

30 April 2003

Dear LUTSF Secretary  
Armenian Ethnographic Dance Research  
Researching for Medsmama (Armenian for grandmother) and other works

Please find enclosed a report from myself regarding my visit to Yerevan last November to research ethnographic Armenian dance. I do hope you find it interesting reading. Many apologies for the delay in posting this to you.

Earlier in the year I had difficulty getting hold of Hasmik who taught me. Her mother was unwell and subsequently died. More recently the company has begun rehearsals to realise the finished work. I worked with Hasmik on several occasions. On 20th November we met for a consultation, 21st we spent the day working on and recording phrases. On the 23rd another consultation focused on music culminating in meeting and hearing the musicians play. On the 25th I watched and recorded parts of a children's dance class. We had 2 further practical sessions on the 27th and 29th.

I was extremely happy with the way the project progressed. With Hasmik, I truly felt I was going to the font for my knowledge. She has extraordinary integrity and a passion for preserving these dances in their purest form. I came away with a huge amount of source material. It is very hard to give you a highlight. It was an extraordinary trip. Armenia is the motherland that only my aunt has visited. The Armenia of my grandmother was in southern Turkey (Cecilia/old Armenia). I have never seen so many Armenians in one place and never been so aware of being Armenian myself and not, being half British!! So, I guess a highpoint is the recognition that there is a strange home from home, that I feel is part of my heritage, a sort of belonging.

For any future awardees I would highly recommend sorting out a translator before you travel. I was lucky in that Hasmik's husband and college was able to take on that role most of the time. His support was invaluable and I missed it sorely when he wasn't around. I intend to send the enclosed article to 'Animated' and will give it to 'City Moves', Aberdeen's Dance Project. As this is research material for our current work set for a British tour in June, I very much hope that the outcome of the work will be widely seen and appreciated. I have ensured that the fund is properly accredited on publicity material and that the project be mentioned in the programme notes.

Yours sincerely

Ani Tchakmakdjian

Researching for Medsmama (Armenian for grandmother) and other works

In November of 2002, I journeyed to Armenia, what some would call my Mother/Fatherland. As a British/Armenian choreographer and Director of Elbow Room Dance Company, this work would be vital to realising my next major choreographic project and influence my work, it is hoped, well into the future. The travel cost of this project was supported by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund to whom I am indebted for enabling me to undertake what was an extraordinary journey into my cultural heritage. On the strength of this visit I have no doubt that this was just the first of many and hopefully a long relationship with this extraordinary, small but wonder filled country, placed between Georgia and Ajarbajan.

My first glimpse of Armenia was from the plane. A silhouette of rolling hills set against a streak of startling poppy red sunrise beneath a black sky. This was to set the tone for the visit. A striking and surprising place!!

I worked one-to-one, with ethnographer/dance teacher Hasmik Harutyunyan on a number of occasions over a period of two weeks, focusing primarily on women's dances but also on the musical culture that goes hand in hand. Hasmik, in her early years, learned a plethora of traditional and ritual dances in the village in which she grew up. They are still part of village life. Dances which contain extended phrases that can be danced for 20 or more minutes at a time. She dances them with the ease I associate with walking, these dances have become so instinctive, second nature to her. She has developed her repertoire through collecting as many as possible. In villages these dances still thrive and play an integral part in celebrating every day life. Although many have been lost to us, it is equally true to say that there are many yet to be discovered and shared more widely. An exciting prospect!

There are dances for all occasions. 'Dance is about life', says Hasmik, a sentiment I share, however there is one exception to this rule in the tradition of ethnographic Armenian dance and that is grief. As I understand it, no set dances represent it. Through a period of grieving one is forbidden to dance, in some cases for as long as 7 years, depending on the traditions of your village. I can but wonder on the implications of this given Armenia's chequered history. Indeed, the piece I am researching touches on my grandmother's own experience where her entire family was lost in the genocide of 1915-16 on Turkish soil, on enforced marches. This is a nation which knows much about grief.

There are many relating to marriage as this is a time where you not only make that life changing commitment but you also leave your often extended family home and enter into an entirely new family. The dances cover all aspects of this immense shift from the excitement of the lead up, to dealing with nerves, dressing the bride, the ritualistic aspect, the celebratory ones.

The dances themselves are mostly set circle dances. Usually structured around a number of repeated phrases where the order in which they are danced can be played with, improvised by a lead dancer. I share Hasmik's belief that some of these dances have ancient roots, dating back to pagan, pre-Christian Armenia. As in most cultures some echoes of the old order remain. You can see this reflected in the music where for example 'Gorani', commonly danced to, can be sung with old verses where the meaning is death and rebirth, arguably in the pagan sense. Younger versions lean towards longing for a lost homeland. To give some idea of timeframe, Armenia's empire was at its height when Antony was visiting Cleopatra, it was the first country to adopt Christianity as a state religion in 301.

To be true to the ethnographic tradition, set dances go to set pieces of music, usually songs, sometimes sung by the dancers. The music, not necessarily always danced to, ups its tempo in its dance format, to a hungry, driving pulse. The hands are linked by the little fingers or held, and never raised above your head unless you are a man. The stature is dignified, pride contained. They are not gratuitous in any way. Soft but grounded feet step gently and continuously through the phrases in an almost hypnotic way, it is enchanting.

Solo dances have at some point developed as part of this rich tradition. It is still true, in remote villages that women are only seen dancing solo at their own wedding. It is a free dance to express your nature and the bride you have become. The exception is if you catch the eye of a male guest at a wedding. He can request that you dance for him, sometimes paying for the privilege. Then you may break the rule and dance holding in your hands the money that would later be passed to the band. These strict rules don't apply so much in city culture according to Hasmik. This may be the root from which solo dances have evolved into very expressive, mostly choreographed presentations with an extraordinary sensuous quality. Often influenced by the classical movement and nothing short of exquisite when danced with integrity. In either context, expressive hands and eyes tell stories. Certain gestures have certain meanings but nothing should be meaningless. 'Your eyes go where they need to go, to say that which you need to say', is a gem from Hasmik. 'Let your heart speak to your hands', was a phrase from Shakeh Avnessian, an International Armenian solo folk dancer.

Another quality can be identified as part of the Armenian tradition of dance, which evolved when Armenia became part of the Soviet Union. This is perhaps the style that is most commonly seen in the west and most familiar. The dances took on a patriarchal quality with Dance Ensembles that toured across the globe. These dances are mostly choreographed, a step away from the strictly traditional ethnographic material and is a tradition which flourishes still.

Hasmik taught me many dances. I recorded each phrase, the meanings behind the dances, names, regions of origin, music which should accompany and any other nuggets of knowledge I could glean from Hasmik. All this was translated via her half Armenian husband, who was invaluable in helping us cross the language barrier. Sadly, my Armenian is somewhat diminished over the years of living in Scotland away from family and an established community.

Despite years of dance training and, as I perceive it, the ability to be fairly versatile in the way I move, I was surprised at how challenging I found it to take all I was given on board. The more you do, the more you feel it right, the more it fits. It is true though I suspect that it is not just the dance but the smell of the place, the people, landscape and culture in the wider sense that ultimately made these dances make sense to me and feel like they fitted in some way. This along with the sense I got, the longer I was there that my 'Armenian-ess', as I call it, was filtering up to the surface and showing itself in long forgotten ways.

I am left with an enormous resource of phrases at my disposal on which to integrate heritage into that which I do, contemporary dance. What a privilege to learn first-hand from someone as connected to the roots of the thing as Hasmik. And to journey to the motherland as I call it now. I never thought that all the answers to 'what is Armenian-ess' could be found there but it is another piece of the cultural jigsaw, my heritage, in place for me.