



an interview with

MIHAI DAVID

by Jovana

Mihai David was born in Bucharest, Romania, and attended the School of Choreography at age ten. Before graduation at age 17, he was dancing with the Romanian State Ensemble; he continued with them, touring throughout Europe, until 1966 when he defected to the Italian government. Mihai came to the United States in '67, danced with the Boston Ballet Co., and had his own exhibition group in Detroit. He is currently based in Los Angeles, where he attends UCLA full time and operates his Gypsy Camp Coffee-house, teaching there on Mondays and Saturdays. Mihai taught Romanian dances at Stockton Folk Dance Camp and the San Diego Folk Dance Conference this summer, and at the San Francisco Kolo Festival in the Fall of 1972.

HOW ARE ROMANIAN DANCES RESEARCHED?

The Romanian State Ensemble gets its dances directly from the people. One thing I want to mention, the difference between choreographing and 'making up'. 'Making up' is what you do in Jazz, but in Romania they don't make up steps. The Ensemble goes to the village, and they get the people together and start dancing. So they see something of interest, and they get the steps. Now, the peasants might dance with their feet crooked, because they haven't taken ballet to have their feet the other way, or they're born with their feet bowlegged. OK. It's not going to be danced bowlegged on the stage. So they bring the steps to the ensemble and do them like a trained dancer would do. They add an arm here and there, or they choreograph in the sense of 'movement' of the whole dance. They come in on this step, and then they move with a different step, and then with a partner or whatever. They don't go in the village (and copy exactly) because that would be just a village dance; it wouldn't be a professional ensemble.

The dances that I teach to American folk dancers are the steps they do in a village, but probably they do it in a circle. I'm not doing any choreography to them. This is recreational. You only need to choreograph when you make it for the stage.

DOES EACH REGION OF ROMANIA HAVE ITS OWN DANCE FLAVOR?

Well, they each have their own culture. The style of dancing in the South and in Moldavia is like two different countries. That's because in the beginning, Romania was split up for a long time and then reunited, and each group of people developed in their own way. Each part of the country does a different type of dance. Not only the styling, but the steps and rhythms are different.

For example, in the South, you don't slap your feet. You just do a lot of fast steps. If it's close to the border, it may look like a Bulgarian dance, like the *Batuta*, which has a lot of stamping. In the South, they hold belts.

Moldavia has a lot of heavy stepping, but also you have slaps on your feet. And instead of dancing high like you do in Transylvania, you bend your body.

Maramureş is a place where your body is really tight, with a lot of movement of your feet (as in *Dans din Oaş*).

In Transylvania you have a lot of slapping, but the dances of the Hungarians in Romania are different from those in Hungary. Some are slow and some are very fast, but they don't have the continuous slaps on the feet.

One dance from Transylvania is the '*Barbunk*'; Hungarians call it the *Verbunk*. It's very fast, has a lot of slaps on the feet, and has one traveling step with a double dip.

Another dance is '*Somes*' (Somes is a river which comes to Clus). Ladies in this dance hold the Varsouvienne position (like in Banat), and they do a lot of very fast turns. Trained dancers turn so fast you can't stop them. But in the case of an amateur, it's even more fascinating, because they turn without spotting! And they turn so fast, it's impossible! I couldn't do it.

In the Fagaras Mountains, central Romania, they also have the slapping. That's where the *Invirtita* usually comes from. There are a lot of *Invirtitas*, which are fascinating. The men do slap their feet, as in Transylvania, but the rhythm is different.

Briul is a very specific type of dance, but we have a lot of *Briuls* from different areas, so it may be done differently. But it comes from the South, where it's normally done by the belt. '*Briul pe Opt*' and '*Briul pe Sase*' are from Moltania. It's also done in Moldavia, like '*Briul Moldavanesque*', where sometimes it's done with the hands on the shoulders.

Another very important dance, one of the biggest traditional dances of Romania, is the '*Dansul Calusarilul*'. It means 'The Horseman Dance'. The steps are like you would be on a horse. The first part is very slow, like a trained horse would walk. The second part is very fast. I've never seen a horse going that fast, but it's just like a horse would do with his feet---it's very close to the ground. *Calusari* is from Calus, in Moltania. It's really rough, and there's no way you can do slaps in it. It's also done in the South, and in Bucharest, original Bucharest.

There are also a lot of *Trei Pazeştes*. It's from the South and has the tricky steps. *Trei Pazeste* is the slang for 'Be careful! Run!', because of the tricky steps. *Trei* means 'three'.

There are thousands of *Horas*. If you go in a village, you'll see a hundred people doing a *Hora*, and there is one basic walk. Now some of them are doing it one way; some people put a stamp in it. So it's not something that is written in a book, where if someone changes it, it's wrong. No, that's not wrong. It's just the feeling of the people. There's a basic to it, of course. But a guy feels smarter and more talented, he gets up there and does his thing.

In general, a *Hora* is going up and down, holding hands in a circle, and moving arms around. That's what it is. It's not a pattern or something.

WHAT ABOUT A DANCE AS DIFFICULT AS "*FLORICICA OLTENESCA*"; COULD PEASANTS DO THAT?

Yah. And they could do it better! The only thing, the way the steps are arranged in the second part is the way they do in ensemble. In the village they don't do them in that order. But they do that type of step, and probably harder, without any training. The villagers hold shoulders and start moving their feet as fast as they can. It's really unbelievable. Even professionals can't do it. There is a basic step, and from that it's a take-off. But everybody is in rhythm, even if they're not doing the same steps. It's up to the feeling of the people.

WHERE DO PEOPLE DANCE IN ROMANIA?

In Romania, or at least in Bucharest, they don't have recreational folk dances, because the people in Bucharest don't like it. Rock and roll is what's happening. But there are people that do like folk dancing; they do it in performing amateur groups, not just for fun. There is no such thing as recreational dancing like we have in America.



In the villages, yes, you do have; because they don't do rock and roll. They dance on Sunday, because that's the only day they have free, unless they have to do 'voluntary work'. They get together in the village, and they have an orchestra. They do all types of dances; depends on where the village is. And if they live out of the city of Bucharest, they have weddings in the street. Everybody blocks the street so no car can pass, and they dance *Horas* and all this.

ARE THERE AREAS IN ROMANIA WHERE THEY STILL WEAR COSTUMES?

Yah, in Oas, where it's quite primitive. Maramures is another place nearby. Also in Transylvania, some places. But now it is getting to be more expensive, you know, to wear those costumes all the time. So they don't wear them that much. But some of the people don't buy anything but costumes. Of course, they're not made with gold around, but they have them made, or some make them themselves. They have boots and hats and all kinds of things. Tourists could buy them too. You go in the village, and you buy at a good price!

DID YOU EXPECT SUCH AN INTEREST IN FOLK DANCING IN AMERICA?

No, I didn't expect that there would be so much interest in folk dancing. I'm fascinated that they like it. I expected there to be more dancing among the ethnic communities, like Armenian or Greek, but that sort of dies out. So it's really something that the American people dance, even though they don't have a background in it. It's just something that appeals to their soul. It's a good thing.

Romanian dances are very exhausting. I guess this is because of the blood of the people. They are very tough dances. Americans enjoy them. Some people get them fast, some not at all, some slowly. But it's a good change, because for the past twenty years they've been doing a lot of dances which are not that strong. But Romanian is very strong; it's really breathtaking!

WHERE ARE THE ROMANIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES?

We have several. One is Detroit, which I think is the biggest. Ohio, the whole state; Chicago, also; Iowa, a lot of them went to the farm; Idaho, where they grow the potatoes. In California, there are very few. At least if there are, they don't keep the traditions. Especially the young kids, they don't even know they're Romanian. I went to a Romanian picnic; they danced only one dance--sort of an *Invirtita*, from Fagaras. They didn't even play Romanian music. The other dances were like *Miserlou* & some simple Yugoslavian dances.

By the way, ROMANIA is the correct spelling, not ROUMANIA, which is the French spelling. Because they print a lot of Romanian things in Paris, people see the Rou... spelling. But it's Romania, from the Romans, who occupied the area.