

Dancing in Other's shoes: between pain and pleasure

Practicing dances of foreign cultures has become a popular hobby in Russia in last decade. Belly dance, Irish dance, Indian dance flamenco and swing dances gather the most followers.

These dance practices are not, though, "ethnic" in a traditional sense. Years of their development and re-enactment in alien cultural milieu has transformed them into a kind of super-ethnic constructs.

The history of modern belly dance goes back to the end of the nineteenth century, when orientalism has become a fashion in the USA and cabaret and variety show programmes have begun to include exotic eastern dances adapted for a Western viewer. This adaptation has turned them into a mix of different ethnic dance cultures (including gipsy dance) and Hollywood stereotypes of the "oriental". Coming home after American tours, the native dancers have continued to perform this mass cultural style at the hotels for the rich foreigners, bringing this modernized traditional dance back to the original culture and making it its part¹. Migration of Western performers to Egypt has also played a significant role in Westernization of belly dance².

The traditional Irish dance has also been transformed in the process of so-called "celtic renaissance" of 19-20 centuries. Local dance traditions were consciously unified in to a hybrid synthetic system to reconstruct the "authentic" Irish dance and to underline the differences between modern social dances practiced in Ireland at the time and the Irish dance which was considered to become an instrument for creation and strengthening of national self-consciousness. The later process of institutionalization of the Irish dance, which included the creation of official ranking system and the world-wide system of contests – feises, has continued to determine the alternations of the dance practice. Swing dances were restored and reconstructed in the 1980s in the USA and Sweden after decades of oblivion. Indian temple dances in the scenic forms have also been affected by collaboration of Indian dancers with Western ones, including Ruth St. Denis and Anna Pavlova. Marginal dance forms like fusion dance and "Bollywood" dance style have also become popular in the dancing societies.

The foreign dance practices, thus, mostly turn out to be synthetic complexes and mixes of ethnic dances, reconstructions made to the demands of the society to dance something "authentic", a product of collaboration of strikingly different cultural traditions. Still, the process of involvement of a beginner into an alien dance practice is twofold. On one hand, it is rarely considered as a way of understanding the Other's culture. The goals of participants of dance rehearsals are far from that: most of them describe their dancing activities in terms of socializing, recreation, looking for something new, relaxation or fitness. On the other hand, this bodily perspective of dancing for fitness plays a perfidious trick. However adapted and transformed, these dances retain significant traces of foreign cultures. As such, they were first developed for and by the people with peculiar bodily habits and the structure of the body. The motions which are seen as "natural" or at least understandable by a native dancer puzzle a foreigner who has moved absolutely the other way lifelong.

¹ Conover G.E. Embodiment, Performativity and Identity: Spatial and Temporal Processes Embedded Within Improvisational Tribal Style Dance. MS Thesis. Florida University, 2007.

² Maira S. Belly Dancing: Arab-Face, Orientalist Feminism, and U.S. Empire. // *American Quarterly*, Vol. 60, #2, June 2008. P. 333

This leads to the articulated need of transforming the body, sometimes in a surprising way. As a lindy hopper told in an interview, dancing is about “feeling oneself a black man”. In Russia as in many Western countries and perhaps even more than in most of them due to the lack of political correctness paradigm, the post-colonial stereotype of some idealized “natives” who move in a “natural” way, being free from the bodily restrictions of a Protestant (in this case Orthodox) society is central to the idea of alien dance practices. As Helena Wulff has noted, “*There is moreover an idea among Irish choreographers that not only do people in general move differently, that is in a more stiff manner, in the North than in the South, but also that Catholics move more softly than Protestants*”³. Foreign dance is thus seen as the form of liberation – no matter the price which is paid for it.

This process of transformation of the body may be painful. Generally, pain is a normal element of learning new body practices, be it sport or dance, and a valuable instrument in it. “*Working to correct bad habits, to modify the body’s aberrations and to increase its capabilities, the dancer frequently incurs pain and learns quickly to distinguish between several kinds: constructive pain that will lead to greater strength or flexibility; destructive pain caused by the incorrect positioning or use of a part of the body; chronic pain, the cumulative result of bad habit; pain resulting from too much tension, too little strength, activities other than dance, overambition, inattentiveness, and so on*”⁴ – describes Susan L. Foster. Yet the perception of this pain may differ significantly.

First, there is a common cultural cliché of pain as the method of evaluation of one’s diligence in training. Good work-out should be followed by a specific painful sensations. Then, Russian culture has developed a settled stereotype of the value of overcoming of pain. If a person continues his/her progress paying no attention to pain, it strengthens self-esteem and social status. At the crossroads of these two presuppositions there lies a common stereotype of the Russian culture than nothing valuable can be achieved through pleasure. Skills and results can only be deserved by constant effort, through violating mind and body and the general willingness and ability to suffer throughout the process of learning and performing.

This understanding of bodily pain as a precondition and result of any serious achievement gets a dancer in another trap. The majority of the practitioners of foreign dances are amateurs who see them as a form of recreation. Moreover, their social milieu also sees these practices as a hobby and estimate it as something of little value in comparison with classic dance or sports. Practicing alien dances, however, requires as much resources as any of the practices which are seen as “normal” and “serious” by the general society, including time, effort, and funds: an amateur dancer, depending on the level of his/her involvement, has to invest relatively much in costumes, music, training, master-classes, educational trips. As the majority of dancers in Russia are young people (14 and 30 y.o.) and particularly young women, many of them are financially dependent on their parents or spouses. To get money for their hobby they have to justify it in their social group and even in their own eyes. Pain comes here as a means of putting a practice into the group of socially encouraged activities: it is painful, hence, it is serious. Pain, thus, becomes a cultural instrument of evaluating bodily practices and a person’s result in them; it is not a surprise, therefore, that it becomes desired.

The other side of understanding of pain in dance practices is its relation to recreation itself. Though recreation is generally understood as leisure and pleasure there are two aspects

³ Wulff, Helena. *The Irish body in motion: moral politics, national identity and dance/ Sport, dance and embodied identities*, p.188

⁴ Foster Susan Leigh. *Dancing bodies. // Meaning in motion*, p.240

which seem to be an important part of any bodily practices, especially dances. First, pain is a part of the complex of sensory deprivation compensation. Like re-enactment activities, a dance practice allows to experience a past culture through physical activity, which was shown by a number of researchers⁵. The postmodern culture is visualized to a large extent; virtual pseudo-images and pseudo-artifacts are dominating the cultural space. The majority of activities of the middle-class (who forms the core of the researched group) lies within the field of intellectual work deprived of any physical sensations. Thus, the need to experience one's own reality through creation of tangible objects or feeling physical sensations leads to the introduction of a number of practices which fill the gap between the "real" and the "virtual". "Pain" in this dimension of the cultural space becomes a synonym of "the real" and "the authentic", meaning both the correspondence of practice with the original ethnic dances re-enacted in a rehearsal studio, and, more important, the physical existence of the practitioner.

Second, pain, paradoxically, can become the means of the escape from the daily reality. As an Irish dancer confesses,

... after the first class everything aches, everything which was trained before, EVERYTHING, even the toes... but it is an absolutely indispensable relax for the brains, for 2 hours all problems remain behind the door of the dancing studio, all thoughts and sorrows wait outside and I am alone with my body for these two hours⁶.

Pain does not allow to concentrate on anything except the class and one's own body and therefore provides some break of the daily routine. Beyond pure physical action of influx of endorphins there is a psychological cliché that pain is an excuse for failures and a reason to stay away from the regular activities for a while. Dance, being itself a captivating practice, is supported by pain in the process of escape from the pressure of modern society. Dance, and specifically an alien dance is thus a complex system of creating an alternate reality. Through it, a person liberates from the conventions of his/her society and allows oneself to move like an idealized free and close-to-nature Other, as a result getting to know one's own body and learning to master it in the way which is not common for the Western post-modernity. Then, the "exotic" practices, social relations and costumes are included into the system. And, finally, he/she simultaneously puts a barrier between dancing self and the everyday reality, and legitimizes this practice in the eyes of the reference group by experiencing the pain, and, still more important, talking about it.

We can see now how pain in the amateur dance scenes receives certain cultural meaning, becomes an instrument of locating oneself in the alternate reality of dance, and a value of its own. Still, in general, pain is less a physical sensation than a representation of a number of stereotypes, which stimulate the exaggeration of it in communications both inside and outside the group. Various dancing scenes differ greatly in their understanding and appreciation of this phenomenon.

One of the most rigid dance practices is the Irish dance, which demands serious physical activity with stress on the spine, legs, development of specific posture and almost as advance stretching ability and turnout as in classical ballet. Though it emerged in an ethnic community constitutionally close to the Russians, its formalization and institutionalization led to development of high demands to a dancer. Learning Irish dance is thus bound together with painful sensations which are in this group understood as an integral and positive part of the

⁵ See, e.g., Agnew V. Introduction: what is reenactment? //Criticism, Vol. 46, #3, Summer, 2004. P. 330; Radchenko D. Simulating the past: Reenactment and the quest for truth in Russia. //Rethinking History (Routledge) – Vol.10 – #.1 – March 2006.

⁶ URL: <http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/kutek/post86659304/> (25.05.09)

process of involvement into this bodily practice. Though the dancers generally find some humorous aspect in constant talking of pain, they continue to articulate the topics of pain, traumatism, overcoming the pain, and, most interesting, the rigid fixation of the body during the dance.

Though dance is normally seen as a complex of movements, Irish dance body discipline combines the rapid and very precise leg movement with absolute stiffness of the upper body. This fixation shows even on the level of the self-presentation on official dance occasions: securely attached red curly wig, thick material of the dress, socks glued to legs for safety, and even formally prohibited corsets and sleeves sewn to the dress not to allow hand movement⁷. On the level of communications, this “stiffness” and discipline of Irish dance can be presented as in following testimonies:

...A good slogan for a Irish dances ad – “Irish dance – tie yourself into a knot!”⁸

...we have a a new catchphrase here – “the epic Irish dowel”... the one which keeps the torso motionless... at least has to⁹.

After Sunday’s class I had only pain in calves, and today aches EVERYTHING. Even those parts which ought not to (I won’t tell you what I mean but just believe me – it shouldn’t ache)¹⁰.

M. Seaver suggests that the reason for such regulative treatment of the dancer’s body lies within the nature of the Irish dance itself. The national dance was seen by the activists of celtic renaissance as a means to “*mold bodies to reflect the body politics of the new state*”¹¹. Dance, in fact, was used to form the controlled, guided body of a subject with a clear understanding of the national idea and morality; as Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan put it, it was a part of the “colonial state’s efforts to pacify, civilize, modernize and discipline the Irish body”¹². There is no surprise, then, in the fact that this disciplining attitude keeps shaping the dance practice through decades. One of the attempts to alter the dance as to the needs of contemporary society became the “Riverdance” show, which has shown Irish dance more glitzy, visual, sexual, relaxed¹³ – being generally perceived as a non-authentic product of globalization.

The perception of pain and body transformation is absolutely opposite on belly dance scene. Though this practice also constructs the body of a dancer to a certain extent, the goal is different. The majority of dance groups’ participants regard belly dance not even as a fitness, but as a means of slimming and, more important, as a way to improve the quality of life by compensating consequences of a number of diseases. In Russia, belly dance is promoted as a complex of exercises which can cure gynecological diseases and improve reproductivity in general, which is supported by the myth of belly dance’s “harem” origin. The participants of belly dance groups also seek relief of spine and leg pain.

⁷ 7.04.2008. URL: <http://bukashk0.livejournal.com/73293.html> (25.05.09)

⁸ 29.01.2007. URL: <http://kanidiya.livejournal.com/101859.html?thread=590563#t590563> (25.05.09)

⁹ 11.01.2009. URL: <http://strori.livejournal.com/214852.html> (25.05.09)

¹⁰ 25.09.2007. URL: <http://tryndetz.livejournal.com/111359.html> (25.05.09)

¹¹ Seaver M. Stepping into footprints: Tradition and the Globalization of Irish Dance. //Dance in a World of change. Reflections on Globalisation and cultural difference. Human Kinetics Publishers, 2008. P. 5

¹² Wilson T, Donnan H. The anthropology of Ireland. Berg, 2006. – P. 49.

¹³ Wulff, Helena. The irish body in motion: moral politics, national identity and dance/ Sport, dance and embodied identities. P. 187

This idea of dance relieving pain is in a sense a manifestation of postcolonial myth of harmony between the “native” and natural environment. There is a general understanding, that “native”, led by “instincts”, unconsciously creates practices which at first glance can seem connected rather with art, religion or other type of social communication, but “are” in fact aimed at maintenance of health and hygiene. On the other hand lies the popular myth of “eastern wisdom”, which shows itself in such practices.

Belly dance is seen as an instrument of body shaping – but at the same time it is also seen as a way of getting in terms with one’s own body *as it is*. Belly dance allows to compensate psychological problems which are linked with a body status different from mass cultural norms¹⁴. The feeling of one’s own disparity from the common beauty standard forces women to find practices and groups which will appreciate their shortcomings and make use of them. Opposite to many other foreign dance practices, belly dance allows not to re-shape the body. Transformation here concerns more mind than body; attitude to oneself rather than bodily attitudes. Asked about the reasons for choosing belly dance, women often say something like: “*I have large bottom and I wanted to make use of it*”¹⁵ or “*I’ve got a lovely little fatty belly after delivery, and it’s real sin not to show it, and I’ve also pierced my navel and it glitters, especially when I’m dancing*”¹⁶. Belly dance is thus a practice which aims at avoiding pain and transformation, having pure pleasure of one’s collaboration with one’s own body. While Irish and, in some cases, Indian dances are putting pain as a value in itself and a sign of progress, belly dance sees it as something harmful, unhealthy and a sign that something has gone wrong.

Between these two obvious poles of the axis of understanding the place and role of a foreign body in a dance technique lies the subculture of swing dances. It is characterized by total absence of the pain concept, which is rather uncommon for dance practices. Being a very intense body activity and involving a developed rank structure, swing dances however demonstrate a very special understanding of body shaping. The core of the practice lies in the idea of “inspiration” and gradual rooting into the new body techniques. That is no coincidence that the practitioners usually speak of their training in terms of “getting involved in music” or even meditation-like “opening the chakras”. In this it has much in common with Latin social dances (e.g. salsa), where “almost mystical experience that can be created by dancing with the right partner to the right music at the right time: the ‘flow’, a feeling of absolute harmony and correspondence”¹⁷. As a female dancer exclaims in her blog,

*I’ve got it! I’ve got how to dance lindy-hop! First year has passed and I am receiving dance enlightenments. I have got bounce finally... for a minute, for a very-very short while, but I’ve got hold of this sensation, and everything has changed!*¹⁸

The reason for this difference of concepts of body, training, transformation and pain is, perhaps, ideological. Irish dance is aimed at achievement. Of all foreign dances it is most like sport and sport dance, with its ranking system, conventions, formality, lack of individual creativity and improvisation – a regulating and disciplining dance. Most of the Indian dances practiced in Russia (e.g. the most popular Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, Odissi, Kuchipudi) aim at maintenance of tradition, and require much devotion and self-denial, but are as much adapted to the host culture by the practitioners (which often causes conflicts between native Indian teachers

¹⁴ Maira S. Belly Dancing: Arab-Face, Orientalist Feminism, and U.S. Empire. // *American Quarterly*, Vol. 60, #2, June 2008. P. 333

¹⁵ 31.03.2005. URL: www.beledi.ru/forum/viewtopic.php?t=214 (25.05.09)

¹⁶ 18.10.2005. URL: <http://www.beledi.ru/forum/viewtopic.php?t=214&start=30&postdays=0&postorder=asc&highlight=&sid=4325f06f933507cf5a343a8194fed567> (25.05.09)

¹⁷ Heike Wieschialek. ‘Ladies, just follow his lead!’ Salsa, Gender and Identity. /Sport, dance and embodied identities. P 129.

¹⁸ 11.03.2009, URL: <http://catluin.livejournal.com/52882.html> (25.05.09)

and their Russian students), putting more stress at health value and beauty of performance than on the conservation of the dance, often at the cost of pain and serious body reconstruction. Belly dance, on the other hand, is understood as a purely recreational practice, a relief rather than strain, which makes it deny pain. Swing dances, especially lindy hop, are totally different from all the before mentioned practices. In their dance, lindy-hoppers seek socializing, play, free improvisation, humour and “being oneself”. The process of learning might be demanding physically, but this finds no reflections in the group’s communication, because pain is neither goal nor means of progress evaluation. Common presupposition is that the better you do lindy, the easier it should be. The interaction between dancing partners is based on balance and the ability to move together without a certain scheme, but in the end maintaining an integral performance.

Thus we can draw an imaginary axis, on which the foreign dance practices will be located on the basis of their attitude to pain. Though all the practices have much in common, this characteristic differs significantly, and reflects the ideological background of the dances. It can be even suggested that changing interest to a dance practice with a certain ideology shows the transformation of values, myths and stereotypes in certain social groups.