

# GREEK DANCE

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**Overview** Ancient Greek music and dance, each one interwoven with the other, were the very fabric of Hellenic culture. From Homer on, dancing plays a central role in group expression and emotion. Children were raised on dance steps and dancing games; rustic rituals, designed to foster a good harvest, were constructed around communal dances, often around dances specific to a particular region of Greece, and pre-mating dances, both rural and civilized, were standard parts of growing up Hellenic. Very little of the moral suspicion of dancing, which still clings to pockets of (say) the modern Protestant suspicion of sensuality, clings to the ancient Greek dance traditions, which were as natural to cultural life as they could be.

**Theater and choral dance.** At no point, in its expressiveness through dance, does ancient Greek culture reach such stages of complexity and world-significance, as in the choral dances which accompanied Greek tragedy, and which remained a defining feature of that tragedy through to the end of the fifth century B.C.E., by which time the traditional religious setting of the chorus had been diluted. Arguably, the origins of Greek drama itself lay in rural choral actions, which were part of rural life and harvest thinking, and which (speculation) derives from the oldest Hellenic traditions which speak out to us from the origins of writing, in the seventh century B.C.E. Organized choral dancing, to be sure, was some kind of dramatic nucleus out of which, by the processes of adding first a single character and then, in Aeschylus, a second character, generated the dramatic conditions for those first 'plays' left to us, *The Suppliant Maidens* or *The Persians*, of Aeschylus. What we see, already in those sophisticated works, is a prominent choral dance, in which the traditional awe, fear, hope, uncertainty of the 'commoner,' is interwoven with action-driving conflict among two protagonists.

**Dance and the fabric of society** The dance alluded to above, as the core of the texture of ancient Greek tragedy, was as said above, the very fabric of Hellenic society. For Plato, for example, dance is one of the necessities for the ideal republic, for the dance builds and reinforces 'the acquisition of noble, harmonious, and graceful attitudes.' Socrates promoted practice in dance as part of a proper philosophical education. Lycurgus, the legendary demagogue of Sparta, recommended dancing as the best kind of military training—the notion of dancing including, here, everything from naked male dancing (the *Hormos* dance) to dancing in full military gear, loaded and ready for battle. (Rhythm, order, discipline: all these values were deeply imbibed and inculcated throughout the Classical Age of Greece. Needless to say the inculcation of these attitudes began in the home, where girls and boys, separately, were habituated to find graceful rhythmic movement at the core of good working habits, good thinking, and pleasure.

**Celebratory public dancesupport** Dance as social event and act is implicit in the Hellenic chorus spirit. It was the highest honor, for an adult fifth century Athenian, to be tasked with outfitting and training the choruses who were up for presentation in the annual dramatic competitions in Athens. (Patrons of the arts, in whatever culture, find their rewards in the bosom of their own society.) Accordingly, men of distinction throughout classic Greece—Antiochus and Epaminondas, the reviver of the city of Thebes in the fourth century B.C.E.—were chosen for such high civic honors as chorus-outfitting, as well as for their general civic prominence. Patriotic Athenians like the dramatist Sophocles 'danced around the trophies of the battle of Salamis.' Aeschylus and Aristophanes are said to have danced at performances of their own plays, and however we take these alleged fragments, of which Ancient chronography is as replete as gossip, we have no reason to question the general drift of the point. In a culture in which Socrates—this one seems to be true—danced with the dinner guests, at a party at his house, we have to accept the depth with which reason and joy could mate in fifth century B.C.E. Athens.

**The dark side of the dance: Nietzsche and Dionysus** The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900 C.E.) analyzes the ancient Greek bifurcation (Apollonian and Dionysian) which he sees as marking Hellenic tendencies toward control and form on the one hand, and ecstasy on the other. The greatness of Greek tragedy, for Nietzsche, results from a pairing of the two essential forces—form and

ecstasy—but the balance of the Greek pairing is fragile, and when the ecstatic breaks its bonds, it can release, into dangerous orgiastic levels of dancing and fervor, the unbounded passion of the Greek spirit. The balance breaking in question, which is a letting free of the dance spirit, can lead to social as well as artistic disharmony, and in fact one of the deepest analyses of this threat, to settled Greek society, is the *Bacchae* (405 B.C.E.) of Euripides, a great play about the overwhelming of a Greek community by an invasion of it from the god Dionysus. Precisely that invasion frees, from the women of the community, their passionate desire for the orgiastic, and more widely the dark sense of human dance, at the point where it threatens male hegemony and the order in things. Euripides has gone profoundly to the greatness of dance, but also to the explosive power of dance which can tear apart even while creating.

### **Reading**

Adshead-Lansdale.,J., ed. *Dance History: An Introduction*, London, 1994.

Dils, A., *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, Wesleyan, 2001.

### **Discussion questions**

What is the basis of the Protestant Christian view that dancing is dangerous? Is there anything in that view? What would Euripides say about it?

What, to the ancient Greeks, was the moral-educational value of dance? Can we still use that value, in our own contemporary education?

How do children 'learn how to dance,' in our culture? Is that learning instinctual or does it need to be trained in?