Greek Dance: An Ancient Link

By Athan Karas

Greek mythology weaves a wonderful tale of how dance began. Before man, Titans inhabited the earth. The Titan goddess Rhea, wife of god Cronus (time), taught the art of dance to the Kouretes (sons of earth) who dwelled on the island of Crete and the Corybantes who lived in Phrygia, Asia Minor. According to legend, Cronus would habitually devour his children at birth so that none would succeed him to the throne. Preparing to give birth to Zeus, Rhea fled to Mount Ida in Crete. Cronus followed in pursuit and Rhea offered him a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, which he promptly swallowed. Rhea placed baby Zeus in the care of the Kouretes, who she besieged to dance wildly while beating swords and shields in order to keep Cronus from hearing the baby crying. In appreciation, Rhea honored the Kouretes and their descendants by making them priests of Zeus to dance the cult rituals, which today are referenced by the Pentozali and the Maleviziotko dances of Crete.

Ancient Greeks believed dance arose from a divine inspiration to express joyful emotions "hara" or "horos." Plato and others attributed the need to dance as a desire to dramatize heroic deeds while Dionysos attributed it to the stimulation of wine and thus Dionysian rituals in Phrygia and Thrace involve dance. Ancient 7/8 and 5/4 rhythms in poetry such as the Iliad and the Odyssey are found in Modern Greek dances. Homer wrote about a wedding dance where bridesmaids sang and danced through the city while carrying flaming torches as young men twirled to the sounds of flutes. This very dance was documented in a scene depicted on Achilles' shield.

Early Greek dances were done at the chorostasi (threshing floors), a circular space where a charioteer stood on a flat board with stones underneath so as to thresh the wheat. After the harvest, celebrations took place on the chorostasi or "orchestra" derived from the ancient word for dance orchesis in reverence to Dionysos god of wine and fertility. These ancient folk dances were known as dithyrambs (antiphonal dance songs) that became the seeds of Greek theater and Greek tragedy. Remnants of these dances were carried on into early Christianity and Byzantium. In time, the dances spread through the countryside resulting in ceremonial, processional, and liturgical traditions, which eventually became the recreational 7/8 Epitritos, 5/8 Paionas, and 9/8 Thohmios rhythms that exist in Greek folklore today.

Archeological inscriptions in Delos mention the Greranos dance performed while holding torches at nightly ceremonials that are linked to the Minoan folklore tale of Theseus who was led through the labyrinth by Ariadne to defeat the Minotaur. Since the ancient Minoans settled in the Peloponese, vestiges of such a dance can be found in the Tsakonikos folkdance from Tsakonia, Peloponesus. Remnants of ancient animal worship exist in such bull dances as Tauromachia, which employs imitations of bulls. These morphe rituals can be traced to modern-day carnival celebrations, which employ lascivious hip swaying and dances verging on vulgarity. Such residue of ancient rites can be seen in primitive revelers' pre-Lenten reenactments in Soho and Naoussa, Macedonia and on the island of Skyros.

Other dances mimic tilling the soil, harvesting crops, and the effects of drought. The Zeimbekiko, with its variety of movements depicting war or a cleansing of such furies has evolved into a flurry of macho showmanship. The ancient oarsmen Keleustes dance still survives with the sponge divers in Kalymnos. The fire dances or Pyrrihios thrive among the cult of Anastenarides (fire walkers) in Macedonia. Those still trying to release the fire within embodied by the deities Apollo and Dionysos, do so with leaping in the air. Greek dances emphasize earthiness and percussive rhythms and into 21st century, many aspects of the ancient gods' revelry exist among the Greeks today.

Athan Karas' name is synonymous with Greek dance. After dancing with major dance companies and researching Greek dance as an exponent of his career, he has successfully produced and presented folklore programs and events in the U.S. and Canada. Mr. Karas is featured in many folk-dance manuals and is represented in the recently produced multi-cultural video by Human Kinetics. Currently, he is an

instructor of Greek Dance and Culture at Loyola Marymount University, and is the U.S. coordinator for Mazoxi, an annual Greek dance conference held on the Island of Crete.

In the early sixties, he founded the Intersection Folk Dance Center in Los Angeles, which subsequently became the landmark of folk cultures and a unique center for Greek music and dance.

Mr. Karas has paved the way for performers in the U.S. and was instrumental in bringing the Parthenon Dancers of Greece to the U.S. and Canada for several tours. He has conducted tours to Greece taking groups to dance festivals along with visits to ancient cites. He has also produced and presented several major Greek Festivals at UC Berkeley, UCLA, and Loyola Marymount University and created ethnic folklore programs for the Southern California Heritage Society. He was also the founder and served as Director of Laografia International Greek Folklore Society.

Mr. Karas has appeared on Broadway, television, and in motion pictures—starring in one of the first Greek-American films, Dark Odyssey, now available on DVD. He is the author of numerous articles on Greek dance and music that have appeared in several major ethnic and national publications. Currently, he has a regular column on dance in the monthly periodical The Hellenic Journal.

Mr. Karas is a member of the Dora Stratou Greek Dance Theatre and Foundation; the Board of Directors for the AMAN Folk Ensemble; an Advisor and Director of the Folk Dance Programs for the California Traditional Musical Society; lifetime member of The Hellenic University Club of Southern California.

Among the honors he received were the 2001 Athenagoras Humanitarian Award, The Man of the Year at the Levendia Conference, a Greek Folk Festival in Tarpon Springs to name a few.