



an interview with

# Graham Hempel

by Jovana

GRAHAM HEMPEL studied folk dance and ballet in Santa Barbara and San Francisco, where he joined Anatol Joukowsky's Dance Guild & performed with the Cosmopolitan Ballet Company and the Pacific Ballet. In 1968 Graham toured with the 'Don Cossack Chorus. He is currently Assistant Choreographer for Vladimir Profilov's Russian Dance Chorus and directs his own performing group, Khadra. This interview was given February 18, 1973, in Oakland, Calif.



SHOULD DANCES FROM RUSSIA BE CALLED RUSSIAN, OR SHOULD THEY BE IDENTIFIED BY REGION?

It's best to designate all as 'Soviet' dances. You could say that Russian Ukrainian dances are a family of dances, and that Caucasian dances are another family, but there are many different peoples within the Caucasus---Ossetians, Pakistanis, Georgians---which could also be called families. To me, anything that comes from the area north of the Ukraine Region, west of the Ural Mtns., east of the Balkan Ocean, and south of the Arctic Sea is Russian. I don't distinguish between Russian and Ukrainian dance. However, Russians feel that Siberia is also 'Russia'. I don't feel Central Asian dance is 'Russian' dance, but it is Soviet dance, politically.

HOW IS RUSSIAN DANCE RESEARCHED?

In this country you can learn it from Russian immigrant teachers, from films, and choreography from books. It's not easy to learn Russian dance by going to Russia. They don't mind American tourists staying in the cities, but they don't want them going into the back country villages. Also, you would have to speak the language.

HOW DO SOCIAL CONDITIONS AFFECT DANCING IN RUSSIA?

Dance in the Caucasus has been affected in the past century by several social conditions. This is a melting pot region, causing a lot of strife, population pressure, and religious differences between Moslems and Christians. Almost all their dances are done without touching one's partner, reflecting Moslem ethics. It's a male chauvanistic society, or was. The men are very much in charge, predominating, patriarchal, and the women are very quiet, keeping the arms and the eyes down, staying in the kitchen, etc. It's also a very fierce society. The men were very much at odds, always carrying a dagger or pistol, or saber as horsemen, and were very militant to protect themselves from the population pressure, which forced them higher and higher into the mountains. This affected the dances greatly, especially the dicotomy of men's and women's dances.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN'S AND WOMEN'S DANCES?

Men's dance is very vibrant, very violent. They seem to dance quite stiffly, keeping their spine fairly rigid. They move a lot, but their aim is to move across the floor without bobbing up and

manship' in their dancing. Russian dance is very competitive; one man will try to outdo the other.

There is a geographical difference between Russia and the Ukraine; Russia is a forestland, and the Ukraine is a steppland. You find more sweeping movements, more squatting movements and stupendous gymnastic feats in Ukrainian men's dancing. The Russians do more 'tap dancing'. However, cultural similarities tend to blend these differences.

#### WHY DO DANCERS DEFECT FROM RUSSIA?

Well, Russian expatriots would probably claim that the person defecting had done so because of political oppression. However, I feel that the artist, being an artist, probably defected because there were more creative opportunities outside the Soviet Union. Artists tend to be people of the world more than people of a certain country. It's probably rather exciting to know that if you leave the Soviet Union, you can belong to a ballet company in England or France or the United States, or you can travel around from one to the other. The really good dancers knew they would be successful wherever they went.

#### WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF YOUR PERFORMING GROUP, KHADRA?

Because Khadra is a performing group, we strive to do dances that aren't done by the average folkdancer, dances that are more exciting to watch or more difficult to perform. Men's dances are particularly more challenging because of their technical nature. We do Russian Ukrainian dances which use many squatting steps (prysiadkas) & Caucasian dances which have some technical difficulty, all the way up to *Lesginka*, which is done on toes & knees. Our Hungarian dances are as technical as our Caucasian dances.

Besides presenting a challenge and experience in the field of dance, I would like to promote some sort of understanding between peoples of the world through folkdance. People have similar needs and wants, but too often concentrate on the differences between peoples. When they realize that others are just as human as they are, they begin to accept them. I think there would be less strife in the world if there were more understanding on a humanistic level.



down. Women's dances also strive for this, but by contrast, the women do hardly anything; they have hardly any movements with their feet.

The men do lots of spectacular *machismo* tricks to prove their masculinity, their readiness to fight. They can dance with their toes knuckled under, fall on their knees, etc. I think African dancing is probably wilder, but the Caucasian dancer does things that look masochistic, just to prove that he can withstand it and still get up and walk away.

#### HOW HAVE DANCES CHANGED IN THE LAST CENTURY IN RUSSIA?

Dances are pretty well disappearing in the village setting, much as they have in our country. Industrialization has hurt the folk arts. It seems the only place in Russia where you can really find folk dancing is in the factories; workers have folkdance ensembles, like company bowling leagues in this country. Dancing within the family on festive occasions is fast becoming a ghost of the past, but performing arts are encouraged. Lenin started this, making opera and ballet so inexpensive that the masses could enjoy them.

**WHAT KIND OF BOOT ARE YOU WEARING?** (Graham wore a high leather boot which covered the knee-caps in front, had no sole, but had a separate leather slipper over the foot only.)

This is the traditional Cossack boot, developed for horsemen and mountaineers. It's a strange thing, Caucasians were both horsemen and mountaineers, because horses go places that you and I wouldn't want to walk. The boot is very functional for riding bareback; they can hug the horse with their feet and legs. The soft foot portion helps the men feel the uneven ground, making them more sure-footed; a thick heavy sole might slide on the rocks. The slipper is sometimes worn over the boot to protect it against the rugged terrain.

#### WHICH CAME FIRST, THE BOOT OR THE DANCE?

Being mountaineers, the Caucasian men had very strong legs, and so were able to dance on the balls of their feet a lot. But the flexibility of the boot allowed them to get up on their toes, that is, with their toes knuckled under (see picture on Page 4).

There is a theory on how this toe dancing developed. If a man were trying to escape from his enemy, he could manouver along a ledge on the face of a cliff. He would get up on his toes, knuckled under, thereby throwing himself against the cliff, and move along sideways.

#### HOW DID PRYSIADKAS DEVELOP?

Prysiadkas could have begun with the daredevilry of the Cossacks in the 15th Century, when the Stepp Region was much like our Frontier. Trappers went out on horseback, without women, to look for game or to raid Turkish Caravans. These Cossacks lived in groups, and perhaps prysiadkas developed as sort of 'one-up-