

WHY, SOME OF MY FAVORITE DANCES ARE CHOREOGRAPHED!

by Loui Tucker

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Those of you who know me know I am passionate about international folk dance and promote it whenever and wherever I can. From time to time I read articles in which the author laments the lack of "real" dances being presented at workshops, and the proliferation of choreographed dances. At dance events, I often banter with others about the word "choreography" and the evident taboo associated with it. As an advocate for dances of all cultures and also as someone who specializes in the dances of Israel, it is painful to hear someone say that many of our dances, including Israeli dances, are not "real" folk dances because they are choreographed. I believe that the dances of Israel are folk dances and that choreographed dances have outnumbered "real" dances for decades. I also believe there never were a lot of "real" dances in our repertoire.

Which dances are the "real" folk dances?

Most of the people who use the term "real" also call them village dances. I've occasionally heard dancers planning a trip to Europe say they look forward to dancing some of their favorite dances with the natives. Unless they ask for a čoček, a syrtos, a čačak, a hambo, a kolo, a horo, a pravo, or a few others, they may be disappointed.

I call them foundation dances, the seeds from which choreographed dances are grown. With some exceptions, certain characteristics are shared:

- They have a basic figure or pattern that is done over and over, with a few ornaments, embellishments, or variations permitted, frequently allowing the dancers to converse while dancing.
- They are relatively simple dances that have been around for many decades, if not centuries, are easy to learn, easy to remember, and easy to pass down to the next generation.
- They can be danced to many different melodies, but require a specific rhythm.
- At dance events, bands play music for these dances, often for 10-20 minutes for one dance.

- They usually have a one-word name such as *čoček*, *sa*, *syrtos*, *čačak*, *halay*, *hambo*, *kolo*, *horo*, *pravo*, *csárdás*.

What about dances that don't share these characteristics? There is a high probability they were choreographed.

- A descriptor is added to the name of the "real" dance such as *godecki čačak*, *horehronsky csárdás*, *divčibarsko kolo*, *vidinsko horo*, *giuševska râèenica*.
- They have multiple figures.
- They are usually done to a specific piece of music.
- The pieces of music rarely last even five minutes and are usually around three minutes.
- The dance is repeated 2-5 times to that specific piece of music.
- They are generally too complex to be easily learned, by following another dancer, except by a more advanced dancer.

Choreographed dances wear many disguises

The reluctance to use the word "choreographed" exists in part because our dance teachers have been disguising choreographies for many years. Some teachers are upfront about the history and background of the dances they teach. As part of the written description, and when introducing the dance, they will state: "This dance was choreographed by So-and-So in Such-and-Such year." Teachers of Israeli dances have always done this, and I'm happy to see that this openness is becoming more common.

Some teachers acknowledge their creation with phrases like, "From the many common steps, a few were chosen for this arrangement," or "This is an arrangement of dance steps," or "...original steps were arranged to fit this recording," or "... based on authentic folk material and arranged for recreational folk dancing in the United States." Why avoid using the word *choreographed*?

Other disguises for the word "choreography" are "Source: Carla Sepeda" or "Learned from Michael Morganstern." The writer of the dance description knows Carla and Michael choreographed the dances, but prefers to avoid mentioning it.

You'll also see these code words: "A dance in the Blah-de-Blah style," or "A dance typical of the dances in the Blah-de-Blah region." These dances were choreographed by arranging dance movements that are common to the region.

Some dance notations attribute the Blah-De-Blah State Dance Ensemble. In other words, they were choreographed for the stage and later became part of our folk dance repertoire.

I heard an interesting story from a prominent teacher about how a dance was quickly choreographed to meet the needs of a visiting researcher who wanted to film a local dance. A leader gathered some dancers and said something like, "Okay, we want our dance to look good for this visiting American. Here's what we're going to do: We'll

do this step 8 times to the left, then this other step 8 times to the left, then we'll do three stamps to change direction and we'll do the same steps going the other way. Let's practice it once and then we will do it for their camera." That's the dance that was filmed, that's the dance that was taught, and that's the way we still dance it. Of course, no mention was made of this on-the-spot choreography when it was taught. We have many similar dances that are like insects trapped in amber, or sepia photographs of how a dance was done once by a single group of people for a camera.

If you want to add Scottish, English, Welsh and contra dances into the mix, they are said to be "devised," yet another code word for choreographed.

Many teachers help to perpetuate the taboo.

One dance teacher told his students that he did not need to choreograph new dances, with a subtext that choreography would somehow taint his product. He said he had enough material from his many seasons as a performer and, if he divided the various suites into its individual dances, he would have enough material to teach for many years. Of course he didn't choreograph these dances, but if they were performed on a stage, somebody else clearly did.

One well-known teacher organizes a festival every couple of years and invites groups from all over the country to come and perform their best material before a panel of judges. The entrance fees are collected and bundled into prizes for the groups that garner the most votes from the judges. The teacher then packages the best of those dances, teaching them on a tour of the United States. I recall watching a video during a lecture by this teacher where the video clips included a performance of the dance we had learned that morning.

Another teacher once told me that dancers didn't seem to like the dances he taught when he first came to the United States. They told him the dances were too simple and the music all sounded the same. He realized that if he hoped to make any money as a dance teacher, he was going to have to make the dances more accepted and popular. He told me he started first by combining dances from the same region, alternating Dance A with Dance B. He then experimented with some less traditional but still valid music. Finally, he admitted, he resorted to choreography.

As a final example, another teacher, after confessing the dances being taught were choreographies, responded to my question "So, why don't you tell dancers they are your choreography?" thus: "Because the dancers want to believe they are folk dances."

Are all choreographies equal?

Andor Czompo, a prominent Hungarian dance teacher, found a piece of music and put a series of typical Hungarian dance steps together to fit the music. He taught this dance to the dancers in the international dance community and it was accepted as a folk dance. This dance is not done by Hungarians.

An American dance teacher, Steve Kotansky, who specializes in dances of the Balkans, found Albanian music and put a series of typical Albanian dance steps together to fit the music. He taught his dance to the international dance community and it was accepted as a folk dance. This dance is not done by Albanians.

I can provide similar scenarios for every prominent teacher in the international dance community, from Ahmet Lüleci to Yves Moreau. These dances are like the

elephant in the living room with its hind legs propped on the coffee table. We either pretend they are not choreographed, or we acknowledge it quietly and privately, but never in public. Either way, they are accepted by most to be full-fledged folk dances in our repertoire.

Compare those scenarios to this one: Gadi Biton, a prominent Israeli dance teacher, found a piece of music and put a series of typical Israeli dance steps together to fit the music. He taught his dance to dancers in Israel and it was later taught to the international dance community. This dance is done by Israelis. For some dancers, the litmus test for a "real" dance is being able to dance it with the natives. Israeli dances pass that test. In spite of all that, Israeli dances are not considered by many to be folk dances because they are choreographed.

So now what?

Perhaps we need to have an even larger discussion about what makes a dance Bulgarian, or Greek, or Macedonian, or Russian. Is it the music? The dance steps? The teacher? The source of the dance? The age of the dance? Who dances it? And do we need to be consistent in our criteria?

Are there "real" folk dances in our repertoires today? Of course. Are there some dances besides the Israeli dances that, were we to go to the country of origin, we might be able to dance with the natives at a party or festival? Yes, absolutely. Those dances are just not in the majority, they are not the ones we tend to do in our dance clubs and classes, and they are not the ones we dance in performance groups to show the public what we do.

Don't misunderstand me: I am not trying to minimize or disparage what we all enjoy. International folk dancing has been a source of joy in my life for over forty years. I'm saying we should be honest with ourselves, and our dance teachers need to be honest with us. We don't need be afraid of the word "choreography" when describing our dances. I'd like to see us accept the reality about the dances we love and enjoy.

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