

Haris Mantafounis

Perpetual flight

Interview by Georgia Petrali

Edited by Michalis Yelasakis

Dance... One moment its flying high, the next rolling about on the floor. Both Haris Mantafounis and Georgia Petrali know this very well. Each has their own style, both teach modern dance. In one sense dance is a concept as misunderstood as rock music. The need to be in movement has given them the need to express themselves, and the need to express themselves has given them the need to dance. It is this sort of person who dances "on the shark's fin..."

(Nikos Kavvadias wrote 'Dance on the shark's fin' in his poem Woman.)

What is your impression of dance in Greece?

My impression is that over all these years dance has been making progress in Greece. It's been 45 years since I first got involved in dance, as a student at a dance school, so my impression is that of the journey dance has been on over all these years. We could say that it began by crawling, then it tried to get to its feet, took a few steps, and now it's fallen back to the floor, with the help of modern dance, which crawls and rolls about.

But it rolls about with a good technique...

Yes! But that means that it isn't stamping its feet. So many times I've heard children coming out of a performance surprised, asking their mothers why the dancers spend so long on the floor. I think that these children have given us a sense of the point dance in Greece has reached today. Let's not forget that we have other styles of dance other than contemporary, if you exclude the Ballet.

What is the reason for this situation, as you describe it?

Fashion, a trend.

What do you mean when you say 'fashion'?

When it seems to have finished its journey, dance needs to have something new. An artist's struggle is to create something new and not to repeat himself, as well as the desire each generation has to create its own voice. This is a truth as old as art itself. And so, each generation, wanting to express itself, discards what the previous generation gave it. The same struggle between the generations that exists in the biological and social spheres also exists in art.

So should we consider that this rolling about on the floor is a stage leading to a revival?

I believe what you say is true. If we say that art is cyclical, like everything, then at some point it will be revived. Also, we can't ignore the fact that there were periods where what was considered the finest art was thought of as irrelevant a few years later. We should

acknowledge that in searching for a new method of expression – simply by looking – people in the world of dance have avoided this. Personally I agree with this, and I have made this a reality in my performances, but I don't agree that things happen very often in such an absolute way. There are people who only do this sort of thing. I like this, but I also like to take it and mix it up with something else, in order to get something new, needing neologisms from the new repertoire.

So, is it an urge to subvert the dance scene that makes most dancers create their own dance groups?

I think that the question answers itself.

Is this the only reason new groups are formed?

There are many reasons. One that is often heard recently is "Where's it worth dancing?" So everyone starts his own group to dance in. The truth is that there is no state infrastructure for creating real, commendable dance groups. This shows that, yet again, there is no policy concerning dance. This is a bad move and we've known about it for years. If there are a lot of groups nowadays, that isn't because the creativity of Greek artists is overflowing, but because they want a way to express themselves. This is connected to the fact that they don't find groups where they should be going to produce a work, they become choreographers straight away and that's it.

How could we avoid this?

We know that things could be better but, in order for this to happen, there needs to be money behind it. Since ancient times there has always been money behind art. That is obvious in America. When we had huge sponsors, we also had huge productions – now that we no longer have them, the period of scrimping is back.

America or Europe when it comes to the art of dance?

I don't believe in drawing these distinctions. I think that every people should express itself in its own way, and create its own art. If you like, I like America in the sense that it is more creative than we are. In this sense, they discover more things and take bigger risks than the Europeans. We mustn't forget that in dance it is said that Americans are "movers" and the Europeans are choreographers. Of course, I think that the Europeans have spread this rumour to flatter themselves, but it is through the American movement that most new things emerge.

What do you think about the standard of Greek dancers compared to foreign ones?

Look, we all know that there is no comparison. Just as there is no comparison in football, there is also none when it comes to dance. I don't think this applies just to dance, but to the arts in general.

What are we lacking?

Technique of course.

Are we lacking in training?

Technique is the result of training. As we very well know, art does not exist without technique. The modern dancer is certainly looking for a way of expressing himself where technique is not a requisite. That is why modern dance is so restricted: because, to a certain extent, it has renounced technique.

How is modern dance connected to classical technique and training?

In Forsythe's production this year, when you see what sort of moves they made on stage, I can tell you that they had classical dance lessons.

In groups abroad, dancers take classical dance lessons before they rehearse. How do groups work here?

They work with fanaticism! When modern dance started, dancers didn't even want to do a classical dance warm up. Greece is lagging behind whatever is happening abroad. So all those people who are doing modern dance today – with few exceptions – believe that they have found a great truth and that they have removed classical dance from the equation.

Do you think, generally speaking, that this is down to the dancer or the choreographer?

People in the world of dance become choreographers before they become dancers. So I don't think there is a distinction. They are equally to blame.

We both know that there are dance groups who begin their rehearsals without even having had a lesson as a warm up...

This is something which is totally illogical, but who can say what each and every person has in his head. At some point, if they have any rudimentary ability, the people who do this will understand that they're doing the wrong thing and that it's not getting them anywhere.

Regarding training, what is the standard of dance schools in Greece?

I can't give you a general impression of dance schools in Greece. I can only talk about the state-run school which I know really well. We could say that it is a school with people and a syllabus. Together, these two (with good material) could lead to great results. Don't forget that private schools are businesses and I don't think that they can cope with a particularly high standard.

In all of Greece is there only one state-run school?

Sadly! There is just the one.

How are we doing in terms of students?

Numerically, there are more students than there should be. This doesn't mean that the standard is especially high, especially when we agree that a private school is not going to have teachers of a high standard, because they don't have the option to pay them properly. Also, we shouldn't ignore the fact that when the students get into training at a professional level, they've already finished college. This is a huge problem in Greece. A dance school can't work miracles in just three years.

What incentive is there for children to go to dance schools at an early age and to stay there?

The incentive is the love you have for what you do. If I'm not mistaken, it was Richter, the great pianist, who said: "You can't create in people the need to create." Surely there are other external incentives which can prolong the desire and the effort. But if this isn't already a part of you and isn't what drives you, then you'll never get as far as you would if you're dancing because you can't simply just not dance.

How does the idea of using your mobile phone to vote for the best dancer you've seen on television seem to you?

That's just a ploy by the people in television to make money.

Do you think that the fact that this ploy is filling the dance schools with students is important or dangerous?

For children, it's dangerous. Because they'll go to these schools and learn what's involved and what is reality. Then, when they decide to leave and go in a particular direction which ensures they have a future, they'll have lost a year, or years, of their life. Let alone the fact that they're living a dream that proves to be in vain. The biggest danger is that, at these ages, failure can be painful and, in many cases, catastrophic.

What sacrifices does a dancer have to make?

If you really love what you're doing there aren't any sacrifices involved, and I'm sure you know that very well.

Haris Mantafounis is a choreographer and teacher at the State School of Dance.

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