

Manifesto for a new breed of folk dance teachers

by **Alkis Raftis**

From the anthropological and sociological point of view, human societies can be distinguished into two very broad categories: preindustrial and industrial, or traditional and modern [1]. An essential criterion for operating this distinction is the corresponding mode for the transmission of knowledge. The traditional mode is through the master/apprentice relationship, while the modern mode is through the teacher/pupil relationship.

These two modes differ radically and determine not only the context but also the content of the knowledge transmitted. Here we will not examine the particular characteristics of the two modes, we will only see their application in dance, folk dance in particular.

If I want to learn a particular dance in the traditional way, all I have to do is ask a friend to show it to me at home or any private place, at a moment convenient for both of us. It could be a dance that I have witnessed around me since childhood, one that I want to learn in order to dance with my friends and relatives. They have also learned it in the same way, for the same purpose.

I can learn how to dance in another way, that is by enrolling in a particular course or by joining a dance group. Even if the steps involved are the same, the method of learning is different, for several reasons:

1.1 **The person** who demonstrates the dance is a teacher, that is someone who teaches dance regularly, more or less systematically, whether as an amateur or as a professional. The teacher is not a friend or a relative of mine.

1.2 **Instruction** takes place in a predetermined, special space - classroom or dancehall - and within fixed time limits.¶

1.3 **The dance** I learn is not necessarily one that I have been exposed to previously; it is probably one that I have not even seen before, but the teacher has selected it for me.

1.4 **The dance** I learn is usually not one that I will dance with my friends and relatives, because they either do not dance at all or they have not learned this particular dance.¶¶

These are the four basic characteristics of the modern mode of learning (whether dance or anything else) which are in opposition to the traditional mode. Anything learned in one of the two modes is automatically "branded" by it and constitutes a fundamentally different type of knowledge. We will class a particular dance as traditional or modern, not according to its movements but according to its mode and context of transmission.

Modern dance idioms are taught in the modern mode; ballet for example has to be taught in a ballet school by a qualified teacher. On the other hand, traditional dances are always learned in the traditional mode, as people perpetuate them in villages all over the world. In ballroom dances, an intermediate idiom, we have a choice: one can learn the tango either in class with a dance-master or by a friend at home. When a traditional dance is transmitted in the modern mode (i.e. by a teacher who possesses a varied repertoire, in a classroom, to persons who have not "inherited" it, etc.) then we will call it a "folk" dance. We use the term "popular" dance (in Europe the term "national", in the USA "ethnic" are used as equivalents) when we do not want to be specific as to whether the dance in question is traditional or folkloric.

The main problem in teaching folk dance (traditional dance is not taught, it is "shown") lies in the fact that teachers throughout the world do not realise the above distinction. They probably believe that in the change from one mode of transmission to another - actually passing from one dance idiom to another - the essence remains the same. Which is certainly not true.

In folk dance, unlike other dance idioms such as ballet, ballroom or jazz, there is always a specific frame of reference, an archetype. This is the corresponding traditional dance from which the folk form has derived. We can approach this model if we chose to (though this is not necessary, especially when dance is used for performance, for recreation, or for simple exercise). But we cannot fully reach it, for in present day society we cannot replicate the conditions prevailing in traditional society [2]. Judged by the four criteria stated above, our dance today is bound to be folkloric. This does not imply at all a value judgement - dance idioms as well as language idioms cannot be good or bad, they are simply different.

If folk dance today is an object of criticism or disdain, it is not because it is compared to traditional dance (the recurring question of authenticity!). It is because, being a modern dance idiom, it fails in comparison to other modern dance idioms. During the passage from traditional to folk, dance has lost the values of traditional society without acquiring the virtues of modern, systematic approach. It now stands in between two worlds as a homeless, impoverished art form.

A hundred years ago, the idea of folk dancing sprouted in the United States and soon was transplanted to Europe [3]. Conditions prevailing at that time determined the approach to it. Then, physical education teachers had the idea that popular dances from one ethnic group can be taught to persons from another as a means for exercise and recreation. Also, within the same country, residents of one region can learn the dances of another region, mainly for patriotic purposes. Soon they discovered too that these dances can be presented on stage as a colourful, exotic spectacle.

Until then, some popular dances had been presented but in totally different contexts: either as ballroom dances for all, or as character dances for ballet audiences.

However simple this idea may sound today, it was really revolutionary; it opened a new era in the world history of dance. Until then in all humanity, no one would think of learning the dances of another ethnic group; they were of no use to him since he could not dance them with his own people. Sometimes a foreign dance was adopted collectively by a social group, but only after passing a long process of adaptation to the local style was it finally included in the local repertoire [4]. No one learned a dance as a "foreign"

dance, a dance that was not or would not be accepted globally and integrated into the social activities of his own group.

So a new dance idiom, folk dance, was born. It was at that time, upon the first steps of the folk dance movement, that a serious imbalance was created which persists until now and constitutes its handicap. From the three main functions of dance, one was rejected fully:

2.1 **Dance as a physical activity.** Most people derive pleasure from rhythmical movement, even if dancing alone. Listening to a melody, singing and moving in unison with others is even more enjoyable.

2.2 **Dance as a spectacle.** Even to one who remains seated or who does not know how to dance, watching others dance is usually pleasurable.

2.3 **Dance as a social function.** Besides the above qualities, a dance which is an acknowledged expression of a social group - that is a dance wherein a social group recognizes itself, feels mirrored in it - is a complete dance.

This third dimension of dance is particularly visible in traditional dance, in comparison with dance idioms of modern society that have their social content variably interpreted by individual creation. In folk dance, this dimension has been neglected by teachers. To recover it, a new generation of folk dance teachers must be brought forward, teachers who master and are able to transmit all five categories of elements for each dance:

3.1. **Ethnographical elements:** Name or names of the dance, locality where it is danced (history of the place, physical surroundings, human geography), related customs, scene and atmosphere into which it is found.

3.2. **Functional elements:** Etiquette, rules, floor patterns, associated behaviour, terminology, procedures.

3.3 **Costume elements:** Costumes description and terminology of costume parts and their accessories, fabrication, maintenance, way of putting on.

3.4 **Music elements:** Melodies, rhythmical patterns, songs, instruments etc. associated with the dance.

3.5 **Cinetic elements:** Basic moments of body and members, variations according to sex, age, status, circumstance, village etc. Possibilities of improvisation.

Besides mastering and transmitting the above elements, the folk dance teacher must keep in mind that:

4.1 **The dances he (she) is teaching** do not "belong" to him(her), they belong to the people who have inherited them from their ancestors in the traditional way. The teacher is like a relay station, like a communications satellite. He captures messages from one direction and diffuses them to various directions. A diligent teacher copies as faithfully as possible the dance movements and acquires as much information connected with the dances, both from the best available sources: at best, the old people in the villages. He must be conscious that he is teaching a foreign language, one that can never become his mother language. This is also true within the same country, when the teacher's origin is not from the particular region of the dance. Unless of course he happens to be a traditional dancer according to the definition already given.

4.2 **Popular dances** of all kinds (traditional, folk, ballroom etc.) are meant to be danced by groups of friends in festivals, weddings and other celebrations. Today we are

obliged to teach them in gym halls, to classes whose members barely know each other, within one or two hours, in silence and abstinence. But the essence of these dances lies not only in their original movements, it is inextricable with the context of their execution. Teaching the movements, however well, or even performing them on stage is not enough; we have an obligation to create opportunities for the dancers to thoroughly enjoy themselves as a group. Popular dance goes with good company, food, wine, song and music. Without them it is an aseptic by-product.

In conclusion, there is a compelling need to work towards a new vision of folk dance. Otherwise, this pastime will gradually lose its reason to exist as patriotism and nostalgia cease to be the main motives for its revival. Ideally, folk dance teachers should be equipped to operate on all three levels - professional, social and ideological - sketched below:

5.1 **Professional.** The teacher should combine thorough training, practical as well as theoretical, with first-hand ethnographic experience. That is, classroom as well as fieldwork background. He/she should be sufficiently endowed physically to absorb kinetic knowledge from his traditional masters. He/she should be equally endowed intellectually to absorb scientific knowledge from a number of areas of scholarship: sociology, ethnology, history, psychology, medicine etc.

5.2 **Social.** As a servant of the arts, he cannot but feel (in default of being) an artist himself: singer, musician, painter, embroiderer etc. But, most of all, he serves dance as a popular art, that is an art rejecting the separation between performers and audience. Nowadays people sit in front of TV or sit in a restaurant, or sit in a theatre, or sit in a stadium, waiting passively to be entertained by professional entertainers. If we can learn only one thing from traditional culture, it is that we can be producers of our own entertainment. A true folk dance teacher is a reveller, he draws his dancers and others around him into reveling with his dances. He does not just teach dances, he relays the beauty of an entire culture (a lost or almost-lost culture), especially the power of this culture to unite people into down-to-earth celebration.

5.3 **Ideological.** Amateurs of folk dance have not yet come to realize that they constitute a social movement in each and every country. This movement is similar to the ecological movement; in fact an older, larger and broader one in respect of values defended. By their number (thousands of teachers, hundreds of thousands of dancers in folk groups, even in a small country), by their social representativity (city and village, all age groups, occupations, levels of income etc.), by their grass-roots organizational structure, by their relative independence from institutions and other social forces (political or religious groups, government agencies, the official arts, the press etc.), they can rightly be considered a social movement of great importance.

But newspapers do not write about folk dance events, though they lengthy columns by ballet and contemporary dance critics. Television rarely shows folk group performances and when it does it is in the most disappointing way. Teenagers do join folk groups in large numbers, only to quit them in equal numbers when they reach their twenties. The man in the street regards folk dance enthusiasts as some kind of romantic, colourful, pass, freaks, compared to the glamorous image of the other dance idioms.

Almost all the general books published on dancing every year have a chapter for each idiom (primitive, traditional, historical, ballet, modern, jazz, etc.) but not a word on folk;

likewise for magazines. Governments and sponsors everywhere give much less financial support to dance than to opera, theatre, or painting. Within the dance budget, folk dance is certain to receive a fraction of what other dance forms get.

Folk dance and physical education teachers, group leaders, choreographers and scholars alike are responsible for this situation. From the beginning, they have not taken this object seriously enough, concentrating only on its recreational aspect. They have not believed in folk dance's power to create active entertainment, to carry the values of an entire culture, to present a different view of the world; an alternative way of celebrating and living.

Now, though numbers flourish, the quality of folk dancing and the average age of participants are rapidly falling. No wonder, considering the low level of instruction given by most teachers. Just showing the steps or the movements can probably be acceptable in other dance idioms, but in popular dance it is a miserable counterfeit of the original.

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