ?⁴ La peur se calme ainsi et la magie de faire apparaître ou disparaître ces créatures reste dans le pouvoir de l'enfant. Si, pendant la journée, les jouets, les poupées et les héros en plastique sont les personnages auxquels il donne vie, le soir, il ne reste plus que leurs ombres, qui s'estompent lentement et se transforment en rêves.

Cette enfance, à laquelle les spectateurs adultes relient le théâtre d'ombres, on l'aime ou bien on craint de la retrouver, car on la confond souvent avec l'infantilisation. D'ailleurs, même des passionnés de la marionnette, qui l'ont réinvestie d'une mission de renouveau pour le théâtre moderne, comme Gaston Baty dans la première moitié du XX^{ème} siècle, ont eu tendance à reléguer le théâtre d'ombres à un niveau qui n'est pas tout à fait à la hauteur, pas tout à fait digne de la grande famille du théâtre de marionnettes dont il fait pourtant partie. Ainsi, dans l'introduction à *l'Histoire de la marionnette*, après avoir dit que ni les poupées en chiffons, ni les soldats de plomb, ni les automates n'étaient des marionnettes, on accorde le paragraphe suivant aux ombres :

Par contre, la variété, la spontanéité du jeu s'obtiennent librement de ces silhouettes découpées et articulées que sont les ombres. [...] Mais, silhouettes plates, ou plutôt immatérielles projections de ces silhouettes sur un écran, elles n'ont rien de commun avec les petits êtres à trois dimensions, en qui l'on s'accorde à reconnaître le type de la marionnette. (Baty et Chavance 1959, 6)

Par conséquent, les silhouettes projetées sur l'écran, images animées qui bougent librement, bien que douées de théâtralité, puisque l'illusion du libre mouvement articulé est là, n'étaient pas perçues, par un homme de théâtre, comme étant des marionnettes à part entière. Et Gaston Baty n'avait pas tout à fait tort, dans le sens où l'ombre n'est pas la marionnette elle-même, elle n'est qu'un des aspects visibles, un des signaux ou indices de la présence de cette figure, de cet être qui se découpe par un effet de contraste sur un fond de lumière, et dont on ne peut que supposer la consistance physique. La question qui se pose reste cependant la suivante : pourquoi bannir le bidimensionnel (ou plus justement le faux tridimensionnel) de cette poupée plate de la famille des marionnettes, alors que, finalement, l'ombre est toujours bidimensionnelle, indifféremment de la nature de l'être ou de l'objet projeté ? Que ce soit une marionnette découpée, une poupée tridimensionnelle sculptée ou un performeur en chair et en os, son ombre sera toujours plate et c'est justement à ce niveau et sur ce plan (que ce soit un drap, un mur ou tout autre fond qui puisse faire office d'écran) que se retrouvent tous et toutes, êtres et choses, en accédant ainsi à une dimension hautement symbolique et mystique, très bien



Fig. 1 : Atelier de théâtre d'ombres pour les enfants, par Beatrice Iordan, au Musée National du Paysan Roumain, Bucarest, 2024, crédit photo Vladimir Bulza.

exceptions près, du temps où le fameux Dominique Séraphin jouait ses ombres chinoises à Versailles devant Louis XVI en 1770. En effet, si nous relisons les écrits du XIX^{ème} siècle de Charles Magnin sur l'histoire de la marionnette, il est évident que la perspective généralement acceptée est celle qui voit de la « naïveté », là où la sculpture à bras mobiles de Jésus produisait des émotions religieuses au Moyen Âge et du divertissement, du pur amusement pour enfants dans les spectacles d'ombres. Magnin cite d'ailleurs la correspondance littéraire de 1770 du baron de Grimm qui affirme ne pas connaître « de spectacle plus intéressant pour les enfants » que le *Shattenspiel* :

il se prête aux enchantements, au merveilleux et aux catastrophes les plus terribles. Si vous voulez, par exemple, que le diable emporte quelqu'un, l'acteur qui fait le diable, n'a qu'à sauter par-dessus la chandelle placée en arrière de la toile, et il aura l'air de s'envoler avec sa proie dans les airs. Ce beau genre vient d'être inventé en France, où l'on en a fait un amusement de société aussi spirituel que noble ; mais je crains qu'il ne soit étouffé dans sa naissance par la fureur de jouer des proverbes. (Magnin 1981, 181)

Bien qu'il saisisse l'ironie de l'écrivain allemand francophone par rapport aux mœurs françaises, Magnin, après avoir passé en revue quelques aspects du répertoire des spectacles d'ombres et de marionnettes, conclut :

En résumé, les théâtres d'ombres chinoises et de marionnettes ont dans notre pays un grand avantage sur presque tous les autres spectacles : ce sont presque les seuls où nous n'apportons aucun esprit de contention et de critique, et où nous allions passer quelques moments avec la seule envie de nous amuser. (Magnin 1981, 188)

La plupart des chercheurs et historiens du théâtre du XX^{ème} siècle confirment le fait qu'à ses débuts en France, le théâtre d'ombres, surtout par le travail artistique de Séraphin « dont le nom était connu au point d'être devenu nom commun pour signifier 'Théâtre d'ombres' » (Baty et Chavance 1959, 60), était un divertissement simple et assez ingénu, et que son succès avait été dû surtout au comique, « à la variété et à la gentillesse » (Baird 1967, 147 ;

Fournel 1982, 148-149) de son répertoire, et aux personnages qui sont restés dans le folklore parisien, comme le petit chien noir Gobemouche. Mais il est possible que le succès ait été dû, dans un premier temps, à l'appellation même d'*Ombres chinoises*, qui ne semble pas avoir posé de problèmes avant les recherches poussées de spécialistes contemporains, et qui prouvent que cette association directe avec la Chine est douteuse et peu justifiée (Chen 2003, 48). En effet, l'histoire semble nous jouer toutes sortes de tours. Les Français, en important le théâtre d'ombres au XVIII^e siècle, l'ont appelé Ombres chinoises, bien que *les ombres à scènes changeantes* que Dominique Séraphin François a présenté au roi de France Louis XVI n'eussent rien à voir avec le type de marionnettes translucides, colorées et bidimensionnelles si fines et si spécifiques à la culture chinoise. Mais cela devait paraître exotique, et la Chine correspondait presque parfaitement à l'idée de l'Extrême-Orient, difficile à atteindre et donc précieux.

Pourtant, il y a une autre possible justification de cette appellation, car le père jésuite Jean-Baptiste Du Halde publie en 1735 un nombre de volumes sur la *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'empire de Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*, qui n'a pas dû passer inaperçu, au regard du goût du siècle pour l'exotisme oriental. Même si l'on peut s'accorder sur le fait que Du Halde n'était pas vraiment familiarisé avec ces spectacles d'ombres et que ce n'est pas lui qui a importé les ombres chinoises en France (Chen 2003, 46), il est néanmoins probable que l'association des ombres avec la culture chinoise lui soit en partie redevable. En effet, il mentionne dans un court passage du tome II de son ouvrage, la manière hors du commun dans laquelle les Chinois célèbrent le Festival des Lanternes vers la fin de janvier (le 15^e du premier mois) : il parle de Lanternes énormes de plusieurs sortes, peintes de figures animalières ou humaines, illuminées par un grand nombre de bougies, ou bien ornées de sculptures ou même de lanternes qui fonctionnent comme des salles de spectacles ou des écrans. La citation mérite d'être reproduite, car elle montre l'émerveillement presque enfantin que ces spectacles suscitaient :

Il y en a plusieurs où l'on représente des spectacles propres à amuser et à divertir le peuple : on y voit des chevaux qui galopent, des vaisseaux qui voguent, des armées en marche, des danses et diverses autres choses de cette nature. Des gens cachés, par le moyen de quelques fils imperceptibles, font mouvoir toutes ces figures.

D'autres fois ils font paroître des ombres qui représentent des Princes et des Princesses, des Soldats, des Bouffons et d'autres personnages, dont les gestes sont si conformes aux paroles de ceux qui les remuent avec tant d'artifice, qu'on croiroit les entendre parler véritablement. (Du Halde 1735, 96-97)⁶

Associées ou non à d'autres curiosités attrayantes comme les lanternes magiques et les zootropes, et bien qu'ayant été importées plutôt du Moyen Orient via l'Afrique du Nord, les ombres européennes se sont retrouvées étiquetées de « chinoises », grâce au contexte culturel du XVIII^e siècle, qui, ne l'oublions pas, voyait aussi jouer en grande pompe *L'orphelin de la Chine* de Voltaire au Théâtre de la Rue des Fossés Saint-Germain par la Comédie Française, en 1755. Avec la Révolution française, les spectacles d'ombres comme ceux présentés par Séraphin sont passés d'un théâtre de salon, aristocratique, à un théâtre populaire et satyrique pour un public de tout âge. Cette tendance a perduré au cours du XIX^e siècle, où s'est cultivé le goût pour les portraits en silhouettes noires réalisés au physionotrace et pour les caricatures, dans la lignée des études physionomiques de Johann Caspar Lavater, dont le fameux *Essai sur la Physiognomie Destiné à Faire Connoître l'Homme & à le faire Aimer*, publié en 1776 à Leipzig/Winterthur en allemand et en 1792 à Londres en anglais, avait connu un très

grand succès. Au-delà de la facilité de tracer le profil de tout un chacun, grâce aux machines présentées par Lavater, cette pratique enrichissait paradoxalement de mystère les nouvelles technologies de l'illuminisme, puisque l'ombre révélait pour Lavater, comme le remarque V. I Stoichita, le vrai « moi » de la personne représentée puisque « l'importance accordée au profil réside dans le fait qu'il est considéré comme une extériorisation directe de l'âme : sa composition même » (Stoichita 1997, 133).

De même, la scène-écran des « ombres françaises » va s'enrichir avec des narrations pré-cinématographiques comme celles de Rodolphe de Salis, avec Henri Rivière et Caran d'Ache au Cabaret du Chat Noir, dues à une mécanique de plus en plus performante et très compliquée (Baird 1967, 153).

La lumière jouait un grand rôle ; elle fournissait à elle seule les effets les plus remarquables et les plus inattendus. Rivière connaissait, pour les avoir toutes étudiées et expérimentées scientifiquement, les combinaisons les plus savantes des verres colorés dont il se réservait la préparation. Ces verres lui permettaient de modifier à son gré, et suivant l'effet qu'il voulait obtenir, l'atmosphère dans laquelle agissaient ses personnages. Ceux-ci, découpés à la scie, avec le plus grand soin, dans des feuilles de zinc, étaient ainsi que les décors, dessinés ou peints par des artistes de l'hospitalière maison. (Maindron 1900, 336)

D'un autre côté, une multitude de nouvelles pièces pour les enfants furent aussi écrites au cours de la deuxième moitié du XIXe siècle, comme celles de Pauline Séraphin, nourries des contes de fées et des histoires puisées dans le folklore par les esprits romantiques. D'ailleurs, avant de devenir le marionnettiste de ses pupazzi noirs, l'homme de lettres Lemerrier de Neuville, avait, semble-t-il, commencé par découper des caricatures dans le périodique *Le boulevard*, qu'il collait sur du carton et « auxquelles il adaptait les bras mobiles, pour les faire gesticuler et bavarder » afin de distraire son petit garçon malade. Gaston Baty raconte que « Carjol (l'auteur des originaux) et Gustave Doré, trouvèrent l'idée amusante et poussèrent le journaliste dans cette voie » (Baty et Chavance 1959, 104). Trop simples, trop enfantines, « ces poupées désincarnées que sont les ombres » exerçaient quand-même « un attrait non dénué de mystère » (Baty et Chavance 1959, 102), décrit par les romantiques Théophile Gauthier et Gérard de Nerval, attrait que l'on retrouve au début du XXème siècle chez Edward Gordon Craig, avec la noble convention de son « Übermarionette » et ses « écrans » qui construisent des scénographies fabuleuses tout en rendant hommage au monde des marionnettes à ombres.

Il me semble important de citer ici Antoine Vitez, grand homme de théâtre du XXème siècle, qui s'est, lui aussi, passionné pour cet art, car il touche un point essentiel qui relie les ombres à une réception enfantine.

La marionnette remue en nous des choses profondes. Elle est l'art de la partie pour le tout, c'est la main à la place de la tête ou du corps entier. Cette saisie du tout par la partie réalise nos vœux d'enfance. Il est devenu difficile aujourd'hui de dire que la marionnette est l'art par excellence des enfants. Les montreurs souffrent de cette prison où on les enferma [...] et je comprends bien l'indignation des artistes exigeant reconnaissance pour l'âge vénérable de leur métier, son passé illustre et sa tradition dans le monde. [...] Mais au-delà du combat, je suis convaincu que la marionnette prend sa source dans les jeux secrets de l'enfance. Le petit d'homme se reconnaît dans l'*homunculus* : l'homme factice, artificiel, fabriqué par des mains et de taille réduite. Ce rêve est à nous et il ne faut pas en avoir peur⁷.



Fig. 2 : Atelier de théâtre d'ombres pour les enfants, par Beatrice Iordan, au Musée National du Paysan Roumain, Bucarest, 2024, crédit photo Vladimir Bulza.

Ce rêve auquel se réfère Vitez, au-delà de celui de l'enfant qui est en nous, est aussi le rêve de l'enfance de l'humanité, de la genèse, de la création, du moulage d'une matière inerte à laquelle on a insufflé l'esprit de vie, ou de la partie d'un autre corps à laquelle on a donné la forme et la dignité de l'ensemble. Et justement, le théâtre de marionnettes, et d'autant plus le théâtre d'ombres, donnent aux spectateurs le privilège de compléter cette dimension offerte par le petit écran du marionnettiste, selon la puissance de l'imagination de chacun, et de la transformer en un tout. Et même lorsque l'ombre n'est pas celle d'une marionnette mais la projection d'un objet ou d'un acteur/actrice, sa valeur métonymique est essentielle, comme nous le verrons plus tard, dans l'analyse des spectacles contemporains. Comme l'écrit si bien Agnès Pierron : « Avec la marionnette, nous sommes dans le domaine de la projection, du phantasme et il est plus juste de proposer des degrés d'appartenance qu'une définition réductrice. Gardons à la marionnette son ambiguïté et préservons-là de l'infantilisation » (Pierron 1982, 87).

En effet, bien que ces personnages soient en général petits, la flamme vivante des bougies peut les animer en leur offrant une ombre qui les accompagne et qui les fait grandir ou rapetisser en fonction de leur position par rapport à la source de lumière. C'est un art presque rudimentaire, qui n'a pas besoin de grand-chose pour exister, mais qui a donné naissance, au fil des siècles, à un extraordinaire artisanat de fabrication et de manipulation de figures fixes ou mobiles qui deviennent des personnages animés. Ces marionnettes à tiges ou à fils peuvent être opaques ou translucides, et donc noires ou colorées selon les matériaux dans lesquels elles sont taillées, qui varient d'une civilisation à l'autre. Cuir, bois, métal ou carton pour les opaques, et papier coloré ou peint, parchemin et cuir fin imbibé d'huile ou, plus récemment, même des matériaux synthétiques traversés par la lumière pour apparaître dans la couleur désirée.

Il faut aussi bien évidemment un écran, qui peut être constitué d'un simple drap de lit blanc tendu derrière un cadre pliant (comme on en trouve chez les marionnettistes ambulants en Inde), d'un tissu en fibres végétales : ortie, papier, coton, lin ou soie (pour les spectacles de la cour impériale chinoise), ou parchemin (dans l'Égypte médiévale), ou encore de fibre de verre dans l'Europe contemporaine. L'important est que les ombres se projettent joliment et clairement sur le support vertical de cet écran, grâce à une source lumineuse située entre la marionnette et l'interprète, qu'il s'agisse d'une petite lampe à gaz, d'une ou plusieurs bougies allumées, d'ampoules électriques ou même de la lumière du soleil, dirigée en obstruant partiellement les fenêtres d'une pièce.

L'un des plus importants romanciers japonais contemporains, Jun' Ichirō Tanizaki, s'attarde souvent dans son essai très raffiné *Éloge de l'ombre*, sur la consistance de l'obscurité éclairée par une bougie, très différente de l'obscurité extérieure : « L'obscurité visible de l'intérieur des pièces, dit-il, où il semble toujours y avoir une lueur vacillante, est un environnement propice aux fantômes, parfois même plus effrayant que l'obscurité extérieure » (Tanizaki 2019, 71). C'est en effet bien là, dans la fenêtre éclairée à laquelle donne forme l'écran de la toile tendue, que peuvent se manifester les esprits, si présents dans les cultures anciennes : ceux qui font peur mais aussi ceux qui sont bienveillants, pour nous, aujourd'hui, des images, des traces dansantes qui nous entraînent dans des mondes passés, oubliés ou retrouvés, nous reconnectant à la transcendance ou, au contraire, nous amusant, critiquant et tournant en dérision les mœurs de la société contemporaine.

Car il convient de préciser d'emblée qu'aussi terrestres ou enfantins que puissent être nombre de personnages du théâtre d'ombres d'aujourd'hui, en particulier dans les pays européens, à l'origine, ils reconnectaient le monde d'ici avec le monde de l'au-delà, qu'il s'agisse d'un au-delà céleste, transcendantal ou infra-mondain, à la fois des divinités et des démons, et des mortels qui ont franchi le seuil de l'éternité mais qui se rendent visibles sous forme d'ombre pour ceux qui acceptent d'y croire.



Différences culturelles et histoires des ombres

Ce n'est pas un hasard que l'histoire fascinante du théâtre d'ombres soit apparue il y a plus de deux mille ans en Extrême-Orient, dans les steppes d'Asie, en Inde puis en Chine et qu'elle soit étroitement liée aux mythes originels du monde et des civilisations de la terre. On ne sait pas exactement où se trouve le premier berceau de cette forme d'art, mais c'est en Inde que l'on trouve les plus anciennes traces écrites. Si nos sources sont correctes, le théâtre d'ombres est même mentionné dans le *Mahabharata*, l'un des textes sacrés de l'hindouisme, datant des premiers siècles avant Jésus-Christ, et dans la région de l'Andhra Pradesh, dans le sud-est de l'Inde, la tradition orale fait état d'ombres projetées sur une toile tendue, datant de 200 ans avant Jésus-Christ. Quoi qu'il en soit, à en juger par la large diffusion des spectacles d'ombres en Malaisie, en Indonésie, en Thaïlande et au Cambodge, qui mettent principalement en scène des personnages de la tradition hindoue, notamment du *Ramayana* et du *Mahabharata*, la prééminence de la culture indienne reste évidente, même si tous ces pays sont pour la plupart passés à l'islam ou au bouddhisme.

Les marionnettes plates indonésiennes, taillées dans une peau de vache et utilisées dans le théâtre d'ombres, sont parmi les plus complexes et les plus raffinées, connues sous le nom de *wayang kulit*. Manipulées par un *dalang*, leur rôle est sacré : elles manifestent le surnaturel sur terre et initient les jeunes aux légendes anciennes. La danse et la performance artistique



Fig. 3 : *Wayang kulit* indonésien, collection privée, crédit photo Ștefana Pop-Curșeu.

sont accompagnées par de véritables ensembles d'instrumentistes spécialisés dans le style musical de percussion *gamelan*, également inscrit au patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO (en 2021).

Beth Osnes, chercheuse passionnée des traditions artistiques malaisiennes, explique : « Les spectacles d'ombres sont une sorte d'invitation physique aux forces du monde spirituel à apparaître et à séjourner pendant un certain temps dans le monde physique. Et comme les êtres spirituels n'ont pas de nature physique mais souhaitent être présents parmi les humains, les ombres sont le moyen idéal par lequel les êtres spirituels peuvent instruire, recevoir des offrandes rituelles, mettre en scène leurs histoires héroïques et ainsi faire perdurer la foi » (Osnes 2010, 12). (Fig. 3)

Ce théâtre est peuplé de personnages surnaturels bons et mauvais qui s'affrontent, ou d'êtres disparus depuis longtemps du monde des humains et qui interviennent soudainement dans les actions des mortels et disparaissent, aussi vite qu'ils sont apparus, dans la nuit des

temps. L'émergence soigneusement orchestrée du néant obscur et informe vers la forme dans la lumière, puis le retour à l'obscurité féconde est l'essence même du théâtre d'ombres, quelles que soient les religions et les croyances qui l'ont généré. C'est peut-être pour cela que d'autres cultures en ont également revendiqué la paternité à travers plusieurs légendes fondatrices.

La plus belle d'entre elles est la légende de l'empereur chinois Wu-ti, de la dynastie Hang, qui, vers 120 avant J.-C., pleure la mort de sa femme bien-aimée. Personne ne parvient à le consoler, sauf un vieux mage qui, nuit après nuit, derrière un écran de toile, fait apparaître devant lui l'ombre de sa belle épouse, redevenue proche de lui, mais qu'il ne peut plus toucher⁸. Fiction réconfortante et début d'un art qui ne sera validé en tant que tel que bien plus tard, au X^e siècle. Les premiers jeux d'ombres attestés dans l'histoire chinoise remontent à la dynastie Song (960-1280) et, comme le démontre Fan Pen Chen, de l'université de New-York, il n'y a pas de preuve réelle qu'ils soient apparus plus tôt (Chen 2003). Ce qui est certain c'est que cet art s'est répandu très rapidement et que, grâce à son succès tant à la cour impériale qu'auprès du peuple, il est devenu très sophistiqué, avec des figures taillées comme dans de la dentelle, des décors, du mobilier et des accessoires à la fois somptueux et raffinés, une variété et une complexité de détails uniques dans le monde du théâtre d'ombres, qui a dû impressionner les voyageurs européens ou les missionnaires comme le père jésuite Du Havre au XVIII^e siècle et qui reste un art encore vivant et très apprécié de nos jours, vu que dans la région de Huazhou, province de Shaanxi, par exemple, d'après les sources chinoises⁹, trois mille habitants travaillent dans l'industrie des figurines de théâtre d'ombres.

René Simmen, dans un splendide livre-album sur le monde de la marionnette, souligne l'importance de la manière dont l'écran sur lequel s'animent ces ombres magiques garde un lien permanent avec le monde de l'au-delà par son appellation même dans les différentes cultures : en Chine, le « voile de la mort », en Indonésie, à Java, « brume et nuages », en Turquie,

le « rideau du départ », dans le monde arabe, il apparaît comme la « toile du rêve », qui cache les secrets du Tout-Puissant (Simmen 1972, 72).

Il est important de souligner la présence constante de la musique et de la narration chorégraphiée, sans lesquelles ces ombres seraient des présences muettes. Tous les pays dans lesquels existe une tradition du théâtre d'ombres possèdent, d'une part, une richesse extraordinaire de légendes et de contes et, d'autre part, une longue histoire de la danse et d'un théâtre-danse, le plus souvent à masques, étroitement lié aux rituels religieux spécifiques. Pourtant, le seul genre de théâtre d'ombres dansé à proprement parler se trouve au Cambodge, avec une variante thaïlandaise. Il s'agit du *robam nang sbek thom*, « la danse des grands panneaux de cuir », qui rassemble des dizaines de performeurs qui dansent à l'unisson, d'un pas rythmé, en tenant au-dessus de leurs têtes de très grands panneaux de cuir d'environ 1,7m de haut devant et derrière un écran de 10 m de long, en plein air, la nuit, avec un grand feu allumé derrière pour projeter les scènes découpées sur les panneaux et raconter les histoires sacrées du *Ramayana* et du *Mahabharata* hindous. Il s'agit d'une danse très codifiée, qui chorégraphie des situations précises comme la marche, le vol, la bataille, la méditation, la douleur, la promenade, la réunion et la métamorphose (Simmen 1972, 98) et qui anime ainsi ces tableaux en les rendant « vivants » et compréhensibles pour les spectateurs. Tout comme à l'origine dans le théâtre d'ombres chinois ou encore dans les formes indonésiennes, les silhouettes découpées symbolisent des âmes parties et revenues pour un court moment précieux sur terre. Il est ainsi tout à fait compréhensible qu'il y ait un lien étroit, rituel, entre ombre et masque dans le cadre de cette communion théâtrale des performeurs et spectateurs, comme le précise Jacques Brunet :

Au Cambodge, la marionnette de cuir a la même fonction que le masque dans les danses sacrées ; c'est la divinité elle-même qui, après une certaine cérémonie de prise de possession, s'y abrite et entre, dans le vrai sens du mot, dans le danseur. L'artiste s'identifie alors complètement au personnage représenté par le panneau de cuir qu'il tient dans ses mains. (Brunet 1971, 41)



Fig. 4 : Séquence de théâtre d'ombre du spectacle : *Tzara arde și Dada se piaptână*. Production du Théâtre National de Cluj, 2016¹ crédit photo Nicu Cherciu.

¹ Spectacle (*Tzara brûle et Dada peigne ses cheveux*) conçu dans un style dadaïste, dédié à la mémoire de Tristan Tzara, texte Ștefana, Ioan Pop-Curșeu et Ion Pop. Masques, projections vidéo et théâtre d'ombres sont très présents sur scène dans un dialogue permanent, soulignant les recherches visuelles avant-gardistes.

En effet, plusieurs spécialistes parlent d'une sorte « d'état de transe » dans lequel entrent non seulement les performeurs mais aussi les spectateurs, grâce à la musique incantatoire hétérophonique et chorale, à caractère cyclique, basée surtout sur différents instruments à percussion et à cordes. « La durée spécifique de la représentation – du coucher au lever du soleil – contribue aussi à cet état altéré, car la combinaison entre une longueur extrême et le manque de sommeil produit une distorsion des modalités usuelles de perception » (Osnes 2010, 19). De même que le masque a besoin d'une corporalité et d'une voix codifiée, qui lui soient propres, l'ombre a besoin de son rythme et de sa chorégraphie, de sa « morphologie artistique » (Odangiu 2022, 172). Et

nous verrons que, toutes proportions gardées, l'ombre joue un rôle similaire au masque dans le théâtre contemporain européen aussi et, bien qu'ayant complètement perdu son côté mystique et rituel, c'est toute une poésie chorale qui vient suppléer à ce besoin de mystère et qui entoure l'ombre de son aura si spéciale et crée ainsi la magie toujours surprenante de ce théâtre. (Fig. 4)

Aujourd'hui, la plupart des spécialistes s'accordent à dire que le théâtre d'ombres n'est pas arrivé en Europe directement de Chine, ni d'Inde, son berceau le plus ancien, mais du Proche-Orient, en passant par différentes étapes difficilement identifiables. Il existait au XVIII^{ème} siècle, époque de forte importation du théâtre d'ombres en Europe, un autre type de théâtre d'ombres, très connu et qui s'était répandu dans le monde arabe, mais aussi dans la région de l'ancien Empire byzantin. Il s'agit du célèbre Karagöz turc, apparu au XVI^{ème} siècle (Puchner 2014, 161), qui a prospéré dans tout l'Empire ottoman et qui, inscrit au patrimoine culturel international de l'UNESCO en 2009, est le seul théâtre traditionnel turc, soutenu au fil des siècles par le fait que le théâtre d'ombres est aussi le seul type de théâtre facilement accepté par les communautés musulmanes modérées en raison de l'interdiction de la représentation figurative d'êtres humains.

Mais le Karagöz est très différent des formes d'Extrême-Orient. Non pas tant en ce qui concerne le savoir-faire des marionnettes -bien que les figures translucides et colorées soient manipulées à l'aide de tiges horizontales et non verticales comme pour la plupart des autres marionnettes plates-, mais en ce qui concerne le contenu dramaturgique. Les personnages principaux de ce théâtre ne sont pas des divinités, des héros mythologiques, historiques ou des princesses de noble naissance, mais des gens simples et ordinaires nommés Hadjivat et Karagöz. Le premier est érudit, droit, avec une barbe en pointe, rationnel, bien élevé et cultivé. Karagöz, au contraire, est légèrement relevé par derrière, barbu, chauve avec un grand turban sur la tête et un gros œil au beurre noir, qui lui a aussi donné son nom. Il est d'origine Tzigane, turbulent, râleur, tyrannique, paresseux, vaniteux et indiscipliné, ne respecte aucune règle et a beaucoup de succès auprès des femmes. Les deux sont de très bons amis, bien que Hadjivat se fasse toujours battre et que Karagöz réussisse à se tirer d'affaire comme par magie.

Les autres personnages sont très variés et reflètent la société et les croyances turques : femmes de tous types et de toutes conditions, Albanais, Grecs, Kurdes, Africains, Juifs, soldats, cavaliers, musiciens, danseurs, paysans, animaux, êtres fantastiques comme les sirènes ou le nain Bebe Ruhi. Des personnages colorés et vivants qui se moquent des mauvaises habitudes, des défauts et des vices, des lois et des règles sociales. Là encore, une légende fondatrice perpétuée par la tradition orale mérite d'être rappelée : on raconte que lors de la construction d'une mosquée à Bursa par le sultan Orhan (1326-1359), deux ouvriers, l'un charpentier, l'autre maçon ou forgeron, appelés Karagöz et Hadjivat, faisaient toujours rire les autres ouvriers par leurs blagues et leurs plaisanteries, ralentissant ainsi le rythme des travaux sur le chantier. Le sultan, furieux de ce retard, les arrêta et les pendit. Pris de remords, car il avait lui-même souvent été très amusé par les plaisanteries des deux hommes, le sultan demanda à l'érudit et artiste Sheik Küsteri de les ramener à la vie par son art (Nicolas 1982, 40; Baird 1967, 84). C'est ainsi que naissent ces personnages charismatiques à la verve extraordinaire et à l'humour épais et populaire, plein de défauts sanctionnés par les rires du public.

Cependant, il est intéressant de noter que, bien qu'il s'agisse d'un théâtre de farce, Hadjivat évoque au début de chaque pièce d'ombres, dans le prologue, le patron de la guilde des marionnettistes, le légendaire Sheikh Küsteri, mais légitime également ce genre théâtral par la prière demandant la protection divine d'Allah avant la représentation, avec l'apparition de l'arbre de vie, une image d'ouverture qui renvoie à une tradition beaucoup plus ancienne,

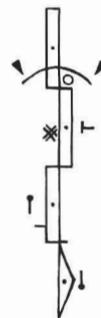




Fig. 5 : Table d'un marchand de figurines grecques de théâtre d'ombres Karghiosis, Athènes, 2025, crédit photo Ştefana Pop-Curşeu.

également présente dans le théâtre d'ombres indonésien (And 1963, 30-32). Existe-t-il donc un lien entre le théâtre d'ombres extrême-oriental et le théâtre d'ombres turc, malgré des évolutions totalement différentes ?

En fait, il existe de nombreuses hypothèses sur la manière dont il est entré dans l'Empire ottoman. Si l'on se tourne à nouveau vers les sources, peu nombreuses, on constate que certaines formes ont pu être apportées vers l'ouest par des tribus roms nomades du Rajasthan ou des îles de Java aux IX^{ème} et X^{ème} siècles, ou peut-être importées d'Égypte par le sultan Selim Ier au XVI^{ème} siècle, où, sous le règne des Mamelouks, l'art s'était considérablement développé. Les chercheurs reconnaissent que les peuples nomades turcs d'Asie centrale semblent également avoir pratiqué le théâtre d'ombres dès l'an 1000 environ, mais comme ces tribus n'avaient pas de culture écrite, aucune trace n'en a été conservée... Certaines sources citent cependant le célèbre

poète soufi persan Farid ud din Attar, auteur de *La Conférence des oiseaux*, qui comparait le monde à un théâtre d'ombres et admettait s'être inspiré de l'art d'un marionnettiste du Khorasan, province où vivaient de nombreux Turcs nomades avant l'invasion de Gengis Han (Chen 2003). Plusieurs historiens affirment également que le terme *Khayal al-Zill*, qui signifie théâtre d'ombres en arabe, était mentionné aux XII^{ème} et XIII^{ème} siècles, tandis qu'au Turkistan ces spectacles conservent leur nom de l'époque des tribus nomades : *cadir hayal*, qui signifie « spectacle sous la tente » (Sabn' Esat Siyavusgil 1961, 5-6 ; Chen 2003, 30).

Il est donc très probable que ce type de théâtre était une pratique courante des populations turques d'Asie centrale qui descendirent vers le sud jusqu'en Iran puis en Égypte, où l'on trouve entre le XIII^{ème} et le XVI^{ème} siècle les marionnettes bidimensionnelles qui se sont perpétuées sous le règne des Mamelouks (1250-1517). Ces marionnettes semblent être une des clés : fabriquées en peau de chameau ou de buffle, elles sont moins mobiles et opaques, ce qui les distingue de leurs sœurs colorées translucides du genre *Karagöz*, mais elles peuvent nous donner un indice sur la façon dont les ombres « chinoises » ont pénétré en Europe occidentale, car des silhouettes noires similaires ont été attestées en Tunisie, en Algérie et dans l'Italie du XVII^{ème} siècle (Puchner 2014, 173).

Transportées sur les routes commerciales, par mer et par terre, les marionnettes plates sont arrivées de deux directions différentes dans les champs de foire européens : d'une part, en Grèce, où c'est le *Karagöz* turc qui est devenu le *Karghiosis*, ne modifiant que partiellement son caractère et enrichissant son répertoire avec des personnages de la société chrétienne : le prêtre, le diable, les enfants, les bergers, les marchands et des personnages du folklore grec

(Baird 1967, 79); (Fig. 5). Il s'agit d'adaptations de style et de contenu qui sont explicables par un début d'émancipation socio-politique grecque par rapport à la domination ottomane. D'ailleurs, ce nom propre a donné en roumain l'adjectif « caraghios » qui signifie « drôle », puisque les principautés roumaines étaient aussi sous contrôle politique ottoman puis fanariote et en subissaient donc les influences culturelles. D'autre part, comme nous l'avons déjà discuté plus haut, le divertissement des spectacles d'ombres a pénétré dans les cours princières et salons aristocratiques d'Occident, où d'amusants spectacles de théâtre d'ombres avec des personnages issus de la société de l'époque ont commencé à être joués dans la seconde moitié du XVIII^{ème} siècle. Dans les deux cas, les personnages étaient en carton, et les ombres noires, sombres, obscures n'avaient presque rien à voir avec le mystère et le frisson sacré du monde de l'au-delà présents dans les spectacles archaïques d'Extrême-Orient, mais créaient une nouvelle magie de la rencontre spectaculaire de l'ombre et de la lumière, la magie des effets pré-cinématographiques.



La magie musicale et cinématographique des ombres contemporaines

La modernité a vu s'accroître l'inventivité artistique quant à l'utilisation des ombres dans les arts du spectacle, surtout grâce aux croisements avec l'art cinématographique naissant, qui était devenu à son tour, au moment des avant-gardes, un véritable laboratoire du visuel. La photographie, les projections sur scène, les jeux de lumière électrique, les montages et les effets spéciaux des expressionnistes, des dadaïstes et des surréalistes ouvraient de nouvelles voies de recherche et d'exploration du potentiel expressif surtout de l'image en noir et blanc, sépia, puis, plus tard en couleur. Mais beaucoup de cinéastes ont regretté le passage à la couleur filmique, trop réaliste, François Truffaut lui-même, par exemple, préférant les nuances infinies du noir et blanc, tout comme des artistes importants ont regretté le passage du film muet au film parlé pour des raisons semblables. Benjamin Fondane, par exemple, dans son texte *Du muet au parlant. Grandeur et décadence du cinéma, 1929-1930*, attire l'attention sur la perte de la poésie et du potentiel du cinéma muet de créer un « langage universel » tant désiré par dada et les avant-gardes historiques. Et si nous pensons aux fascinants ciné-poèmes de Man Ray (*Emak Bakia*, de 1926, et *L'Étoile de mer*, sur un poème de Robert Desnos, 1928) ou à *La Coquille et le clergyman* de Germaine Dulac, sur un scénario d'Antonin Artaud (1928), pour ne citer que quelques-uns des grands films de cette époque, il est impossible de ne pas saisir la séduction opérée par la confrontation des ombres et de la lumière, qui se disputent, s'embrassent, se croisent, se fuient et se retrouvent, donnant naissance à des contrastes et à des formes d'une séduisante poésie et induisant au spectateur un état d'hypnose ou de transe esthétique très semblable à celui ressenti devant le théâtre des ombres dansantes du Cambodge ou devant des masques étranges auxquels renvoient les visages empreints d'expressions fondamentales, des acteurs et actrices de ces films. Comme le décrit subtilement Ioan Pop-Curșeu, dans un article sur le cinéma dada et surréaliste,

La danse des cols de chemise d'*Emak Bakia* se métamorphose en un vertige des formes rappelant même parfois les sculptures de Brancusi. C'est une danse des transformations, où les formes découlent l'une de l'autre, dans une dynamique permanente, où la forme de départ – le col de chemise – finit par se perdre, devenant jeu d'ombres et de lumière sur le carrelage. (Pop-Curșeu 2016, 16)



Fig. 6-7 : *Slugă la doi stăpâni* [Serviteur de deux maîtres], au Théâtre National de Cluj (2003), crédit photo Nicu Cherciu.

Nous n'avons pas le temps ici de nous attarder sur les ombres au cinéma ou dans les animations, vaste et attrayant sujet¹⁰, mais il était important de mentionner cette idée de « langage universel », dont on ne peut pas les dissocier, un langage des corps en mouvement, un langage des jeux de lumière et des émotions, qui précède le langage verbal qui est aussi un langage propre à l'enfance, un langage à énigmes, mystérieux, séducteur et provocateur, en d'autres termes qui relève de ce qui est perçu en tant que « magique », que les ombres connaissent et à qui est due, en grande de partie, l'association de ce théâtre à un public prêt à laisser gambader son imagination. Ce langage, si précieux, est peut-être une des raisons pour lesquelles le théâtre d'ombres n'a pas disparu et n'est pas prêt à le faire, mais se réinvente continuellement dans les limites de sa technique d'origine, artisanale, primaire et accessible, ou bien en profitant des nouvelles technologies et entrant dans des combinaisons scénographiques incroyables et fascinantes, comme celles décrites par l'artiste Sylvie Chartrand, où se rencontrent « les inversions, superpositions et substitutions du corps et ses doubles (l'ombre en particulier), les présences incertaines et les identités troublées par la métamorphose, l'altération de la silhouette humaine au seuil de l'informe » (Chartrand 2018, 21)¹¹. Nous ne parlerons pas de celles-ci, ni des nombreuses troupes de théâtre de marionnettes et animation qui ont continué au cours du XX^{ème} siècle et de nos jours à composer des spectacles pour les plus petits, dans l'esprit des contes et des histoires amusantes de Séraphin. Le terrain propice de développement des ombres se voit là où le théâtre dramatique, comique ou musical en a besoin et dans la manière dont il les utilise.

Ainsi, en regardant du côté des productions théâtrales roumaines récentes, nous pouvons donner quelques exemples qui viennent étayer nos remarques à propos de l'évolution du théâtre d'ombres en Europe qui, tout en allant dans une direction complètement différente des spectacles archaïques orientaux, a retenu, dans son étonnante diversité, la symbolique fondamentale de ces ombres, leur secrets, leur existence ambiguë entre apparition et disparition, leur magie complexe, blanche, enfantine et comique ou bien noire, macabre et angoissante, mais toujours surprenante. Bien qu'ayant perdu leur sacralité originale, les ombres ont gardé leur pouvoir d'attraction et de séduction pareil à celui des masques, qu'ils continuent souvent d'accompagner. Ce n'est donc pas un hasard si nous les retrouvons dans des mises en scène de pièces de Goldoni, comme par exemple dans *Slugă la doi stăpâni* (*Arlequin, serviteur de deux maîtres*), dans la vision scénique de Mona Marian, au Théâtre National de Cluj (2003), dans la scénographie d'Eugenia Tărășescu-Jianu. Les ombres annoncent ici les masques des acteurs de la commedia dell'arte qui arrivent, et s'installent en scène, avec leur théâtre ambulante. Avant de voir Arlequin, Brighella, le Dottore, le Capitano et Pantalone,

le spectateur les devine en voyant leurs silhouettes avancer lentement, sur l'illustration musicale de Corina Sîrbu et se découpant en contre-jour sur l'écran illuminé par la lune. Ces projections créent une atmosphère onirique et ouvrent les portes de l'imagination théâtrale. Tacitement, le spectateur a signé ainsi le pacte de la convention ludique d'un monde qui fonctionne selon d'autres lois. (Fig. 6-7)

Ce sont les lois d'une magie qui rend visible l'invisible, qui se rit de la réalité concrète du quotidien et joue des tours à la perception sensorielle. Et si les séquences d'ombres font partie de la marque personnelle de la metteuse en scène, passionnée par les marionnettes, les masques et les avant-gardes, elle n'est pas la seule à en avoir saisi le charme et le potentiel magique. Dans son interprétation contemporaine de *La Tempête* de Shakespeare en 2019, Gábor Tompa utilise, pareillement au magicien Prospero de la pièce, les ombres des acteurs en projection comme en contre-jour dans une scénographie qui fait entrer les spectateurs dans la boîte noire d'une *camera obscura* ou d'une lanterne magique. C'est également un espace de toutes les possibilités, des visions, hallucinations, illusions et projections infinies qui est construit par une autre artiste roumaine passionnée par les masques, Carmencita Brojboiu (scénographe du spectacle). Cet espace lui-même est un masque, un masque neutre, d'une pureté effrayante. Un espace abstrait, fait d'écrans blancs qui deviennent le piège, le labyrinthe de la réalité virtuelle qui trompe les personnages faussement naufragés, ennemis du maître de l'île, qui brouille leur vue, leur ouïe, leur sens de l'orientation en en faisant de véritables marionnettes dans les mains d'Ariel et sous la baguette magique de Prospero. Comme l'explique le metteur en scène dans la brochure de présentation du spectacle :

La Tempête est la pièce de Shakespeare dont la structure se rapproche le plus de la musique. La musique a une forme précise, abstraite. C'est pourquoi, pour moi, la baguette magique est aussi une baguette de chef d'orchestre, avec laquelle Prospero orchestre la tempête dès le début. Lorsque Prospero brise la baguette, il ne reste plus rien dans le théâtre. Tout disparaît. Même les projections qu'il orchestre... C'est extraordinaire ce système de miroitement dans lequel la même situation se joue dans le farcesque et dans le grotesque, et dans le tragique et dans le politique¹².

En effet, il s'agit d'une orchestration visuelle et auditive qui combine du point de vue scénographique, projections vidéo, montages, collages de peintures, lumières et ombres. Et chaque fois que les personnages perdus entrent en scène, ils le font en tant qu'ombres, avant de se retrouver eux-mêmes et de se dévoiler toujours un peu plus devant leurs compagnons et devant les spectateurs. Comme dans une *camera obscura*, l'œil du grand mage les surveille attentivement et en contrôle chaque mouvement, en se réjouissant du spectacle. Ici, rien

Fig. 8-9 : *Furtuna* [La Tempête], Théâtre National de Cluj, 2019, crédit photo Nicu Cherciu.

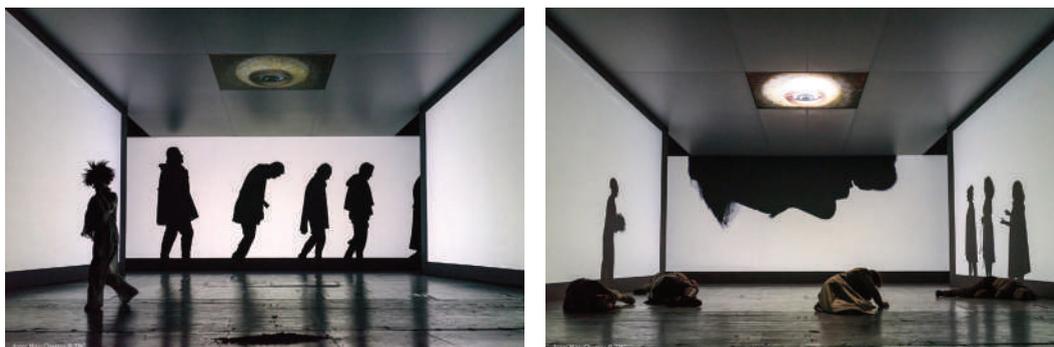




Fig. 10-11 : *Cântece de speriat frica* [Des chansons pour effrayer la peur], Théâtre National de Cluj, 2024, crédit photo Nicu Cherciu.



n'échappe à cet œil démiurgique et les ombres y retrouvent leur valeur sacrée, magique, en faisant descendre, symboliquement, les personnages dans le royaume des morts pour les en faire ressortir pardonnés, purifiés. (Fig. 8-9)

Max Milner, dans son bel essai sur l'ombre, *L'envers du visible*, affirmait à juste titre que « les croyances dans la solidarité profonde et la communauté de destin entre l'être humain et son ombre aboutissent, dans les religions qui croient à une existence après la mort, à l'idée que l'ombre constitue la part de l'homme qui lui survit et qui le représente dans l'au-delà : non pas son âme dans le sens spiritualiste du terme, mais une émanation de son être qui reste matérielle, quoique non sujette à la corruption et inaccessible au sens du toucher » (Milner 2005, 23-24). Ce constat qui rejoint le noyau des plus anciennes légendes de la naissance du théâtre d'ombres en Orient reste valable aussi dans les mises en scène contemporaines qui accordent une place importante au symbole et à la suggestion et qui ont besoin de rendre visible ce qui survit de l'être humain quand il n'est plus là physiquement, mais quand il a laissé une trace dans le monde, devenant ainsi une présence saisissable mais intouchable.

Nous retrouvons cet emploi poétique et dramatique de l'ombre dans un des plus récents spectacles-concerts signés par la cantatrice roumaine Ada Milea : *Des chansons à faire fuir la peur*¹³, d'après les textes de la lauréate du Prix Nobel, Herta Müller. Ici, les ombres sont plurivalentes, elles habitent le monde intérieur de l'écrivaine et se détachent de sa mémoire, en prenant contour dans ses écrits, en devenant personnages dans un collage où le poids de la réalité trop douloureuse s'éthérise par le jeu du translucide et de l'opaque sur l'écran de la feuille blanche du livre de sa vie. Souvenirs et projections mentales, désirs et peurs se retrouvent dans ce second plan, très visible, de la toile de fond, de cet écran toujours présent au centre avec sa double fonction : celle de bouclier ou de paravent, derrière lequel le personnage principal peut se retirer pour se protéger ou se retrouver soi-même, et fenêtre ouverte ou miroir, qui lui permet, et nous permet en tant que spectateurs, de sonder son âme, de voir ce personnage un peu plus à découvert. (Fig. 10-11)

Ainsi changent de statut les personnages qui passent de la scène située devant l'écran sur celle placée derrière celui-ci, y compris la jeune écrivaine qui quittera son pays pour échapper au piège de la Police politique communiste (*Securitatea*). Ils deviennent des souvenirs, des projections chères ou effrayantes, mais dont l'héroïne peut se détacher et retrouver son courage. Les ombres mêlées avec sensibilité à la musique prennent vie et recomposent, avec les découpages des mots chers mais douloureux, une réalité que l'âme exilée peut affronter. Des mots comme *neige* (zăpadă), *ciel* (cer), *carrousel* (carusel), *fabrique* (fabrică), *peur* (frică), *mouchoir* (batistă), se miroitent et se répondent en tant que paroles des chansons, découpages en carton et ombres, et se chargent ainsi d'une consistance chorégraphique à part, puisque dans la scénographie créée par Alexandra Mureșan, ils sortent de derrière les tables, glissent sur le sol, sont projetés dans les airs, se laissent fouler aux pieds par le l'officier de la *Securitate*, apparaissent sur les murs et dansent dans les mains et dans les chansons des personnages.

Le rôle des ombres dans ce spectacle est complexe, puisque ce sont elles qui permettent de jouer avec la chronologie et la spatialité, mais elles ont aussi quelque chose de très ingénu, de simple, sans prétentions, et c'est une manière d'expression artistique qui correspond bien à l'esprit des chansons et de la musique composées par Ada Milea. Ces ombres sont un support, un rappel, une aide, une joie car elles ne représentent que le souvenir d'une tristesse, mais aussi une trace ineffaçable, les sédiments d'une vie faite de sentiments, de décisions, de liens rompus, de projections, en d'autres mots elles sont les contours visibles des peurs à vaincre par l'acte artistique. (Fig. 12-13)

Deux autres spectacles-concerts méritent encore notre attention ici, car ils complètent le paysage des ombres contemporaines que nous voulions présenter pour plusieurs raisons : l'utilisation de techniques du théâtre d'ombres d'une manière très créative, chaque fois nouvelle et adaptée aux besoins dramaturgiques divers, l'association constante avec la musique et le mouvement rythmé, la visée d'un public mélangé, de tout âge, et la richesse de la performance des ombres dans le cadre du genre comique aussi bien que du genre dramatique qui sont caractéristiques des spectacles d'Ada Milea. (Fig. 14)

Comme nous l'avons vu, l'histoire du théâtre nous montre que pour que les ombres produisent un effet théâtral, elles doivent bouger, danser, parler ou, pour le moins, apparaître et disparaître. En fait, nous pouvons nous rendre compte que plus les personnages-ombres sont en mouvement et plus comique en est l'effet. Moins ils bougent et plus sérieux en est le message, comme si leur origine sacrée, le mystère de leur relation avec la mort ou avec un au-delà inaccessible refaisait surface pour quelques instants. Car il faut reconnaître en effet que bien que nous ayons ici un théâtre qui utilise et intègre les ombres et non pas un théâtre d'ombres à part entière, l'assertion de René Simmen pour qui, « ce théâtre plus que tout autre, tient de la sorcellerie, de la magie, du mystère » (Simmen 1972, 72), garde toujours sa validité.

De plus, chez Ada Milea, ces ombres sont une permanente invitation au voyage, avec tout ce que ce voyage a d'imprévu, de mystérieux et même d'effrayant, que ce soit le voyage mental de retour dans le passé communiste du personnage de l'écrivaine Herta Müller (dans *Chansons à faire fuir la peur*), le voyage imaginaire d'Alice (dans l'adaptation libre d'*Alice au pays des merveilles* de Lewis Carroll 2019) ou le voyage du pingouin Apolodor (d'après le livre homonyme du surréaliste roumain Gellu Naum 2014). C'est sur ces deux derniers spectacles que nous nous attarderons un peu avant de conclure, car nous retrouvons ici le monde de l'enfance que les ombres européennes ont peuplé au cours de leur histoire et le font toujours.

Dans le spectacle-concert pour enfants *Apolodor*¹⁴, il n'y a pas de décor. Une moitié de la scène est occupée par les acteurs-musiciens et chanteurs qui ont le rôle de conteurs, mais qui revêtent aussi quelques éléments de costume, en devenant ainsi de plus crédibles témoins des invraisemblables aventures du pingouin Apolodor. L'autre moitié est l'espace vide où bouge le pingouin : l'écran très grand au fond, l'acteur jouant Apolodor devant, qui parle, réagit, revit sans cesse son propre voyage, à l'aide de Loumi, un réfrigérateur mobile qui l'accompagne partout. Le spectacle commence dans le noir complet, avec l'écran seul allumé d'une couleur chaude, projetant les ombres de trois personnages, figurines de grandes dimensions découpées dans du carton : Apolodor, le chat Titz et le chameau Suzie, ses amis du jardin zoologique de Bucarest. De ces trois ombres noires, dessinées de manière non réaliste par l'artiste plastique Paul Mureșan, hyperbolisant la tête du chat et la rapprochant du masque, mais laissant le chameau de profil, debout, comme s'il était bipède, se détache le pingouin qui s'avance vers le public, en abandonnant sa tête animalière. Il ne rejoindra ses deux amis qu'à la fin du spectacle, quand, après avoir fait le tour du monde et après avoir retrouvé sa grande famille qui lui manquait, il se rend compte que sa place est dans le cœur du Zoo où il chantait avec Titz et Suzie. Comme le précise Ada Milea, dans la brochure de présentation du spectacle :

Apolodor est une sorte de carte géographique musicale des voyages du pingouin de Gellu Naum. A la place de photos, il y a un écran avec des ombres mouvantes. Dans cette zone-là, tout être humain peut changer de forme pour devenir personnage. Et il y a aussi des personnages (surtout des animaux) qui, dès qu'ils sortent de derrière l'écran, peuvent ressembler à des humains.¹⁵
(Fig. 15-16)

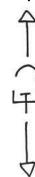




Fig. 15-16 : *Apolodor*, Théâtre National de Cluj, 2014, crédit photo Nicu Cerciuc.

En effet, entre les animaux et les humains, il y a une symbiose parfaite en scène, car la convention fonctionne à merveille, grâce aux masques associés aux ombres, à la musique et au mouvement, au passage rapide d'un personnage à l'autre et d'aventure en aventure. D'ailleurs, l'écran aux ombres fonctionne mieux qu'un simple album-photos classique. Il est vivant : les « photos » surprennent les jeunes spectateurs en bougeant une main, la tête ou en se transformant en de véritables animations. Ainsi, par exemple, le palmier qu'Apolodor trouve dans une oasis en Afrique est habité par plusieurs singes dont l'un tombe amoureux et lui construit toute une histoire qui se traduit en images-ombres par une sympathique mise en abîme visuelle qui déclenche les rires du public. (Fig. 17-18)



Fig. 17-18 : *Apolodor*, Théâtre National de Cluj, 2014, crédit photo Nicu Cerciuc.

On pourrait se demander pourquoi ne pas avoir choisi des projections vidéo ou des animations cinématographiques pour raconter les voyages du jeune héros de Gellu Naum. Il y aurait eu plus de couleurs, de mouvements, d'envoûtements peut-être. En fait, c'est ici que se fait la différence entre l'Art divertissant et le simple divertissement. Utiliser le théâtre d'ombres équivaut ici à montrer un double respect : et pour l'esprit avant-gardiste de l'auteur et pour les spectateurs qui deviennent ainsi des partenaires de la création théâtrale. D'un côté, le spectacle reste fidèle à cette vision ludique, volontairement artisanale, des premières

avant-gardes qui ont inspiré le surréaliste Gellu Naum et la mise en scène va tout à fait dans la direction presque radicale qu'Alfred Jarry proposait en 1896 dans son article « De l'inutilité du théâtre au théâtre » soit, rappelons-le, une scène sans décors, avec des écriteaux pour signaler les changements d'espace car, disait-il, « il est juste que chaque spectateur voie la scène dans le décor qui convient à sa vision de la scène » (Jarry 1896, 468)¹⁶. Les écriteaux sont ici dérisoires, des *post-it* colorés, qui marquent sur un énorme globe terrestre le parcours et les arrêts du pingouin voyageur mais le principe y est. De même, les personnages-ombres marquent par chacune de leur apparition une nouvelle étape dans l'avancée du personnage principal et sont facilement retenus par le regard des spectateurs grâce à leur caractère d'« effigie du personnage », pour reprendre les mots de Jarry. Il est intéressant que cette question de choix entre ombres et projection filmique se posait déjà au début du XX^{ème} siècle, comme le montre un commentaire d'un certain G. M. (peut-être Georges Méliès), dans l'article « Les ombres chinoises », *La Vie au Patronage* n° 3 du 15 juillet 1909 :

Mais, dira-t-on encore, l'ombre chinoise et le cinématographe ne sont-ils pas deux ennemis jurés et l'ombre peut-elle supporter la comparaison avec son omnipotent confrère. [...] Le cinématographe est une invention géniale, les ombres sont des plus pures sensations du Beau et il y a entre ces deux projections toute la différence qu'il y a entre une photographie et un tableau. Celui-ci est factice mais aimable, celle-là est réelle mais brutale. Le cinématographe enfin c'est la *Vie*, les ombres c'est l'*Art*. (G.M. 1909, 170-1)

Si nous revenons à *Apolodor*, le rythme de la parole parlée alternée avec et étayée par la parole chantée, accompagnée par ces ombres qui, tout comme les masques utilisés, sont simples mais très expressives et donc « universelles » (Jarry, 1896, 471), laissent place à l'imagination du jeune public, sans lui proposer des suites d'images filmiques toutes faites. Le film est à faire par chaque jeune ou moins jeune spectateur car le spectacle respecte ainsi la temporalité spécifique de l'histoire racontée, avec ses moments d'attente, de surprise, et de reprises. C'est ainsi qu'à l'aide des ombres, l'enfant voyage à son tour de l'Afrique au États-Unis, il échappe au bandit de Connecticut, il est envoyé sur la lune par des membres du Ku Klux Klan, devient un héros, retombe sur terre et, repêché par un Afro-américain, se remet en mer vers le Pôle Sud, échappe au pirate, arrive dans les mains d'un savant fou et du robot de ce dernier, puis, enfin, retrouve sa famille en Antarctique, cette famille qu'est le public même. Le cercle du conte se referme sur lui-même avec Apolodor qui repart derrière l'écran et retourne ainsi à l'état d'ombre éternelle, afin que l'histoire puisse recommencer à l'infini avec chaque nouvelle représentation. (Fig. 19-20)



Fig. 19-20 : *Apolodor*, Théâtre National de Cluj, 2014, crédit photo Nicu Cherciu.



Fig. 21-22 : *Apolodor*, Théâtre National de Cluj, 2014, crédit photo Nicu Cherciu.

Il y a une belle poésie enfantine de ces ombres : le contraste entre le noir contour des figurines et la blancheur ou la couleur de l'écran éclairé « définit les formes des marionnettes et se meut avec leurs mouvements, ayant une apparence à la fois liquide et solide ». Elles sont faites de ces ingrédients « élémentaires qui composent nos journées, la lumière (le jour), l'obscurité (la nuit) et le mouvement (l'effort, l'amour, les conflits et le sommeil) qui finissent par échapper à notre attention. Ainsi, la clarté du spectacle d'ombres, le simple contour de la forme, nous renvoie à ce qui est essentiel » (Osnes 2010, 11). Ces observations que Beth Osnes faisait à propos du théâtre d'ombres malais sont tout à fait valables dans ce spectacle où l'œil n'est plus distrait par des détails superflus mais se concentre sur l'apparition, le mouvement et la disparition de cet être mystérieux qui est fait d'un mélange chorégraphié de présence et d'absence. De plus, comme dans les ombres traditionnelles, la musique est essentielle et accompagne sans relâche le parcours des ombres. (Fig. 21-22)

Dans le spectacle-musical d'Ada Milea, *Alice*¹⁷, la scénographie signée par la regrettée Alexandra Constantin¹⁸ place l'écran au centre entre deux autres pans de murs qui jouent à leur tour le rôle de fond pour des ombres projetées par des objets et les personnages qui se trouvent en scène, avant qu'ils ne disparaissent pour laisser place à de très jolis et étranges champignons lumineux, presque phosphorescents, de taille humaine, qui marquent le paysage du pays des merveilles. Cet écran central s'avère être le pivot spatial du spectacle. Plus haut que large, il fait office tantôt de mur pour séparer la scène visible de la chambre invisible d'Alice, tantôt de porte ou de dizaines de portes imaginaires qui font pendant à l'unique porte réelle, tantôt de trou du lapin, dans lequel tombe Alice, d'ascenseur entre les niveaux du monde ou de prison qui l'enferme par ordre de la reine de cœur. C'est aussi l'espace privilégié du personnage principal qui lui permet de jongler avec les réalités, les objets et les êtres qu'elle rencontre et de revenir au point de départ de ce labyrinthe mental où elle s'engage. (Fig. 23-24)

La justification profonde de la présence des ombres vivantes dans ce spectacle semble être le dédoublement même de la petite fille qui, d'une part, souffre de solitude, et d'autre part est en manque d'images car le livre qu'on l'oblige à lire n'en contient pas. Tout naturellement, Alice se tournera vers son ombre pour se faire un partenaire de discussions et vers son chat. C'est d'ailleurs à l'état d'ombre qu'Alice fait sa première apparition en scène avec son gigantesque animal de compagnie. La solution est intelligente car le spectateur, conduit par la chanson ludique du narrateur (toujours présent avec ses instruments sur scène), pénètre d'emblée dans la tête du personnage. Ainsi, dès le début du spectacle, les rapports ambigus avec la réalité sont marqués par les aller-retours d'Alice entre sa chambre et la scène, lieu ouvert des rencontres les plus farfelues. Tantôt ombre, tantôt présence tridimensionnelle, Alice ne peut tenir en place. Elle se chahute avec elle-même faute de pouvoir le faire avec sa mère ; elle se



Fig. 23-24 : *Alice*, Théâtre de Jeunesse Piatra Neamt, 2019, crédit photo Marius Șumlea.





Fig. 25-26 : *Alice*, Théâtre de Jeunesse Piatra Neamt, 2019, crédit photo Marius Șumlea.



contredit, se tape, s'encourage, mais avant tout : elle *joue*. Le théâtre d'ombres lui permet de jouer ce dédoublement tout en restant crédible, puisqu'elle est, en quelque sorte, sa propre marionnette. Elle sort pratiquement de son état d'ombre pour devenir le propre personnage de son histoire, mais c'est à l'état d'ombre qu'elle va passer d'une étape à l'autre, et plusieurs des personnages imaginaires du monde d'Alice apparaissent à l'état d'ombre, avant d'entrer en scène, comme le lapin blanc, doublé lui aussi par un lièvre... En entrant et sortant de derrière cet écran, les personnages deviennent eux-mêmes des ombres et marquent ainsi l'entrée dans un monde différent, le mode subjectif, intime, de l'imagination, des peurs et désirs chaotiques d'Alice. (Fig. 25-26)

Ada Milea et Alexandra Constantin ont su utiliser intelligemment les ombres, sans en abuser et sans trop d'artifices vidéo supplémentaires. Ainsi, la tombée d'Alice dans le trou du lapin est montrée par un effet visuel simple et convaincant qui superpose l'ombre mouvementée de l'actrice, mimant la tombée légère ou rapide, à des projections vidéo lentes -avec des objets et animaux qu'elle voit flotter autour d'elle-, et rapides -qui ne laissent plus apercevoir que des lignes colorées, clin d'œil aux chutes spécifiques des dessins animés-. Une fois en bas, les différentes images des portes se succèdent et l'ombre de la clef qu'Alice tient dans la main n'atteint évidemment pas la serrure. C'est ici qu'on voit l'efficacité originaire du théâtre d'ombres qui joue avec la dimension des images par le simple fait de s'approcher ou de s'éloigner de la source de lumière. En un clin d'œil, Alice peut devenir grande, en buvant le contenu de la bouteille étiquetée « Bois-moi », ou redevenir petite en mangeant le gâteau magique. À la fin de l'aventure, elle refait le chemin inverse pour se retrouver dans sa chambre et la musique s'arrête, l'ombre d'Alice disant : « Je ne veux plus jouer. C'est fini » et la magie du spectacle prend fin avec la lumière de l'écran qui s'éteint. Rappelons ici la réponse que donnait Gaston Baty à la question visant la définition-même de la marionnette : « Qu'est-elle donc en fin de compte ? une poupée, apparemment, mais capable de revêtir des personnalités diverses et douée d'une mobilité intelligente et puissamment expressive : une 'poupée qui joue' » (Baty et Chavance 1959, 6). Et ici, Alice est sa propre poupée, son ombre qui joue.



Conclusion

Tous les exemples cités ici ne font que relever la continuité, la longévité et la pertinence du théâtre d'ombres qui perdure dans ses formes traditionnelles, en tant que patrimoine culturel inestimable des civilisations de ce monde, mais également en tant qu'art métamorphique, qui se réinvente, en créant de nouvelles formes et contenus ou en recyclant des formes anciennes sous d'autres contours, d'autres chorégraphies et d'autres lumières. Relégué quelquefois injustement au statut de frère mineur du théâtre dramatique et même du théâtre de marionnettes, le théâtre d'ombres concentre en lui-même l'essence de l'art théâtral. Rappelons-nous ce qu'Edward Gordon Craig disait à ses élèves acteurs : « Seul un acteur né peut véritablement comprendre une Marionnette, il s'ensuit que de tous ceux qui peuvent s'essayer à cette technique (*craft*), seuls les acteurs nés parviendront à la maîtriser » (Le Bœuf 2009, 14). Pour Craig, dont on connaît les hautes demandes par rapport à l'art de l'acteur, la marionnette est donc une pierre d'achoppement et réussir à la maîtriser équivaut à découvrir sa véritable vocation théâtrale.

De nos jours, les pratiques éducationnelles ont compris l'importance de la marionnette, qu'elle soit la poupée en trois dimensions ou la figurine plate des jeux d'ombres. Il n'est

pas difficile de remarquer que les ombres se sont considérablement développées dans le domaine du théâtre pour enfants tout au long du XX^{ème} siècle et aujourd’hui encore. Il existe de nombreuses compagnies de théâtre de marionnettes et d’ombres dans tous les pays qui proposent non seulement des spectacles pour les plus petits, des spectacles qui combinent la danse, la musique et l’animation, mais aussi des cours et des ateliers pour différents âges. Ce qui contribue à la fois à éduquer la sensibilité artistique et à développer l’épanouissement personnel des jeunes, en enrichissant leur imagination et leur savoir-faire. Dans les musées (par exemple dans le cadre du Musée du Paysan Roumain à Bucarest ou au musée du Quai Branly à Paris), dans toutes les capitales des grandes villes du monde, mais aussi dans certains villages de Chine, de l’Indonésie ou de Malaisie, la tradition est encore vivante, les enfants dessinent, découpent et donnent vie à ces ombres, personnages de leurs mondes fictionnels intérieurs à l’aide de la musique et du mouvement. En ce sens, nous ne pouvons qu’approuver Agnès Pierron quand elle affirme que « la marionnette demeure l’un des plus beaux objets à susciter des phantasmes que l’homme ait jamais fabriqués. Elle offre des variations sur l’espace et le temps, qui lui préservent une merveilleuse ambiguïté. Une typologie, aussi exhaustive soit-elle, ne rend pas compte d’un phénomène donnant l’impression de limites jamais atteintes par la créativité » (Pierron 1982, 87). En effet, sans limites est le voyage que nous font entreprendre les marionnettes du théâtre d’ombres, entre rêve et réalité, entre vision et image, entre objet et projection. Un voyage ludique, profondément théâtral et profondément humain.



NOTE

1. Cf. site web : <https://pilobolus.org/company>.
2. Cf. documentaire *Les Dogons Chronique d'une passion*, DVD Musée du Quai Branly, par Pierre-André Boutang, Annie Chevallay, Guy Seligmann, Denise Paulme, Geneviève Calame-Griaule, Germaine Dieterlen, Jean Rouch, Paris : Arte Editions, 2012.
3. Cf. site web : <https://ich.unesco.org/fr> pour les entrées sur la liste UNESCO : 2008 pour le théâtre d’ombres cambodgien, 2008 pour le théâtre d’ombres indonésien, 2009 pour le théâtre d’ombres turque, 2011 pour le théâtre d’ombres chinois, 2018 pour le théâtre d’ombres syrien.
4. Malgré les limites inhérentes à l’époque où le livre a été écrit (1927), on peut encore trouver de belles considérations sur la valeur magique et sacrée de l’ombre dans Lévy-Bruhl (1963, 151-191).
5. Voir le beau livre-album dirigé par Patrick Le Bœuf (2009).
6. Consulté sur gallica.fr : <https://numerabilis.u-paris.fr/ressources/pdf/medica/bibnum/00992x02/00992x02.pdf>
7. Antoine Vitez dans la préface Paul Fournel (1982).
8. Les très nombreuses variantes de cette légende sont discutées par Fan Pen Li Chen (2007, 22-7) dans son chapitre « Han dynasty origin plays ».
9. Voire : <https://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html0/culture/editorschoice/23081/529-1.htm>. Et pour la presentation des spectacles d’ombres de cette région voir : Junyan Yang et Yuansi Jiajie (2018).
10. Voir Lecointe (2015).
11. Voir aussi, par exemple, les installations performatives présentées dans le cadre du Programme international de scénographie de la commune Ovidiu, organisé par OISTAT România ; voir le documentaire « Portret de artist: în dialog cu Adrian Damian, creatorul de spații » [Portrait d’artiste : en dialogue avec Adrian Damian, le créateur d’espaces] TVR Cultural, 2024 : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=454_K840Lo4.
12. <https://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/piesa-703/furtuna/>
13. *Cântece de speriat frica* [Chansons pour effrayer la peur], production du Théâtre National Lucian Blaga de Cluj-Napoca, première 18 Avril 2024.
14. Production du Théâtre National Lucian Blaga de Cluj-Napoca, première 7 Mars 2015.
15. <https://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/piesa-662/apolodor/>
16. « De l’inutilité du théâtre au théâtre », dans *Le Mercure de France*, 1 septembre 1896, p. 467 - 473. Voir <https://www.retronews.fr/journal/mercure-de-france/01-sep-1896/118/2733675/82>, consulté 01. 2025.
17. Production du Théâtre de Jeunesse Piatra Neamt, première 24 Nov. 2019.
18. Artiste roumaine (7 Juillet 1988-24 Janvier 2020).

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III. Dialogues and Images

On Being Available. Conversation with Silvia Călin

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Silvia Călin is a graduate of the Floria Capsali Choreography High School and of the I. L. Caragiale University of Drama and Cinematography. As a dancer and choreographer, her chosen field of expression is contemporary dance, but she also enjoys her involvement in the theatre, where she works with a range of directors on determining how actors should move on the stage. Fascinated by language, whether it takes the form of word, gesture, or complex movement, she always devotes great attention to studying the construction of a message or a story.

Jiga Iliescu, Laura, Silvia Călin. 2025. "On Being Available. Conversations with Silvia Călin."
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ABSTRACT

This interview focuses on the act of dancing as a corporeal experience that connects body and mind as part of an indestructible unit deployed in specific spatial and temporal arenas. In this respect, traditional folk dances and dancers share with modern performers and dance performances a corpus of sensorial and cognitive tools for bodily exploration. The dialogue is between Silvia Călin, a contemporary dancer and choreographer, and Laura Jiga Iliescu, an ethnologist. The issues explored during the interview are concerned with self-perception and connection with other dancers performing in the same arena; fixed structures, creativity and improvisation; movements, exertion, breathing and altered states of consciousness (with comments on ecstatic ritual dances); objectification towards one's own body; and related topics.

KEYWORDS

Dancing experience; body and mind; tradition and the modern art of dance; supernatural encounter narratives.

My conversation with Silvia Călin, dancer and choreographer, touched on a number of subjects linked with the general theme of this issue of the *Martor* journal: the configuration of the relationships between movement, sound and space from the perspective of bodily knowledge; social communication and sacred communication actualized through dance; hypostases of the relations between tradition and individual creation in traditional dance, ballet, and contemporary dance; the construction of the individual message and of expressivity through dance; formal dance training and the place of ballet schools as institutions in different social contexts.

The aim of our discussion was to articulate two professional perspectives on the shared realities that exist around dance, each of them with its own concepts and ways of understanding and evaluating the movement involved. For the ethnologist, the perspective of Silvia Călin, an *insider* of dance, provides valuable information concerning how to understand a form (choreography) of traditional knowledge to which her access is not direct but mediated through the beliefs and narrations she studies.

Silvia: Why do you think people, the first people let's say, started dancing? I believe dancing appeared before spoken language did.

Laura: It's complicated to establish which came first. Both speaking and dancing, and indeed any kind of activity that involves a sequence of predetermined moves that are organized in the mind before being externalized through actually being performed, imply a mental capacity to articulate information. This holds true whether we're speaking about dancing, tying a knot, or processing raw materials. I believe these things go hand in hand, whether we are dealing with speaking, singing, movement and dance, or with a succession of actions that achieve the production of an implement or even of a work of art. We are talking about two kinds of thinking: retroactive, by means of which the memory is activated, and planning-focused.

Silvia: Yes. I am asking simplistic questions now, so that we can see where we're heading. Why did they not perform incantations and leave it at that?

Laura: Because everything happens via the body. And when you perform an incantation, you don't stand there like a block of stone, you move. You shake your head, you rotate...

Silvia: You see, I hold that movement is the first form of expression, but you support the claim of words [smiles]. All the same, why do we dance?

Laura: I can say why *I* dance. In the first place, I dance because I like doing so [we laugh]. Now more seriously: as far as I'm concerned, dancing is very connected with music. Music that I hear with my ears, not internal music. At a given moment, this can make me want to move. And rhythm. I can move on my own or with a partner or even in a group of people, but this once again depends on music, or rather on *what kind of* music can be heard.

Silvia: Dancing is also a form of socializing, isn't it?

Laura: Yes, with a partner or in a group, it is a form of human communication. I have never taken part in a ritual dance; that would mean also experiencing a communication that involved the vertical dimension. When you dance with someone, you anticipate how that other person is going to move, you don't dance just how the mood takes you, as I might move now if I were to dance to electro music when home alone. An anticipation of the other person's movements based on a preexisting structure and on memory: how I have danced in the past, how I have seen other people dancing, how I have seen the steps ... On such occasions, when you become tired or bored, you either leave the dance and it goes on without you, if it's a group one, or you keep going in order not to make it stop, you persevere to the end, you finish up exhausted and you smile. With satisfaction. Like in a team game.

Silvia: It was worth my asking you. Because I don't feel dancing the way you do: simply dancing for pleasure at a party. Rather, when I'm on the stage, my movements are constructed, the product of conscious thought. I create a language via my body, without words, like a Neanderthal we might say, someone who is not yet capable of speech but who is attempting to say something, to enunciate something through their body alone.

Laura: You are not talking about dance as a form of individual expression—*I'm dancing because I feel like it*—but to the fact that...

Silvia: ...that I wish to convey something. To someone. I think it is simpler when we are talking about traditions. It's like when people used to dance as part of a ritual that had a very specific purpose. To invoke rain, for example. They knew very well why they were dancing and their purpose was to transmit a primordial message which, even though it was addressed not to other people but to God, was extremely concrete. But ritual dances have disappeared; no one now spends their time stamping the ground and raising their arms to make the rain come. They are called *traditions* now, because they [the ritual dances] have disappeared. So, I would say that there are two kinds of dancing, both valid: for yourself, and for others. In

both of them the body is engaged in a way that depends on the message and the purpose of the dance.

All the same, when I reflect on contemporary dance I find something of the old functions of dancing, because contemporary dance expresses, raises, even seeks out the problems of present-day society, and for this you try to find an appropriate bodily language. Like in rituals, in a way.

But do you still take the body seriously, do you still feel it even when nothing hurts? Do you think about it?

Laura: In *Antropologia corpului și modernitatea* [Anthropology of the Body and Modernity] David Le Breton proposes the phrases “I am a body” and “I have a body” as a criterion for differentiating between pre-modern and modern societies. This possessive in the second phrase, he suggests, implies a detachment from your own body, which you simultaneously construct and attempt to conceal. Le Breton also notes that at the very beginning of the modern period, the aristocracy, as a sign that they belonged to that social category, used to inhibit their bodies. They didn’t laugh noisily, they behaved in a restrained manner, etc. Even Court dances are characterized by delicacy, discretion and order. Without the sweat associated with lower-class people’s dances.

Silvia: Right, you begin to not want your body any more, you seek to remodel it, transform it. It starts to offend you. People no longer use their bodies in the way they should and this leads to the appearance of new illnesses, not only physical but also affecting the brain. Because we were made to cultivate our vegetable gardens, to travel on foot, to exert ourselves, to produce endorphins and dopamine naturally. The body is made to give us both pain and enjoyment.



Dancing and institutions

Laura: When did you start dancing?

Silvia: When I was three years old.

Laura: Children generally dance when they’re small—but how was it that you took up dancing quite that young?

Silvia: First my mother took me to the Children’s Palace, where dancing was taken extremely seriously, with only the very best children selected, because they were used for the performances in front of Ceaușescu. There, dancing was only a form of decor. And the children were a faultless, beautiful, living installation for the *beloved leader*. I remember being a doll on a cube in one of these shows. Later she sent me to gymnastics, because it was the Nadia Comăneci era. I did gymnastics for a long time.

In fact, I even used to do gymnastics when I was playing. I would line up all the little girls in front of the block and collect coloured milk bottle tops to make medals for them. And I would teach them such exercises. We had an entire artistic program. Clearly, working with my body was something that came to me readily and easily. Expressing myself in that way was simple. If you made me recite a poem I would mutter, go red, hide away.

Finally, when I reached the fourth grade, my mother sent me to the ballet school and... it was lucky I was a docile child. They would say to me: “Now I’m hurting you. Yes?” “Yes.” “Now you must stay on the rope for one minute and I must get on your back. Yes?” “Yes.” I had good powers of resistance. Many people say dancers have a bit of masochism in their makeup. I’m exaggerating. But there is a sense in which you can endure pain better than

others can. From an early age you are tortured and twisted, literally. And the worst of it is that the discipline you have in order to perform does not form you but rather deforms you. I don't know whether this power of endurance that can make you a dancer is a learned behaviour or something you have from birth. Clearly there also exists the perception that "these people don't have a childhood," but at the time it seemed normal to me. I didn't experience it as torture. "This is my life. That's all." When I went through adolescence it didn't cause me any problems, because all the movement I was doing kept me away from the all-adolescence crazy problems. Later, when both dance school and the Communist period were over, only then, at the age of 18, I asked myself: is it OK to learn to dance under such a harsh regime? That damaging to one's ego? That humiliating?

Laura: Are you talking about the ballet school and the teaching methods there?

Silvia: Yes. I thought it was normal for it to be like that. Being called a cow, being slapped, or... It was only after I left high school that I realized that it wasn't all right. Because there are other ways to be trained as a dancer.

Laura: These dance schools were on the Soviet model?

Silvia: Yes. I don't know what it was like in the West. But, for example, when I went to France on a school exchange, I saw that things could be done differently. There all the girls were the same: tall, superb. But they had a nutritionist, whereas in our school here they'd say to us: "You're fat. Lose three kilos in two weeks. It's not my job to tell you how," How? With vinegar; you would drink vinegar until you couldn't drink any more. Or plantain tea. Or you would eat nothing but potatoes one day, nothing but apples the next, I don't know what on the third. No one cared. It was a total aberration. And it alienated you from yourself. I'll put it in terms of a comparison for you. In Paris the girls at the ballet were flowers, they probably had their struggles, too, but they made up a garden that was beautiful, well looked after, organized. While we were weeds. A garden of weeds, I could call us. That can be beautiful too, but the weeds are still weeds. Some survive, others don't. Some are suffocated by others; some suffocate the others... That was the kind of difference. It may well have been tough in the dance schools in the West too, I don't know. Scrubbing floors is tough wherever you do it. Now methods have changed hugely here too.

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The self and the shoal of fish

Laura: Let's talk a bit about solo dancing and dancing in a group, on the stage. How do you integrate and position yourself in the space, how do you relate to distances, vectors of movement, forwards and backwards, upwards and downwards etc.?

Silvia: When dancing as part of a collective you practice how to be aware both of the group and of the space you have at your disposal, but without changing direction in relation to the stage as a whole. Your reference points are only right and left. No more. The people beside you. You function as if you were in a shoal of fish. But what comes out of all the small units is harmony. You take part in it, but you cannot control it on your own.

And there's something else. When dancing in a group you can't afford to have your own emotions. You depend on the others and they depend on you. Because there is a single voice. Which you need to serve. It doesn't matter what ideas or emotions you have. If you start expressing your own feelings, it's no longer a collective or a group, it's a ... revolt [laughs].

Laura: Is the mood you are talking about created while you are dancing, or do you have it before the dance begins?

Silvia: For a professional it's healthy if they don't stake too much on the sensitive feelings they experience on the stage. Effectively, you need to practice them and filter them. You need to know all the emotions that are going to come in the course of a given dance, you need to work hard on this, so that you're well prepared. You mustn't get so *high* during a performance that you can't control yourself afterwards.

Laura: So you know in advance what kinds of emotions are coming during a dance. Here I am exuberant, here I am sad, etc.

Silvia: Yes, you know. And you don't let yourself be overcome. These feelings are linked with the language and the message that you need to convey. Which is not your personal message. Any external stimulus, be it a personal problem or a physical problem, needs to be forgotten if it doesn't form part of the character you're playing.

Laura: Even if the dance *carries you away*, you still have to control yourself. Because it's not yourself you are expressing.

Silvia: It depends what you're working on. For example, if we're not talking about a fixed, worked-out structure but about improvisation, then you have a research area in which you can go through the whole gamut of feelings, emotions, stimuli etc. It's happened to me; I experienced the emotion I knew I had to feel at a specific point in the dance, I experienced it for real. It was and it wasn't controlled, I don't know how to explain it. It was actually a gift. To play someone who's in love, and to begin to be in love. But in a classical work with a set structure, you mustn't be carried away either by the dance or by experiencing feelings, in case you get in the way of the other members of the cast.

Laura: Do you become objective about your own body when dancing? Do you detach yourself from it a bit? When I say body I'm also referring to the mental and emotional aspects.

Silvia: A fundamental quality of any dancer is availability. I was in Israel many years ago, at Baceva, and I was given some T-shirts that said *available* on them. And once again I realized how incorrectly I had understood dancing in school for all those years. If, instead of being put down by all kind of treatment and comments like "You're fat," "I'm going to throw you out," "Stand by the door" and so on and so forth, someone had told me and explained to me that a person who appears on the stage needs to be available, it would have helped me a lot. Now I know. Available means that you need to be happy with what you look like, to be at peace with your body, and to be present.

Laura: Are you also talking about the flexibility of communicating with others through dance?

Silvia: Definitely. This availability and flexibility involve a normality which we didn't have in the years when we were being trained at the ballet school. But in fact it characterizes your attitude towards yourself and towards the court of the public. As when you take an exam. You don't go there because you are scared, you don't go because you are afraid of making a mistake, you don't go because you want them to like you. You go because you are available to communicate. I'm not concerned with your past, but with the fact that you are here open towards me.

Laura: Where *you* refers to me, the public.

Silvia: Yes. You can also miss this as a result of too much pride. Flexibility. You, the dancer, are like dough. You shape yourself and allow yourself to be shaped.



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Sound, breathing, movement

Laura: It's said that both laughter and meditation have the capacity to make you not think about anything. The mind is empty. This produces a therapeutic effect, at least for stress therapy. Is it the same when you dance for a profession?

Silvia: It can be. The external ceases to exist for you because all your senses are occupied, nothing parasitic can stimulate you anymore. There's no room for it. In addition, the mind is fully occupied when you're dancing because it has to think both physically and in terms of feeling what your arms, legs, neck and breathing are doing.

Laura: How does movement help?

Silvia: Precisely this: sound, respiration. Look: if I make a simple movement and [draws air noisily into her chest] breathe in, the sound amplifies it. It draws the movement after it. Breathing or even the sound of breathing draws you like an arrow. I'm convinced that trampolinists, high jumpers, tennis players, people who practice martial arts, for example, are helped by the way they breathe.

Laura: As if you were getting off to a good start.

Silvia: Yes. But in dancing, breathing is calibrated by movement.

How can you not think about your breathing when you move, if stopping breathing would mean you'd stop moving [joking]?

Laura: Respiration itself being a movement.

Silvia: Precisely.

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The controlled body

Laura: There are dances that bring about powerful emotional and cognitive states that are externalized in a bodily way. In this context I would be interested to know your point of view, as a professional dancer, regarding the controlled body and also its kinetic hypostases that are not under conscious control. Because here too, we may be dealing with a form of communication that draws upon the numinous register of reality. A form of communication which, in the last analysis, becomes an ecstatic dance. Or a mystical one. For example flying dervishes who, through a dance that involves a twofold rotation, in a circle and around their own axis, control their bodies and bring them into a state of ecstasy. An ecstasy in which the movements are not chaotic. The opposite example would be that of the possessed, stimulated body, whose movements are spasmodic; in this case the body is merely a vehicle and not an active participant in the sacred communication.

I saw an anthropology film where there was a female dervish who started revolving with her arms beside her body. Gradually, her arms seemed to lift themselves on their own, impelled from within, not that she was raising them in a conscious manner. Then her arms went down and she lifted just one arm and held it slightly inclined. Everything was coherent, orderly, harmonious. Circle.

Silvia: It's interesting what you say about the arms. Effectively, when you raise your arms and revolve, you increase the number of revolutions, you become a propeller. Probably they know this; raising their right arm, left arm, both, they control the revolution. They can even control how dizzy they become. I don't even believe they get dizzy. It's possible that the training they undergo causes the dizziness center in their brains to atrophy [laughs slightly].

In classical dancing, when you do 32 or however many *fouettés*, the rule is: the head starts last and returns first. That is, you have to have a fixed point all the time. A single point, so you don't get dizzy. You can rotate for a long time if you do this. Whereas it seems that dervishes rotate their heads as well, but they keep their eyes fixed on their palm when rotating, so they hold on to the idea of a fixed point.

I believe that whenever dancing is being done professionally, whether we're talking about a dervish or about a ballet dancer or ballerina, there is a technique and a mechanism behind it. And as long as you have a technique and a mechanism it's harder to lose your mind. Or for your emotions to carry you away. And I also believe there are professional dancers who even know how to lose their minds.

Laura: I am also thinking of the dancing of *călușari*,¹ who also rotate, rotate, leap in the air, until it appears that they are no longer in control of their bodies, but this loss of control is again part of their ritual behaviour. They roll their eyes, their bodies are convulsed and possessed. But the *călușar* dancer, who is a professional and ritually initiated in his turn, comes back every time from the state in which he rolls his eyes and moves spasmodically—a condition that corresponds, according with local beliefs, to his choreographic confrontation with the fairies. But if an ordinary person, not a professional, were to meet these same fairies and were *carried away*, let's say, in their dance, they would develop gout as a consequence. In fact, the *călușari* confrontation with the fairies takes place in a context that is a ritual one, in other words a controlled context.

It may be that this ability is linked to the professional's constant self-monitoring during the dance. You don't come out of yourself, you don't distance yourself from yourself, you don't detach yourself but rather you know all the time what's happening.



Spirits, dancing beings and rotatory movement

Silvia: Let me ask you something: how is it that different cultures share stories about people who dance with fairies or who come under the influence of fairies or spirits from different worlds? I was thinking of *Giselle*² with those dead girls who've come from somewhere else. There are spirits of this kind in our Romanian beliefs, the English have them too, they're everywhere. Did spirits of this kind actually use to appear? I wonder.

Laura: Are you talking about dancing spirits?

Silvia: Yes. Who would drive you mad and make you dance until they gave you seizures or left you dead. What's the explanation for this theme? Why do people make up stories of this kind?

Laura: These are tough questions for an ethnologist. Because such stories can generally be linked with an attitude towards beliefs and with a manner of viewing the world.

We may be dealing here with an archetype that asserts the existence in the world of the dimension of the sacred. In all the ways in which it manifests, not only the institutionalized ones. Because the Fairies, too, the dancing fairies, embody an expression of the sacred.

Silvia: Yes, and they *dance you* by making you rotate. Perhaps it has to be a perfect form, a closed one, not a line?

Laura: I do not know. Rotation is perceived as the movement that mediates in a bodily way the passing-over to other states of being of the person who rotates, or even their journeying to different places, different areas or different lands. This pattern too is widespread in and beyond Europe. Mirjam Mencej has written very finely about this.³ So it is not only a

belief in fairies that is common property but also the theme of rotation as the vehicle of transformation. Whether you revolve around your own vertical axis, or roll over and over, or dance in a circle, you become different. You have the same thing when a character nods three times and changes into something else, you have it when it's a matter of people who *are carried away*—both physically and mentally—while dancing with a rotatory movement and wake up *somewhere else*. In this rapid motion, they undergo something. Turning round and round, rotation, is a kind of journey. Have you ever had this kind of role in a dance with predetermined moves?

Silvia: No, but there's something we can connect with this. One, all dancers have experienced that moment when you can't go on. When you feel you're going to die. You are going to faint. Your body can't keep going. And then you kind of go into a loop, after which you recover miraculously. Two, I'm thinking of *Giselle*, which is an old ballet, a classical ballet, a white ballet. Yet there you have *Giselle's* madness. She lets her hair down, she runs wild on the stage, she hurls herself on the ground—these things mark a complete break with classical convention. In fact, this is a first intertextual irruption of contemporary dance into a classical dance.

But still, what is going on in all these stories?

Laura: These are expressions of knowledge. I believe that stories explain physical, emotional, psychological, and mental states, but they explain them figuratively, not literally, potentially even anthropomorphizing these states so that they assume the form of fairies and spirits. Story explains reality by interpreting and transfiguring it on a number of levels, including symbolically.



Traditional innovation, artistic innovation, contemporary dance

Laura: Within the ethnological field there is much nuanced discussion of the dynamics of the almost dialectical relationship between tradition and innovation, which manifests during performances in such a way that, at a given moment, a *new* sequence, created more or perhaps less spontaneously in the course of a dance, because this is what we're talking about, a leap, a limping movement or even a small sequence of movements, if it is not felt as so innovative that it is rejected, can from then on become a standard feature of the dance concerned, possibly bearing the name of the person who created it. For us the innovator remains anonymous, but for their community the new element becomes so-and-so's leap, as it were. But the dance stays largely the same: a Serbian dance, for example. Things change when traditional dances leave their original context and appear on stage. They become a spectacle/performance that expresses the vision of a choreographer, director, scenographer, etc. How does innovation manifest itself in the context of classical dance? I am thinking of the fact that here there is a choreographer, a known person, who creates the entire structure. Do innovations of this kind occur?

Silvia: Yes. As a dancer, you contribute your interpretation and virtuosity. In your own words, you leap a little higher, or whatever. As a choreographer, you may be looking at an original that's as much as a hundred years old, created by a predecessor. In relation to this model, you can innovate, change things here and there, the costumes for instance, but you cannot take out a whole section and thus destroy the libretto. Here things are clear: this is the libretto, this is the music, and these are, by and large, the moves. In neoclassical dance, you can have ideas, you can make changes to the libretto and even the music, but you can

never change the character and configuration of the movement, which continues to resemble that of the classical dance. So you can play with the surroundings, the stage setting, the costumes, but the main line of the dance stays the same. In contemporary dance you can change everything. For example, you can follow the libretto but all the swans can be men. All the elements can be mixed around and changed, reinvented.

Laura: What is the difference between classical dance and contemporary dance?

Silvia: In the first place, in classical dance you have a standard set of moves and repeat them *ad infinitum*. There is an alphabet.

Laura: But *Swan Lake* with men as swans? Do they perform the same moves as in the classical dance?

Silvia: Largely, yes, but not necessarily. But they all have tutus. Even if the moves are changed, because we're talking about contemporary dance, an identifying feature is preserved that reminds you of the classical story.

Laura: So, one category of contemporary dance reinterprets the convention of classical dance. But you also have contemporary dances that come from *nothing*, in the sense that they don't derive from a classical libretto.

Silvia: In this case we are talking about a concept that sets out from zero. Constructing language, constructing a new story, if you can—because it's hard to dramatize movements—constructing images, constructing a world. In which ideally you should have something you want to say.

Laura: To return to the code of communication, innovation and creation, possibly the reason why contemporary dance sometimes horrifies people is that it is so different from classical expectations, if we can so describe them.

Silvia: Exactly. And there are some people—I am referring to choreographers and | dancers, not to the public—who like this much tougher area of investigation in which you don't have a recipe to follow.

The dance doesn't necessarily need to be first-rate, but you need to be powerful as an artist. As a personality.

Laura: Does this strike me as a bit more individualistic? Compared with the shoal of fish you were talking about.

Silvia: Why not? You are expressing yourself.

Laura: How much dance is there in a contemporary *performance*?

Silvia: Performance can touch a more realistic area. I saw the first shocking human installation at Mumok, in Austria, where one of the works exhibited was composed of crucifixions. Real ones. And funeral corteges. The whole being a *performance* that imitated reality extremely well. There was an explanation there of how after the Second World War the Austrians were extremely angry; they were neither horse nor donkey, neither with the Germans nor without the Germans. Frustration and violence gathered force. The artists I'm talking about felt their need to show a different side of life. We are not prettifying anything anymore. Life is blood. Not good fairies.

Laura: So *performance* isn't necessarily tied to dance or to a choreography but only to the body.

Silvia: That's right. For example, Alexandra Pirici,⁴ who creates installations that are highly valued—pictures that are slightly in motion. Or Marina Abramović,⁵ who makes use of her own body, though she is not a dancer.

Laura: What is improvisational dance?

Silvia: Harmony between soul, mind, body and what comes from outside: music, smells, lights or temperature. There is also energy transfer. And an aid: when you are afraid to say



something in words and look elsewhere. Here, yes, you can seek and have emotions. That is, at the point at which you are no longer just a mechanism, as in classical, organized dance, when you're no longer constructing phrases but seeking emotions and being available for them. The most interesting thing is when an improvisation happens without music. You look for different sounds. Breathing, panting on the floor... It's also very important that you don't have mirrors—while in classical dance you have to see yourself, check yourself, in contemporary improvisational dance it doesn't matter what the moves look like.

Laura: But what are you looking for?

Silvia: Your own emotional state; you are looking for yourself. For this an experiment of this kind needs to last at least an hour. You get tired. But even improvisation requires practice. To liberate your mind, to empty it. Improvisation doesn't necessarily mean someone dancing on their own, as the mood takes them. You can also have a partner with whom you improvise. You have to get used to them so that you're not hampered by the presence of a foreign body etc. This can go a bit in the direction of therapy.

Or there can also be improvisations on given themes. As when our teacher came in and said "Dance the Little Match Girl," It was very hard. Adina Cezar,⁶ who was an impressive character, in the 6th grade, when contemporary dance was introduced—from that moment I knew that this was what I wanted to do—said to us "Come on! You're leaves," Then she would construct something with us, but depending on each person's availability. Some people may regard this as stupid. But from the moment when you stop thinking it's stupid, you're *available*. You're a sponge. This is a failing of schools, in general: teachers don't build with their pupils. And the children curl up like hedgehogs, they're not *available* any longer, and the story's over.

Laura: I'm remembering the difference between games and playing. When you dance *Giselle*, it's a game, with rules. When you improvise, you're playing *being leaves*. Playing is a bit free, it doesn't have a clearly defined immediate purpose. But it helps you escape from the (definitely socially rooted) conventions you impose on yourself.

Do you ever also play while you're dancing?

Silvia: Yes. Because I'm extremely ludic and empathetic.

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Limit situations

Laura: Body. It also presupposes its own dynamics, including ageing. Or accidents, illnesses, etc.

Silvia: Then you need to make peace with your body. And, once again, to remain *available*. You can no longer do what you used to be able to do, but, using small actions, you can still construct. Things can be done well at any age. All the same, when you are young and strong you don't yet know your body. And when you reach a deeper understanding of it, it starts creaking. And you're left with nostalgia and a kind of frustration.

In old age you have something you don't have when you're young, and it's settledness. Contemplation.

Laura: All through our discussion I have been conscious of an aspect we haven't yet mentioned, namely limit situations. Which can result from effort, fear, accidents, etc.

Silvia: Well, the performing arts are like that. No one is interested in banality. And I'm not referring to themes but to how one approaches any theme.



I am a body

Laura: To return to Le Breton’s theory, I think that you, when you’re dancing, fall into the category of *I am a body*, not that of *I have a body*.

Silvia: Yes. Probably anyone *is* a body. And I have something else to add: movement doesn’t lie.

Laura: It’s not only movement that doesn’t lie; the body doesn’t lie either. But it can still deceive you.

NOTES

1. The *Căluș* is a complex esoteric ritual, predominantly choreographic, that is performed in Pentecost week by a group of mature men and virtuoso dancers—*călușari*—whose functions include a therapeutic one. According to a set of beliefs, people’s summer meetings with *lelele*—supernatural female entities thought of as singing and dancing in a circle above the earth—give them physical and psychological illnesses. Sometimes, these fairies *snatch* people up into the air and revolve them with them in the dance until they are exhausted. The diseases caused by *lele* can be cured by the *călușari*’s dances. During the choreographic ritual performed for the benefit of a patient, one of the *călușari* begins to move chaotically, rolls his eyes and falls to the ground in an ecstasy. These are the physical and visible external manifestations of his dance conflict with the fairies, whom he faces up to without being harmed, and this produces the therapeutic effect. At the end the *călușar* gets up, restored and in his right mind.

2. *Giselle* is a ballet composed by Adolphe Adam, following

a libretto based on the texts *L’Allemagne* by Heinrich Heine and *Fantômes* by Victor Hugo. The original choreography is by Jules Perrot and Jean Coralli. The ballet had its premiere at the Paris Opera in 1841.

3. The reference is to Mirjam Mencej (2019).

4. Alexandra Pirici is a Romanian artist and choreographer who is well known for staging installations, public actions, gestures and sculptures that challenge the viewer to re-evaluate the public space.

5. “Marina Abramovici is a conceptual artist of Serbian origin whose works explore body art, the limits of the mind, the art of endurance, and the relationship between the interpreter and the public” (Pistrui, February 2023).

6. Adina Cezar (1941-2024) is one of the pioneers of Romanian contemporary dance. She taught at the Bucharest Dance High School and in 1973 founded the contemporary dance group Contemp.

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Figure 1. *Caiet Studentesc* [Student Notebook]. *De szép a szeretet* [Love is beautiful],⁴ János Papp, 2013.
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The Devil's Images: Dance Scenes in Naïve Paintings

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the work of János Papp, a self-taught artist from Vișea, a village in the Transylvanian Plain, Romania. Known locally as *Ördög* (the Devil), Papp was renowned for his vivid naïve paintings and his multifaceted role in the community. His artworks depict idyllic village life, combining images of nature, animals, and rural customs. Among his creative legacy are richly illustrated notebooks. This research focuses on his visual representations of traditional village dance scenes. Papp's paintings are both autobiographical and documentary, reflecting his life experiences and the collective memory of Vișea. His works are distinguished by a detailed, realistic style, yet often reinterpret traditional scenes with symbolic or aesthetic intent. The study highlights how his drawings of dances preserve gestures, costumes, and gender roles typical of past eras. His paintings reveal both historical accuracy and personal stylization, offering unique insights but requiring cautious interpretation in dance scholarship. Through text and image, Papp's notebooks construct a distinctive self-portrait embedded in local culture. His works reflect influences from *falvédők* (embroidered wall hangings), merging domestic folk aesthetics with visual storytelling.

KEYWORDS

Naïve art; autobiographical representation; traditional dance culture; visual ethnography; collective memory; Transylvanian Plain; emic perspective.

Walking down the streets of Vișea, a village in the Transylvanian Plain,¹ one is met with an unusual sight: rooftops are adorned with paintings of mountains, forests, deer, rabbits, and other animals, streams, lakes, and people fishing peacefully. Similar scenes appear on the inner walls of the old cooperative granary in the village centre: drawings and short explanatory captions that depict an idyllic rural life. When asked about the origins of these artworks, locals offer a surprising answer: "The Devil painted them!" Each of these creations is associated with János Papp, known as *Ördög* [lit. the Devil].

Martor 30/2025 - Bodies in Motion: Dance, Movement, Gesture



The Life and Career of János Papp

János Papp was born in Vișea in 1930 as the fourth of six children. His mother died when he was young. His father was an amateur poet and also a local master of ceremonies, performing at baptisms and weddings. After completing his military service in Popești (Alba County) and Clinceni (Muntenia), János Papp married Zsuzsanna Fodor from Vișea in 1953. They had one son and two daughters. Throughout his life, *Ördög* held numerous occupations:

shepherd, farmhand, soldier, sign painter, farmer, livestock breeder, vintner, hauler, machine operator, warehouse and factory worker, bricklayer, house painter, fish farmer, bull caretaker, (...) postman, night watchman, occasional musician (...) and who knows what else. My fellow villagers said: only the Devil had a more diverse set of jobs. (Papp 2010, 4)

János Papp can also be considered a specialist from another perspective: from 1977 to 2012 he served as the Calvinist cantor of the village.² In addition, he took on the role of “village crier,” regularly announcing important events from the hill near Vișea, all while continuing to paint and decorate until his death in 2021. His naïve paintings adorn houses and public buildings in Vișea and neighbouring villages (Bărai, Gădălin, and Jucu).³



The booklets of János Papp

This study focuses on dance representations found in the artist’s archive, which includes a wide range of writings, drawings, and paintings. We first learned about Papp’s creative activity during fieldwork in 2007, and about their continuously growing archive in 2010. At that time, his collection included 13 handwritten, richly illustrated booklets, 67 pages of drawings and stories, as well as the typewritten manuscript and illustrations of his self-published 150-page book (Papp 2010). The book was published with a CD supplement featuring the author’s organ performances and Christmas carols. The notebooks combine visual and written materials, personal and local histories, and poems reminiscent of folk rhymes.

The number and content of János Papp’s notebooks changed over time. He began drawing and writing his stories and memories on separate sheets of paper. He then bound these sheets together into a large A4-sized notebook. Whenever he recalled a detail about any story, he would draw it, take the notebook apart to insert it, and then rebind the pages. From the 2010s onward, his grandson who lived in Cluj, started supplying him with small booklets. From then on, János Papp made his drawings in these booklets.⁵



The role of artistic creation in the life of János Papp

Reading the writings of János Papp and looking at his pictures, we occasionally come across episodes where his knowledge and abilities stand out—qualities that distinguish him from other members of the community—such as his work as a village crier, cantor, author, or his mastery of painting and drawing. When constructing the narrative of his life story, the

latter appears to be the most prominent, as illustrations accompany each of his stories. In his self-ontology and in the process of becoming a creator, he emphasises his family's difficult situation and his development through self-reliance.⁶

János Papp's drawing skills and his unique, detail-rich perspective already stood out in his childhood. In his writings, there is only one single reference suggesting that he might have inherited his creativity from his parents: he noted that his father was a voluntary poet that was invited at weddings and christenings. Without offering any explanation for his writing or drawing activities, János Papp opens his earliest memoir with these lines:

One day I went with the lambs to the hill called *Surlo*. It was a beautiful day, there was also a lake there on the plain. I always carried a booklet and pencil, and I loved to draw: landscapes, a threshing machine with people threshing, the lambs sleeping, the buffalo bathing in the lake, the village. Then, a woman came down from the hill where she had been hoeing, to relieve herself. Back then, people didn't wear underpants. She threw her skirt over her back and did her business. I immediately drew the scene in my notebook. In the evening, the teacher came and asked about my booklets (...). While flipping through them, he stopped. I was sitting on the bench by the stove when he called me over, looked at the drawing, looked at me, and said: "What is this?" I shrugged and said: "Well, I saw the lady like that." "Okay, okay, but pay attention next time to what can and cannot be drawn!" "Alright, teacher sir." But as I observed, that this was the picture the teacher liked best.⁷

János Papp offered two explanations for his nickname *Ördög*. Both explanations emphasise his expertise and exceptional skills and justify his unusual activities in the eyes of the local community. According to one version, he earned the nickname because of his many trades—he was skilled in so many things, just like the devil himself. In another version, he recalls that in 1957 (according to the date of the related illustration) the local schoolteacher was directing a play with the village youth and asked him to paint the scenery.

As I was working, I heard several adults say to their children: "See, this is pure devilry!" (Referring to what I was doing) (...) The next day, while walking through the village, I heard the children behind me saying: "That's *Ördög*, Uncle János!" And that's how I became, to this day, *Ördög* János. (Papp 2010, 78)

Just like in his childhood episodes, he attracted attention during his years in the military service because of his drawing skills. During this period, he was ordered by higher authorities to create large (100 x 80 cm) caricatures of Tito, Eisenhower, and Ranković,⁸ which were later published in the newspaper *Glasil Armatei*.⁹

Neither the life interviews conducted with János Papp nor the handwritten manuscripts contain any specific reference to him having formally studied drawing or receiving external training in this regard. However, we do know that after his discharge from the military service, he learned interior painting and decorating. Many of his stories begin with a situation where someone invites him to a village to whitewash or paint. Moreover, nearly all episodes are permeated by the theme of creativity and individual artistic expression. Beyond simple wall painting, he decorated clients' homes with ornamental designs, flowers, or detailed scenes from everyday life. The geometric precision in his compositions, the accurate proportions, perspective, and the fine rendering of details all suggest that part of his drawing skill was consciously developed over time.

His adulthood was a period of active work, with his services primarily sought by the villagers and people from the surrounding area. However, in his old age, remembrance and the act of commemorating came to the forefront. From 2009 onward, he wrote and drew



mainly in the afternoons and during winters in his booklets, where he depicted everyday life in Vişea and episodes from his own life.



Frames of local history in the works of János Papp

The manuscripts in János Papp's archive consist of a series of loosely or closely interconnected stories and drawings, resembling comic strips. The texts operate on multiple levels: beneath their primary readings, one can infer hidden meanings—so-called coded texts (Lotman, 1994, 57-80). Stories within stories, or in other words, possible coded texts include the following:

- Construction of the self: emphasizing his unique skills and his status as a specialist;
- Local history: especially collectivization and its aftermath;
- Stories of overcoming dangerous situations and escaping harm, usually through luck, honour, shared responsibility, and solidarity.

As a primary source of inspiration and reference for these works, we can consider the visual world of *falvédők*,¹⁰ a topic that long remained at the periphery of ethnographic research and outside the institutional framework of officially accepted visual culture, much like naïve art.¹¹ In János Papp's works, scenes reminiscent of those depicted on *falvédők* come to life. At the same time, the relationship between text and image—the captions, the dating, and the detailed, precise style of depiction—suggest something more. While *falvédők* symbolically express new desires, new roles, and the promise of a more independent, freer way of life (Hankiss 1987, 71), Papp's material is instead defined by the myth of the self and local history.

János Papp dated most of his drawings with remarkable precision—often down to the exact year or even day—and responded sensitively and accurately to the changes brought about by modernization. His works represent alternative forms of historical knowledge, primarily reflecting an interest in the local past and a desire to structure and preserve it (Keszeg 2007, 18-43). His images include direct references to numerous details of local history—for instance, who was the village teacher or pastor at a given time, which public building had what function, or how the different parts of the village were called by locals. At the same time, he also reflects on current events, highlighting elements that may be of broader interest and contribute to local heritage. One such example is a poem he wrote for the harvest ball held in October 2010, which was attended by visitors from Hungary:

Don't let us down, people of Vişea
The folks from Hungary are watching ya.
They travel here from far and wide,
Let your fame spread far with pride.
Let not the village bring on shame —
It's small, but proudly Hungarian all the same.¹²

Papp János's writings and drawings can be understood as autobiographical constructs "in which one's social position, everyday conflicts, and sense of security are made visible" (Keszeg 2005, 20). His archive preserves stories related to his own life, the local past, community events, and the representation of the landscape. Yet he does not merely describe events – he "draws maps" that act as interpretive guides, enabling the viewer to imagine and understand a world that is gradually disappearing.

A szüreti bála kijelentés
a hegyről, így hangzik a kürt utánn.



É mai nap szombat este hét órakor,
kezdődik a szüreti bál.
Jönnék a Palatka-i orvosok.
Hoznak a nyirentyűbe jó orvosságot.
A nagy bögőbe láb kemőeret.
A be menetel ingyen lesz, a
Hakari Misi - esárdájába.

Figure 2. Announcement of the harvest ball from the hill... János Papp, 2013.



Images of dance

The examination of visual sources related to the dance culture of bygone eras and various ethnic groups is well established in European dance folklore studies and dance anthropology.¹³ Hungarian researchers have often relied on historical sources, such as drawings and paintings, to develop the typology of folk dances in the Alpine-Carpathian Region (Pesovár 1994).

However, in ethnochoreology, it is relatively rare to use dance representations created by members of the studied communities themselves as emic sources.¹⁴

In the following, we analyse the visual recollections of János Papp concerning traditional dance events and dances in the village of Vișea.

In Figure 2, we see the scene where János Papp announces an upcoming ball.¹⁵ The painting was created sometime between 2008 and 2010. Next to it, the following caption appears:

Announcement of the harvest ball from the hill, this is how it sounds after the horn: “This very day, Saturday, the harvest ball begins at seven o’clock in the evening. Doctors from Palatka¹⁶ are coming, bringing good medicine for the kidneys. Foot ointment for the double bass. Entry will be free, at Misi Kakasi’s inn.”¹⁷

Here, *Ördög* János is already reflecting on the impact of the dance house movement,¹⁸ as by the 1990s the balls were mostly organised at the request of guests from Hungarian revival circles. In many cases, it was even these visitors from Hungary who organised the events, where traditional local dances were typically performed. Before the political changes of 1989, it was not customary for older or ill villagers to attend local dance events. However, dance house enthusiasts with an archaizing mindset and with a strong interest in traditions used to make efforts to invite many elderly dancers—the so-called tradition keepers—to these balls (Varga 2016, 11).

The caption includes the artist’s name and the date of creation: *Ör(dög) Papp János, 2013 – Jan 18*. The person standing behind the bar counter, Levente Kiss, was the tenant of the local bar, between about 2010 and 2014. The bar, mostly referred to as a “buffet” by the locals, is located in the centre of the village. It was mostly frequented by the older generations. It hosted numerous dance filming sessions and smaller dance events, while the former cooperative granary mentioned above, could accommodate larger crowds and was used for balls and weddings. The bar counter visible in the picture and the mural in the background (also painted by *Ördög*) reflect the actual layout of the bar.

However, the spatial arrangement of the people in the painting is not realistic. The bar did not have a built-in musicians’ platform like those used at weekend dance events or weddings—platform known as a *cigánypad*.¹⁹ Rather, musicians used to play standing in the *buffet*. They stood on the left side of the room—in front of the mural, near the back door, or in front of the bar counter—usually positioned close together. Men dancing the solo *legényes*, usually faced the band and only turned away when the dance was filmed, if they wanted to look toward the camera—mostly complying with the researchers’ requests.²⁰

It is apparent that the painter considered the dance event a special occasion, as he depicted the dancer and the girls watching him dressed in festive attire. Furthermore, the man is not wearing the post-World War II jodhpurs, but an earlier costume piece – the *fehér harisnya*.²¹ On the left side of the dancer’s hat is a red and green floral ornament, indicating that he is a young man of Hungarian ethnicity.²² It is also possible that the painter turned



Figure 3. The legényes dance in Visea. János Papp, 2013.



Figure 4. Play, Gypsy, play a tune, make everyone feel the groove. János Papp, 2013.



Figure 5. This lad swings two girls, leaving behind the girls from Gádälin. János Papp, 2013.

the dancing figure toward the viewers to make the movement more visible. As in reality, the musician watches the dancer's movements closely, which is clearly visible in the picture. The solo dancer's movements are noteworthy: bent legs and a forward-leaning upper body prepare for a leg-hitting motif. The painting may refer to a dance style typical before the World War II: according to archival film footage and recollections, men born around the late 19th and early 20th centuries often hit their shins while leaning forward from the waist during the *legényes*.²³ In later generations, this forward bending during shin hitting was no longer considered aesthetically pleasing and survived only among a few men who danced in an old-fashioned manner.²⁴

The title of the painting (Figure 3), "The *legényes*²⁵ dance in Vișea," suggests that the painter intended to give a general impression of male dances in the village. It is worth noting that by the 2010s, the *legényes* dance was very rarely performed in Vișea. On the left side of the picture, a few women are holding each other's arms. From their headscarves, we can tell that the woman on the left is likely married, while the one on the right is a girl wearing a ribbon in her hair. Both wear a *lájbis köntös*,²⁶ a garment that became fashionable in the region around World War I. The women watch the dancer passively, reflecting a spatial arrangement and gender differences found in traditional settings (Varga 2017, 105).

Figure 4 was drawn on 18 January 2013 by Papp János. Its caption paraphrases a shouted rhyme: "Play, Gypsy, play a tune, make everyone feel the groove." In the lower corners of the picture, we can see grape clusters—decorative elements used to adorn the harvest ball venue. This suggests that the dance event shown here no longer takes place in the village bar but rather in the former cooperative granary. The granary could accommodate larger audiences and is the traditional venue for the harvest balls in Vișea. On the left, the musicians are playing while standing, as they would in the *buffet*, but not as they would in the cooperative

granary. Their positioning is not entirely realistic either: the double bassist stands between the lead violinist (on the left) and the viola player (on the right), whereas in practice the viola player would usually stand next to the lead violinist. The lead violinist has turned his head away from the dancers (a rare occurrence in real life), while the other two members of the band watch the movements closely. The couple dancing in front of the band is about to begin a turn, as suggested by their body positions and arm placements. To the right, another couple prepares for a characteristic Transylvanian Plain-style dance movement in which the man spins the woman behind his back from his right side to his left side—a move locally known as *elhányja a nőt pe la spate*.²⁷ The image captures the preparation phase for this movement.

Further right, two women stand arm-in-arm, watching the event. The dancing men wear festive lad's attire, as indicated by the decorative sprigs on their hats. However, the man on the right appears older, suggesting that the image was inspired by a festive dance occasion, such as the harvest ball attended by visitors from Hungary. At such events, men often wore their old traditional youth attire, to please the Hungarian folk tourists. The women in the picture appear fuller-figured and older. Only one woman wears the *lájbis köntös* typical of unmarried girls.²⁸ The other three wear chin-tied scarves characteristic of married women.

In Figure 5, neither the creator's name nor the date of creation is visible; nevertheless, it is likely that the final picture in our series also belongs to the above-mentioned painting cycle. The text in the painting—"This lad swings two girls, leaving behind the girls from Gădălin"—is a lively rhyme reminiscent of shouted verses, presumably written by the painter himself. The little verse refers to a humiliating ritual that sometimes occurred during dancing: a young man who was angry at a girl for some reason would invite her to dance, but during a spinning turn he would "accidentally" leave her behind and continue dancing with another partner. The abandoned girl would stand for a while, then usually sit down, or in worse cases, leave the dance floor in shame.²⁹

In the centre of the picture, the dancers are performing the *hármas csárdás*.³⁰ The image captures the exact moment when the man, dressed in traditional festive attire, spins both women under his arms. The woman on the left is likely unmarried, as suggested by her *párta*,³¹ while the woman on the right is presumably married—although she wears a *lájbis köntös* typical of unmarried girls, her headscarf indicates otherwise. The band's setup and positioning are realistic. The way the lead violinist tilts his head suggests he is closely watching the dancers' movements. On the left side of the image, men in festive attire sit at the table with drinks, also observing the dancers.



Conclusions

This study examines the paintings of János Papp from the perspectives of naïve art, self-expression, collective memory, and the documentation of local dance culture. Papp's work forms a bridge between traditional village life and individual storytelling. His paintings work at once as visual chronicles, records of dance history, and personal confessions. Thus, the images are not merely illustrations but distinctive representations of autobiographical sources, local history, and creative self-representation. Papp's works offer an emic perspective on the traditional dance culture of a Transylvanian Plain village, yet—as evidence for dance-folklore or dance history research—they should be used with caution (see, for example, the placement of the band in Figure 4). The drawings often present an idyllic view of tradition that reflects the painter's aestheticising intent. Much like *falvédők*

or popular folk plays, the drawings align with the urban elite's romantic notions of rural life. Regarding local traditional dance customs and dance forms, the images provide only limited and uncertain data, even when the existence of a given phenomenon (such as shin-clapping performed with a forward-leaning posture) is confirmed by other sources.



NOTES

1. The Transylvanian Plain (in Hungarian: *Mezőség*, in Romanian: *Câmpia Transilvaniei*) is a region with a multi-ethnic population of Romanians, Hungarians, Gypsies, and formerly Armenians, Jews, and Germans, and is known for its exceptionally rich dance and music culture. Vișea (in Hungarian) or Vișea (in Romanian) is a small village with a Hungarian majority population in the western part of the Transylvanian Plain. Local folklore plays an important role not only in ethnochoreological and ethnomusicological research but also in the Hungarian folk music and folk dance revival scene.
2. This role is also reflected in a popular joke in Vișea: "Which is the village where the priest preaches in the church, and the devil plays the organ?" The playful people of Vișea even made a pun on the name János Papp, saying: "In Vișea, Pap(p) is the devil" [*pap* means "priest" in Hungarian].
3. In Hungarian: Báré, Köteland, and Zsúk.
4. The expression "Caiet Studențesc" is in Romanian, while "De szép a szeretet" is in Hungarian.
5. During a fieldwork in May 2013, *Ördög* only had five small-sized booklets containing his own drawings and notes. The rest had most likely been taken by his grandson, who had encouraged him to draw from the very beginning.
6. See a more detailed content analysis of János Papp's autobiographical works in Gatti 2013.
7. Excerpt from János Papp *Ördög 1937–2009: Remembering the Past*, from the handwritten booklet. (Translation by the author).
8. Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) was a Croatian-Slovenian Yugoslav communist revolutionary and head of state. Dwight David Eisenhower (1890–1969) was a US Army General and the 34th President of the United States. Aleksandar Ranković (1909–1983) was a Serbian and Yugoslav communist politician, Minister of the Interior.
9. *Glasul Armatei* [lit. Voice of the Army], was a periodical of the People's Army of socialist Romania.
10. Traditional embroidered wall hanging pieces, often used in Hungarian and Romanian folk culture. The embroideries typically portray stylized, idyllic scenes of rural life.
11. Following Bourdieu, self-taught artists who begin with "limited cultural capital" are often regarded as "intruders into the realm of culture" (Bourdieu 1970, 169).
12. Excerpt from János Papp's poem Declaration for the Harvest Ball.
13. Theresa J. Buckland wrote an excellent summary on the subject (Buckland 2006).
14. The main themes in the work of Juli Vankóné Dudás, a Hungarian peasant painter, were the folk customs of her native village and scenes from everyday life and festive occasions. The volume dedicated to her art includes a selection of her paintings along with biographical information (Vankóné 1983).
15. The traditional weekend dance events were announced in some villages neighbouring Vișea with a shout from the hill. In Tăușeni (in Hungarian: Marokháza), for example, the *kezesek* (lit: quarantors, dance organizers) were traditionally proclaimed in this way. In Vișea, this practice was revived in the 2000s by the elderly local cantor *Ördög*, who took it on voluntarily or for a modest fee. Previously, only the popular folk plays and the subsequent dance parties were proclaimed, while news of the dance events used to spread informally (Varga 2023: 146). This tradition resembles a normative custom widespread in almost every village of the Transylvanian Plain region – see, for example the St. George's Day or New Year's announcements, when local youths would shout out noteworthy or humorous events of the past year from the hill (Gatti 2011 and Zsigmond 2018).
16. In Vișea and its surroundings, Gypsy bands from Pălatca (in Hungarian Magyarpalatka) have been providing traditional dance music for centuries. "Doctors from Palatka" is a humorous nickname referring to them. Among the Gypsy musicians of the Transylvanian Plain, there are three groups speaking three different languages. Of these, only one group uses the term "Roma" to refer to themselves, while the other two (such as the musicians from Magyarpalatka) reject it. Therefore, we use the umbrella term "Gypsy" as an exonym, even though we are aware that it is a politically charged term. Additionally, the local majority society often uses the word "Gypsy" synonymously for the musicians, even if the musician is of Romanian or Hungarian nationality.
17. A similar text is quoted by Beáta Gatti in an earlier publication (2011, 14). Mihály Kakasi *Misi* is a local entrepreneur who, since 2008, has rented the cooperative granary from the municipality to use it as a venue for balls and weddings. In the spring of 2014, the bar was transferred

to Mihály Kakasi by the previous tenant, Levente Kiss. *Ördög* depicts Levente Kiss as the bartender in the third picture.

18. The dance house (in Hungarian: *táncház*) movement is a Hungarian folk dance revival that began in the 1970s. It started as a grassroots effort to preserve and celebrate traditional Hungarian folk music and dance by organizing community dance events where people could learn and enjoy authentic folk dances in an informal, social setting – see Taylor (2021).

19. Traditionally the music band was usually situated on a waist-high wooden platform, called *cigánypad* (lit. gypsy bench, because on the Transylvanian Plain the musicians usually were gypsies) in order that the spinning skirts would not disturb them while fiddling (Varga 2017, 106).

20. In one of Csenge Keresztény's studies, we read about how the presence and requests of researchers influenced dance performance during the filming process (Keresztény 2023, 219-221).

21. The *fehér harisnya* (lit. white stockings) were narrow, close-fitting men's trousers made of broadcloth. The Hungarian population of the villages in the Transylvanian Plain wore them until the mid-20th century, usually as part of festive attire.

22. After World War I, in many Transylvanian villages certain clothing items functioned as ethnic markers and identity symbols. Hungarians very often wore green hats decorated on the left side with a bouquet of red and white flowers and green leaves. The red-white-green colour combination symbolised the Hungarian national colours. In contrast, during the same period, the Romanians from the Transylvanian Plain often danced wearing brown hats, decorated with yellow and blue flowers on the right side.

23. See, for example, the stylistic differences in the recording No. Ft 802.10, available in the Knowledge Base of Traditional Dances (<https://neptanctudastar.abtk.hu/en>). Here, the older man wearing a traditional fur hat (Mihály Gáspár *Misi*), dancing on the left side of the frame, performs a more archaic version of the *legényes* than the men dancing next to him:

<https://neptanctudastar.abtk.hu/hu/dances?Localities=%5B%22Visa%22%5D>.

Similarly, we see an old-style performance in the recording ZTI Ft.864.12a-b+, performed by dancers among whom the second person is originally from Vișea:

<https://neptanctudastar.abtk.hu/hu/dances?Localities=>

[%5B%22V%22%5D](https://neptanctudastar.abtk.hu/hu/dances?Localities=%5B%22V%22%5D).

24. Locals pointed out to us several times—for example, when teaching us a dance—that the generations born in the 1930s and later considered a straight posture is more attractive.

25. The *legényes* is a traditional Transylvanian men's solo dance. It is a highly energetic and improvised dance performed mostly by young men, showcasing their strength, agility, creativity, and masculine behaviour. For more about the *legényes* dances of the Transylvanian Plain, see Martin (2020).

26. The *lájbis köntös* is a vest sewn together with a skirt, following the fashion of the Empire era. It was in style on the Transylvanian Plain from the early 20th century until the 1970s. For more details, see Székely (2025, 124).

27. In the Transylvanian Plain, mixed Hungarian-Romanian expressions are common, such as *elhányja a nőt* (Hungarian for "throws the woman") followed by *pe la spate* (Romanian for "behind his back").

28. By the 2000s, most women from Vișea had already sold their traditional *lájbis köntös* to folk dance revivalists.

29. Gădălin is a village with a Romanian majority population, located near Vișea. Visits by people from Gădălin to Vișea were always regarded with particular attention, as ethnic tensions during the World Wars had strained relations between the young people of the two villages. It is possible that *Ördög* János is referring here to an actual incident when a young man from Vișea humiliated a girl from Gădălin.

30. The *csárdás*, during the era of national romanticism in the 19th century, was a Hungarian national dance that rapidly spread from urban ballrooms to rural villages. In Transylvanian dance folklore, it coexists with and interacts closely with earlier dance traditions, primarily from the Renaissance period. A special form of this is the *hármás* [lit. triple] *csárdás*, in which one man dances with two women. This can be seen in recording No. Ft. 686.6 of the Knowledge Base of Traditional Dances:

<https://neptanctudastar.abtk.hu/hu/dances?Localities=%5B%22Magyarpatatka%22%5D&SearchResult=1>.

31. In Vișea, the *párta* (maiden's headdress) was rarely worn. It appeared almost exclusively at harvest celebrations and school festivities around the time of the Second World War. Occasionally, female characters in popular folk plays wore it in the 1950s and 1960s.

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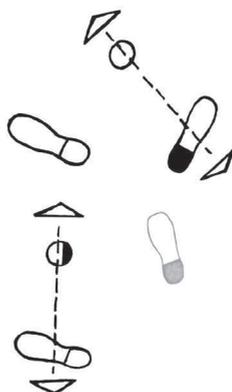
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IV. Book Reviews

János Fügedi. 2023. *Signs of Dance. Laban Kinetography for Traditional Dancers. Solo and Circle Dances.* Budapest: Institute for Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities, L'Harmattan. 540 pages.

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Van Zile, Judy. 2025. "János Fügedi. 2023. *Signs of Dance. Laban Kinetography for Traditional Dancers. Solo and Circle Dances.* Budapest: Institute for Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities, L'Harmattan. 540 pages." *Martor* 30, 188-90. [DOI: 10.57225/Martor.2025.11]

János Fügedi's voluminous 2023 publication exemplifies his deep understanding of the theoretical basis of the movement documentation system most often known in English as Kinetography Laban or Labanotation, extensive practical experience in notating dances, meticulous research, and clarity in organizing and teaching complex material. These attributes make the book an invaluable contribution to seeing, analyzing, and communicating about movement in ways that can be used in many approaches to dance studies as well as to research that engages with dance through the lenses of other disciplines and dances from locales other than Hungary.

In the preface Fügedi articulates his intent to introduce "the reader to Laban kinteography" (a particular terminology he explains), including "its conceptual foundation in movement analysis." He laments movement analysis being "regrettably... missing from dance education," and the need for dancers and others involved with dance "to learn movement analysis and increase their inventory of kinetic concepts." While occasionally drawing on examples from other geographic areas and kinds of dance, Fügedi delimits his focus to "solo and circle dances" "of the Alpine-Carpathian region, especially those of the Hungarians." He further describes his intent as not to "acquaint the reader with the entire [kinetography] system... but to set forth a method for analyzing the specific movement features of a living dance culture while presenting, step by step, the possibilities of the notation system."

Fügedi's meticulous attention to detail is exemplified throughout the book in his care to credit sources as well as his mentors, colleagues, and various assistants. Introductory material recognizes Mária Szentpál, Ágoston Lányi, and Ann Hutchinson Guest, individuals among the foremost authorities and practitioners in the system originated by Rudolf von Laban and who were Fügedi's mentors. He notes the contributions of Hungarian colleague Gábor Misi for facilitating the development of some areas of the system and proofreading the Hungarian version of the volume reviewed here (*Tánc – Jel – Írás* [approximate translation "Dance—Sign—Notation"], L'Harmattan Kiadó / MTA Zenetu-dományi Intézet, 2011). And he acknowledges English-language translators, creators and proof-readers of verbal text and notated samples, photographers, and models for photographs in this "enlarged English language version" of the original. Although brief, a section on Kinetography's development shows the extensive contributions of individuals, textbooks, and institutions in Hungary. Frequent references to documents of the International Council of Kinetography Laban (ICKL), the major organization that, since the mid-20th century, has regularly met to explore new uses of the system and further its development, point to the importance of the individual contributors to the organization's work. Correspondence between all of the individuals, reports on countless meetings, and major texts published in English and several European languages informed Fügedi's research and knowledge base as well as his understanding of the system's historical evolution and its users.

Fügedi's explanation of the basics of kinetography are presented in 71 pages; 293 pages describe

elements of the symbols and concepts critical to notating dance from the delimited geographic area; and 151 pages contain a glossary of symbols, lists and illustrations of movement motifs, extensive notes to the text, a list of references cited, and an index.

Readers of this review should not be deterred by the voluminous nature of the book, nor this summary of it. As an experienced dancer, scholar, and teacher Fűgedi clearly illuminates kinetography's principles, gradually guides the learner through notation practices for simple to quite complex movements, and draws extensively on photographs, line drawings, schematics, and symbols to illustrate the points he makes—all concisely summarized in charts with notated and photographic examples at the end of each section. The result yields models for those who teach any facet of the analytical systems originated by Laban and for those who want to learn about the system in a highly accessible fashion. Additionally, the volume can be scanned easily and sections isolated to learn about or teach the growth of the system in a manner relevant to individual needs and interests. Hence, the volume is a tremendous contribution to English-language material that clearly describes movement features important to, and distinctive of, Hungarian dance. These descriptions should be useful to not only those who study dance, but to anthropologists, sociologists, inter-disciplinary researchers, and any who study the multiplicity of things that constitute "culture," and to those who wish to know something about movement in Hungarian dances without directly engaging with the notation symbols or without learning to do the movements themselves.

Fűgedi's differentiation between the subtleties of what dancers feel as they are moving and what observers sense but may or may not be able to articulate, are embedded frequently in his descriptions of the intricacies in Hungarian dance movements. This differentiation is the basis for some of the choices he and his colleagues make in adapting the system for notating the dances of their own and those of neighboring cultures, and goes beyond kinetography basics to engaging with selected advanced methods to describe intricate movements of the legs and feet that characterize Hungarian dance. Attending to the sequence in which Fűgedi presents material, the ways in which he breaks down concepts and gradually leads his reader from the simple to the complex, and his explanations of why Hungarians have made specific notation decisions provide models for those teaching in diverse settings or notating other kinds of dance that focus on other parts of the body. For notators, careful reading of the text leads to understanding the need to determine what to notate and what not to notate, and how to highlight things that should be documented. It is also a recurring reminder of how beneficial the flexibility of the system is when one understands its most basic principles.

Fűgedi concludes with brief comments (rooted in a lengthier presentation published in a 2018 journal article) on "practical advice" regarding notating "from film and video." Some may benefit from reading this section before tackling the sections on the notation system itself. By explaining the detailed way in which Hungarian dance notators and analysts utilize their extensive archive of filmed field recordings to fully analyze movement subtleties, Fűgedi counters frequent declamations that film supplants a need for notation. And identification, early in the book, of locations of major holdings of primary source materials is valuable to informing future debates as the system continues to evolve, as well as a reflection of the extent to which Fűgedi himself sought to uncover details about the system.

Because a kinetography score is set up to align with a visual representation of timing of movements, and because of the intricacies of timing in many Hungarian dance movements, Fűgedi often includes music notation to facilitate understanding the rhythmic structure and its representation in a kinetography score. In his section on notating dance from film he delineates important considerations for attempting to discern timing from many of the older archived silent films, and the importance of documenting how timing in each instance was determined. He also discusses how to obviate challenges the flat, two-dimensional nature of film imposes on clearly seeing some movements, and emphasizes a point he makes throughout the text—when notation theory and practice are solidly understood, and movement details are clearly seen, the simplest notation methods should be chosen for use.



Some might wonder about the inclusion of 340 notes that span slightly more than 20% of the entire volume. These notes provide a rich resource for those already advanced in using kinetography and for those interested in more extensive details of the system and its history. Like the rest of the book, the notes contain a wealth of visual examples and reference a vast array of sources and resources.

Because of the values of this text in introducing dance notation and Hungarian dance to a broad array of disciplines, an explanation of what Fügedi and his colleagues mean by “traditional dance” would have been helpful. Although used in many publications, there are frequent debates about what this phrase means, with implications often only suggesting such things as dances emanating from older time periods and dances considered indigenous to particular people and places prior to significant outside influences.

Those already involved with kinetography at advanced levels may differ in their own usages and perhaps even disagree with some of the choices made by Fügedi and his Hungarian colleagues. Native English-language speakers and writers may occasionally stumble over what they consider unusual word choices, misspellings, or grammatical errors. These are quite minor matters, however, in relation to the clarity of Fügedi’s explanations, and in no way detract from the book’s overriding excellence and contribution to dance studies. The depth and breadth of Fügedi’s knowledge, vivid descriptions, thorough analyses, and the manner in which he teaches concepts and tools for recording movement provide the basis for an understanding of the constantly moving nature of what makes something dance.

The first draft of this review was completed the evening before I heard of János Fügedi’s death. Words cannot express what I felt when I learned of his demise. I decided to not make any substantive changes to the review, but felt compelled to note my extreme sorrow. János was younger than I in years, but substantially older in wisdom, knowledge of kinetography and movement analysis, and depth of conceptual understandings of movement. I consider him both a colleague and mentor whose death leaves an unfillable void; a meticulous scholar who produced a significant body of important research results in numerous languages; a caring and sharing teacher and friend who leaves behind a legacy of kindness and insightful and well-reasoned debates that furthered personal and professional growth among his many colleagues and students from across the globe.



Kendra Stepputat. 2024. *Tango Dance and Music: A Choreomusical Exploration of Tango Argentino* (1st ed.). London: Routledge. 280 pages; 45 B/W Illustrations.

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Skinner, Jonathan. 2025. “Kendra Stepputat. 2024. *Tango Dance and Music: A Choreomusical Exploration of Tango Argentino* (1st ed.). London: Routledge. 280 Pages; 45 B/W Illustrations.” *Martor* 30, 190-92. [DOI: 10.57225/Martor.2025.12]

This book makes a substantial contribution to tango studies and slips into a rich vein of detailed, passionate, carefully written academic accounts from Marta Savigliano’s (1995) iconic *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* and Julie Taylor’s (1998) poignant ethnography *Paper*

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Tangos, to Robert Thompson's (2005) flourishing *Tango: The Art History of Love* and Kathy Davis's (2015) feminist call *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World*. Each study brings a disciplinary angle to the tango orchestra and dance floor. Kendra Stepputat's orientation is around the choreomusical – concentrating on the dance as it reached Europe in different waves, and its distinct musicality or “danceability” as explored through a series of unique experiments.

Bound within a useful Introduction and Conclusion, there are three substantive chapters: a choreomusical overview of tango from 1900-2020 (45 pages); tango music and its danceability (75 pages); tango dance and its musicality (105 pages). Thus, the weighting of the volume is towards the dance and its musicality. This extends from Argentina to Europe as a translocal “music-dance practice” (p.3). Rather than delve into the migratory flows, or the postcolonial struggles the dance and music articulate, Stepputat shows her ethnomusicological strengths with essential details of the dance music: a 4/4 meter with harmonic progressions and average 120bpm speed to engage with. This confirms research I have read or heard about in the last few years on the therapeutic use of the dance – dance for health, healing and wellbeing with the tango walk used in the rehabilitation of cardiovascular medical complaints; Cardio-Tango, as it is referred to in France. More exotically, this can be seen in tango for democratising patient-carer relations in Buenos Aires's Borda Hospital with their “All of us are crazy for tango” program (when I visited, one patient thought he was General Galtieri defending the ward against my English incursion).

This walking dance—this “improvisation to music” (p.140)—born from the Diaspora to Argentina, and returned through the translocal, varies from professional stage dance to community practice and experimental engagement. In her opening overview, Stepputat traces the “whitewashing” (p.22) of this dance as it became codified, commercialised, commoditised, and moved slowly across the twentieth century from the mean streets to the soft-lit dance studios. Whilst it still retains an exotic appeal, and is still considered a New World dance, Traditionalists harp/accordion back to the Golden Age music of orchestras and composers and arrangers of around World War Two (1933-1955), whilst Moderns look to the experimental Tango Nuevo vanguard from the 1960s. Stepputat includes a post-1980s local and international revival of the art form in chronology that eventually drifts into a de-corporealised “neotango” blend of danceable music and body movement principles. Throughout this detailed and evocative chronology, Stepputat weaves in examples of the music, from the melodic Di Sarli and rhythmic D'Arienzo of the Golden Age to the heavy metal ballads of Metallica (“Nothing Else Matters”) that I used to practice to for hour after hour.

Chapter Three: “Tango Music and its Danceability” examines the criteria for what makes a danceable tango dance, improvised, rotating anti-clockwise through the *ronda* (dance space), open or closed with one's partner. It begins with a breakdown of the music from motives to phrases to melodies; their accents from arrastre drags to sharp *staccato* endings; and the vocabulary of interpretation that musicians and arrangers—and not only dancers—add to the compositions. There is exquisite ethnographic detail contained within the accounts of dirty players (“mugre”) with micro-timings and phrasings to add expression to the piece. Experienced audiences and dancers are attracted to the layers and suspense of the music. This is shown by way of interview with experienced dancers, instructors and DJs. New dancers, concomitantly, prefer simple, consistent, predictable pieces—the familiar whilst they are gaining experience of the dance. Stepputat established an online survey on music and danceability with 199 respondents ranking what they liked, enjoyed and found danceable, including versions of the music and some tracks made for the survey itself. The results of the survey and experiment show that dance experience plays significantly into music preference and that it changes as engagement develops. Tango improvisation relies on predictability for the less experienced dancer. Further to this, Stepputat's study stakes out new research trajectories into “harmonic comfort zones” (p.117) where dancers feel at ease and confident in their music and practice.

The final chapter, “Tango Dance and Its Musicality,” analyses the suspenseful walks, the posture



and its dissociations, the pivots and the torques of this dance and how they all give onto a style of tango that can belong to a distinct era. It also presents an innovative motion capture experiment with professional dance teachers such as Homer and Cristina Ladas. This gives the researcher the ability to compare and contrast walking to walking with music, and to refine details to heel speed, hip movement (lateral pelvic tilt), hip-shoulder dissociation angles, knee angle, gait cycle, acceleration and deceleration points in the dancing. Stepputat neatly links this technical detail with an evocative account of dance learning: the use of the free leg to mark out the beat, the passing of weight through the body with its mechanics, the confidence of the heel strike. This sophistication became standard dance research, one day, and will allow other dance scholars such as Brenda Gottschild (2003) to comment more assertively as to the pelvic roots of dance forms—broken in African models, and straight in European ballroom (and Traditional Irish Dancing) manuals.

This is a book that is a useful read and guide to the dance, as well as its music and how the two interact. It will help the tango DJ to identify the roots of their unconscious practice. It will also be a continual reference book on the music(-ality) and the dance(-ability) of tango. If there is a drawback it is the technical detail that one can become lost in, feeling less engaged and engrossed in the read than the other passionate studies of the dance. Is Stepputat too clinical in her explication of this magical musicality and mystical danceability? Each chapter, also, has extensive notes and References when they could have been deferred to the end of the book. These are quibbles, however, for a most exceptional tango study.

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Debarshi Prasad Nath, Ralph Buck, and Barbara Snook, eds. 2024. *Reflections of Dance along the Brahmaputra: Celebrating Dance in North East India*. London and New York: Routledge. 290 pages.

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Biswas, Debanjali. "Debarshi Prasad Nath, Ralph Buck, and Barbara Snook, eds. 2024. *Reflections of Dance along the Brahmaputra: Celebrating Dance in North East India*. London and New York: Routledge. 290 pages." *Martor* 30, 192-95. [DOI: 10.57225/Martor.2025.13]

Reflections of Dance along the Brahmaputra is a refreshing account on dances of India's easternmost states. An earnest effort to treat a wide range of movement traditions, this collection of essays expounds how community-led embodied practices draw on ancestral legacies and resources to give shape to dance in the twenty-first century. Interwoven throughout the text is the idea that community engagement is integral for the sustenance of dance not only in

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rituals, but also in spaces regulated by state and national institutions of culture and higher education. The book is an output of a coalition between Tezpur University (Assam, India) and the University of Auckland (New Zealand) fostering collaborative research partnerships. Editors Debarshi Prasad Nath, Barbara Snook and Ralph Buck thread the relationships between artistic practice and lived experience across various communities while drawing out the place of dance in society.

In the introductory chapter, Parasmoni Dutta begins with the geocolonial framework in order to develop a more adequate understanding of the gap in the knowledge on cultural forms and practices of the eight states in the Indian northeast – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. It is rightly stated, that dance practices “testify to this liminal characteristic of the region in relation to the cultural practices of the Indian mainland” (p. 8), and indicates that dance engenders a collective well-being. Alongside “assemblage of representative descriptions” (p. 9), the chapter outlines the contexts under which many community dances are thriving. The sweeping overview falls short in engaging with the complexities of dance in the region, including the inevitability that with time, culture *will* change, and experimentation in creative practices will bring its inherent ability to cultivate collaboration outside community. It is equally important to mention the conditions under which cultures are disappearing in Brahmaputra valley.

Pradip Jyoti Mahanta writes a short historiography of Sattriya dance and Anwesa Mahanta pens the “nuances of embodiment” through her insight as a Sattriya practitioner (p. 34). Building on literary, oral and kinaesthetic practices fulfilling “ritual pursuits in support of religious services” (p. 26), movement traditions blossomed under the care of Sattri, the monastic establishments that function as socio-religious and cultural centres in Assam. Amidst rekindling of the state’s cultural heritage, one of the most significant turns in staging Sattriya emerged in late 20th century, when female performers were trained to dance what was up till then, a monastic tradition (pp. 29-30), and when Sattriya was given the recognition as a classical dance at a wider national level. Over the last decades, intellectual enquiry on the distinctions between ritual dance and staged dance, has further expanded the repertoire of Sattriya.

Incorporating objects at dance and ritual sites could bring about symbolic extensions of cultural identity, in a process which elevates expressive possibilities and push creative boundaries. In stating the link between dance and material culture which Anwesa Mahanta defines as “tangible dimensions,” the author draws upon literary descriptions of objects and how they are expressed by the practitioner’s gestures and physicality. She outlines how place-making of Assam is connected with dance, or how the objects assimilated to embellish the dancer, are hand-crafted in various places of the state. She draws out how her dance brings together the symbolic, the material, and the experiential. Both chapters offer overview on how exponents of Sattriya drew on collective memory in the process of transmission, rearranging each of the dances by decorating them with frills of rhythmic feats, movements, and gestures.

Alison East and Barbara Snook’s chapters discuss the essence of reciprocity in fostering an even understanding on community dances in Assam through ethnographic fieldwork and movement workshops. East’s reflective account seeks to understand the “relationship of dance to community life” in Assam (p. 46). Braided with experiences of students of the University of Otago and artists of KALPA, Assam, the exchange of knowledge of dance, society and culture is conceptualised as *Sannidhi* or confluence. Interspersed with field reports and teachable moments, the chapter captures various points of encounter between the visitors from New Zealand and their hosts. Snook engages with facets of pedagogy that encourage creative and cultural thinking. Central to the chapter are five case studies that introduce unknown ways of moving with intent and purpose of learning creatively inside classrooms. Removed from society or rituals, the curriculum embraces spontaneity, intuitiveness and joy. Facilitated by Snook and her team, the participants “generated their own rules and responses to accommodate new understandings” (p. 155).



Noting a lacuna in the gendered and feminist discourse of local dances, Moushumi Kandali studies the women who dance Bihu, Sattriya, and participate in the Bodo ritual of Kherai. Kandali makes some pertinent points about the erotic “gaze” on *Bihuwoti* dancers in stage performances, VCDs and music videos. A more compelling narrative arises from the analysis of gaze on the *Doudini*, the dancer-priestess of the Bodo Kherai Puza. She observes, despite being venerated as an empowered deity, beneath the gaze of the public—the undressing and adorning of the dancing body—is an exploitation of labouring, vulnerable women (p. 146). A comparativist approach to analyse dancers across sacred traditions provides copious information on form, practice and spectatorship, and the chapter does not shy away from asserting a paradigm beyond the cultural hierarchisation as normally seen in “tribal” and “non-tribal” peoples.

Kherai’s dance world is further mapped with great attention by Madhurima Goswami, who situates dance within customary performing contexts. The figure of the *Doudini* is evoked as a mediator between the community and divinities. Goswami observes how the ritual is organised through kinship and village networks, but the female dancer-priests perform by themselves, and often live in isolation as they carry the knowledge and stigma of the role as well as the contempt of the community. As some of the *Doudini* dances are no longer performed, they have been erased from public memory. She also hints at erasure and restructuring of Bodo culture when it was noted that a tree worshipped by ancestors of the Bodo was chopped to make a prayer hall (p. 63). Otherwise, the community in each of the villages eagerly participates in the Kherai Puza even though some of the movements seem abstract to them. On a long-term basis, community members are constructing movements for inter-generational transmission, which Goswami frames as “restored behaviour” (p. 75).

Women from Koch Rajbangshi, a trans-border ethnic community of the region, pray to the divinity *Hudum Deo*, by dancing around *Hudum Khuti*, which is an erect plantain pole and a symbol of fertility. The ritual seeks rain for agriculture and fulfilment of desires. The dance movements mimic everyday agricultural activities. Free from the male gaze, movements, lyrics and the context from which the dance emerges are erotically charged. Preetinicha Barman likens the nude dancing women with parched soil, “left arid and fallow for lack of rain” (p. 80). If the author addressed a few of the conditions under which local forms of feminism flourish amidst a heteropatriarchal system, and not rely entirely upon the premise that women sustain procreation in every aspect of agrarian as well as conjugal life, then sensuality and power—which she only mentions in passing—could have lent a more nuanced insight on embodiment in dancing for the *Hudum*.

Dances of indigenous communities amplify the connection between them and nature. Their dances also accrue social significance when they are performed as choreographies in formal ceremonies. Mousumi Mahanta searches for meanings the tribes of Assam have ascribed to their folk dances (p. 94), and she gathers that through performing the “folk,” the tribes “strengthen their ethnic identity” (p. 101), which are further “given a platform by local governments for the purpose of supporting tourism” (p. 102). Although it is mentioned in the methodology that participant and expert interviews from the Rabha, Mishing, Karbi, Tiwa, and Deori ethnic groups have been conducted through ethnographic research, the readers are given fairly concise summaries of the significant dances of each tribe. This strips an opportunity to dip into the lexicon of meanings that can indicate how the communities’ connection with nature is threatened during calamities, or trace matters pertaining to communicability and power in performance where both government and the peoples rely on dances to ground matters of ethnic identity.

Co-authors Parash Jyoti Moran and Hashik N.K. research culture of the Morans, a patriarchal community with over hundred clans who dance during the festival of Bohag or Rongali Bihu. The chapter discusses in detail the various socio-ritualistic aspects of the festival, including the gendered segregation in dance and lyrics of the invocatory and narrative songs. However, it foregoes analysing

the danced segments, as well as why the annual collective re-embodiment during seeding of the paddies during Bihu, its history and memory are important.

Exploring social media and the politics of dance, Jayanta Vishnu Das's chapter aims to refresh the new knowledge on the contemporary practices and circulation of dance. Framed around transitions in media practices after economic liberalisation in India, the author reviews traditional dance and community festivals within spaces that generate commerce and visibility, such as the Assamese television and video content sharing platforms. While enquiring if media prejudices slip into representation of dance, Das asks if indigenous dance can be framed independently of these representations. He does not answer the question. He makes an important point, which is on global platforms and on social media, "difference is used as a tool for attracting audience and tourists, and dance creates a visual metaphor. What was once captured through the lens of the colonial ethnographer, is today staged for the world to see" (p. 132). A few examples from the state sponsored festivals he cites, such as the Hornbill, Dambuk, Sanagi, Majuli, would have enriched the chapter.

The book has two major oversights that loses the authors' appeals to readers about recognising marginality. Firstly, the authors of the publication do not engage with critical dance writings on historical, archival or ethnographic perspectives on the region. In the past decade, the discursive landscape of dance in India's northeast region have been framed in the works of Rehanna L. Kheshgi (*Crowning the Bihu Queen*, 2022; *Queering Assamese Bihu Festival Performance*, 2023), Debanjali Biswas (*Dance Cultures*, 2022), Georgie Pope (*Mobilising Assamese Vaishnavite performance practices*, 2020), Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (*Dancing to the State*, 2017) and Erik de Maaker (*Performing the Garo Nation*, 2013). Engagement with works such as these, could have deepened the sense of varied creative practices in the face of "threat of globalisation-induced cultural homogeneity" where "every dance is a conscious political expression of a culture" (p.5). While the focus on indigenous society and rituals is commendable, the structure of the book lacks the space to allow for serious contemplation on dance itself.

Secondly, the fluvial land along one of the world's largest braided waterways—the mighty Brahmaputra and its neighbouring regions, has borne witness to fierce climate change, intense authoritarianism, political disenfranchisement, disparate accounts of state-making, and self-determination movements in postcolonial India. These processes continue to have ramifications and repercussions within dance and its expressions, histories, legacies as well—the absence of which is deeply felt in the writings. To believe simply in the restorative aspect of performing arts is being naïve as it simplifies the cost at which performing arts is sustained, funded and allowed to represent the communities of the region. To really speak on the greater diversity of the arts in northeast India—*margi* or *desi*—i.e., structured or spontaneous, classical or vernacular—entails tapping into the embodied memories of many of the dances that have not been documented, or are running the risk of becoming extinct as the communities themselves struggle to keep up with the old ways of moving with shifting spaces, observed more tangibly through the loss of forests, agricultural and mineral-rich lands.

In the last part of the book, the readers meet impassioned educators and performers. The chapters by Juri Gogoi Konwar, Gaurav Rajkhowa, Mandakini Baruah, and Mayuri Bordoloi succeed in narrating individual perspectives on "doing" dance and dance-related research, and in many cases, these activities are inter-related. The biographical profiles reveal how arts are nurtured in spite of dwindling patronage, public perception, expectations from rituals and performing arts, and the mobility that is granted to those who are involved in creative pursuits. Despite dedicating five chapters to artist sketches, there are passing mentions of practices and practitioners from the neighbouring states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura. The edited volume predominantly discusses performance-makers of Assam, as clearly mentioned in the introductory chapter (p.2). For the publication, *Celebrating Dance in Assam* would have been a more fitting title.

Michael Heaney. 2023. *The Ancient English Morris Dance*. Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd. 536 pages; 94 figures.

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The Ancient English Morris Dance is the latest work published by Michael Heaney, the result of decades of research and immersion in the topic. According to Heaney, the book provides "a chronological account of the history of Morris dancing" (144), spanning from medieval records to contemporary practices. It traces the circumstances that shaped Morris dance from its first record on 19 May 1448 to the present day, in a descriptive rather than interpretive manner. The author presents a wide range of historical documents, giving readers a multifaceted understanding of the dance evolution.

While the primary focus is the scholarly analysis and documentation, the author skilfully weaves in anecdotes that engage and entertain a broader audience. These carefully placed stories serve as vivid vignettes that humanise the historical account. As a result, the book appeals not only to academics who seek rigorous analysis and documentation, but also to general readers who may encounter it by chance and become drawn to its subject. By blending academic rigour with engaging storytelling, the author bridges the gap between specialised scholarship and wider readership, expanding the book's reach and impact inviting a diverse range of readers to explore the rich history and cultural significance of Morris dance.

An exceptional facet of Morris dancing highlighted in the book, and one that personally resonated with me, is its detailed portrayal of the many roles it has played throughout history. Notably, Morris dance is shown not only as something shaped by its environmental and socio-political context, but also as a dynamic vehicle for engaging with and responding to the dominant cultural trends of different periods. Through meticulous analysis and compelling narratives, the book demonstrates how Morris dance has served as an active medium for addressing and reflecting the pressing issues of different periods, spanning centuries of cultural evolution. This nuanced exploration underscores the adaptive capacity of both the dance and its dancers and highlights its profound significance as a form of artistic expression and a mirror of the socio-cultural dynamics of the eras in which it thrived.

In conclusion, *The Ancient English Morris Dance* written by Michael Heaney is an invaluable resource for scholars and enthusiasts alike who explore the rich history of Morris dance. This work serves not merely as a chronological account but as a rich tapestry interwoven with threads of social, political, and cultural contexts that have shaped its development over centuries. Moreover, the book goes beyond mere description, examining the underlying motivations and implications of Morris dance's evolution and offering readers valuable insights into the broader cultural dynamics at play. Through careful analysis of archival documents, folkloric sources, and scholarly literature, Heaney provides a nuanced understanding of how Morris dance has been shaped by, and in turn has shaped, the socio-political context in which it has existed. By exploring the myriad transformations that Morris dance has undergone over the centuries, Heaney invites readers on a journey of discovery that illuminates the profound significance of this ancient tradition and its enduring relevance in today's world.

Sándor Varga. 2023. *Változások egy mezőségi falu tradicionális tánckultúrájában* [Transformations in the Traditional Dance Culture of a Village in the Mezőség Region]. Budapest, Cluj-Napoca: Hagyományok Háza and Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság. 294 pages.

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If a single term were to be highlighted from Sándor Varga's 2023 publication, it would be "transformation." This is not only because the term appears in both the book's title and in the titles of seven chapters, but also because it highlights a process that has increasingly characterised the research of Hungarian folk dance culture over the past one and a half decades.

Sándor Varga's book¹ is a revised version of his doctoral dissertation defended in 2012, drawing on more than 30 years of research. The book was published by the Hungarian Heritage House in Budapest, founded in 2001, and the Kriza János Ethnographic Society in Cluj-Napoca. This dual affiliation reflects the two sides of the author's professional life: fieldwork was conducted in the village of Vișea (in Hungarian: *Visa*), located 40 kilometres northwest of Cluj, in Cluj County, Romania, while the processing of the data and Varga's professional affiliation are connected to Hungary (Szeged and Budapest).

The language of the book is characterised by a blend of scholarly precision and readability, with personal anecdotes about field experiences often appearing in the footnotes. However, these recollections are by no means secondary—they weave a rich fabric of the village's traditions, bringing community members to life, and showing that fieldwork is far more than a mere systematic collection of data and presentation of dry information. These personal moments also testify to the researcher's gradual immersion in the field:

In another instance, when a local man in Țentea learned that we were foreigners, he insisted on treating us. We entered the tavern, where it turned out that no goods had been brought in for weeks—the last beer had just been consumed by another local man. After a brief discussion, he offered us the remaining half-bottle of drink, which we then shared in great camaraderie. This was the most delicious beer I have ever had. (p. 9, translation by the author)

In addition to the personal perspectives of the fieldwork, the amount of collected and processed data is impressive. Over the course of 30 years of research, Varga participated in 13 weddings, ten balls, six sheep-measuring events,² and several house parties and discos. He organised more than sixty dance recordings and was involved in recording nearly 100 hours of analog and digital video footage, featuring about 150 individuals and nearly all the village's dancers. He conducted interviews with more than 100 informants from Vișea—including Hungarian, Romanian, and Roma individuals—recording nearly 500 dance-related narratives.³ During the fieldwork, more than 10,000 photographs were taken and over 500 archival photographs were

digitised. The collected materials indicate numerous research directions: Varga has examined dance customs, dance etiquette, dance teaching, dance proxemics, shouted dance calls,⁴ and the use of dance-related vocabulary. He has done so using the tools of ethnochoreology, which combines a dance-folkloristic approach (describing dance materials, dance organisation, and dance events) with a dance-anthropological one (focusing on the dancer and the community). Through this dual approach, Varga introduced perspectives not previously applied in Hungarian folk dance research—an achievement highlighted by the committee of his habilitation presentation in 2023. Varga used multiple data collection methods. During his long-term fieldwork, he administered questionnaires, conducted participant observation (supplemented by the embodiment method, drawing on his practical dance knowledge), carried out semi-structured and narrative interviews, and applied dance filming, photography, and feedback interview techniques. Throughout his time in the community, he actively participated in the villagers' daily life and festivities.

Transformation is not only a central theme of the research, but it also characterises the researcher's perspective, underscoring the necessity of the long-term fieldwork conducted by Varga. One of the key merits of his work is that, in contrast to approaches that treat Hungarian folk dance as frozen moments in time, Varga takes a critical stance, interpreting the data within a broader context. He considers macro-, meso-, and micro-environmental factors into account, and embeds them within social, cultural, economic, and political frameworks, thereby approaching the subject holistically. For this reason, he begins his book with a thorough historical overview, incorporating aspects of microhistory and historical anthropology, as he regards these factors as having significantly influenced the dance culture of the *Mezőség* region (Transylvanian Plain)—influences that are still visible today. Varga intentionally does not confine his focus to “archaic” phenomena. He also examines 20th-century ballroom dances, the impact of the disco culture of the 1970s, and the revival movements linked to the staging of traditional dances. He does not overlook the effects of globalisation, the dynamics of economic crises and booms, labor migration, or the arrival of dance trends from Western Europe—all of which have shaped local traditional (dance) culture.

The 294-page book is divided into four major thematic sections. The opening chapters present the scientific approaches that frame the study and trace the historical and ecological changes that have shaped the local society. Varga then presents data on dancing, dances, the spatial organisation of traditional dance culture in the *Mezőség* region, the spatial practices of the dances in *Vișea*, and the changes in the dance repertoire over time. He then analyses the collected material in relation to the continuously changing context and explores the transformation of *Vișea*'s dance culture in the 20th century. The book is complemented by a photo appendix consisting of colourful images which, although only a small fragment of the researcher's collection, offer a glimpse into the everyday life, festivities, dance events, and social relationships in *Vișea*.

The latter aspect is particularly important, as the author has not only shared his research findings within the academic community but has also engaged with the community he studied, by applying the method of collaborative ethnography. This approach reflects the researcher's attitude, which Varga described as follows:

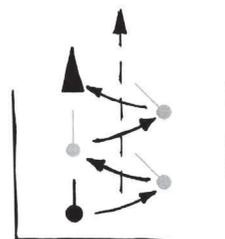
Neither during the fieldwork nor in the analysis did I deny my emotional and aesthetic bias toward the people of *Vișea* and their traditional dances. I never sought to maintain the illusion of objectivity with a so-called “value-free” researcher attitude. [...] Understanding *Vișea*'s dance culture through its own concepts was only possible by learning the local value system, and this only worked when, through dancing together or discussing dance, we “found each other with the informants.” (p. 30, translation by the author)

The quality relationships that developed over the years between the author and the group under study provided him the opportunity to continue the process of mutual reflection not only in the field but also during the process of writing. This illustrates the diversity and depth of the researcher's role, as well as the responsibility that goes beyond standard professional ethics. Alongside the scholarly demand for analysis, the researcher's empathetic relationship with the subjects of his research is also evident—a quality through which Varga firmly establishes himself as a 21st-century scholar. He demonstrates that change is not only recognised in the subject of study but also in the scientific paradigms themselves, and he positions his work accordingly.

Although the author has spent three decades researching the dance culture of the Mezőség region, he does not consider his work concluded. Returning to the field—either in person or through existing recordings—he plans to refine his observations on the use of space, exploring how individual dancers create dance in different proxemic situations, how dancers adapt to one another within the community, and how layers of social and cultural processes shape these practices. He also aims to describe the characteristics of the cultural relationships across different social groups. We eagerly await his further findings and strongly recommend reading his book.

NOTES

1. The book is written in Hungarian, with summaries in English and Romanian.
2. Prior to grazing, villagers measure for each owner their sheep milk-yield to decide how many times an owner can milk the sheep while they are grazed in the common herd during the summer season. This custom was of extraordinary economic significance in the communal life. The milk measuring is traditionally followed by a celebration featuring folk dance.
3. Varga (2023, 20-21).
4. The vocal prompts or exclamations dancers make during traditional dance occasions and during staged dance performances. These vocal prompts are often rhythmic and improvised.





In this issue of Martor, we have aimed to publish a diverse yet coherent body of knowledge related to traditional dance, which, at the same time, is able to respond to the social, cultural, and artistic issues of our time. We hope that we will contribute to developing a sensitive scholarly approach to the problems of dance, which is capable of interpreting contemporary cultural processes without losing sight of historical explanations, and which draws its conclusions from analyses based on a thorough knowledge of the material. We want to make it possible for ethnochoreology with a focus on historical and formal issues and for the dynamically transforming dance anthropology to meet in a way that allows them to maintain their specific identities, to avoid falling into the traps of fashionable populism, while respecting precise scientific criteria, and to be able to provide important impulses for each other and other disciplines.

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