

## Book Review

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*Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation and Power* by Anthony Shay. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002. 287 pp., 35 black and white photographs. Cloth \$65.00 ISBN 0819565202. Paper \$19.95 ISBN 0819565210.

In 1969, Joann Kealiinohomoku's seminal article, "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance" created a paradigmatic shift in how the dance in general, and ballet dancing in particular, was thought about and classified by Western dance scholars. Kealiinohomoku drew attention to several critical issues, including ethnocentrism in defining and writing about "dance." Nearly thirty-four years later, Anthony Shay's *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation and Power* has the potential to create a similar reconceptualization of the way dance scholars value and subsequently write about *folk* dances.

Shay has spent more than forty years investigating, collecting memorabilia, and viewing taped as well as live performances, of some of the world's most renowned State Folk Dance Companies. In many respects his book reflects a labor of love, but a labor that is steeped in critical attention to cultural, theoretical, political, gendered, social, religious, and ethnic practices. Interdisciplinary in focus, Shay's book will appeal to anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, folklorists, and others who are concerned with studies that address cultural and political concerns as well as economics and class distinctions. His research emphasizes the need to contextualize dance research by positioning the dances, dancing, and dancers within their respective socio-cultural, and especially political, *milieu*.

Shay focuses on the following national dance companies: the *Moiseyev Dance Company* (Russia), *Ballet Folklorico de Mexico*, LADO ensemble of folk dances and songs of Croatia, Egypt (a veritable bazaar of dance companies), the *Dora Stratou Greek Dance Theatre*, and the *Turkish State Folk Dance Ensemble*. In his investigation, the author does not shy away from asking difficult questions. While he is concerned with who dances and what is danced, he also draws attention to who is *not* dancing and what is *not* danced. For example, who dances varies from company to company: the repertory of *The Moiseyev Dance Ensemble* requires dancers with formal training in ballet and character dancing, whereas *The Ballet Folklorico de Mexico* at one time drew many of its male dancers from the provinces because they could earn higher wages by dancing in the company. Likewise, when LADO first started, Shay observes that under socialism, male dancers could earn extremely respectable salaries by dancing in the company. In the 1960s, however, when capitalism replaced socialism in Croatia, the salaries for professionals (doctors, engineers, etc.) became far more lucrative, and dancing in LADO subsequently became less attractive.

Shay methodically devotes a chapter to each of the aforementioned national dance companies or countries, illustrating how the choreographic strategies of each company reflect culture-specific economic, social, and cultural positions

and biases. Shay's approach invites further socially situated investigations of State Folk Dance Ensembles—investigations that transcend the need to give pride of place to nothing more than colorful costumes, energetic and athletically elite performers, and pleasant and entertaining staging and choreography.

In his introduction, Shay immediately confronts the reader with the notion that State supported folk dance ensembles are agents of social and political power. He notes that "dance plays a role in the intricate minuet of international politics and diplomacy, creating colorful, exciting images that reach and charm millions via stage and electronic media" (p. 2). Indeed an audience's positive impression of a performance often translates into a positive impression of a nation or country *per se*. However, the situation on stage may not reflect reality on the ground. In 1995, for example, Shay viewed a live performance of the *Ballet Folklorico de Mexico* in California that included a rather romanticized choreographic depiction of young Chiapas women. That same evening on CNN he saw video footage of some Chiapas villagers being victimized by the Mexican military in efforts to quell the rebellion. The juxtaposition of these two different representations of Chiapas should give pause to those who still advocate the study of dancing and dance companies without considering their social, political and economic contexts.

To date, anthropologists of the dance have, for the most part, focused upon examinations of danced activities among a specific group of people rather than the nation-state, and the activities of State Folk Dance Ensembles have been largely neglected. According to Shay, the literature reflects a paucity of information on State Folk Dance Ensembles in large measure because the issue of authenticity is in question. Shay states that those who pursue dance research among the "nonprofessional populations of villagers and tribal people," often view State sponsored companies as nothing more than "slick," "unauthentic," and "theatrical" entities whose product is a misrepresentation of the original as well as a misrepresentation of tradition and cultural values. Those who research "authentic" material in more traditional settings question the authenticity of the material produced by the State Folk Dance Companies because, in their opinion, it reflects the whims of individual directors rather than the collective spirit of the villagers or common people who dance in non-theatrical settings (*cf.* Williams 2000 and *JASHM* Volume 12, no 3).

Shay points out that some directors of State Folk Dance ensembles take the position that it is impossible to move village dances directly to a professional stage. Amalia Hernandez, for example, who served as artistic director of *Ballet Folklorico de Mexico* until her death in November of 2000, took this position because "Without stagecraft and adaptation for size and perspective, the originals look like nothing" (p. 36). Likewise, Igor Moiseyev, the founder and director of *The Moiseyev Dance Company* claims to have had no interest in trying to recreate authentic Russian folk dancing on stage. Instead, he borrowed freely from "character dance" found in many nineteenth-century ballets and simply "expanded and developed character dance to produce a folklorized dance style that became unique to the *Moiseyev Dance Company*" (p. 35). In contrast, both *LADO* and the *Dora Stratou Greek Dances Theatre* purport

to recreate as much authenticity as possible on the professional stage. However, Shay notes that even though both companies excel in their presentations, the sense of "village" is never really recreated. At best the audience may enjoy the illusion and "spirit" of the village dances, songs and settings.

In further addressing the issue of authenticity, Shay distinguishes between those companies which embrace "essentialization" and those which opt for "particularization." For example, Igor Moiseyev, the director of *The Moiseyev Dance Company* adopts an "essentialization" position in that the costuming is color coded and uniformly styled, the music reflects a uniformly produced sound, and the dancing appears to be a more homogenized product reflecting a singularly focused national perspective. In contrast, *LADO*, under the direction of Zvonko Ljevakovic, is of a "particularization" persuasion in that it makes a concerted effort to provide regional recognition in the details of the costuming, choreography and music offerings. In these ways, each company reflects social, political, cultural and economic ideologies. In making this distinction, Shay again clearly highlights the need to examine the unique particulars of each company and situate them within their respective social, cultural, economic and political contexts.

Shay notes that the dancing done "in the field" and the dancing performed on a professional stage may be considered different genres. Nevertheless, there are important ways in which the two interact. For example, he draws attention to the influence that the State Folk Dance Companies have on non-professional groups interested in "perfecting" their performance and staging techniques. Specifically, he cites members of the *LADO* company who are engaged by non-professional dancing groups to assist in maintaining their "traditional styles." He suggests that these contrasting genres are best considered "parallel traditions": folk dancing done by the national companies and folk dancing executed by non professionals are both worthy of study and comparison. There is a "dynamic cycle that encompasses the appropriation of cultural and choreographic elements from field to stage and a return to the field of presentational elements" (p. 17). He also makes the case that "the genre of staged folk dance operates in a parallel space to folk and traditional dance 'in the field.'" "[T]he staged performances of professional state folk dance ensembles make constant reference through claims of authenticity to those dances that occur in the physical and social environments in which individuals perform dances that are native to them" (p.226).

Shay also makes reference to important ways in which the "field" groups and the professional companies differ from one another, as, for example, in the "mode of transmission." In the former, dancing may be learned through observation and informal participation, or through informal instruction from an older member of the community, whereas dancing in the State supported groups is usually learned from a professional teacher in a prescribed studio environment. He also notes that improvisation may play a large role in dances executed in the field whereas dances performed on a professional stage are usually set, well rehearsed and meticulously staged. Recognizing these differences creates a better understanding of the unique nature of each genre.

It is to Shay's credit that while he devotes a separate chapter to each of the State Folk Dance Ensembles of Mexico, Russia, Croatia, Egypt, Greece and Turkey, he does take time within each chapter to compare and contrast the similarities as well as the differences between each company. Shay discusses the dancers, their training and the company repertory. Unfortunately the author does not engage in any comparative analyses of the action signs that constitute the choreographic works performed by these companies. In so doing he elides important questions surrounding issues of authenticity and the kinds of changes that are frequently imposed when these dances are subjected to "folkloric" treatments for the stage or other non-traditional performance spaces (See Williams 2000, 2004). This omission trivializes the actual movement content, or at least relegates it to the sidelines as if there is nothing of value to be understood there, which is, of course, not the case. Focusing instead on social context, Shay grounds each chapter in a thorough examination of the socio-political history of each country.

Analyses of music and costume provide further understanding of how each company is constituted. Each chapter is grounded in a thorough examination of the socio-political history of each country. He also offers thorough discussions of how politics, religion and other national issues give identity to a company. In the chapter on Egypt, for example, he provides an in-depth analysis of how colonialism has played a role in shaping the dance performed by Egypt's professional folk ensembles (*cf.* Franken 2002). Colonialism has not only created divisions of power that distance upper and lower classes, it has also shaped the moral basis upon which the dance in Egypt has been sanctioned as appropriate or inappropriate. The role played by Islam in Egypt exposes an even greater division in class structure. Peasants are viewed with disdain by the more sophisticated upper class, whose members value the performing arts of the West over their own national performing art treasures. Shay notes well the difficulty in discussing Islam since there is no easy way to define a religion that has such varied interpretations and practitioners.

Shay also provides invaluable insight as to how each company interacts with its State government in terms of financial support. While some countries truly value their State Folk Dance Ensembles as national treasures, others have leaders who see their State Folk Dance Ensembles in terms of their own personal or political gain or even as a means of promoting tourism. Clearly there are marked differences in how each country presents its professional folk dance ensemble to outsiders. Shay duly notes that, "it is necessary to any analysis of these large national folk dance ensembles to accept the idea that they are *political* institutions. These companies are a reflection of the political and social realities and national discourses of the nation that is on display and fulfill a crucial role in a nation's strategies of representation" (p. 225).

The State supported folk dance companies also reflect public attitudes and prejudices toward race, minority groups and gender. In Saudi Arabia, for example, members of the state folk dance ensemble are all men. Shay views the exclusion of women as a political statement and a choreographic strategy that helps promote the ideology, image and identity of the supporting state government. Likewise, the Serbian State ensemble *KOLO* presents a very

biased view of its gypsy minority population in its repertory. *KOLO* performers are usually seen wearing long stockings and traditional costumes that cover their bodies. When depicting the gypsy population, however, performers appear in bare legs wearing off-the-shoulder blouses. *KOLO* performances depict the gypsies as "irresponsible," "childlike," and "sexually lax individuals who dance, sing, fight and fornicate the night away"(p.8). Shay reminds the reader that the choreographic strategies of each company are not innocent depictions of each country's culture as viewed through dancing, singing and music. Rather, the choreographic strategies are highly complex vehicles for understanding the priorities and prejudices of the populations who support them.

Throughout the book, I was impressed by the complexity of the author's investigation and developed a true appreciation for the breadth and depth with which Shay handles the material, as well as his passion for the field of folk dancing. He demonstrates that behind all the glamorous costumes, the athleticism of the dancers, and creative staging of the repertoire of State supported professional folk dance groups, lie matters of religion, politics, class, ethnicity, and gender, each calling for further investigation.

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