

Early Greek Dancers Make A Splash in North America

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By Steve Frangos

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Greeks have always been dancers. One of the most enduring stereotypic images of contemporary Greek Americans shows them dancing to their hearts' content. If there is one thing that can be said indisputably about Greek public and private entertainment, it is

this: Greeks really like to dance.

Knowing this inherent love of dance it is extremely curious, then, why, with so many self-proclaimed experts on Modern Greek music in North America, has not one of them paid systematic attention to the actual dancers?

Oh, to be sure, there is always some obligatory mention about the complexities in Greek dance rhythms, but nothing about the dancers themselves, or even about the various and sundry setting for Greek dance.

I'm speaking here of traditional Greek folkdance. I want to roughly outline the early history of Greek dance in a professional setting, and in the local community. But I also want to take up a notch. I want to discuss public dance.

DANCING AT KASTONGADI

The earliest eyewitness accounts of Greeks dancing in North America, aptly enough, were at kastongadi. "Kastongadi" was the Greek American term for the Castle Garden building on Ellis Island. Those Greek immigrants wishing to enter the port of New York City, and therefore the United States of America, in the late 1880's and early 1900's, had to go through the long lines at kastongadi.

In 1888, American observers had no clue as to what the Greeks were up to the first time Greek dance was recorded. "It was generally supposed that they (the Greeks) were engaged in a religious ceremony of some sort." The steamship Rhaetia had landed at Castle Garden with a party of 250 Greeks, 67 of whom were men. For reasons not explained in the news account, the Greeks were detained. How did the Greeks respond to this quarantine?

"A dozen of them joining hands, all but the two end men, formed a semicircle, and walked very sedately from left to right,

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while the right-end man went through the most extravagant capers. During this dance, if it could be called a dance, all sang in a very monotonous tone, repeating the same words over and over. The agile right-end man suited his actions to the words, evidently, and at the proper periods leaped in the air, threw his feet sideways and turned around, regaining his feet with a fling under the arm of his next comrade, to whom he was joined by a handkerchief instead of clasping his hand. At intervals the end man was relieved until all had been given a chance to caper. They kept up this demonstration for over two hours, while their companions gazed on in admiration, and the emigrants outside the enclosure jeered at them and mimicked their chant (New York Times, May 7, 1888)."

The next account may be tied to the World's Fair, which was just then being mounted in Chicago. The "dance der ventre" is what Western Europeans in the late 1880's and early 1900's called all forms of what is today known as belly dancing.

"A party of five Egyptians and two Grecian dancers were among the passengers who were landed on Ellis Island yesterday from the steerage of the steamship Obdam. They come to this country to introduce a new dance - "der ventre," they call it - the feature of which is a sensuous, swaying movement of the body, which is said to have made quite a hit among the sensation-loving Parisians. Four of the Eastern visitors are dusky-faced young men.

One of the others is a handsome Greek girl. The other two are daughters of the Nile. The party is in charge of Stamadi Polenei, a young Grecian woman. She came in the saloon of the Obdam. She did not call at the island for her charges yesterday, and they were consequently detained (New York Times December 3, 1892)."

The real question here is who was Stamadi Polenei? Was she al-

so a dancer? Was she a promoter?

LITTLE EGYPT

Ever since 1893, when George Pangalos, the Greek businessman from Constantinople, first introduced Balkan and Middle Eastern dancers to North America via the World's Fair Columbian Exposition in Chicago, this centuries-old dance form has met both heartfelt acceptance and open disdain. The various dancers, even the media created figure of "Little Egypt," were all the rage from May 1 to October 31, 1893 when the Chicago World's Fair was host to 27 million visitors - nearly one quarter of the country's population at the time.

The overwhelming popularity of the Midway on which the various foreign theaters were found had a huge influence on popular culture in the 20th Century. Not only did the "... display of 'native villages' on the Midway of Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition inspired circuses to enlarge their own displays of tribal people.

The Midway also stimulated the idea for a collective amusement company... and the carnival, as we know it, was born. Bringing cakes, rides, food, music and theatrical entertainment into one complex was an idea heartily approved by the entertainers and theater managers who peopled the Midway and the Wild West Show. By the turn of the century, the first permanent iteration of the concept of the Midway was established at Coney Island, New York and has been followed by scores of permanent amusement and theme parks throughout the country - including Disneyland and Disney World (www.xroads.virginia.edu)."

Little Egypt was the stage name for at least two popular exotic dancers: Ashea Wabe, who danced at the Seeley banquet in Chicago (causing a scandal at the time), and Frieda Mahzar Spyropoulos (died, 1937), both appeared (as did other women dancers) in the Egyptian Theatre on the Fair's Midway. Frieda Mahzar married a young Greek who was a vendor at the Fair: Andrew Spyropoulos

Use a Stir in America

(1882-1955).

ALREADY ESTABLISHED

What few Greek Americans today realize is that there was already an established form of "Greek dance" when their ancestors arrived in North America. These Greek dances were most often performed by the young daughters of America's upper classes, who would don gauzy white costumes and perform "Greek Suites" of classical dances. These dances were inspired by Isadora Duncan's free interpretation of classical Greek dances, after she studied dance figures on the classical vases at the British Museum. These dances were very popular among the upper classes in the Roaring Twenties.

Not everyone cared for these free interpretations of classical dance. Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950), the renowned American poet, once complained: "I am tired of the Greek dance. I am tired of a group of respectable young women garbed in pastel shades of home-dyed cheesecloth, limping discreetly about, in reticent abandon, to the tune of something or other in three-four time. I am tired of the curved elbow, the dangling hand, the lifted knee, the thrown-back head, the parted mouth, the inarticulate bust restrained by a bath-cord... the look that registers horror, the look that registers woe, the look that registers that Spring is here... Why is it the girls of so many of our best families, the hope of our land, as you might say, insist upon getting all safety-pinned up into several yards of mosquito-netting... (and then are found) standing around somebody's golf links?"

This sort of dancing was far different from the Greek dancing one could see during this same period in any Greektown in the nation. Louis Adamic (1899-1951), the Slovenian American who wrote extensively on the 1880-1920 massive wave of immigrants to the United States, offered this description of the urban American "Greek dance" one could see by the late 1900's (interestingly,

Adamic uses the Bulgarian term, "kyotchek" for belly dancing):

"In large cities like Chicago, Detroit and St. Louis, where there are large colonies of Balkan immigrants, there are coffeehouses for the different strata of immigrant society-dingy places for the menial workers and luxuriously appointed parlors that cater to the intelligentsia and the business class. A coffeehouse is generally located in a big hall, either on the first or second floor of a building. It is furnished with marbled-topped tables and chairs with wire-twisted legs... at the back of the hall, there is a small kitchen where the proprietor brews the coffee and the tea which he himself serves to his patrons. Lokum, baklava and other Oriental delicacies are also served, in addition to bottled American soft drinks... The kyotchek troupe (i.e., the belly dance ensemble appearing in these coffeehouses) consists of two girls and three men, the latter making the orchestra of a violin, a clarinet and a xylophone. The girls, mostly American-born, schooled by the managers to sing obscene Turkish and Greek songs, and to dance the sensuous kyotchek, are generally plump of body - a discernment on the part of the producers, they having taken into consideration the tastes of the patrons..."

The troupes now form in Chicago and first present themselves to the critical eyes of the Chicago Greeks. If the girls 'can do their stuff' and meet the approval of the blasé Chicago first-nighters, they are instantly booked for long periods... with contracts for extended and profitable visits to Detroit and other Midwest cities."

As we can see, it is not so difficult to locate eyewitness accounts of Greeks dancing from 1888 until the very early 1920's. How much more Greek American history is just waiting to be rediscovered and brought to our collective attention?

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