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Dancing Behind the Curtain: Dance Politics in the USSR in the Cold War
Final Report for OSA Archivum

My stay at the OSA Archivum lasted from 1 June to 25 July 2022. For me, as a performer artist of Ukrainian origin, doing research on Dance Politics in the USSR means not only getting to the roots of present-day perspectives on dance in Ukraine (as well as gender and body politics) but also contributing to the deconstruction of the USSR grand mythology which is a primary task for the Ukrainian cultural front, especially since the start of the war. The Open Society Archives with its wide holdings of the Eastern bloc historical documents and materials served as a perfect platform to start my project (even though the choice of working in the Cold War archives may seem not so obvious when it comes to dance research).

Before arriving in Budapest, my conception of archival holdings was formed through the familiarisation with the OSA online catalogue where I could find many documents describing Dance Propaganda in Eastern bloc countries but not talking about the situation in the USSR specifically. So I arrived in Budapest with '...Eastern bloc countries' in a working title and with the idea to focus on Central European countries in my research. However, my work with materials and consultations with the OSA staff reassured me to direct my attention mainly to the USSR Dance Politics. Still, as a future project, I am interested to look into the differences between attitudes to Western music and dance styles in the USSR and Central European countries: as it was said in one of my archival findings, an article on socialist music in Poland in the 1950s, 'there is a curtain within the Iron Curtain' (Panufnik, 1954). As one could see, I did not refuse from working with Central European materials completely but my main focus remained on the USSR.

The timeframes of my research period were defined not only by the availability of documents: the range of found materials on dance varied from the late 1950s (after Stalins' death) to the early 1990s (first post-soviet years). I have chosen to focus on the period from the late 1950s to the early 1970s as the most ambiguous for the USSR Dance Politics, where state views on 'appropriate' dances coexisted side by side with the youth's fascination with 'vulgar' and 'decadent' rock'n'roll and jazz until the official cultural doctrine eventually

became more malleable for foreign cultural trends.

I should point out the density of the Soviet dance collection in the OSA archives. Materials of my interest we not scattered around different places: there were at least three folders focused specifically on dance in the USSR:

300-80-1:1011/3 (Dances) from Red Archives
3**00-120-5:341/4 (USSR/Cultural Exchange: Dancing)** and
300-120-5:342/1 (USSR/Cultural Exchange: Dancing) from Western Press Archives.

The last two folders feature the Soviet dance performances as an export product for cultural exchange and the first one contains information on dance practices as leisure time in the USSR. Obviously, such classification reflects the materials' origins (Western press articles on the USSR collectives touring versus the USSR newspaper articles on the situation in local dance clubs) but I have noticed that it also separates 'high art' dance forms such as Soviet ballet theatres and Moiseev ensemble from 'low art' of dance floors contaminated with Western music and dances, by the opinion of Soviet press. However, I should add that the folder **USSR: 300-80-1:1011/3 (Dances)** besides Soviet newspaper articles also features Western reports (Radio Liberty/Free Europe) on the dance situation in the USSR.

Studying dance history is inseparable from music history scholarship, so another important source for analysing the politics of dance became the files on Music in USSR, in particular:

300-120-5:431/8 (USSR: Music: Rock'n Roll, 1957 - 1992)
300-120-5:431/4 (USSR: Music: Jazz, 1958-1989)

In addition to materials directly featuring information on music and dance, I have also consulted with documents describing the social life of Soviets, such as reports on:

- Education

300-120-5:364/4 USSR: Education/ Teachers
300-120-5:362/1 USSR: Education: Comparison with the USA, 1955 - 1989

- Cultural Exchanges:

300-120-5:345/1 (USSR: Cultural Exchange: Students
300-80-1:469/2: Cultural exchange: general
300-120-5:340/2 USSR: Cultural Exchange: General

- Social portraits

(**300-120-5:464/1 USSR: Soviet Man, 1960 - 1989**),

- General Cultural Trends in the USSR

300-120-5:463/4 USSR: Society: Elite, Creative Artists)

To analyse my findings, I use Andre Lepecki's concepts of Chorepolicies and Choreopolitics connected with the idea of agency in choreography (2013). While the idea of Chorepolicies relates to the imperative force of choreography and can be used in my research to describe the control of dancing bodies as the manifestation of Soviet authority power, Choreopolitics describes individuals' ability to perform movements freely and in this way to break the conformity of Chorepolicies. So, young people dancing rock'n'roll and jazz, in fact, were claiming back the agency over their bodies from the state. The Soviets' fear of granting back the agency to individuals was well embodied in writer Leonid Likhodeev's words in 'Komsomolskaya Pravda' newspaper (1964):

'A youngster is a thinking individual. Besides legs for dancing he also has opinions'.

Allowing young generations to have their own opinions was simply impractical for the Communist party: what if they refused to direct their energy to fulfil the tasks of Communism and focus on individual success instead? That meant the failure of the Global Socialist Revolution project and the collapse of the whole Soviet system (what indeed happened in 1991).

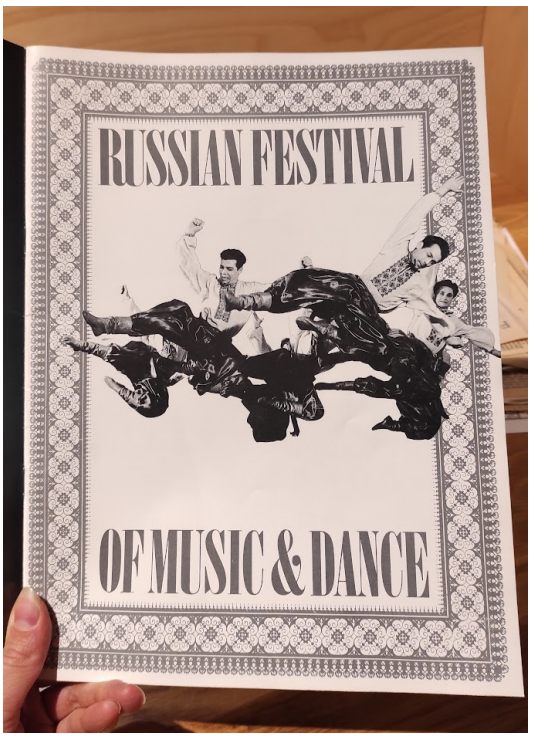
Still, the party views on dance evolved with time. Newspaper materials allowed me to trace the evolution of official party views from complete rejection and condemnation of Western trends to negotiation and multiple attempts to replace 'bourgeois' styles with 'highly moral' newly invented Soviet dances and then finally to admitting the inevitability of western music's and dances' spread among Soviet people and approval of ballroom dances as the lesser evil.

The USSR newspapers' descriptions of dance movements also suggest the connection between the freedom of motion and freedom of mind. What always evoked the judgement of older generations were the non-conforming body movements: shaking, twisting, 'disgusting dynamism' as famous Soviet choreographer Igor Moiseyev put it (Topping, 1962).

However, in the Moiseyev ensemble, the freedom and variety of movements were not only encouraged but necessary. Several highly-skilled state-sponsored choreographic ensembles and ballet theatres represented the USSR abroad, employing dancers' bodies as perfect examples of "... the beauty, athleticism and discipline of Russian dance". By demonstrating excellence on stage, the USSR claimed supremacy in the international political arena as well.

Nonetheless, the well-designed Soviet scenarios of performing the excellence and superiority on Western stages were regularly broken by protest groups, such as Jewish Defence League in the USA (Miller, 1974). The performance disruptions sometimes happened in a peculiar and rather harmless way such as letting mice out in the audience, but in many cases a real threat to dancers' (and even the audience's) bodies was present. Nails and pins on stage, then gas attacks in theatre venues were supposed to harm the dancers and in this way disable them as propaganda tools and also punish viewers who came to consume the propaganda's product. A dancer's body used as a tool for performing foreign politics was threatened not only as an individual body but also as a part of the Soviet organism.

Another aspect of the USSR dance export politics I would like to point out is the representation of ethnic minorities on stage. Although I did not plan to focus on it initially, the materials' character in the OSA made it impossible to omit this topic, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine where the ethnic factor plays an important role. Among the documents, I have found a brochure titled 'Russian Festival of Music and Dance' featuring… Georgian dancers in their national costumes on the cover (see ill.1). Next page had a picture of Ukrainian dance 'hopac' under the same title as the Russian festival (ill.2). The practice of placing all the USSR national minorities' dances under the same umbrella of 'Russian' or 'Soviet' dance did not encourage the recognition of USSR republics' national cultures independently from their Big Brother. Even in the case of the Ukrainian ensemble of Pavlo Virsky touring on its own, the Western press reviews were equivocal: yes, Ukrainians were vital and full of energy on stage but lacked the elegance and intellectuality of Russian ballet.



Illustrations 1 and 2: Russian Festival brochure depicting Georgian and Ukrainian dances (Porter, 1975).

The materials I consulted with not only helped me to trace and evaluate the USSR's internal and external Dance Politics but also motivated me to look into the Soviet Gender and Body Politics as factors shaping the general attitudes to dance practices. Investigating interrelations between Soviet Dance, Body and Gender will be my next step that my work in the OSA laid the foundament for: I will use my current findings for preparing a PhD proposal on the abovementioned topic.

Finally, I would like to highlight the welcoming and warm environment of the OSA Archivum. Besides providing me with materials for my investigation, it also gave me invaluable social capital and brought new opportunities. I am very satisfied with my stay and will do my best to promote the scholarship.

References:

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