

an interview with

# Andor Czompo

by Jovana



ANDOR CZOMPO was born in Budapest, and raised in Turkeve, Hungary. He toured Europe with the Hungarian Folk Dance Ensembles and later became a State-licensed Folk Dance Teacher. After coming to the United States in 1957, he worked with several exhibition groups, performed on TV, and was a dancer-choreographer for the Kovach-Rabovsky Hungarian Ballet's "*Bihari*". In recent years, he has choreographed several dance suites for the Duquesne University Tamburitians and the BYU Int'l Folk Dancers. Mr. Czompo was recently recognized by Hungarian folklore experts as the leading authority on Hungarian folk art in the Western Hemisphere. Currently, he is Assistant Professor of Dance at New York State University at Courtland, NY.

#### WHAT IS THE BEST WAY FOR AMERICAN DANCERS TO ACQUIRE THE HUNGARIAN STYLE?

I feel American folk dancers generally over-emphasize the importance of style. Not just over-emphasize it, but somehow try to separate it, like an addition to the dance. Style is something which produces itself when the dance is done well technically. American folk dancers are in an extremely difficult situation. Let's compare an American dancer to a native dancer. A native dancer usually dances relatively few dances or very few types of dances. These he dances practically his whole life; he's not influenced with anything else. But an American folk-dancer tries to do 68 different nationality dances. Mixing of the different types of execution is quite obvious.

I would like to make a parallel between "dance language" and "spoken language". When someone learns a foreign language, regardless of how well he learns it, he always has some kind of accent. And it's the same thing when someone learns Hungarian dance. Regardless how well technically he does it, he always retains some foreign accent dancing. So to over-emphasize style, I think we destroy a great deal of the enjoyment of the dance.

#### IS IT MORE IMPORTANT TO ENJOY A DANCE OR TO DO IT CORRECTLY?

If a dance is not enjoyable when it's done correctly, that dance shouldn't be danced. You cannot separate the two. If you do a dance correctly, and it is not enjoyable for you, there's nothing wrong with the dance; there's nothing wrong with you. It just happens that the two things don't get together. Folk dancers should be a little bit more selective in their dances. They don't have to do every dance.

#### WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR AMERICANS TO DANCE IN HUNGARY?

Very little, to tell you the truth. Very few (Hungarians) know anything about international folk dancing. People still dance the csardas occasionally in close family gatherings. To participate, you more or less have to be a member of that family, or have very, very close connections. And the dance style is improvisative, within a certain framework. They mix the figures, how many times they repeat, and so forth. It is extremely difficult to get into this kind of dance.

#### ARE DANCES DONE IN THE SAME WAY IN HUNGARY & THE UNITED STATES?

Definitely not. We have to more or less 'translate' the Hungarian dances for American use. We have to condense them, arrange them or fit them to the available music, and that gives very little possibility to improvise. Generally speaking, American folk dancers don't know how to improvise, because that takes much longer work and being exposed to certain types of dancing. American folk dancers just don't have that kind of time. I tried it once to teach two or three simple figures for csardas music. After everyone learned it pretty well, I told them I put on the music now, and each couple decides how many times they will do

each step. It was the worst mess I've seen in my life! And eventually nobody liked it. I understand why. That takes time, until they can freely improvise with a couple basic steps, like you usually do with a tango or foxtrot.

#### WHAT ARE THE POSSIBILITIES FOR TRAVEL IN HUNGARY?

It is quite easy. If you have a valid passport and visa, you can travel in Hungary freely. If you change places for more than 24 hours, you have to report that to the police, but this is not because you are a foreigner; the Hungarians have to do the same thing. If you stay in hotels, the clerk takes care of this. You can travel by car, and public transportation is quite good, so it's no problem in that respect. But I wouldn't advise, if you don't speak Hungarian, to spend too much time, except if you are very adventurous, away from the cities. Even in the cities, although people try to be very helpful, you hardly can get around.

Your best bet is to stay with organized group travel. The whole system is based on that. They cater to larger groups. And if you are interested in folklore, they have special folklore tours, especially in the summertime. They take you out to the villages where you can see village musicians and organized folk dance groups. No change to join in. I have to be honest about this; there is very little possibility to go and do a csardas.

#### DOES HUNGARY ENCOURAGE NATIONALISM THROUGH DANCING?

Does Hungary try to encourage nationalism when they speak Hungarian? It's their own. I don't think it's nationalistic for them or anyone to do their own dancing.

However, at one point I have the feeling this was done, not necessarily consciously, and not by the authorities, but from the young people. After the Second World War, when in 1948 the government accepted Communism, and later became Socialist, they introduced a great deal of Soviet culture and dancing. Authorities encouraged organized folk dancing groups in schools to learn Russian dances. This encouraged people to dance, but in the meantime, the young people discovered Hungarian folk dancing, even if it wasn't done in their own village any more. It was kind of a national backlash of the whole movement, and Hungary became aware of the richness of her own tradition. At that time dancing expressed a certain nationalism, but I think this is passed. When they dance, Hungarians don't try to sell nationalistic ideas about it.

#### DOES HUNGARY HAVE A DANCE INSTITUTE?

Yes, one way or the other. After World War II, they organized the Hungarian State Folk Institute, which had several departments: dance, music, folklore, embroidery, and so forth. This was rearranged, and now the Hungarian Academy of Science, a folk music and dance research group, very advanced and one of the best in Europe, concentrates on research and preservation of the fantastic amount of material which is found. The Insti-

tute of Popular Culture publishes the findings to make them available for choreographers, dance teachers, and the educational system.

#### ARE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL COSTUMES MADE COMMERCIALY IN HUNGARY?

Hungarians do not have a "National" costume. Rather, Hungarians have folk costumes which represent geographical areas, sometimes only villages. In Transylvania, part of the Hungarian language territory which now belongs politically to Roumania, traditional clothing is still in everyday use. It's not a costume for them; that's their clothing.

There is a workshop in Budapest which makes simplified variations of original costumes and supplies folk dance groups who don't have originals. The old traditional clothing is very, very hard to find, and when you find it, the owners wouldn't even consider selling it, because they still wear it. If they don't wear them, usually they don't have them, because numerous Hungarian researchers and folk dance groups are combing the country, finding them before you do. If it is really valuable, it goes to the folklore museums; they have a very strict rule that this type of valuable museum piece cannot be taken out of Hungary.

#### WHAT IS THE MOST POPULAR KIND OF MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT FOR FOLK DANCING IN HUNGARY?

The Hungarian folk dance orchestra, whose repertoire is strictly the traditional melodies which accompany dancing. Not the gypsy orchestra, which plays everything from Argentine tangos to Viennese waltzes, although the instrumentation is similar. Early in this century, single instruments provided music for folk dancing, the bagpipe and zither type instruments. But even today, Hungarians, even performing folk dance groups, always dance for live music.

#### IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE HUNGARIAN VERBUNK AND THE RUSSIAN PRYSIADKA?

I don't think there is any close relationship. The Verbunk developed in the 17th or 18th Century, evolving from the shepherd's and men's dances which became more regulated with the military recruiting influence. I really don't know the background of the Russian Prysiadka, so I can't compare it. If some technical similarities occur, it's probably accidental. The closest relation to the Verbunk is the Bavarian Schuhplattling. There are historical proofs that this type of dance was known all over middle Europe.

