

BOOK REVIEW

Ancient Dramatic Chorus through the Eyes of a Modern Choreographer: Zouzou Nikoloudi. By KATIA SAVRAMI. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. Pp. xi + 169. Hardcover, £45.99. ISBN 978-1-4438-9946-8.

Among the components of the *opsis* of Greek drama, choral dance is perhaps the one least studied nowadays in the context of classical scholarship. Nevertheless, imaginative researchers and artists have striven to recover this largely lost ancient art, and their work has sometimes exercised seminal influence on the development of the techniques and aesthetics of modern dance theater, through pioneering figures from Isadora Duncan to Martha Graham. The history of the Modern Greek revivals of Attic drama also includes impressive (though poorly known internationally) cases of talented choreographers who dedicated themselves to bringing alive the choruses of ancient plays in performance. The spiritual line that starts from the Delphic festivals of Eva Palmer-Sikelianou in the 1920s passes through the monumental educational activities of Koula Pratsika (who single-handedly trained almost all the prominent dance artists of post-war Greece) and culminates in Zouzou Nikoloudi (1917–2004)¹, arguably the creator of the most brilliant choreography ever designed for the production of a classical play: Aristophanes' *Birds* in the legendary *mise en scène* by Karolos Koun (1960).

Savrami's book is the first substantial monograph to be published on Nikoloudi's oeuvre. It focuses on the performances of Nikoloudi's own dance company, the *Chorika*, which was founded in 1966 and operated intermittently until the eve of the artist's death. The first part of the book explores Nikoloudi's intellectual background and the influences she creatively assimilated in developing her own choreographic style and educational methods. Emphasis is placed on the ideas and practices of the German school of expressionistic dance, which Nikoloudi absorbed during her apprenticeship at Zurich in the 1950s, when she studied and cooperated with such luminaries as Mary Wigman (her principal

¹ Savrami writes "Zouzou" throughout, following the standard international practice for the transliteration of Modern Greek. But perhaps the form "Joujou", used by Nikoloudi herself in the advertisements of her dance recitals (see 155–156), would be preferable. The name obviously comes from the French word *joujou* ("plaything") given as a nursery sobriquet, presumably by upper-class parents who were obsessed with French culture.

mentor), Kurt Jooss, Harald Kreutzberg, and Rosalia Chládek; she also came under the influence of the composer and pedagogical theorist Carl Orff. Savrami expertly traces the connections between the German artists' theories and the techniques and exercises evolved by Nikoloudi for training the performers of her company.

Another abundant source of inspiration was the native folk tradition of Greek music and dance, together with the rich archaeological heritage of Nikoloudi's homeland. These were the determining factors of the idea of "Hellenicity" (*hellenikoteta*), a main tenet of Greek mid-war modernism, which also shaped Nikoloudi's aesthetic credo. The aim was to define the distinctive qualities of Hellenic culture in its diachronic presence and mould them into a dynamic spiritual identity for the people of present-day Greece. Thus, with regard to the choral design for the performance of ancient drama, visual elements from the dancing figures of ancient vase-paintings were combined with rhythms and kinetic patterns of Modern Greek traditional dances. The ideological basis was provided by the unprovable but fascinating hypothesis that a kind of bodily expressiveness or poetics of kinaesthesia has survived among the Greek population from very ancient times.

The second part analyzes specific productions of the *Chorika* company, mainly relying on a lengthy video recording made at the Kalamata International Dance Festival of 1995. This recording presents an anthology of the best portions of Nikoloudi's choral performances, from the *Oresteia* through the *Bacchae* to Aristophanes' *Birds*—some of the most impressive and challenging choruses of extant Greek drama. It is a pity that no record survives of her work on the satyric *Ichneutae*. Nikoloudi's practice was the exact opposite of what the producers of classical tragedies did in Hellenistic and Imperial times: they used to strip away the choral parts, while she concentrated solely on select choral odes, detaching them from the dialogical episodes. She thus strove to condense and encapsulate the core of the dramatic experience in the audiovisual spectacle of a singing and dancing collectivity. Innovative theatre artists, such as Koun, had already promoted the chorus as the backbone and mainstay of ancient drama. Nikoloudi carried this notion to its ultimate aesthetic consequences.

Central in Nikoloudi's artistic vision was the indivisible trinity of speech, song, and movement, fused together into a total performance ideal which was held to represent the essence of Greek theatre. In her productions there was intense interaction and osmosis between these three interconnected means of expression. Speech operated as a musical element, as rhythmic patterns were created through the repetition of key words or phrases with profound significance and emotional

power. Dance functioned as a visualization of the music, concretely transposing the effects of counterpoint or polyphony into space through the distribution of movements over different groups of performers and levels of the setting. Flowing and staccato motions, pauses, rotations or diagonal curves of the dancers' bodies were compounded, as though syntactic units or musical motifs, so as to follow the course of the poetic meaning and the fluctuations of the musical mood. Nikoloudi advanced further than any other of her contemporary colleagues in drawing up a corporeal grammar of the choral ode.

Throughout the book the author translates many passages from Nikoloudi's lectures, interviews, and pedagogical writings, which afford a good glimpse into her thought. At the end there is a series of illustrative snapshots from performances of the *Chorika* (although the resolution could have been higher), a complete catalogue of the company's productions, samples of reviews from the international press, and reproductions of pages from Nikoloudi's original choreographic scores—the precious imprint of a great artist's hands.

A few pages of the book may prove hard to read for a non-specialist unfamiliar with the jargon of choreology. An additional chapter on Nikoloudi's collaborations with other theatrical troops and directors, most notably Koun, would have been worthwhile. There is also some repetitiveness, given that discussion of the same key concepts and methods is reiterated in various chapters instead of being systematically and exhaustively addressed in one place. Overall, however, the book offers a wealth of pragmatic information and penetrating analyses; it is a first-rate contribution to the study of the modern reception of ancient theatre, valuable for classical scholars, drama critics, and artists alike. Above all, it is a reminder of the cardinal importance of music and dance for the emotional effect of an ancient play. Directors of the avant-garde should take particular heed of it.

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