

## **GREEK DANCES THEATRE "DORA STRATOU"**

The living museum of Greek dance, since 1953

A non-profit institution subsidized by the  
Ministry of Culture and the National Tourism Organization  
under the auspices of the Municipality of Athens

- Daily performances in the its 900-seat garden theatre, located on Philopappou Hill, opposite the Acropolis.
- An ensemble of 75 dancers, musicians and folk singers
- A collection of 2,500 village-made costumes, jewels and other works of folk art worn on stage.
- Courses, lectures and workshops on folk dance, folk instruments and folk culture
- Field research programs in Dance Ethnography, Dance History, or Sociology.
- Study group, courses and workshops on Ancient Greek dance
- Archives of dance books, articles, field recordings, photographs and films
- A series of 53 records; 15 cassettes, 7 videocassettes, 30 books on dance in Greek, English and other languages, 8 CD-ROMs.
- Costume copies can be made to order.
- Close cooperation with the International Dance Council CID and the International Organization of Folk Art (both UNESCO non-governmental organizations)

## **GREEK DANCES - «DORA STRATOU» THEATRE**

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### **PRESENTATION**

The "Dora Stratou" Theater in Athens is an institution unique in its kind in the world, with varied activities, all centered around Greek dance. As a theater it differs from all other theaters and as a dance company it differs from the other dance companies.

### **The "Dora Stratou - Greek Dances" Society**

This Society was founded in 1953 by Dora Stratou who remained its president until 1983. Ms Stratou was the daughter of a former Prime minister and sister of a Minister; she was a trained classical singer. She managed to mobilize state and private support in order to create "a living museum for Greek dance" which later expanded into other activities. She believed in the preservation of dances as a proof of the continuity of the Greek race since Antiquity.

Members of the Society are persons who have offered significant services to the Theater in their various professional, scientific or other capacities. Membership is less than 100, mostly academics of all backgrounds. The General Assembly meets every

three years to elect a 7-member Governing Council, and every year to hear the Council's report. The President of the Council manages, represents and binds the Society with his actions.

President, since 1987, is Alkis Raftis, formerly Associate Professor of the University of Patras and Visiting Professor of the University of Paris. He is President of the International Dance Council CID, and former member of the Board of the International Organization of Folk Art IOV, both UNESCO organizations. Dr Raftis has published many books and articles on dance in various languages, and is the leading authority on Greek dance.

### **The costumes collection**

The late Dora Stratou managed, by buying old costumes from the villages in the course of 30 years, to equip the Theater with the largest collection of its kind: 2,500 traditional costumes from all regions, an important collection of folk jewelry, as well as a great number of various objects and accessories (village-made shoes, masks, swords, kerchiefs, bells etc.). Most of these costumes cannot be found to buy, nor copies made since the craftsmen and the fabrics do not exist any more.

This collection is at the same time the Theater's wardrobe, requiring constant maintenance and security. About 1,000 costumes are worn on stage during each season. Dancers are taught how to put them on, how to tie kerchiefs in the various characteristic headdresses of each region and how to fold them properly. Wardrobe mistresses assist dancers to dress and ensure proper maintenance and storing. Some costumes are extremely heavy, others are embroidered with gold thread.

### **The dances**

In Greek folk dance, steps are relatively simple but the style of execution varies from place to place and is difficult to reproduce. It takes an accomplished dancer years of dancing with good dancers who possess the local style and with good music, to become imbued with it. The leader of the line in a chain dance has the most important role, as his understanding of the idiom is transmitted to the musicians and to the other dancers.

While most folk dance troupes around the world have learned their dances by dance masters or choreographers, this ensemble has built up its repertoire by inviting groups of villagers to perform on stage. As each village was presented, the troupe's dancers learned the dances by dancing with the villagers. These original appearances were filmed and serve today as reference to check whether dances are still executed in the genuine style.

About 80 different villages, islands or regions can be presented, each one with its particular costume, music and dances. For comparison, an average folk dance group in Greece has a tenth of this repertoire. The total number of dances in the repertoire is about 200.

Another source of pride is the fact that the troupe has no choreographer and no dance master, it is simply composed of dancers. There is no major dance company in the

world which can boast such a feature. All dances are presented in the same manner and style as they have been brought by the villagers. New dancers learn the dances the traditional way: they copy the local style by simply dancing during rehearsals alongside older dancers.

### **The troupe**

The main troupe is composed of 50 dancers, 25 men and 25 women. In addition, it has dancers from regions with a very particular style, such as Crete or Pontos, who perform only their local dances, as well as invited dancers from particular villages. There are 5 to 10 vacancies every year, for which about 100 applicants - who are experienced dancers from other groups around the country - present themselves each January. They dance with the troupe's dancers until finally the most competent ones are integrated in April.

The troupe rehearses every evening prior to the performance for 1 1/2 hour. During the winter season most dancers have several small groups where they teach. By dancing every single day of the year they improve constantly and keep in form. All dancers and musicians have a morning job for a living. The troupe has about 15 permanent folk musicians and singers. They play for rehearsals and performances every day; no recorded music is used to dance, in order to maintain the personal rapport between dancers and musicians, inherent in folk culture. Musicians have access to the archives of old field recordings, to verify the correct rendering of the particular style of playing characteristic to each region. Some of the dancers and musicians have been raised in the Theater, their fathers having performed there. Many are married to fellow dancers and usually bring their children along because most of their evenings are spent there.

### **The theater**

On the pine-covered Philopappou Hill, opposite the Acropolis, a 900-seat open-air theater was built especially for the "Dora Stratou" company. The stage was designed by famous Greek painter Spyros Vassiliou. The floor is very large in order to allow the free evolution of dancers, just like in a village square or dance-field. Within the 25-acre theater area, a hall was also built, used for winter rehearsals, courses and workshops.

Performances take place every day at 21.30 hours, Sundays at 20.15 hours. It has visited 22 countries and has been awarded many distinctions, notably by the Academy of Athens and the International Theater Institute. performances a week, from the end of May to the end of September. Until now 5,000 performances have been given, attended by 2,800,000 spectators. During the winter, the troupe sometimes travels abroad to perform, usually at government-sponsored occasions.

### **Education**

From October to April there are dance classes for beginners, advanced and children. Each class is 1 1/2 hours a week for three years. There are two instructors in each class, a man and a woman. Recorded music is used there, chosen from the theater's repertoire. Students receive educational material and take part in the other activities.

Special workshops are offered to dance teachers on the methodology of research, the teaching folk dance and the staging of performances. Every week there is a lecture by an invited specialist, usually a member of the "Dora Stratou" Society. Subjects are relative to dance customs, music, costumes and various other topics related to dance. Attendance is free and the audience participates in a conversation with the lecturer afterwards or ends up in the nearby taverna. Sometimes, instead of a lecture, a group of amateur musicians might be invited to play. Workshops are organized once every two months. A group of older people is invited from a village to present their dances, customs and local culture. During two days and evenings they dance, sing, play music, tell stories and discuss with the workshop participants. They bring their old costumes, handicraft, photographs and musical instruments; sometimes they even bring wine and local food for everyone. A researcher with field experience in this village is in charge, giving the necessary background information.

During the summer season, dance workshops in English are held in the Theater. They last one week, 4 hours every afternoon, with lectures and visits to folk museums in the morning. Folk dance groups outside Greece either arrange for such courses, or invite dancers to give workshops there during the winter season.

### **Archives and publications**

The Theater offices and the costumes collection are housed in a 5-storey building in Plaka, the old town of Athens. In the same building are kept the archives of recordings, films and field notes. There is also a library of 10,000 books and articles, a costume maintenance workshop, a showroom and a lecture hall. Publications include 50 records and a series of 30 books in several languages. Also programs, postcards, posters, videocassettes and tee-shirts. The Theater undertakes the fabrication of costumes, simplified copies of its originals made to order for folk dance groups. It also assists film and theater directors, choreographers and costume designers in the staging of performances with traditional character. In the same building are located the headquarters of the Greek section of the International Organization of Folk Art. Most Greek folklorists (more than 3,000 members) belong to this organization, which has branches in 160 countries. The Greek Section has its own activities, such as publishing a newsletter, organizing conferences etc. around the country.

### **Research**

By recording and filming the groups of villagers who were invited to perform in the Theater, important archives have been initially constituted. It has been supplemented by recordings, photographs and notes taken during visits to other villages. These films and recordings are used today to verify that dancing and music in the performances do not deviate from the original. A library of 10,000 books and a collection of records with folk music continuously updated ensure that any researcher can find, gathered in one building, a unique wealth of resources. A study group on ancient Greek dance functions independently within the Theater, offering courses, workshops and exhibitions. During the past few years, more than 40 research programs have been launched, using ethnographic or sociological methodology, under the guidance of Dr. Alkis Raftis. They include several doctoral and postgraduate thesis, as well as diploma dissertations by students of Greek and foreign universities.

In addition, many other students and researchers come to ask for resources or advice. Folk dance group leaders frequently call in to inquire on various matters. In this way the Theater is the focal point and crossroads of everyone involved in Greek dance.