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A “Western Couple” in Lorca Massine’s *Zorba the Greek*

The present work continues the argument discussed at the Annual Conference of Society of Dance History Scholars and The Congress of Research in Dance, that took place in Athens from June 4th to June 7th. The title of the Congress was *Cut and Paste: Dance Advocacy in the Age of Austerity*. During my presentation I analysed some parts of Lorca Massine’s ballet *Zorba the Greek*, first performed in 1988 at the Arena di Verona.¹ I made a particular emphasis on discussing the female character of Marina and her point of view in a predominantly masculine society, as it was portrayed in the Cacoyanni’s Movie. Apart from that, my narration has also included the analysis of Zorba’s character in his real and genuine being. Now, I will try to analyze the non-Greek couple of the novel, through Massine’s ballet: John and Madame Hortense.

As we know, the famous novel and the film have had put on stage through a famous ballet, often trivialized by performing of little companies. The Syrtaki was especially created for Cacoyannis’ movie in 1964 (with the great Anthony Queen as Zorba, Alan Bates as John, Irene Papas as Marina, and Lila Kedrova as Hortense).

As M. Hnaraki writes:

«The final image by which the audience left the cinema was that of Zorba’s dance, a scene which became the symbol of Greece and of the Greek spirit represented by Zorba in particular.

¹ First performed with Vladimir Vassiliev as Zorba, Gheorghe Iancu as John, Donna Wood (Alvin Ailey Dance Company) as Marina, Rosalba Garavelli as Hortense. I will use, for this paper, the Video recorded live at the *Arena di Verona* (August 1990, Domovideo): Orchestra, Chorus and Corp de Ballet of the Arena di Verona; Director Mikis Theodorakis; Choreography and stage Director Lorca Massine with Vladimir Vassiliev as Zorba, Gheorghe Iancu as John, Luciana Savignano as Marina and Rosalba Garavelli as Hortense.

The popularity of this theme led to the production of a Broadway musical in 1968 and a ballet in 1987. Mikis Theodorakis comments that the film's music has been turned into a myth. Since that time, Zorba and his dancing have lent their name to restaurants and various other products over the world». ²

This “new tradition” founded by the film is based on ancient and popular reminiscences.

The Ballet *Zorba the Greek* was viewed in more than thirty countries and by more than three million enthusiastic spectators – according to the Choreographers' official website. ³ The enthusiastic public conferred its transformation in to a new Greek myth.

As Maria Hnaraki also writes, paraphrasing Kazantzakis' text, «Zorba has many things to say but would rather dance them» ⁴, because through dancing Greeks create a dialogue between Western/Apollonian and Eastern/Dionysian spirit. The human being is always put in the middle of their thinking. According to this thinking, there's nothing better than a Cretan vision, the «Third locus» ⁵, derived from the approach of the Greek element and Eastern element.

Lorca Massine's choreography expresses nodal points of man's life as love and death differently, because he gives voice to love, from the women's point of view. This element doesn't exist in Kazantzakis' novel – except for the only one character, a pathetic Madame Hortense who is given the possibility to love as a female, even though perceived and described from the masculine point of view. ⁶

We must remember that in Greek tradition, since the times of Homer, the woman has been the “queen of silence” (= has reigned in silence). But dancing, being a form of a non-verbal communication, gives women the possibility to express their emotions remaining silent. Thus the feminine universe receives greater space.

² M. Hnaraki, *Speaking Without Words: Zorba's Dance*, in the *Bulletin of the Ethnographic Institute* 57 (2), 2009, 25-35: 26. Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA).

³ <http://www.lorcamassine.com/Zorba>.

⁴ M. Hnaraki, *Speaking Without Words*, 25.

⁵ M. Pateraki, C. Mountakis, *Zorba's Cinematic Dance: a Global Fame, Local Claim Beyhond Studios and Screens*, in the *Scienze of Dance*, Volume 6 (2013), 68-85: 70.

⁶ M. Venuso, *Zorba's dance in Lorca Massine's dancing expression*, presentation read at the SDHS/CORD Annual Conference, *Cut and Paste: Dance Advocacy in the Age of Austerity*, Athens, June 4th – 7th 2015.



In L. Massine's ballet the male sections are predominant and Madame Hortense doesn't dance. Her inner being is in the care of the pantomime.

She is a fundamental female character in the novel, because she's the only woman who lives like a man. Kazantzakis' describes her with realist touch. Cacoyannis gives more space to the melancholy of the old "siren". Massine makes her character a wizened mask. The most lyrical moments of Mikis Theodorakis' score are entrusted to her dance: they underline a melancholy sadness for a time gone by, for youth that won't come back. In this case, as in the case of Marina, the female point of view emerges through the ballet character. Madame Hortense isn't described in the third person, nor does she act as Zorba's stooge. She arrives on stage and mimes her life. She doesn't dance, but expresses herself in a gestual code, because she's old and she can't dance. But pantomime is also the best way to recount one's emotions. In her life she has had many stories and youth has gone away quickly.⁷

In this first version of Massine's staging, Hortense is markedly a mask. The disaster of her life is finishing and the transposition of human feelings into the ballet allows, better than any other significant performing the spiritual changing of a prostitute.

⁷ S. Leigh Foster, *Choreography and Narrative*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1996 [it. ed: *Coreografia e narrazione. Corpo, danza e società dalla pantomima a Giselle*, Dino Audino Editore, Roma 2003].

Kazantzakis' novel was written in 1943, during the German occupation; it explored and projected «Greek people's remarkable powers of endurance despite repeated disaster»⁸. And dancing is a way of enduring life despite many kinds of disasters, as Madame Hortense's case.

The most suggestive scene is without doubt the marriage. In the novel and in the movie there is a symbolic “betrothal” made by Zorba, Hortense and John in solitude, after John's unkind lie about Zorba and his wish to marry the “old siren”. Massine organizes a touching scene around the idea of marriage for the woman: a real hymeneal, with veils and torches in the hand of the girls, as *ancillae dominae*. Zorba marries Hortense (or pretends to to it) and carries her in his arms to her house entrance, as tradition wants. The sensitivity of this moment is great, because dance, once again, can express the female point of view about a wish.

Her death happens on the same musical theme, worn-out and languid. The female element of this “western couple” is the stereotype of corruption. Only the dance performance can redeem the “fat goose” of the novel, according to the famous *cliché* of the rehabilitated sinner (as Thais, or Manon Lescaut, or Marguerite Gautier – although with different dispositions in their life). The cruel realism of the movie translates the decline of a woman who, in an archaic world, tries to preserve her “Western being”, through the rags she is wearing or through her “make up”.

Madame Hortense's feeling herself “the Queen”, the “saviour” of Crete, and this is the reason why Zorba calls her “Bubulina”, as Laskarina Bubulina (1776 -1825), the Greek heroin who had fought against the Turkish. But Hortense is “only” the saviour of her men, because she gave them happiness and love. A character really viewed from a masculine point of view, both in the novel and in the movie.



⁸ Cf. Peter Bien, *Nikos Kazantzakis's Novel on Film*, in the *Journal of Modern Greek Studies, Greek film*, Special Edition by stratos Costantinidis, in Pateraki, Mountakis, *Zorba's Cinematic Dance*, p. 70

The most painful scene, in the movie, is her death. The dishonesty and avidity of poor are taking away all her belongings while she is still alive, and the old *praeficae* are waiting for her death as hungry bitches. It's "the poor" who have to take away everything before the State will do it, because Hortense is a woman without heirs. Finally also Zorba, who was been near her till death, leaves the corpse to its fate: nobody will bury her, because she is Catholic. For Zorba it doesn't matter because, when someone dies, it's the same, whether he is buried or not.

Lorca Massine's ballet, as usually in dance, idealises this death in a final *Pas de Deux*. Only after Hortense's death, Zorba dances his sorrow in the ballet. In the novel he has always danced sorrow, but for the public of choreography it's the first time. And yet Romantic ballet teaches us to understand sorrow in dance and the greatest choreographers, in the Nineteenth century, were able to investigate human soul to give sorrow a form, as we know.

John, the second protagonist of the novel and the ballet, is the writer who comes back to Crete, the homeland of his grand parents. Now, he looks at Greece with the eyes of a foreigner. In the novel he's the projection of Kazantzakis himself, with a great profoundness of thinking.⁹ This profoundness seems to be forgotten in the character of Zorba, from the collective point of view. Zorba dominates everything and eclipses John, sometimes with an irreverent joviality.

Michel Cacoyannis makes John's character on Alan Bates: he is a shy man, nearly insecure, a bit awkward, in contrast with the powerful and unsophisticated Zorba. But in the ballet there isn't the profoundness of Kazantzakis' thinking. John is the stereotyped hero of the dance tradition, although the choreographical score isn't an academic ballet. And although Lorca Massine uses a mixed style (with classic, modern and folk elements), his "direction" of the staging characterizes John in a traditional way.

Effectively, at John's entrance on stage, the character appears stronger than how it is described in the literary source and in the movie. In a ballet staging he must be a hero. In the novel he's the intellectual lost in his thoughts; in the film he's the silent writer and always awkward. In the ballet, instead, he storms into the scene with resolution, on a different and modern musical instrument, the xylophone. His diversity is underlined in this way.

⁹ M. Hnaraki, *Speaking Without Words*, 26-27 and notes.



John dances in a classical style, but not too classical, because he's the "Apollonian man" but at the same time a modern man. He is jumping with vivacity in *jetés* and *temps levés*: there's a different characterization of the writer. In the novel and in the film he dissociates himself from every type of physicality: this factor prevents John from being involved with Zorba, at the beginning of the story. It is very difficult to express this point through a choreographic expression. In this ballet the writer wants to learn and imitate Zorba's steps at once. These steps are naturally different from John's, because Zorba's movements are more bound up with the ground, as *balances* and *rond de jambes*. John looks at these steps with interest and curiosity, because his dance is more aerial than Zorba's dance.

In the movie Zorba teaches him the Syrtaki from Hasapiko. In the novel the zeimbekiko, the most interior male dance (difficult to be performed by a foreigner, so in the movie Cacoyannis chooses the syrto - hasapiko/hasaposerviko, combined with a famous song based on the *Rebetiko* genre *Strose to stroma sou gia dyo/Make your bed for two*¹⁰).

There's also a difference in the characters of Zorba and John. In the novel and in the film Zorba's tall. In the ballet the Apollonian hero is usually tall, so the role of John is given to a taller dancer, while Zorba is the character role for a shorter dancer. And this is the stereotyped situation of the classical ballet, taken by Massine and put into his choreographical score with many different types of dance, as we said up in this paper.

¹⁰ M. Pateraki, C. Mountakis, *Zorba's Cinematic Dance: a Global Fame, Local Claim Beyhond Studios and Screens*, in the *Scienze of Dance*, Volume 6 (2013), 68-85: 70.

John-Hortense is a non complementary couple: it gives us the possibility to understand the negative approach to the foreign element, in an archaic world. John is a writer, an intellectual, and the unsophisticated Greek man must educate him and liberate him from the restrictions of culture.

In Cacoyannis' movie Crete is the place of the past and nothing is as John would like. It's as travelling in the past and he is a passive viewer. Only at the end of his travel Zorba captivates him into a dance in which he finally recovers himself.

While writing in the novel permits the in-depth analysis of the inner being, in the movie this is concentrated only in few moments. It is the same in the ballet, where spatial and temporal needs require specific abilities in the description of such profound feelings. In Lorca Massine's ballet John often dances with Zorba on a choreographical and musical *leitmotiv* that anticipates the final Syrtaki: there's already great agreement in between both. And this happens because the language of dance (in the novel and in the movie it will arrive only at the end of the plot), in the ballet, is the only language they can use.

The analysis of the four principal characters, divided in two non-complementary couples, allows, at the moment, to consider some results. The inadequate consideration of Zorba's character (who has a great philosophic calibre) probably originates from the exalting of dance in Kazantzakis novel. This is the greatest supporter and defender of dancing, in all the text. The movie, where Cacoyannis transfers the Syrtaki's scene on a Cretan beach at the end of the film, initiates the process of "lightening" of the real message, towards a "consumer" simplification. In the various stagings of Massine's ballet, the desemantization of the protagonist has also cancelled the real character of the other three protagonists, although the female vision is an important piece of news. Zorba's theme, in all the world, suffers a lot of kinds of abuses. Only to entertain people. There's a great difference from the original idea. The common imagine of Greece, besides the cultural vision of an immortal antiquity, doesn't go beyond summer relax and levity of songs.

Zorba has been received in this way, but its succes probably depends also on this factor. The ballet westernizes the character of the widow and makes a new occidental

hero, who is John. Sometimes it trivializes Zorbas¹¹, but gives voice to the female element in a new way for the subject.

¹¹ M. Venuso, *Zorba's dance in Lorca Massine's dancing* expression, presentation read at the SDHS/CORD Annual Conference, Athens 2015.