

# "RACHENITSA! TRY TO OUTDANCE ME!": COMPETITION AND IMPROVISATION THE BULGARIAN WAY

*Daniela Ivanova-Nyberg*

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...In this extraordinary dance, tone and step, spirit and body merge together like a whirlwind; every cell catches fire — in a crazy impetus for life, for creative-self-oblivion, for diving into the arch-ecstasy of Eros.<sup>1</sup> (Sheytanov 1994:247)

The topic of the *rachenitsa* is probably as rich and multi-layered as this poetic image; so is the topic of improvisation. The "layer" discussed in this paper is the solo *rachenitsa* as it is performed today — individually or in couples — during recreational folk dance competitions. I propose that, although these competitions' *rachenitsas* are choreographed in advance, we can define degrees of improvisation within the genre of Bulgarian folk dance art based on folklore.

The *rachenitsa* competition model itself may be seen, broadly speaking, as a signifier of today's folk-dance practices. My research perspective is influenced by Lotman's and Uspenski's understanding of culture as a mechanism for creating texts, while seeing the text as a mode for cultural realization (or, through which culture is realized) (Lotman; Uspenski 1990:217–243).<sup>2</sup>

This paper looks at the *rachenitsa*'s competition "text" from a "close distance" by adopting historical, anthropological and ethnochoreological perspectives. Its sources include first-hand observations, video materials, interviews, research publications and lifelong emic-etic experience. The paucity of domestic studies on dance improvisation presented the work with both great challenges and fascination. For suggestions, references and access to related articles of Anca Giurchescu (1983), György Martin (1980) and others, I am especially indebted to Anca Giurchescu, Liz Mellish, Andriy Nahachewsky, Placida Staro, Tamás Korzenszky, and others.

## ***Rachenitsa*: Historical Perspective**

It is the chthonic orgiastics, typical for our agrarian culture, in which we can place the male wedding *rachenitsa* (along with *kukeri*, *starcheski*,<sup>3</sup> and wedding-with-travesty-element plays). (Racheva & Ilieva 1982:3:31)

In Bulgarian academic tradition, the music-rhythm-play-dance origin in the remote past was researched for many years by scholars Anna Ilieva and Iskra Racheva, who stated:

[...] The wedding ritual was mainly related to the prosperity of the kin (man) in which the erotic direction of the energy prevailed [...] This led to organizing the entire psychic tuning, the corporeal tonus of the dancers in a specific way. The energy was directed from the belly and pelvis to the legs, changing both the body posture and the way of dancing, with movements that were characteristic for agrarian cultures (trampling down the earth but also caressing and inseminating it). The dance energies were transformed into specific movement symbols: jumps, squats down and up, laying down, and others, becoming the foundation for the long-short rhythm, measured typically by the drum (Racheva & Ilieva, 1982:3:32).

Due to two “breaks” in folk culture (as defined by Racheva and Ilieva), these being the involvement of women in dancing the wedding *rachentisa* (with instrumental accompaniment) and the involvement of men in the sacred *horo* circle (by breaking the circle and leading it), its music and dance development was set on its way toward artistry, from which the wedding was shaped into its recognized “classical” appearance. Female wedding groups (sisters-in-law, daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law) began using male dance material while giving it their female, sacral character. Women assimilated the male *rachenitsa* and made it their own. Here we find the three-element *rachenitsa*-step (Ilieva and Racheva 1982:3:36).<sup>4</sup>

Descriptions by travelers through Bulgaria from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century offer a few examples that seem to relate to *rachenitsa* solo dance, concluded Katzarova in her “Bulgarian Dance Folklore” (1955:7). Summarizing her own field research, Katzarova wrote:

The *rachenitsa* is the most well-known and widespread dance of this type in the country. The dance is as often in pairs as it is a solo dance. It is often performed, as people say, *sam po samè* – as a solo dance, without a partner (1955:41–42).<sup>5</sup>

Katzarova provided the following details:

Bulgarians show the highest dance achievements in the solo dance and in the solo dance in pairs. In the flow of the dance, men unfold all their dance imagination and exceptional talent for improvisation. Dancers that are older love the grotesque. With a sense of humor, they incorporated in their play funny movements of the body, hands and feet. Initially a solo dance in which every dancer performs individually, the *rachenitsa* for weddings and celebrations transforms itself into a group dance with many participants. In the vortex of the common dance, many not very good dancers also become involved — something that they would normally hesitate to do otherwise, due to its appearing too risqué to be exposed to the critical eye of people observing solo dancers (Katzarova 1955:47).

The *rachenitsa* is commonly described today as a dance with hands.<sup>6</sup> The *rachenik* is the name of the handkerchief that is often held by dancers during the dance. And, although the *rachenitsa* in 7/8 (“quick-quick-slow”) is also performed in a closed circle, semi-circle and

line, its etymology provides the dance's main specifics: a solo-dance with the hands. From this overview and from other sources we may conclude that solo *rachenitsa* in pairs is a relatively late phenomenon, well rooted, however, in its early twentieth-century traditional context.<sup>7</sup>

### **Solo-Rachenitsa In Ensemble and Folk Dance Clubs' Repertoire and Competitions**

In a previous publication, I discussed the folk dance ensemble as a cultural phenomenon, investigating the early activities of folk dance groups in urban settings (the 1920s, 30s and 40s), the development of the professional genre of folk dance art based on folklore during the socialist era, and the genre's struggles after 1989, due to the severe economic situation and loss of governmental support (Ivanova-Nyberg 2011). In this study, I aimed to distinguish the ensemble specifics and to analyze the role of the choreographer in transmitting and disseminating cultural knowledge labeled as "folk." Proceeding from this research, we might turn to a quotation from a leading Bulgarian choreographer, Kiril Haralampiev, who in the 1960s wrote: "Quite improperly, the *rachenitsa* disappeared from the repertoire of our ensembles" (Haralampiev 1961:10). And, indeed, the genre of Bulgarian folk dance art based on folklore developed stage repertoire derived from various folkloric regions that included the *rachenitsa*'s forms and steps in divertissements, suites and chamber dances with and without scenario. It did not incorporate, however, the solo *rachenitsa* — as an improvisational practice — in the routine rehearsal activities of the ensemble.<sup>8</sup>

I observed the first change in this situation in 2000 while attending a national choreography conference in the context of a Christmastime *Try to Outdance Me* competition at the Palace of Sport in Varna. The conference's overall conclusion was that folk dance ensemble activity was in stagnation, even bolted shut, and that something new had to be done to overcome the crisis — something fresh and appealing to people. It was at this time that some new projects, such as the show "Two Worlds" (called by the guild "an experiment") of the former artistic gymnastics coach Neshka Robeva, were introduced and very warmly received across the country.

The Christmas season's *Try to Outdance Me* competition, along with the "classical" ensemble program, included a *rachenitsa* competition in pairs. During an interview, organizer Katya Damyanova commented, "Competing with solo *rachenitsa* in pairs was the idea of the first director of the Palace, Simeon Simeonov, who invented this category [...]" (Ivanova-Nyberg 2011:280).

Today's situation is a widespread recreational folk dance club movement, initiated by professional choreographers a decade or more ago. These clubs appeared as a new, active form;<sup>9</sup> in the embrace between the old (ensemble) and the new (clubs), today's ensemble has adopted some characteristics of the club, while the club has begun to assimilate the old ensemble model's features. Competing with others is one of these features. In order to compete in the numerous festival competitions today (including the *Try to Outdance Me* television show) every club participant must select a representative male-female pair. These pairs compete with the other attendees by dancing to recorded *rachenitsa* music from Thrace, Central-North Bulgaria, Dobrudzha, and the Shop regions. Thus, while bearing in mind that every choreographer "prescribes" (borrowing Nahachewsky's term [2012:74]) the

sequence of movements for the *rachentisa* competition, how may we now define its improvisational aspects?

### The Concept of Improvisation

Within the area of folk dance the meaning of term 'improvisation' is very broad and rather vague. (Giurchescu 1983:21)

While discussing improvisation in an Iranian dance context, Anthony Shay addresses two theoretical constructs on improvisation which, according to him, best conceptualize this process as it is manifested in solo improvised dance:

Levi-Strauss' discussion of bricolage (1966) shows how known units are recombined in new ways, and the Lord-Parry theory of storytelling and oral composition in the former Yugoslavia (Lord 1970) suggests a model of the types of elements that are employed by storytellers, which I utilize to show how parallel strategies of composition of movement phrases and formulae are elaborated, developed and embellished by performers of dance. (Shay 1997:267)

I offer this quotation because it provokes further investigations and thoughts with regard to the "logic of choice principles" in improvisation (Shay 1997:272), "stylistic parameters," and the concept of the "period eye" (Shay 1997:288), which bring additional dimensions to texts on improvisation of Giurchescu (1983), Nahachewsky (2012), Martin (1980),<sup>10</sup> and others that best resonate with the present topic.<sup>11</sup> I may also add here that I have found myself in the role of the *bricoleur* both as dancer, improviser, and choreographer, but also as a researcher. As a dancer, I naturally began inwardly asking, "How do I, myself, improvise? What kind of 'tools' do I have in my 'box'?" I gained my "tools" somewhat naturally (being born a dancer, I believe), "traditionally" (by learning my first dance steps from my grandmother), but also formally, via ensemble and choreography institutional training. I found the *bricolage* metaphor also useful to illustrate my work as a researcher — in my efforts, from publications on improvisation in folk dance in a traditional context, to discover analytical tools that will work well for the analysis of the solo *rachenitsa* in non-traditional contexts, while at the same time bearing in mind the complex nature of the folk dance club repertoire.

It is possible to understand many aspects of improvisation, as has been accomplished with music and epic poetry, as Nahachewsky writes in his study on Ukrainian dance. Improvised dance is not really structureless and disorganized, but rather structured in "different" ways from a fixed-form dance. A closer look at improvisation in dance reveals a number of different possibilities for understanding and discussing this phenomenon (Nahachewsky 2012:74).<sup>12</sup> In this study, he also addresses Giurchescu's research, according to which improvisation is primarily a spontaneous activity based upon traditionally acquired dynamic patterns, stored in the dancer's mental and kinesthetic memory. Nahachewsky developed this by stating:

The model for a dance is relatively permanent in the person's mind, and also in her body in the form of kinesthetic memory. This more-or-less stable model can be

called the prescription for the dance. The prescription for the dance consists of a series of instructions or rules that are required for successful performance. Some of these prescriptions deal with specific movements and types of movements that are appropriate, and others deal with how these are combined to structure the dance [...]. The concept of a prescription for the dance is closely related to the term "choreography." In fact, a "choreography" is a detailed plan or a mental model for a dance performance. Given this understanding of the terms, all dances are choreographed. Some dances are choreographed prior to the commencement of the performance, while others are choreographed by the dancer "in the flow," during the moment of performing itself. This latter situation is called improvising. (Nahachewsky 2012:75)

## Analyses

Although, while its roots are in the remote past, the solo *rachenitsa* in competition settings today may be analyzed only with the awareness and recognition of the recent development of ensemble and folk dance club practices and repertoires. Drawing the diachronic line helps reveal the solo *rachenitsa*'s reinvention, which is due to efforts leading toward breathing life back into this "genuinely Bulgarian" dance, but also an awareness of a search for novelty. That which did come back to life, however, was stylistically shaped by the ensemble repertoire's *rachenitsa* patterns, including several stage clichés. For competitions, choreographers and folk dance club leaders "prescribe" the flow of dance that is arranged by them from motifs that are often descended from well-known choreographies. These ensemble-like *rachenitsa* motifs serve today as the main "tools" for building a two-minute composition that is intended to represent a specific ethnographic region.

Dynamic patterns that are acquired after long years of practice in the rehearsal hall can also be qualified as "stored in the dancer's mental and kinesthetic memory." Dancers' competence in the folk dance clubs vary from very limited (the competence of adults very new to folk dancing) to very advanced (typically adult, long-time members of folk dance ensemble often since their youth). The couples competing with the solo in-pairs dance are usually selected from the most experienced dancers. It is not rare to observe a "state of performance" that does not overlap with the "state of dancing" because of their cumulative performance habits. These couples are not facing only each other but rather, they are facing the jury and audience; dance became the dance "for" and not so much a dance "of" X of Y. On the contrary, one may also observe dancers that are fully involved in the "state of dancing" which may happen not only due to their competence<sup>13</sup> and self-confidence, but because of the club leader's encouragement. One of my interviewees, a folk dance group leader, explained that he does not trust dancers' competence; therefore, every *rachenitsa*'s steps and styles need to be rehearsed: "If there are any improvisations, they are subject to mistakes because of forgotten choreography" (Tsochev 2014).

Bearing in mind the fact that we usually have a clear prescription for dance, we can probably put the solo *rachenitsa* for competition generally under the category of dances with "zero degree of improvisation," as suggested by Giurchescu, however conditional these characterizations may be. Wide open questions clearly remain regarding a choreographers' choices. Therefore, topics for ongoing research may be seen as two-fold: choreographers'

improvisations (their ways of choosing and combining ensemble motifs and the motifs themselves, i.e. applying structural analyses), and dancers' improvisations (seen predominantly within the internal communication circuit). Within the internal communication circuit, we may place our attention on feelings:

[...] Each feeling may generate new and different movements rather than only the repetition of previous ones. Likewise, each physical movement may intensify the previous feeling and ideas, or it may well produce new mental experiences [...] The internal communication circuit involving a dancer's body and her mind is most relevant in the discussion of improvisation. (Nahachewsky 2012:74)

From here we may develop a great array of improvisational aspects regarding dancing while following a choreographer's prescribed dance pattern. These "manifestations" are not so much examples of dance at the structural level but are more closely related to the performers' emotional and physical states at the moment of dancing: their interaction with their partner and other dancers, their reaction to the audience response, the feeling of the space, an awareness of comfortable or uncomfortable dance shoes, a response to unexpected changes of musical tempi, and other factors. (Nahachewsky 2012:76).

Another open question is related to memory of how to dance:

The participation of the mind in dance can be further differentiated into two categories. On the one hand, some mental activities relate specifically to the state of dancing, and take place specifically at the moment of performing. On the other hand, the dancer must also retain a memory of "how to dance" even when she is not dancing, ready for re-activation at her next performance. (Nahachewsky 2012:74)

An analogy that may seem rather abstract comes to mind but nevertheless resembles the process of cultural memorization and reactivation of cultural reservoirs (after Lotman & Uspenski 1990:223). This is to propose that what was acquired over decades as folk dance ensemble knowledge has already been stored in the cultural reservoirs and kinesthetic memories and has been well blended with the traditional way of dancing.

## Conclusion

Composition and improvisation are so often seen as binary opposites when, in fact, there exists a wide range of musical practices that combine elements of both, states Jesse Stewart, a teacher of musical improvisation (Stewart 2013). In a playful manner (while indicating the need to rethink the assumed opposition) she suggested to her teacher the term "comprovisation." "Maybe," he responded, "but it can also be an *imposition*." In a playful manner, and with a similar implication, I can probably suggest the term "*choreographisation*."

## ENDNOTES

1. Translations from Bulgarian here and throughout are by the author of this paper.

2. See also Lotman (1990).
3. Italics are added by the author of this paper.
4. Ilieva fully develops her analytical approach in Ilieva (2007).
5. Katarova provides several names under which the *rachenitsa* is known across the country, explaining the specifics that every name suggests in terms of the style and formation of dancing or regarding the context, usually a wedding (Katarova 1955:41–42).
6. From *ръка* (singular), *ръце* (plural), *ръчица* (diminutive) — different forms, developed under the processes of palatalization in Slavic languages where consonants such as *z*, *k*, *x* appeared in derived forms as *ж*, *ч*, *ш*.
7. See Dzhudzhev (1945); Garov (2014); Nikov (2014).
8. See Ivanova-Nyberg (2011:280).
9. See Malinowski (2004:155).
10. Martin also links improvisation to poetry: “The extraordinary structural openness and stage of variability of improvised dances can be compared only to the lament as an art to folk poetry” (Martin 1980:394).
11. See for example Koutsouba (2000).
12. Here Nahachewsky is referring to Albert Lord (Lord 1960:3–138).
13. “Improvisation is directly dependent on the dancer's competence [...] [A dancer's] ability [...] implies the faculty to recall, evaluate and select nearly simultaneously the pre-existent dance stereotypes, according to all the objective and subjective conditions which determine a given performance. It also involves the technical skill and quality of the dancer's movements” (Guirchescu 1983:28).

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