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Who is the Grandmother of this Dance?

Teaching ottoman-influenced folk dance using patterns of dance genealogy

Trying to trace the evolution of folk dances back to their elementary roots, I met the dances' grandmothers: archaic patterns of movement that can be regarded as the bases of elaborate folk dances. With the help of these "grandmothers" learning dances becomes much easier. Dances that at first sight seem to be very different suddenly become recognizable as members of a widespread family. The student does not have to work hard to memorize a large number of differing dances, but gets gradually acquainted - in a relaxed way - with various nice family members. Evolutionary logic helps the students to avoid cramps in their legs and brains and spares the teacher a lot of explaining. So turn up the music and enjoy learning!

In many territories previously belonging to the Ottoman Empire, we find a simple dance that everyone in those areas knows and loves. In Bulgaria it is named *Pravo Horo*; the Makedonians call it *Pravo Oro*; in Greece it's called *Hassaposervikos* or *Zonaradikos* or *Sta Tria*; the Pontic Greeks say *Omal...* and there are many more names in many different regions.

This is the grandmother dance that fascinates me most of all. There are other grandmother dances with other dance families, you can find quite a number of them in the various fields of folk dancing. But this one, with its six simple steps, seems to me to be the true queen among those grandmothers. I don't know any other dance that has developed as many variations as this one.

In my class I present you this grand old lady together with a few of her offspring. I use a teaching method that avoids explanations as far as possible, since I don't like to spend too much time without music. We glide from one variation to the next, thus perhaps physically experiencing some of the ways dance evolution may have taken. We end up with a dance from Bulgaria on the one side and a dance from Armenia on the other. Grandma has descendants in every corner of the Ottoman Empire.

Starting with the grandmother, how do we find our way down to the grandchildren? We take the six simple archetypal steps and change the pattern bit by bit.

This bit-by-bit teaching method makes it easy for the student - the teacher however has some work to do. First you have to analyze the dance you want to teach: Which dance family may it be from? Then you have to plan your strategy: What are the logical and useful steps to take?

Here is a short summary of how you can construct the transformation from grandmother into offspring: starting with the archetype, you can...

- **make a variation of an element**
(e.g. instead of "touch" you can "hop", make two quick steps instead of one slow one, make a turn instead of going straight etc.)
- **repeat an element**
(e.g. four steps instead of two)

- **extend an element**
(e.g. instead of "step and hop" you dance "1,2,3 steps and hop")
- **change direction**
(e.g. dance to the middle, go backwards etc.)
- **change the rhythm**
(e.g. begin practicing the dance pattern in a 2/4 or 4/4 beat, and later change to an irregular rhythm like 5/8, 7/8, 9/16, etc.)
- **change speed**
(e.g. first dance half speed on the same music, take a slower song, or choose speed variations on your laptop)
- **change the way you move**
(e.g. small steps instead of big steps, vibrate while stepping, swinging softly, etc.)
- **add another element**
(this might be any other element from any other dance family)
- **add arm movements**
(start without linking hands, than link hands with arms in V-position, later change to W-position, than swing arms...)

You can implement some of the bit-by-bit variations while dancing, without having to stop the music. Or you might have to explain some details briefly, but then the party can go on. This way, the process of learning a dance is dancing already. A professional dancer may accept that learning a new choreography can be hard intellectual work. But in recreational folk dance groups it makes sense to have as much fun as possible already while learning the dance. However it wouldn't hurt professionals to have fun learning by this method either.

If you decide to teach this way – bit-by-bit, with ongoing music, and without too much explanation – you will have to welcome a certain amount of chaos. Some students may be irritated when the teacher doesn't talk much. But every folk dance teacher knows that students are irritated by new dances anyway. So just trust in the power of self-organization of chaos! Research about the process of learning has found that people remember only a small percentage of what they hear, a little more of what they hear and see, and even more when they hear, see, and touch the subject of learning. Most of all they remember what they have been learning by doing and thereby overcoming a little difficulty.

The ongoing music, an encouraging atmosphere, and the teacher's good sense of humor will help to overcome any kind of possible irritation. And if it's one of those days when it's bad weather or full moon and everybody steps on everybody's toes... just choose a nice piece of music and return to the lap of grandma! And then try again.