

***The descendants of Terpsichore,
remarks on a Russian ballet influenced by ancient
Greek elements of performance in connection with
Oriental poetry***

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Learning something about ourselves, we learn something about the world, and learning something about the world we enrich and learn ourselves.

(Efim A. Rezvan, in: 60 параллель / 60 Parallel №4(31) 2008, p. 49

This lecture is a contribution to the echoes of poetic performance, as it was *Echo* the mythical maiden whose body became transformed into a shadow of sound.¹ And we like to speak about the shadows of the muse, who will give inspiration for the dancers and singers of eternal songs when interpreting the texts by their voices and performance: Terpsichore.

In our time media adaption of dance performances is focused either to video-clip sequences connected with pop-songs or to special European items of dance in connection with traditional ballet. However it should be not forgotten that even in ancient Greek culture also dance performances belonged to a special system of an expressive non-verbal communication. Several types of emotions, subjects and expressions between real and fictive world can be visualized by matters of dance performance – decorations on Greek ceramic vessels show many variations of dance or rhythmic steps. The muse Terpsichore granted inspiration and protection to the combination of dancing and singing, ancient Greek records mention diplomats' ritualized variations² of dance as well as Roman sources refer to special dance elements that were performed during religious rituals (e.g. the

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special dance of the Salian priesthood³). In addition such performances in a style known as *mimos* and *pantomimos* became the performing art to express all kind of human behavior and possibilities by which also the limits of an educated behavior could be crossed by the performer's way of realization. In a similar way we know even from ancient Semitic culture David's dance in front of the holy case. Finally it should be not forgotten that many European traditions of rhythmic dance can be led back to the dance and rhythm traditions of ancient India⁴, whose western traditions are still vivid with some lines of the Andalusian Gypsy flamenco.

Since Medieval period style of Middle European dance was divided into several types⁵: folkdances – vivid performances by a social group and focused to the group's ethnic or cultural items – and the courteous style of a special kind of figurative walking that depended from the rules of protocol and behavior on an aristocratic level and mode à vivre, a performance that also was devoted the elaborate style of representative gowns, dresses and headwear.

Finally the European style of ballet became the aesthetic expression of class, gender, body and soul.

It was the beginning of the 20th century that brought a lightening initiative by creating new adaptations of traditional poetry and dance which finally led to new formal expressions in European ballet. It was the time when a growing number of creative people had thrown off formal elements of cloth, such as wigs and corsets. Naturally draped clothes and dresses became the preferred style to cover a body; the performing dresses became influenced by the ethnic style of exotic tribes, such as from Oceania as they were painted by the artists or as they became preserved on early photographs. In a similar way European imaginations of "Orientalism" explained their definition of "Eastern Dreams": operas about the story of "Sheherazade" or performative imaginations of "Sindbad the sailor" are well known. Fashion, home interior and painted art brought Mediterranean, Egyptian and in general Oriental inspiration to the homes of the European rich. A special accumulation of exotics was Mata Hari's "Oriental" dance

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(Margaretha Geertruida "Margreet" Zelle MacLeod, 1876-1917)⁶. Mata Hari became a favorite lady of the founder of Musée Guimet in Paris (Émile Étienne Guimet, 1836-1918). Oriental inspired dance later was replaced by Josephine Baker's (1906-1975) exotic celebration of *négritude* and Jazz.⁷

So it was only a question of time and occasional inspiration to realize the ingenious idea of modernizing European ballet. But, how to introduce the auditory into that new style – as we can see by the various interpretations of Russian Igor Stravinsky's "Le sacre du printemps" (1913)?⁸ The subjects were inspired by archaic rituals and by the imagination of archetypes of prehistoric religion and believe: powerful, faithful and following the internal logic of the myths. It was in 1973 late Pina Bausch⁹ in Germany whose sophisticated choreography brought the myth back to its origin by performing it on the stage: the smell of earth became visualized by the dancers' acting – we can see, feel and smell our archaic roots in a way as it is delivered by Hesiod's cosmogony as well as it was portrayed in Wim Wenders' 3D movie of that ballet ("Pina", 2011, Berlinale).

However, is it possible to transfer also the world of poetry and lyrics into the symbols of dance in our time? How to manage the subtle symbolism of a poem in a period that is more inclined to the rough subjects of realistic prose than to the gentle and tender world of lyrical poems?

Based on the great early 20th century traditions of Ballets Russes (Russian Seasons, 1908-1929), there is now to discuss an innovative Russian approach on that topic. Author of this project is Prof. Dr. Efim A. Rezvan in Saint Petersburg, who is specialized in Qur'an research and Islamic studies and who generously granted me a glance on his project titled "Hafiz 1921".¹⁰

The imagination of the ballet is focused to harmonize two lines: the Hafiz adaption of early 20th century Russian poet, traveler and researcher Nikolai Stepanovich Gumilev (1886-1921)¹¹ and E. Rezvan's exceptional experience in Arabic calligraphy: Telling the story of N. Gumilev's alter

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ego and that of one of his favorite ladies, the ballet figurines – a male poet and a lady imagined as Peri – appear as poetic figures from Hafiz’ world and in the same way their fate is also told in poetic verses as if they originally would emerge from Hafiz’ world, too. It is a story of loss and finding each other, a story of desperation and redemption, a balance between the individual and creation. Due to the Persian context of the tale, the formal structure of the plot with three acts follows the Indo-European tripartite scheme¹². The main accessory is taken from the old Mediterranean zodiac elements that became acting parts in the ballet: either in a single function or as functional groups: Cancer, Scorpio, Leo (The Lion), Libra (The Scales), The Wind (a winged creature), Gemini (The Twins), Virgo (The Virgin), The Dervish (an image of an old man), Capricorn (The Goat), Sagittarius (The Archer). The functional groups are: Cancer, Scorpio and Leo followed by Libra, Virgo, Capricorn, Sagittarius. Especially the last mentioned belongs to the Greek myth of Orion – the hunter in a great cycle of mythical tales.¹³

A poet, waiting for being condemned to a lethal fate, comes into the focus of a heroine named “Peri”, half mystical being and half a helping beauty. Even in the great exposition of the first two acts, the dangers, emotions and temptations of an uncertain world are displayed, esp. by quasi-living letters, which appear as a movable commentary of the genuine part of the plot. In the third act the main figures – the poet and Peri – are transformed into Gemini (twins): so the solution of the dance-drama evolves a metamorphosis like that in ancient myths as we know from Ovid’s poetry adaption of Greek tales. Twin individuals mostly represent oscillating realities – here and there but with an invisible character between. Twin individuals are thought to be close to special celestial or spiritual spheres: as male twins we know Kleobis and Biton, the Dioskuroi Kastor and Polydeukes, who by their fate became mortal and immortal travelers between a celestial paradise and the world of the passed (Hades) until they finally symbolized the astronomic “Gemini”.

On the performance level, the Mediterranean line with its zodiac iconography is connected with the Persian poetry example by the special structure, lineage and proportions of Arabic letters, who are defined by E. A. Rezvan as “frozen music”. Following their strong calligraphic rules, E. A. Rezvan elaborately imagines that – in the same way as we see the acting individuals – the poem’s text can be imagined by a special choreography of the letters. The meaning of these letters is seen from two perspectives: on the one hand the basic importance of the Arabic alphabet and its religious and sensual context and on the other hand the special meaning of letters and alphabet as the base of creative poetry focused to special Russian culture and literary tradition.

Following such combined idea and logical structure of an European-Oriental combination of creative arts, E. A. Rezvan’s project will be able to visualize the twin arts “literature & music” as well as “literature & dance” by waking up their common basic roots by a dance realization and the ingenious idea that letters of the Arabic alphabet can be imagined by dance performance. Surely this defines the difference with other alphabets which lack such specific possibilities of connected-characters in their cursive writing.

It is worth to mention that on occasion of the Tokyo Summer Festival titled “Music and Literature” in June, 29th, 2002, German author and poet Durs Grünbein discussed a similar theory in his lecture “Betonte Zeit”¹⁴ (“sounded time”/“sound of time”, G.Z.). He suggested that the poem is a music-arrangement in waiting (“Denn das Gedicht ist ein Tonsatz im Wartestand”)¹⁵, because he defined that textual letters are the same like music-notes for the sound of music: “Buchstaben sind, so gesehen, für den Laut, der das Bild nach sich zieht, das gleiche wie Notenzeichen in der Musik”¹⁶ whilst the echo of both remains in the ear of each art’s recipients.

As seen from the highlight and transcendental end of the ballet the emotional level of the figurative part of ballet and tale reaches its summit with the author’s direction advice “Everyone freezes”. Can we imagine this as the therapeutic solution in connection with the plot of an eternal story?

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Does author appeal to the psychological chill-factor that causes positive abilities in cerebral memory as the basic pre-conditions of social binding and lingual ability as it is recently discussed in the context of cerebral-neurology in coherence with human cultural dispositions?¹⁷ A doubled emotional factor will be reached by both, the visual art and the involved music. And in case we follow the theory of Durs Grünbein, the letters tell the story by their special meaning: the visible “sound of the letters” in the ballet is the top-point of abstraction of music – “frozen music” as the ballet’s author expressed in his introduction.

If we have a glance to the possibilities of modern-dance theatre there are now specialists who are dancing texts whilst imbedding the sign-language of the deaf into modern dance choreography as a special communicative and new sensual dimension for hearing and non-hearing recipients as it is realized with the project " Bodie Slan Guage " of the Tanz Forum Berlin (Dance Forum Berlin).¹⁸ In case we see the creative possibilities of modern pantomime¹⁹, it could be of some interest to all kind of modern poetic art-projects to use this artistic experience for new presentations of the texts of world-literature. So we can turn back to the performing arts of the Mediterranean and Eastern culture, as they were delivered in many texts. Notwithstanding the subtle early evangelists’ censorship in case of these arts²⁰, we can trace back our roots of performing arts to build a bridge to the visualization of our common Mediterranean and Eastern literary treasures. The Russian project gives an imagination about the yet undone possibilities because of the basically rich hereditary of ancient Greek language traditions in Russian language and by the practiced inclination towards sublime Eastern adaptations.

It is be worth to notify that one of the basic traditions of Mediterranean art and performance will survive if we accept the creative adaptations of their authors, creators and performers which are the interpreters of our common cultural heritage – the descendants of Terpsichore need our attention and auditory to complete their way for new dimensions of art.

Notes:

- 1 Cf. D. Grünbein (ann. 14) 73.
- 2 F. Weege, *Der Tanz in der Antike* (Halle/Saale 1926); S. H. Lonsdale, *Dance and ritual play in Greek religion* (Baltimore 1993); M.-H. Delavaud-Roux, *Les danses pacifiques en Grèce antique* (Aix-en-Provence 1994).
- 3 K. Abel, Art. Sali (2), in: *Der Kleine Pauly. Lexikon der Antike in fünf Bänden*, Bd. 4 (München 1979) 1511sq.
- 4 My best thanks belongs to Elena Polikarpova, master in Russian and Classical Indian dance, Arkhangelsk/Russia, for many inspiring talks and practical introduction in that field in 2012 and 2013.
- 5 Th. Hentschke, *Allgemeine Tanzkunst : Theorie und Geschichte; antike und moderne (gesellschaftliche und theatralische) Tanzkunst und Schilderung der meisten National- und Charaktertänze*. *Documentachoreologica* 12 (Leipzig 1986).
- 6 On Mata Hari's quarrel with Sergej Djagilew and his *Ballets Russes* see http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mata_Hari <24.02.2015>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mata_Hari <24.02.2015> See the recent exhibition of Musée Guimet titled "Du Nô à Mata Hari, 2 000 ans de Théâtre en Asie"; 15.04.-31.08.2015, <http://www.guimet.fr/fr/expositions/expositions-a-venir/du-no-a-mata-hari-2-000-ans-de-theatre-en-asie> <24.02.2015>
- 7 Ph. Rose, *Josephine Baker oder wie eine Frau die Welt erobert* (Wien, Darmstadt 1990); A. Prechtel, *Josephine Baker* (München 2006).

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- 8 http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_sacre_du_printemps <23.02.2015>
- 9 http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pina_Bausch <23.02.2015>
- 10 I like to thank my friend and colleague Efim A. Rezvan for many talks about his project and for the permission to read and to reflect about his project materials.
- 11 E. Rezvan, Horse-Rider. African diary. 60 Parallel № 4 (31), 2008, 74-71, esp. 50sq., cf. www.efimrezvan.ru <30.04.2015>.
- 12 G. Dumézil, Les dieux Indo-Européens. Mythes et Religion 29 (Paris 1952).
- 13 H. v. Geisau, Art. Orion (1), in: Der kleine Pauly. Lexikon der Antike in fuenf Baenden, Bd. 4 (Muenchen 1979) 344.
- 14 D. Grünbein, Betonte Zeit, in: id., Antike Dispositionen. Aufsätze (Frankfurt am Main 2005, Suhrkamp) 66-80.
- 15 Ibid. 74.
- 16 Ibid. 73.
- 17 On the neurological conditions see E. Altenmüller/R. Kopiez, Warum uns Musik bewegt. Evolutionäre und musikpsychologische Aspekte, in: Musikarchäologie. Klänge der Vergangenheit. Archäologie in Deutschland, Sonderheft 07/2015., 22-29, esp. 26, 29 fig. 6.
- 18 <http://www.ballhausost.de/produktionen/bodieslanguage/>
<24.02.2015>;
<http://www.gebaerdenwelt.tv/artikel/kultur/mehrkultur/2014/08/20/20140820106274511.html> <24.02.2015>;
<http://www.taubenschlag.de/Tanz> <24.02.2015>

- 19 <http://www.taubenschlag.de/Pantomime> <24.02.2014>
- 20 A. H. J. Greenidge, *Infamia: its place in Roman public and private law* (Oxford 1894 = reprint Aalen 1977); M. E., Molloy, *Libanius and the dancers. Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien 31* (Hildesheim 1996); For literary adaption cf. D. Grünbein, *Zwischen Antike und X*, in: id., op.cit. (ann. 14) 393-398, esp. 394sq.