

FOLK DANCE AND DRAMA

(Lecture delivered in the University Theatre on the 3rd May, 1960)

By VIOLET ALFORD

MY TITLE says *Folk Dance and Drama* because I have long specialised in these interwoven subjects, and because so far as I can judge in a visit to the island, Malta possesses some very good comparative material in these subjects. If there is time I would like to bring in the improvising singers of Malta who I have been able to hear and compare them with other improvising bards, especially the Basque Bertsularis, and a wonderful bard from Croatia I once heard. If time, also I would like to touch on the tradition of Giants. But one talk of forty minutes will be short indeed and the folklore subjects will perforce be but few.

Your *Maltija* – to plunge straight into comparison – is a ceremonial Country dance when used at Court, that is at the Governor's State Balls, a recreational, social dance when performed by Country people and others who like to practise their own customs. Country dances are figure dances, Rounds, Squares according to their shape, or in old fashioned language 'Longways for as many as Will'. The Country dance is historically an invention of the English – not the British generally, but of the people of England who were written of as 'the dancing English who carried a fair presence'. The dances began to appear in the Tudor period after the Medieval Carole had gone out of fashion and died away. Yet this ancient Chain dance does still live, in the form of the famous Farandole of Provence, the Cramignon of the Low Countries and the Choros of Greece, and Horas of the Balkans. The figure dances presently began to be danced at the English Court and we have some of the names of those danced by the Maids of Honour of Elizabeth I. Trenchmore, for instance, was a great favourite of theirs. Village people danced them too, and in James I's reign the Country dance quite invaded Court balls because the Duke of Buckingham's young brothers and sisters did not know the Court dances and the duke, the favourite of the King, was allowed to have everything his own way. In the reign of Charles II they returned after the Commonwealth as great favourites and Pepys, the celebrated diarist and Supplier of the Navy, gives a description of the King and one of his ladies and another couple dancing a square for four 'Hey Boys Up go We'. Then the English Country dances began to be taken abroad – great Houses and other Courts began

to like them – Italy danced ‘Buttered Pease’ under the title of ‘Piselli al-Burro’ and I suspect the figures of the *Maltija* reached the island during the late eighteenth or the early nineteenth century. The figure called ‘Alamanda’ is rather later and is known nearly all over Western and Central Europe as Allamanda, l’Allemande and other variations sometimes as a figure of a Country dance, sometimes as a dance on its own account. Country dances also went to the United States and came back again about ten years ago as the American Square Dance with amusing rhyming calls to tell the dancers what to do next. But even the calls did not originate in the States. Jane Austen, that demure novelist, called the figures at a Country Ball at Basingstoke near her Hampshire home, to give a single example. The *Maltija*, as you all know, is a Square for sixteen and the Leader in the traditional manner calls the figures. When danced at a State Ball ceremonial dress is worn, the men in red velvet with white wigs, the ladies with powdered hair, in eighteenth century gowns with paniers. They carry bouquets and in some figures are linked to their partners by ribbons. Just so were the dancers of the ceremonial Farandole linked as they passed through the streets of Bayonne, to stop at certain points for a figure dance; the Greek State Balls demand a ceremonial traditional dress, that of the ladies called Amalia costume after the first Queen of Greece. Besides going across the Atlantic and coming home again English Country dances in the square form, the Contra danse, came back from Paris as the Quadrille. This was supposed to be something very French and very fashionable. Dance fashions often keep up a shuttle movement, from the village to the Court, fall from fashion and return to the village as the very latest thing from town. A great deal of French folk dance now consists of these old-fashioned Quadrilles with Mazurkas and Polkas. French promoters of dance groups, although very careful about local costume, never seem to go far enough back for their dance and music material – a great pity.

To follow another travelling dance we go right across Europe to Scandinavia and Finland. These Northern Countries, rather cut off from fashion, managed to keep descendants of the Medieval Carole in their sung chain and circle dances, enormously long ballads sung by the dancers supplying the motive. Some of these became dramatic as the verses told heroic or fairy stories, chiefly tragical, for the North, with its long hours of darkness, seems to engender both sentiment and tragedy. A Danish ballad for dancing says:

There danced the Maidens with hair unbound,
It was the King’s daughter who sang the Round.
A Princess was the leader.

and still more dramatically:

The King of the Wends with all his ships
 Came sailing in from Sea
 And captured the Maidens who were dancing on the shore.

A Norwegian dance ballad goes on and on and on — about twenty-nine verses, I think, the dancers performing precisely the same action on the Refrain — twenty-nine times over. } But into this medieval backwash of Chain dance and song came a new fashion from Poland. The Swedes, as you know, fought for many years in Germany, Poland and Russia and about the year 1600 soldiers returning from the wars took back the Polka with them to Scandinavia. In Poland it was simply *Polski*, the Polish dance, in Scandinavia it became the *Polska* and practically put an end to the ancient Carole with its chain of dancers and its interminable ballads. Figure dancers of the Country dance type were also beginning to be liked and many of these became *Polska* too — although there was not a Polka step in them. They are frequently Pair dances, the couples standing in a circle but dancing only together, and frequently also Rounds and Squares called by nineteenth century ballroom dance names — Waltz, Quadrille, but neither a Waltz nor a Quadrille — which is very confusing to dance students. We will now listen to the traditional air of the Norwegian *Springar*, a Country dance for couples standing round a circle, partners dancing with each other, not with other couples.

A record of a Springar tune was then played

Now we will go to England and hear some lively Country dance tunes played by the Square Dance Band, amateur musicians belonging to the English Folk Dance and Song Society. } They love to get together to play. The dances and their tunes are not old ones but characteristic of the end of the nineteenth century. They are real village dances which probably never went to balls.

Records of English Country Dance tunes were played

Everyone knows of the Italian Tarantella. } This famous dance is in reality a folk dance, but much stylised when appearing on the stage. On its native heath it is performed in several different forms, some quite simple to suit Country people, some ornate to suit Neapolitans. One of the medium forms, not too ornate, comes from Sorrento. } Here one realises its true Country dance form — two rows of dancers *vis-a-vis* as in the English Longways for as many as will, but quite unlike this form when it comes to the steps. } Tambourines bang and jingle, the orchestra, one may

call it, of strings and guitars and a curious wooden affair like three croquet mallets which clack violently together, makes a great noise and the airs are nearly always in that almost frenzied rhythm connected in our minds with the Tarantella. I need hardly remind you of the story that dancing it is supposed to cure the bite of the deadly tarantula spider. It may be useful in preventing Coma – to keep the patient moving. This is folk-medicine founded on a pathological truth, as it so often is.

A record of a Neapolitan Tarantella was then played.

RITUAL DRAMATIC DANCES

All those just played to you are social and recreational dances, even the Scandinavian sung dances *now*, although they had another aspect. But we come to another category of dance, dances performed for an altogether different purpose, neither social nor recreational but ritual, appearing for one day only or at one season only, and disappearing for the rest of the year. These are men's dances, the duty and prerogative of the young men of the village. The dancers (nearly always) must be unmarried men, often they form a club or a fraternity or belong to some trade guild such as Bakers, Cutlers or Sword smiths, or, as in France, they are the recruits ready to join the Army that year.

Roumania possesses one of the most famous of these dances, the Calus, the performers the Calusari. They dance for forty days in the Spring, they act a dance-drama, they possess a Fool who during these forty days must be dumb – and he was too when he came to a Folk Dance Festival in London. We had no idea that their visit coincided with their forty days of ritual dancing, and they did not say so but they came all the same, dancing in the corridor of their train, dancing thro' the streets of London, resolutely and inexorably dancing and the Fool did not speak.

There are many such amazing dances still alive. Amongst them is the Sword Dance. I am not speaking of the Scottish Sword dances which you have seen performed by pipers and dancers of Scottish regiments, in which a sword and scabbard are laid crossed on the ground and a solo dancer performs intricate steps in the angles thus made. What I mean is called the Hilt-and-Point Sword Dance in which each man, from five to a large number grasp the hilt of his own sword in his right hand and takes the point of his neighbour's sword in his left. They thus make a chain of swords which never comes undone until the figure is finished. Sometimes they are bunched into a tight group, sometimes they open out into a wide circle; they pass under and over the swords, one at a time, two at a time, occasionally under all the swords raised to form a tunnel, an endless

series of intricate figures. Germany, Switzerland and especially Austria and Spain are extraordinarily rich in this sort of Sword Dance. They come out at the village feast, our own Corpus Christi day and during Carnival. They are, as I said, ritual seasonal dances for men. In France only two are left, in Italy there are a few. England is rich in this dance especially Northumbria and Yorkshire. It is chiefly in the possession of coal miners and miners of ironstone and their season is the Winter Solstice, between Christmas and the New Year.

Folk drama and elements of drama cling to this dance and it is this which makes it so valuable, so important an addition to both Folklore and Anthropology. I must here recall Frazer's great thesis in *The Golden Bough* and all the anthropologists who have come after him. His Divine King, personifying the Old Year, who ruled for a span of years and was then removed to make way for a younger, stronger man, seems to have a descendant in the folk drama and Sword Dance even to-day. Frazer's first brilliant proposition has, of course, been modified by others as knowledge has increased and I venture to say that the study of folk dance now going on all over Europe has been one of the chief means of clarifying and consolidating the theory of the King, Leader or Chief who as his powers failed was killed by his own people to make way for a young successor. In a few regions this age-old custom actually exists today. Not long ago *The Daily Telegraph* gave news of the Shilluk, a people on the White Nile, whose Ruler is a Priest-King who after a cycle of years has to give place to a young successor. This arbitrary end of a Ruler's life was because in the minds of primitive people prosperity — that is the food-supply, the ripening of crops, the reproduction of animals, even the birth of children — in the villages depended on the strength of the King. In their eyes he was more than a man, he was touched with supernatural powers.

Dr. Margaret Murray, whose excavation work at Borg in-Nadur is so well known, seeks to fit the Divine Kingship on to historical characters. She sees a ritual death in the slaying of William Rufus in the New Forest, and several other historical personages. Very surprising, but this marvellous lady, now ninety-five, does not proceed without some firm ground to tread on.

The folk drama in which the ritual removal of a character occurs is played at its appointed season from Greece to Spain, from Italy to the Scottish Border. Frequently it is connected with a Hilt-and-Point Sword Dance, frequently it appears alone. The Sword Dance also may appear alone or with a few ragged dramatic elements left from a forgotten play.

Both dance and drama are pre-Christian and almost certainly pre-historic. The earliest parallel of which we hold a record is the dance of the

Salian Priests in Rome. That was seasonal – in March – a men's dance performed with strict ritual, in which they carried swords and shields, a magico-religious rite (pagan religion) if ever there was one. So it is unreasonable to expect so ancient a custom to retain all its leaves as in the spring time of European cultures many leaves have fallen in the course of centuries; moreover accretions of every sort have grown round the rite. Experience is needed and a hundred comparisons before discarding this, disentangling that, so that the tattered, overloaded confusion of a dance-drama can be detected and its component parts put into their places. What is lost in Portugal may be found in Bohemia, what Bohemia lacks may be seen in Alpine villages. And so by degrees sense emerges and the old, tattered cloak is mended – to change the metaphor.

In England we have two Folk Plays, the St. George Play all over the Country, the Plough Play in the North East. I do not mean that the people call them so, these are the names given by folklorists for study purposes.

St. George is the Patron Saint of England. You may read an article about him which appeared in the *Times of Malta* on his day, April 23rd, and again a letter yesterday. It tells how his cult came to England with returned Crusaders. But the history it gives is not popular history. Popular tales make St. George deliver Sabra, the King of Egypt's daughter, from the dragon but in the play, although mentioned, Sabra never appears.

Each character marches on to the stage, which is merely an imaginary circle in the street or in the hall of the house visited, announcing himself

Here comes I, St. George
 A Knight of courage bold.
 I fought the fiery dragon
 And brought him to the slaughter
 And with my sword I won the King of Egypt's daughter.

Poor stuff now but remember the mouth-to-mouth existence it has led.

St George fights a Turkish Knight who is killed and revived by the Doctor, and several other characters strut in to announce themselves,

Here comes I, old father Beelzebub
 And in my hand I carries my club

This personage may have wandered into the St. George's Play from an ancient Mystery.

The Mysteries, as you will know, were organized by the Church in medieval times to teach an illiterate people their Bible history and the Story of the Passion. In many countries when they had outlived their usefulness in that manner they broke up into characters who walked in religious

processions and in that form you still have them in this Island. Indeed at Qormi the store house in which processional regalia and implements are stored is still called *tal-Misteri*. The *Times of Malta* on April 6th this year published part of a long article on Shakespeare dealing with the influence of medieval plays including the Mysteries.

St. George is often played by Sword dancers, sometimes the play consists of a few remembered lines only, sometimes even these have been lost and only some dramatic characters remembered. These always include the Fool and a Lady – who is a man dressed in woman's clothes. But at the end of the dance the swords are woven into what is called the Lock and put round the leader's neck. When suddenly withdrawn the effect is horrific. He falls to the ground and one expects to see his head roll away separately.

Sometimes the leader stands on the woven swords and is raised shoulder-high on this little platform, so that even where there is no real play someone is symbolically killed and in a far more archaic and telling manner than by a mere duel. Nevertheless it is the revival of the slain man which is the necessary act. Our other Folk Play, called the Plough Play has every sign of antiquity far greater than St. George. It also has a killing and a resurrection and, although you may be surprised to hear it, it shows strong affinities with the Carnival village plays of Greece – of Thrace. The main theme is the killing of the Old Father and his resurrection as a strong young man. This would be the far distant descendant of the Divine King and would ultimately depict indeed the death of the old year, the birth of the new. There is a Bride all ready for him when he grows up, which he does in the course of the few minutes of the play. The Springtime marriage takes place and all is prepared for next year's cycle. In England the Sword dancers kill the Old Father who declares that he will turn his face to the light and 'Will die for all of you'.

Italy possesses two splendid Hilt-and-Point Sword dances, in Piedmont. They link more with the Alpine zone of dances than with those of the Mediterranean Harlequin. The Fool is the person raised and killed. On the island of Korcula in the Adriatic, there is a good example called simply *La Kumpanija*, the Company; on the small island of Lastova (Lagosta) there is another and on the island of Ischia near Naples is a dance which is certainly a corrupted form of the Sword dance. They use swords in some figures, clubs in others and the leader is raised on the woven platform to show to the crowd. It is called *N' drezzata*, the weaving. This is why I class this Ischia dance as a Sword Dance although they have forgotten the Hilt-and-point linking.

I almost believe that the *Parata* of Malta is an offshoot of this great

European ritual dance. It comes out in the Spring, at Carnival. It is therefore seasonal. It is a men's dance although now unfortunately performed by boys. They hold Swords and Shields – but at Ischia they carry swords and clubs, and in Spain swords, shields, wands, sticks. It is a ritual dance, not social, not recreational. Further you have a Spring Bride as in the Plough Play in Thrace and many another region even if she is now only four years old, and what is more she is raised up on high for the crowd to see just as the Leader is raised.

The explanation of the *Parata* is that it commemorates the fight with the Turks. All the Southern Sword Dances give the same explanation – Turks Moors or Saracens. Even St. George of England fights a Turkish Knight. Practically every Spanish Sword Dance is supposed to be a battle between Christians and Moors and is often called, not the Sword Dance, but La Morisca. During the last two centuries of the Spanish Reconquest hope of clearing the Infidel from Spain sprang so high that all Europe joined in it, and this gave rise to an extraordinary vogue for Moors and everything to do with them – dress, jewelry, buildings, music and dance.

Malta believes the Knights invented or started the *Parata*. If you could run this oft-repeated assertion to its sources it would not be the least surprising to find that it was an Italian or a Spanish Knight – if Spanish preferably one from the Auberge d'Aragon for Sword dances abound in Aragon – who, remembering his home dramatic dance-battle against the Moor, taught it to his young retainers in the Island where the enemy was the Turk. Folk sources must never be neglected although they frequently prove to be untrue. But this one may well have an historical source. Somebody might like to try to find records of such a person as I have suggested and it may be possible to tell you if there was or still is a Sword dance in the place he came from.

Music for Sword dances differs very much. In Piedmont they are performed to a drum beat only, rhythm but no tune. Sometimes the time is traditional and nothing but that one must be played. Often tunes alter from year to year. At the village of Sena in Aragon there is a whole suite of tunes; the most enormous bagpipes I have seen and a drum provide the instruments, with singing. Since they change so much I do not consider tunes of the first importance.

From an anthropological point of view as differing from that of a choreographer I feel the same about steps. Always in Sword dances small running steps are used to take the men in place. Often they break into a more ornate step according to what is danced in the region. High leaping steps, stamps and even pattering are important on account of their symbolism – as high as you jump so high will the crops grow, as hard as you hit

Mother Earth so quickly will she awake in the Spring. Our Northumbrian pitmen practice clog-dance steps while they are holding up the Lock of Swords. This is the tap dancing for wooden-soled shoes as done in the public houses of that region.

A record of a fiddle tune of the type used for English Sword dances was then played

Now to jump, as comparative studies do, to the other end of the Continent. The Sword Dance at its simplest is a Chain dance, a chain linked by swords. Here are the tunes of a Croatian chain and then of a Macedonian chain linked by handkerchiefs or by arms, or by the men grasping each others' belts. Macedonia is close to the Greek Choros region, the Chorus of the ancient Greek Theatre which was the forerunner of the orchestra.

Records of a Croatian and a Macedonian Chain dance were then played

What about the conservation of all this wonderful inheritance? Two wars enormously increased transport taking people into the towns instead of their providing their own entertainment; industrialism which empties the villages and other contributing factors have turned the minds of the Country folk from their own heritage. The young ones think it a bore and disdain it. The old ones are shy about it and fear to be laughed at — which they are. Nevertheless war which nearly killed it, denuding the villages of young men — *Il n'y a pas assez d'hommes* — was the cry everywhere in the Pyrenees when I began to work there between the wars — war in a peculiar way resuscitated it in occupied Countries. Folk customs were, as a rule, tolerated by German invaders. I have a remarkable photograph of a handful of women and boys raising the May tree in a street in Brussels, a trio of German soldiers pushing past the little group without paying attention. Belgian processional giants were brought out immediately the occupiers had been driven out, the Belgian Government even giving grants for new clothes for these great citizens. In England the Women's Institutes are usefully gathering records written and unwritten and compiling histories of their own villages, never forgotten remembrances of May day, Christmas-tide, all Halloween, dances and drama. And although village girls may prefer rock 'n roll and crooning another set will come to Country dance parties in the village Hall, paying two shillings and sixpence and dragging their boy friends with them. Besides this, love of their own traditions has seized artistic and educated circles. The beauty and the strangeness, the archaic strangeness yet familiarity of ancestral tradition, pulls them. The first time I saw Morris dances and heard Morris dance tunes when the revival had begun I felt I had known

them always. The Medical and Science Schools of Newcastle University have a crack team of Sword dancers now. They were taught by pitmen and at the right season there they are, out in the streets dancing side by side with traditional teams of miners. As for the English Morris — about which I have not been able to speak, for it is a subject by itself — Oxford and Cambridge undergraduates, young London artists and businessmen, Birmingham University students, in fact educated men all over England have formed the Morris Ring, a fraternity of Morris dancers so that from a handful of surviving teams when Cecil Sharp began noting the dances there are now hundreds, and they, like Sword dancers, are out in the street again, again after seventy or eighty years without them, welcomed by everyone. How good it would be to see the *Parata* teams coming in from various places, teams of men, instead of one team of little boys?

In France this movement has got rather out-of-hand and a federation has been formed to exercise some necessary control over leaders who, preferring quantity to quality, see no harm in borrowing dances and tunes from other parts of the Country. These too-enthusiastic enthusiasts have to be taught that folk art is strictly regional. My best-known friends, the Basques, are quite the worst offenders in this respect. Since I knew them between the two wars they have created a hotch-potch of so-called Basque dance and music and costume never seen before in their country. ;

The educated people of Sweden have saved the Art the peasants have almost lost. The great Folk Museum, Skansen, is famous throughout the world, buildings, costumes, documents, records and live dances and music going on there from every province far-away and near at hand. ;