

Georgia Petralli

Childlike-ness is my driving force.

“Modern dance is an overlooked art form in Greece. Over the last two years, Georgia Petralli has taught the people of Crete new modes of movement and expression via the “contact/improvisation” seminars she organises, while she has a vision of a dance project set in the back streets of the traditional Agia Triada neighbourhood of Heraklion. With experience as an assistant choreographer for the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony in Athens, she gives her own opinion about the state of modern dance in Greece, and gives us first-hand information about what she is planning with her newly created group named “Fysalida” (“Bubble”).

By Maro Tsagaraki – Photography by Zenia Drosou

How did you decide to get involved in modern dance instead of becoming a traditional ballerina?

I like classical dance, although it is a different world that ties you to movement, and has other demands on your body and on your life. Because of that, I prefer the genre of modern dance – it’s more open for me, at least in theory. Ballet exists for the reasons that it began, and it’s good that it does. But for me, modern dance is a step further.

What is the standard of modern dance in Greece?

We’ve got good dancers in Greece. Greeks have passion, on stage they are on fire, explosive. But they don’t have discipline, which is why there aren’t many dancers in any one group. Of course, this is also connected to the fact that the roles of dancer and choreographer are somewhat blurred in Greece, which is something I believe affects standards. To a certain extent this pleases me as well, because I also am an unruly person, although I have been taught discipline in England, Holland and Switzerland.

Don’t dance and the provinces seem to be contradictory to you? Not forgetting the existence of the International Festival of Dance in Kalamata, of course.

They don’t seem contradictory to me, there just isn’t any tradition surrounding it. Greece is a country where everything takes place and exists in Athens. All the groups, all the schools are there. In Thessaloniki there are one or two schools and two or three groups. In Kalamata of course, because of the international festival, you see mostly foreign groups and a couple of Greek ones, again from Athens... The 1st Mediterranean Platform for Modern Dance took place in Hania in 2004, a great opportunity for the island to open up to dance, because the lies that we are somewhat isolated are awful.

In spite of all that, and even though you could be in the centre of everything – in Athens – you decided to make things happen here in Crete...

When I returned from abroad I stayed here for a year and even though I was hounded by the thought “what do I do now?” I didn’t let it get to me and I said “it can’t be like this. There are a few people who are searching for something else.” So I started the “contact/improvisation” seminars. Perfectly unpretentious, perfectly simple; and now I can say that there are a good

number of people who have got into it. I'm not saying that improvisers are dancers, but they have a feel for it, or at least are given the chance to be able to let their bodies express themselves as they want to for a few moments, not in front of a mirror, in a hall, with one move that I show them.

How did “contact” start, and what is it trying to achieve?

It came from America, from Steve Paxton, a dancer who started looking for another way, another mode of expression, through his own personal search. He created a group via this process, originally made up of 11 men, and continued to search. They went into the process trying to come out with a different sort of movement, playing with falling, leaping, floating, physical strength, pulses, turns, touching, lifting, acrobatics. “Contact” has many elements, each reminiscent of something: from *capoeira* and martial arts to modern dance. Depending on the experience and memories it has, each body has something to gain from movement.

Even though “contact” isn’t such a widespread form of expression, there are a lot of participants at the seminars in Crete. Where did this recognition come from?

Amazing people come, and everyone says that... In general I believe that there are different sorts of people: someone reading a press release or a poster, or from mouth to mouth, if they want to search inside themselves to see things differently through movement, then they come to it thinking “what is this? I’ll go out of curiosity.” And there are other people who are already involved in dance – Latin-American, ballet, modern dance, yoga or other forms or movement or meditation and exercise – they want to see this aspect as well.

And in Rethymnon this sort of seminar has developed in a studio?

There was an offer for a first taster seminar and the people who came really got into it. And so a group was formed, the Cultural Group of Rethymnon, with a core of 10-11 people, where they practice contact improvisation systematically every two weeks. Because we’re trying to keep this core group structure, we’re open to people who want to watch, but who have already done similar things, so as to make it easier for them to join the group. Last year we had a five-day seminar at the university which 30 people attended, and there was a lot of interest in something more regular being created. The Municipality of Heraklion invited me for a third time this year: the first time it was a one-day seminar, which traditional, Cretan, rembetika and more modern musicians were invited to, and we improvised with the instruments and our bodies. It was an unbelievable night. In 2006 it was a two-day seminar with a great turnout, around 25 people, and on the second day of this year’s three-day seminar, there were around 56 people – a record high I think!

Could one consider ‘contact’ as something fundamental to the modern dance movement?

I wouldn’t say that, because I don’t like to give things contrived titles. But I could say what ‘contact impro’ means to me personally, because I feel very small in front of this concept and style. It can liberate movement and bring consciousness to the discipline, to the way of moving: it’s one thing to dance, and another thing to say why and how to do it. Because you’re in a studio and you’re following instructions? How can that become something esoteric? Can I make my mark through this sort of process? I can find myself in a place with 50 unfamiliar people and in one day, by practising ‘contact’ using trust exercises, touch techniques, body work, authentic massage, I will communicate with all these people and

create my own dance. I have seen unbelievable things from people who come for the first or second time, and I think "If only I had a camera to capture this moment." For me, this is magic. The body, you see, has incredible understanding, it's just trapped by habit and by the mind.

When you choreograph, are there any basic elements that you incorporate into your choreography or is it a psychological process "of the moment"?

Choreography always has a framework, the structure and the idea are the outline. From there on I like to explore with the people I'm working with. At the beginning their bodies hold them back – which is where improvisation is necessary – and then I find the direction. I like to work with a particular movement I have given, but I also improvise with the dancer to find moves through his or her body. Of course, it is very difficult for someone to exactly copy the movement of another body – but when it happens, the improvisation and resulting beauty are something else.

Are there certain elements which keep coming back and give you ideas for choreography?

Usually they depend on the situation: madness, love, relationships, anger, death – I'm saying these terms in general but it's never that simple. Recently, the house – as a concept – has had tremendous importance for me; the love a person feels for peace and solitude, the concept of being watched, the need to feel safe in your own space, like separation, peace or solitude. For me this takes many forms: from how much we calm down at home, to what extent the home is our soul and our skin, our essence and the outside world, our daily life, to what extent you are really alone at home – if you have a family, a partner or if you're being watched by a neighbour with a video camera... I would really like to make a performance with all these elements – I've got something in my mind, and I'm working on it at the moment...

Where did the inspiration for the video you're making come from?

My source of inspiration for the video "Flock" was the Big Brother concept, the idea of being watched and the question of how much we are really alone. At the end of 2004 I was in Paris, where I met up with an actress friend. She had been living for some time outside Paris in a place she'd rented through a director at the theatre, and when she came home one day, quite by chance, she saw a cable sticking out of a plug socket. The girl was being watched by the owner of the house, who had installed a state-of-the-art camera, that even the police couldn't detect, in a poster, and was watching her in the bathroom and living room. For me this is a horrendous story, something that makes me quake, and which I think I would like to pursue. Certainly, I always have material, because I still have an adequate level of paranoia!

Will you show this video at any festivals?

I'm sure that it will be shown, and I'm trying to arrange the premiere to happen here. There is the "Gurdjieff Enneagram" which talks about nine types of person. I have been inspired by my friend's being spied on, to make up my own seven types of person that I believe we all carry about with us on a daily basis, like masks – roles which we assume daily. These are the simpleton, the stargazer, the conformist, the diplomat, the hysteric, the demented and finally the hopper. These characters each have their own style, movement and image. Eyes,

hands, other people's feelings are all introduced into these topics, which makes the whole impression given by the body seem to be really strange.

Have you found other dancers to collaborate with in Crete?

In this particular video I do the movement and dance alone, I am both the choreographer and the dancer. There are people who have helped me with the kinesiology, as eyes, noses... Another project I've been working on since last year, and which I hope either the municipality or some other sponsor will take on is about my neighbourhood, Agia Triada in Heraklion. It's a very old neighbourhood and I have, I think, a really beautiful proposal to support its rejuvenation: to make an architectural dance video. All the shots would be outside, by old monuments in alleys, by old houses from the times of the Turkish and Venetian occupations, which I'm not sure will be here for much longer... My aim is to give this area distinction via modern dance. I've started experimentally, and have been working on it for two years. I've begun to use students from my seminars in the shoots, and I find that I can take moves with their bodies with sincerity and accuracy – as much as any body can – and I'm bringing down dancers from Athens.

Have you been in touch with the municipality about this project?

I have taken the idea as far as I can take it, I am at the stage of waiting and worrying about how art lags behind in this municipality. Apart from two or three people who value my suggestions, who try to help me and whom I thank, there are others who pass it off as totally superficial and I don't know if they have understood exactly what I'm suggesting: the vision of the whole thing, the promotion of a neighbourhood and a town through the artistic sphere. I want to take the dance video/documentary concept, which could be shown at a festival, and turn it into an advertisement for the town.

What was your experience as assistant choreographer at the opening/closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games 2004 like? Many people have talked about the makeshift way the whole thing was organised.

It wasn't that confused, it was an explosion and there was an awful lot that had to happen... Given that Greece had no experience in staging such large productions and performances, there were mitigating circumstances. However, there were some situations which really could have been avoided.

How did this event affect you?

It wasn't the most emotional thing that I've done in my life, or the most esoteric, compared with my personal career as a dancer, as a creator or as a teacher. It drove me mad, stressed me, tired me and left in awe – it put me on the largest of all stages I have ever contributed to. And I think that something special came out of it, something strong and emotional. Only the joy of the volunteers who participated gave me any relief. And the fact that you get to share this thing with so many people makes you smile.

Out of all the European countries you've worked in, which one has the biggest modern dance movement?

There's a lot going on in Holland, and in London of course... London, but in general there is a crisis in Europe, in connection with the results achieved. Certainly things are better than in Greece; that is, dancing is a profession with working hours, with holidays and with social

security. Most people work as freelancers and work on projects for between two and four months, so they find money more easily from sponsors, from the government or from other organisations. Whatever the case, there is still no stability, that still applies even abroad. I can think of two or three really strong groups in Holland and England, things are developing in Brussels as well. In Germany there is the *Staadtheater* tradition, where ever community has their own opera, their own dance group – a concept totally alien to Greece.

What have your collaborations in Crete been like up to now?

I've been here since last summer to work on the Agia Triada video. Another dancer came down from Athens and together we did a shoot at the Gate of Dermata. I decided to stay and give some seminars and work with some of the groups here. I've given seminars on movement, basic principles of classical dance, and improvisation to an expressive dance group "Syn Kinisi" in Hania, and at the "Horokinisi" school in Heraklion. I'm still working with the university theatrical group and with the "Kyklos Grafis" group. I'm also continuing the contact/improvisation seminars.

Recently you created your own dance group – "Fysalida"...

It will have its base in Heraklion, without that confining where the performances or whatever will take place. Some twenty or so artists will be part of it, working on theatrical or dancing moves, and it will have a musical-dance or dance-theatrical feel to it. The aim is for dance to become more therapeutic, with groups and productions for children. But the challenge is to create groups of amateurs and/or pensioners and for them to give performances or create projects. On the whole, it will explore things through the art of dance through different forms. For example, community dance, a new movement where professional dancers and amateurs discover the joy of movement via simple moves and create various themed projects. One such collaboration is that of the residents of the Municipality of Vironas with the choreographer Luca Silvestrini, which will be performed at the Vrachon Theatre on 22nd September.

You have also taken part in "Live your myth in Greece". How do you want to find your own myth? Always through dance?

When you step into someone else's body and say something, you are liberated for a second, you feel an incredible leap in your heart and it makes you dance. Imagine if you do this with ten, twenty people at the same time. This is the process the seminars look at. As a dancer, it is the stress, the pleasure of pain – these sadomasochistic tendencies in the preparation of a production that are important and also when you finally get out on stage: the image of a pebble falling in the sea comes to mind, and the implications of this. It is the "here and now" of the performance in general, the energy and the connotations leave you behind. Anyone who's experienced it will understand. As a choreographer I'm still learning. I've done choreography for amateur groups, small solos. I don't know what will happen, but I know I want to be true to what I have to say. This will be the biggest challenge, to try to maintain the childlike quality that I have, which is one of the forces which drives me.

- *The production by Luca Silvestrini, in collaboration with the British Council and the Isadora Duncan Centre for Dance, will take place on 22nd September at the Melina Merkouri 'Vrachon' Theatre.*

- *On the 10th, 11th, 12th and 13th November the Persa Stamatopoulou dance group will perform with Georgia Petrali's Fysalida group, at the Pagopoieion (1st floor) in Heraklion. Clips from the "Flock" video will be shown.*
- *For information about the Fysalida dance group: www.fysalidance.com, contact@fysalidance.com, and +30 2810 224321*