

THE HUNGARIAN STATE FOLK ENSEMBLE AS A DYNAMIC INSTITUTION IN HUNGARIAN ETHNOGRAPHY

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Every year thousands of individuals come to know Hungarian folk culture through staged performance. From children's ensembles to amateur ensembles to the most professionally organized groups, audiences in Hungary are treated to a wide variety of creatively reinterpreted Hungarian folk dance and folk music traditions. Staged folk dance has become a unique and powerful mode of cultural expression. This article attempts to illuminate staged folk dance's potential for commentary, focusing on the choreographies and work of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble (Magyar Állami Népi Együttes, or MÁNE as it is commonly referred to). Established in 1951, it is one of the oldest folk ensembles on the European continent and is the only professional ensemble in Hungary that is referenced as a *State* ensemble. Much more than a static or isolated organization that provides a pleasant evening's entertainment, the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble is integrally woven into the fabric of social life, qualitatively shaping and contributing to an ongoing socio-cultural dialogue. It accomplishes this through its dependence on source folk genres presented in the amplified artistic frame of the stage.

Keywords: *táncház*, Dance House, folk dance, folk music, Hungarian, staged folk dance, Miklós Rábai, Sándor Timár, Gábor Mihály

A Brief History

The staging of folk dance forms has a significant history in Hungary, dating back to the late 19th century and continuing to the present day. In conception and output, staging strategies have resiliently adapted to dramatic social, political and economic changes, and I first want to briefly outline the important predecessors of today's ensembles. The following is not a deep exploration of staged folk dance's history. Instead I provide a quick overview that highlights the most important antecedents of the State Folk Ensemble, including the 1896 Millennial Exhibition, the Pearly Bouquet Movement, and amateur folk ensembles.

The 1896 recreations of village life at the Millennial Exhibition in Budapest attempted to present folk genres in as authentic a frame as possible, literally trans-

planting artifacts, cultural expressions, and even villagers to the heart of Budapest for the exhibit. Influenced by 18th and early 19th century trends of romantic nationalism, these re-creations of village life were couched in the belief that folk genres developed organically from the uneducated masses who were tied to the land and therefore represented the essence of a nation. For the occasion of the 1000-year commemoration of the Hungarian tribes' migration into the Carpathian Basin in 896 A.D., this was a symbolically significant mode of commemoration.

The *Gyöngyösbokréta* (Pearly bouquet) movement of the 1930s and 1940s occurred in the context of interwar period populism. It placed Hungarian villagers on the stage for purposes of touristic presentations and celebrations of national holidays. Amidst the rigid ethnographic work of scholars and ethnographers that had begun at the turn of the century (with scholars like Bartók and Kodály leading the way in the field of folk music research), and with the stamp of ethnographic approval from such institutions as the Ethnographic Society, placing villagers themselves on the stage to dance their own dances in their own way lent an air of authenticity to the performances and determined the criteria for what would be considered "authentic" in terms of staged folk music and dance.

An outgrowth of the Pearly Bouquet Movement as it disintegrated, amateur folk ensembles also sprang up around the country. This tendency intensified throughout the political upheaval of the 1940s. Organizations connected to social and economic life, including factories, worker's unions, student groups, and so on, often had a folk dance group associated with them.

The Choreographic Eras of the State Folk Ensemble

Miklós Rábai

The order for the formation of a national performing folk ensemble came from the central government in 1950. Loosely modeled after the Soviet Moiseyev Ensemble, the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble came into existence in 1951. As the first professional folk dance ensemble in the country, its creation ushered in an era of professionalism in staged folk dance that lasts to the present day. The presentation and further development of folk genres were among the main goals of the organization:

The task of the ensemble should be to collect, preserve, further develop and present the traditions of the Hungarian people.¹

Miklós Rábai (1921–1974) was one of the names under consideration for the position of choreographer of the Ensemble, and he ultimately gained the title. As a participant in the amateur folk dance movement who came from a background of

physical education training, Rábai's helm as choreographer was marked by a highly stylized form of choreography. The first dancers of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble all had ballet training, evident in the highly technical execution of their movements. Synchronized choreography was another signature stamp of the Rábai era, as were the plotted stories and folk tales that formed the basis of his works. Some of the more representative and well-known Rábai choreographies that still remain in the Ensemble's repertoire are *Kállai kettős* (with music by Kodály) and *Ecseri lakodalmas*.

His goal was to create great Hungarian dance art, and towards this end he envisioned a three-tiered process.² First was the choreography of simple folk-tale plays, followed by pieces that had a historical theme and ultimately ending with great dramatic works. The three-step process bears remarkable resemblance to the artistic conception of Béla Bartók in Bartók's creation of a new national art music deriving from folk music several decades earlier.³ Essentially, Rábai wanted to create a new "formal language" of dance art by relying on folk dance genres and folk customs, but also by developing them to a higher level.⁴ *Kisbojtár* and *Latinka ballada* are good examples of some of his more stylized, dramatic works.

With his emphasis on technical execution, synchronization and stylization, Rábai's choreographies tended to be more aesthetically oriented than any choreographic style that had come before. He appeared to be less concerned with faithfully representing the source folk genres as they actually might appear in the source contexts, highlighting the debates circulating at the time about the direction of staged folk dance choreography. Central to these debates were the opposing obligations to what I call the theoretical categories of "folk" and "art," the ultimate challenge for any professional, performing ensemble that derives its source material from folk genres but must also depend on creativity and innovation to thrive. Given the directions towards perceived notions of authenticity (as established by the Pearly Bouquet Movement, for example) that previous folk choreographies had taken, in other words towards the "folk" end of the spectrum, Rábai made the bold choice to lead the Ensemble more in the direction of "art," emphasizing the aesthetically apparent qualities of cultural expression.

Sándor Timár

After Rábai's sudden death in 1974, the State Folk Ensemble was left in a state of flux, and a temporary directorship was given to Dezső Létai, who essentially continued in Rábai's style. Rábai had changed the choreographic vision of staged folk dance, but the same choreographic debates that had flared up at the time of the Ensemble's creation had never fully died down and were brought to the forefront again with the transition. One of the main criticisms in Hungarian dance circles

was the seemingly increasing distance from the original folk sources of Rábai's choreographies. According to the minutes of a meeting of the Magyar Táncművészek Szövetsége (Hungarian Dance Federation) on May 30, 1979, in which members debated the growing problems within the Ensemble, several reasons were given for this period of crisis, one of the most important being the lack of ethnographic knowledge within the Ensemble, or at least as reflected in their choreographies. Létai himself frames the problem in this way:

The familiarity with and use of folk tradition. Summarizing briefly: In this respect we have fallen behind, yet it is a requirement of the ensemble to be familiar with and apply the results of scholarly folklore research! The name and the task of the Ensemble ties it to this. Today, this is where the problem lies, that within the Ensemble many languages are spoken, the language is not uniform. It is not possible to establish a literary language without a familiarity with the mother language.⁵

A new choreographic era ensued with the appointment of Sándor Tímár. Like Rábai, Tímár was involved in the late 1940s and 1950s with the amateur folk dance movement, but in 1958 he established the Bartók Ensemble, a professional ensemble that was named in recognition of the pioneering ethnomusicologist and music ethnographer. Acknowledging the work of music ethnographers was indicative of the times, as the ethnographic collection of folk dance consumed many scholars, particularly Tímár's colleague György Martin. The mood for the collection of folk dances was fervent, and it led to an increasing familiarity with still vibrant folk dance traditions, including the more improvised styles of Hungarian folk dancing.

In this context, Tímár became much more concerned with choreographic considerations of authenticity. As one of the founding members of the dance house movement, he was committed to presenting folk dance as a living tradition that still had relevance in people's lives, and this guided his choreographic choices. His appointment as choreographer of the State Folk Ensemble in 1981 was made in part because of his commitment to what was perceived as a more authentic folk style. His principles of dance as an "anyanyelv"⁶ (mother tongue) transformed how staged folk dance choreographies looked within the Ensemble.

As an example, one of his most revolutionary choreographies was *Öt legény tánca*. The choreography begins with a single man on stage dancing in a *legényes* style. There is no musical accompaniment except for the music he creates on his own body with leg slaps, claps and stamps. He is eventually joined by another male who matches his actions, and it appears as though a sort of competition will ensue. A few more males join in, as does the music, and the choreography goes into full swing. The emphasis on individuals or individual groupings as opposed to large groups of dancers, the lack of synchronized gestures, the less ballet-like

movements and the constantly moving use of space are choreographic choices that were all driven by Tímár's involvement with the dance house movement and the deepening ethnographic knowledge that was disseminated as a result. As a kind of corrective to the artistic directions of the State Ensemble's previous choreographic era, Tímár led the choreographic vision back to a "folk" emphasis.

Gábor Mihály

Following a choreographic era that was perceived as highly authentic, the present choreographer of the State Folk Ensemble, Gábor Mihály, has taken the State Folk Ensemble in yet another direction. Having admittedly no significant knowledge of folk dance or music as a living tradition when he was a young child, Mihály came to know folk dance through staged performances as a youngster in Jászberény and thus became familiar with the power and beauty of staged folk dance early on. He joined a local group and eventually was invited to dance in the State Folk Ensemble by Tímár himself, and even danced in the *Őt legény tánca*. He worked his way up as a dancer in the Ensemble, becoming a dance leader and eventually staging a few choreographies himself, until he was named as artistic director in 2002.

The drastic social, economic and political changes that occurred in Hungary in the late 80s and early 90s led to another period of crisis for the Ensemble, and once again brought to the forefront the ongoing negotiation of the Ensemble's vision. The emphasis on what had been regarded as Tímár's highly authentic choreographic style, influenced by the dance house and larger folk revival movements, had increased the public's knowledge of Hungarian folk dance traditions through presentation. But there was also a sense that it had limited the full artistic and creative potential of what staged folk dance could do in cultural life at a time when Hungarian society was in great flux. The new choreographic staff responded.

Mihály's vision for the Ensemble has been to move forward by circling back. In many ways, he and his staff have resumed Rábai's original artistic vision of creating great, uniquely Hungarian dance. But rather than framing the choreographic debate as an opposition between "art" and "folk," they carry the vision on with the knowledge that their artistic palette has only been enriched with the increasing knowledge of Hungarian folk styles, in other words "art" has been enriched by "folk." Works like *A földön apám fia volnék*, among others, contain a gestural vocabulary and a use of space that are considered to be much more authentic than anything that Rábai ever staged, and thanks to the Tímár era, the dance house movement, and the larger folk revival movement, these elements are also recognizable as much more authentic.

This has the potential to make the performances more real and personal, or in other words, more relevant, to the audience. For audience members who attend performances in search of this kind of authenticity, it has the ability to create a more real sense of “us.” But the use of the stage as an artistic frame to momentarily suspend time and insert present-day choreographies bears more resemblance to the Rábai era than it does to the Tímár era. For those who attend Ensemble performances to have their aesthetic senses or imaginations more keenly stimulated, this is a useful technique.

Dynamic Work

Consideration of these three choreographic eras as a whole suggests that the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble is a dynamic institution. It has changed and adapted as the various political, economic, and social circumstances around it have changed. But it has also had to change and adapt according to what was taking place in other folk dance contexts, and in this regard, what was happening on the stage has always been highly responsive to what was happening in other folk dance contexts. As there was a change in each of the contexts suggested in Diagram 1 below (the basic triangular structure was first suggested to me by László Felföldi), other related contexts had to adapt. For example, with the increasing knowledge of what existed in the “field” with the “original” folk sources, the dance house movement flourished. In turn, this affected what happened on the stage, prompting a change in the choreographic direction of staged folk dance towards a more traditionally faithful representation. Other dynamic relationships were also established and are more fully explored in the scholarship produced as part of the 2008 György Ránki Hungarian Chair Conference at Indiana University, of which this article represents a part.

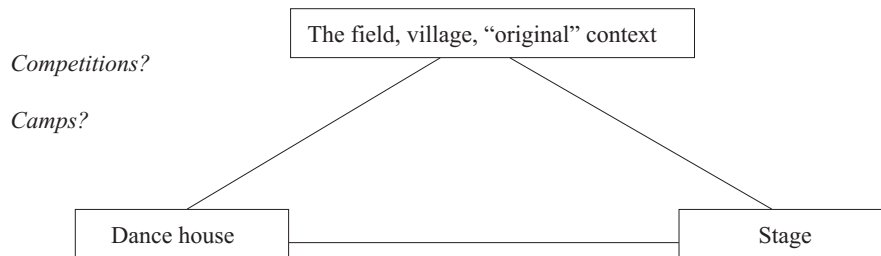


Diagram 1. The various contexts of Hungarian folk dance and their dynamic relationships

I suggest the addition of some new contexts for folk dance, that of dance camps and of dance competitions. Hungarian folk dance camps are numerous in Hungary, but especially in Transylvania. They have become a significant factor in how folk dance is learned and disseminated, and they also have important implications for notions of authenticity, since they offer a chance to interact first-hand and in an extended format with vanishing village life. Competitions have served to raise the technical level of various kinds of folk dance, which has implications for the aesthetic quality of staged folk dance. Both of these would be interesting areas for future research.

The Artistic Frame

Before I analyze very briefly two choreographies by the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble to illustrate their dynamic nature and the potential folk dance choreographies have for socio-cultural commentary, I first want to clarify what I mean when I say that staged folk dance exists in an artistic frame. The genre of staged folk dance necessarily relies on the theoretical categories of “folk” and “art,”⁷ categories of which I made mention earlier. While staged folk dance is often evaluated in terms of its relevance to the former category, it is not often evaluated or analyzed in terms of the latter.

There are many crucial elements that the audience doesn’t see that serve to define the Ensemble and also serve as criteria for placing an Ensemble in an appropriate theoretical category. I refer to some of these elements in my discussions of the choreographic analysis. These include:

1. *Selection of dancers.* This can mean selection for the ensemble as a whole or for one particular choreography. In the first case, selection can determine the gestural makeup of the whole Ensemble. In the Rábai era, for example, the dancers in the Ensemble were trained in ballet style. This led to a gestural vocabulary that was not considered “authentic” and was thought to be stylized. Presently, some dancers have ballet training, but many do not and have only danced folk dance in either an “authentic” village context or in a dance house setting. The movements appear to be more genuine. In the second case of selection for a particular choreography, if there is one dancer who is particularly skilled in a regional dance or happens to come from that particular region, then the selection of that dancer lends a more authentic element to the choreography, a factor about which the audience knows nothing.
2. *How dances are learned (transcription vs. incorporation).* The difference between learning a dance by, for example, watching a video tape (transcribed knowledge⁸) and learning through working with an actual person or through an

actual experience (incorporated knowledge) may not seem great, but in Hungarian folk dance, it matters. As ethnography emphasizes the fact that folk culture is dead or dying, there are fewer living folk masters from whom to learn. The next best thing, according to ethnography, is video documentation of the folk master performing the dance, and increasingly this is being used in many ensembles as a marker of authenticity.

3. *Range of genres.* Anyone who goes to see a single Ensemble performance does not see the range of what the Ensemble can do. The fact that an ensemble has works in their repertoire that are considered to be more authentic, for example, indicates that the ensemble places value on authenticity, no matter how vague the notion, and that they have a particular understanding of how that should manifest on the stage. A range of genres also represents a more complete picture of the Ensemble's vision and intentions.
4. *What did not make it in.* There is a range of artistic choices that are made when assembling a choreography over time. What the audience sees is the end-product, but gestures, music, steps, etc., are edited along the way. Unfortunately, the audience is not able to see in a single performance what was edited out and why. These things can help clarify artistic intention.

The most important element that staged folk dance possesses to cue it as an artistic performance is the stage itself. This alone often places it in the category of "art" rather than "folk." It is one of the main reasons why, for example, most people are so ready to say "That's not folklore!" even when they see a villager on stage performing a dance from his or her own community. But the subject of staged folk dance is folk dance. One of the things staged folk dance does (at least one of the goals of the State Ensemble) is present its subject, folk dance. Dance ethnography also presents folk dance, but of course in a very different way.

As an artistic frame, there are many things that a staged performance allows or amplifies that folk dance ethnography cannot. These include a qualitative approach, narrative, differing concepts of chronology, and differing concepts of location.

1. *Qualitative approach.* The goal of ethnography is to document tradition with the use of rigid scientific methodology. But as it has mostly been practiced in Hungary, with an emphasis on technical movement and comparison, ethnography can do little to point out relationships convincingly other than provide quantitative data. It also can do very little in the way of providing interpretations of what that data might mean. With a close relationship to ethnography, staged folk dance offers the possibility for speculation and interpretation and allows the chance to ask questions such as "What if?" Connections can be sug-

gested and relationships between seemingly disparate elements can be put forth with few repercussions.

2. *Narrative*. Staged folk dance allows the possibility to tell a story, complete with a beginning, middle, and end, and to play with how that narrative is told. The importance of how something is told versus what is told, as well as what this contributes to meaning, has been a crucial avenue of thought in many studies of folklore. Performance theory, for example, holds the manner in which a story is told as key to understanding something about the message itself. The narrative conventions followed can borrow directly from literary sources such as novels, short stories, novellas, tragedies, etc., as well as theatrical conventions or oral bodies of work.
3. *Chronology, differing concepts of time*. Staged folk dance allows the possibility to stay in real time, but also to travel throughout a narrative in other kinds of time (i.e., Bakhtin's "folkloric time"). Time can pass at lightning speed, or a single moment can be drawn out to create different illusions of the passing of time or chronology.
4. *Differing concepts of location*. Like the play with time, a staged performance allows the possibility to travel to any location, whether abstract or real.

Choreographic Analysis

In the following brief analyses of two of the most recent Ensemble choreographies, all of these frames are used to some degree in the creation of meaning. By analyzing these choreographies, my intention here is to explore how art can be used in the creation of meaning, and more specifically, how the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble has utilized strategic artistic devices to create meaningful performances that have relevance to their audiences. It is not my intention to suggest that these are the sole interpretations intended by the Ensemble. I recognize that every individual viewer will ultimately have their own interpretations and meanings, and the choreographic staff acknowledges this as well. But I also believe that there is an inner logic to how these choreographies are constructed, one that takes into account the importance of aesthetic qualities and artistic choice as much as it does the basis in folklore.

(The following choreographies are available at www.hagyományokháza.hu/mane.)

A földön apám fia volnék

This show, premiered in 2004 and touted as one of the more authentic choreographies of the present-day Ensemble, contains many elements that are im-

mediately striking. The most obvious of these is that all of the dancers are dressed in black and white costumes which, while formally similar to the original folk styles, are limited in their chromatic palette. A second striking technique is the play of time. Periodically throughout the show time is slowed down so that dancers are sometimes dancing in very slow motion, only then to resume dancing at normal speed several seconds later. Dances sometimes overlap as well, and overall there is a very fragmentary, unfinished feel to many of the dances.

At the same time, audio-visual materials are also utilized. For example, video projections onto the back of the stage wall depict natural landscapes as well as skillfully done sand drawing. Additionally, opaque screens are sometimes pulled down in front of the dancers so that only a shadowy profile remains. Aside from this, there is even one point in the choreography where all of the dancers, while singing a folk song, dramatically turn to the back of the stage towards the natural landscape that is being projected on the back stage wall, creating for the audience a frame-within-a-frame moment.

When asked my opinion of this show by the choreographic staff, I told them that although the movements and use of space did indeed seem more faithful to original folk styles, I was confused by the elements of the black-and-white costuming, the distortion of time, and the use of films and screens. The staff indicated that the idea was to focus on the beauty of the dance itself, the literal movements and the subtle kinetic variations that distinguish one regional dance from another. But the choreographer also mentioned that many of the techniques mimic how individuals remember, often in fleeting, vague glimpses and many times in a neutral black and white palette.

Thus, while there are many elements that stay faithful to the folk sources and stamp this choreography as more “authentic,” including the technical movements themselves, use of space, and the unseen effort by the choreographer to have dancers themselves choose to dance the regional or stylistic dances with which they were most familiar, this is also a very artful presentation of folk dance loaded with meaning. Aside from the focus on the dancers’ movements, this choreography is a self-reflexive commentary on the role of staged folk dance, the role of audiences, and the role of memory in the preservation of heritage.

Pannon freskó

A newer choreography that I was able to witness from beginning to end was *Pannon freskó*, which premiered in 2005. The title of the production refers to lost fresco fragments that were discovered in a ruin in Hungary, which at the time of the Roman Empire was known as Pannonia. More than just a reference to archaeological excavations, however, this show uses narrative devices to suggest histori-

cal connections between many of the cultural forms of Eastern, Central, and Western Europe.

The production is essentially a story-within-a-story, complete with a prologue, intermission, and epilogue, and a clearly marked separation between the dancers when they dance with masks on and when they dance with masks off. Additionally, the use of circular and cyclical imagery is prevalent, from the use of the seasons to mark off the sections of the show to the reference to life cycles and a figure of Death himself. Musically, the recurrent use of the *Dies Irae*, the Latin tune from the *Mass for the Dead*, in various strategic places throughout the show provides a kind of narrative unity, similar to the cyclical techniques used by musical composers such as Beethoven, Wagner or Berlioz in their great musical masterpieces.

Along these same lines, circle dances are used to provide a time reference at various points in the drama. With the presentation of the first circle dance in the first few minutes of the choreography that comes out of amorphous abstraction, the crucial relationship of circle dances to the past, a relationship also emphasized in folk dance ethnography, is established early on. As the narrative proceeds, the reference to the past is facilitated through the technique of employing a circle dance.

Circle dances are used as universalizing elements as well, since various circle dances from other cultural regions are choreographed into the production. And finally, the clearly modern, non-traditional clothing of the dancers places the audience in a neutral, non-specific location, further universalizing what is seen on stage.

All of these elements combine to suggest meanings that are complex and yet relevant in a globalized world. The program pamphlet itself makes reference to this idea, and thus the audience is invited to ponder the concept of globalization even before they sit down to watch the show:

The scenic dance vision's monumental... moments evoke the European, and within it, the Hungarian culture's mighty, world-forming influence. It is worth reveling in its beauty once again, before the globalization that is spreading from within completely unifies its varied colors.

This choreography demonstrates that staged folk dance is far better suited than any other current mode of expression for launching a larger discussion about globalization or Hungary's response to globalization. This is not to say that globalization does not exist or affect any other folk dance context in Hungary, or that globalization has not been discussed in any of these other contexts. Indeed, globalization's perceived threat to all of these other contexts may be precisely the reason why it is discussed at all in the context of staged folk dance. All too often, however, staged folk dance choreographies like *Pannon freskó* are simply ana-

lyzed on the basis of their relation to the authentic, folk sources and judged accordingly, without consideration of the crucial contribution that the artistic frame makes. This is what I have intended to address in this article. To judge all choreographies as such is to misunderstand the work of the ensembles that produce them. The unique qualities of staged folk dance in Hungary, including the use of artistic frames that have been enriched by ethnography and also by the history of the genre, allow for a unique contribution to a larger socio-cultural dialogue.

Notes

- 1 Vadasi, *Szálljatok fiókáim...*, 33.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 3 Bartók, “The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music”, in Béla Bartók, *Essays*, 340–344.
- 4 Vadasi, 35.
- 5 “Szövetségi viták...”, 10.
- 6 These concepts are more fully explained in Tímár’s book, *Néptáncnyelven*.
- 7 It also involves other theoretical and cultural categories, such as “popular”, but for purposes of this article I focus on these two categories, as they are often seen as oppositional.
- 8 The terms “transcription” and “incorporation” are terms I have borrowed from Paul Connerton in his discussions of cultural and social memory; see his *How Societies Remember*, cited in the References. Other dance scholars have borrowed these terms as well in reference to dance (see Buckland 2001, for example).
- 9 See Richard Bauman 1986, for a basic introduction to Performance theory.
- 10 Bakhtin 1981.

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