

# Ancient orchesis and Europe

*Raftis, Alkis*

Throughout its history, European artistic dance does not cease to regard Ancient Greece as a source of inspiration. We can see that ballet, from its very early steps in 16<sup>th</sup> century courts to its current form, has drawn from a multitude of themes emanating from the ancient Greek world. The Olympus gods are the main heroes in most dance intermezzi enriching operas, tragedies, and comedies that emerge during that time period in France and Italy.

The reader might be surprised by the initial mention of artistic dance in this text, when our subject matter is amateur dance. The reason for this is that artistic dance in its early steps is to a great extent an amateurs' playground: the dancers come from the French court's nobility and that kind of spectacle –choreographed by dance teachers– is aimed exactly at giving them the chance to dance and to be admired. It is not until 1681 that professional women dancers make their first appearance on stage.

Then, it is time for the creation of classical ballet in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; it is to flourish considerably in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, always complimented by a variety of ancient Greek themes. Gods like Apollo or Orpheus are abundant, and there is a profusion of bacchantes, priestesses, satyrs and warriors. Greek mythology presents a field particularly fertile with ideas to choose from, but it can also be used as a pretext for the bourgeoisie of that period to project their fantasies.

Moreover, any representation of the ancient world provides the dancers with an alibi for their body emancipation. In vivid contrast with the morals of that period, their movements are now free and some parts of their body can be exposed to view while on stage, a standard practice in ancient times.

Since Renaissance times, all art forms draw their themes almost solely from mythology, and dance is no exception. Historical knowledge of the ancient world receives no attention, and the same can be said of lessons learnt through it; on the contrary, what matters is the symbolic projection of that knowledge as a guarantor of the existing state of affairs, which was presented as its continuation as well as its heir.

We reach the 1900's, when ballet has already discovered its limitations and goes through a deep crisis. It was then that Isadora Duncan comes on the scene not to reanimate ballet but in order to give artistic dance its own new definition. Duncan finds inspiration in Greeks, not in their dance themes, but in their movements. She dances not exactly clothed but rather wrapped in multiple veils, and barefoot. She rejects any movement encoding as well as any predefined choreography.

Everyone has been told the rest of the story, given the startling developments during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both in the revitalization of ballet and in the evolution of modern dance to this day. During this period, the occurrence of references to antiquity has been decreasing, since there is no need for an imaginative space that can simultaneously be exotic and idealized.