

KOLO FESTIVAL 2019 – A Review

by Clem Dickey

It was a foggy Black Friday morning in San Francisco. The four doors to the Croatian-American Center were closed. There was no hint of occupancy, but a small sign on the leftmost door read “Enter Here.” Inside, the Kolo Festival was assembling. It was 9:10 am, and John Filcich had the Festival Records collection of CDs, DVDs, old syllabi, and a cookbook or two arranged on a table. Paul Bourbon was on stage, fiddling with the sound. A few strings of lights, yet unhung, were also on stage. A tall fellow entered after me. He spotted John Filcich, whom he greeted with happy recognition. It was John Morovitch, a featured singer, musician, and dance teacher. Before the weekend was over, nearly 300 dancers, musicians and friends would greet each other in a similar fashion. Walmart probably had a greater attendance, but Kolo had more fun.

Joe Graziosi, Cristian Florescu, and Sonia Dion taught at the major sessions. Between them they taught 25 dances in two days. Sonia and Cristian brought a collection of new (to me) dances, and many of the old-but-good jokes and repartee with which they pepper their teaching. When I learn from them, there is always someone who cannot manage the styling, and Cristian lampoons him or her (without mentioning names) by illustrating how *not* to sway, step, or carry oneself. The required carriage varied: some in proud “San Francisco” style, some in a more proletarian, earthy “Los Angeles” style. The style locations no doubt vary as they travel the world.

Like a scale model, the dances felt as if they fit together exactly one way. Styling was like model paint: it could make or ruin the assembled dance. I had previously learned from Cristian in Stockton to let a dance seep from our ears to our feet. Kolo Festival allowed less time, so Cristian repeated some of the ten dances he taught over the two days. I haven’t the memory necessary to describe all their dances, but will mention a few. Each session started with Hora de la Țerova, a walking and rocking dance. Joc din Arad has a SQSQS rhythm, for which Dick Crum provided “get your papers here” as a mnemonic. To that Sonia added “bon voyage tout le monde” which has the same beat, assuming your French is, well, better than mine. Cărășelul stepped a little outside the Romanian box by, well, adding a box: the first figure has dancers completing a full turn as they draw a four-sided box. Finally, Hododârla let us practice syncopation and some boot-slapping, not that I saw anyone wearing actual boots.

Joe Graziosi’s Greek dances worked like a set of Lego blocks: within each structure there was room for variation. Joe observed that all beats which did not transfer weight were equivalent: a pause, a touch, a lift, a scuff. If the pause was on a slow beat, one could even turn it into a quick double-step. To illustrate, he taught Tourkikos (from Rhodes). The sequence was 9 beats (one measure) long, counted QQSQQS. The middle “slow” beat (counts 4 and 5) was a pause, or a scuff, or a quick “right-left,” depending on whim. Tourkikos is danced facing another small group of dancers consisting of two or three people, or perhaps just one.

As an inexperienced Greek dancer, I also appreciated Diplos Horos Messinias, which alternated Tsamikos and Syrtos patterns.

At the end of the second day of teaching, Kolo Director Bill Cope announced to general acclaim that

Cristian and Sonia, and Joe would return to the Kolo Festival in 2020.

John Filcich and John Morovich shared an hour each day teaching Croatian and Serbian kolos, some of which, they confessed, might have originated in the emigre communities of Chicago, or maybe Pittsburgh. John Morovich also taught singing classes and played with Sinovi Tamburitza Orchestra (of Seattle).

Chubritza, Sinovi, and Zabrava International traded off the early evening musical slots in the Main Hall, returning in the late evening/early morning (after I had left for bed). Smaller bands played in the Kafana. I did not spend much time in the Kafana, a room perhaps 15 by 30 feet, but when I did venture there, it was quite crowded. I won’t mention a number, lest the Fire Marshall read this, but musicians, noshers, and dancers all squeezed in.

On-site lunches and dinners were catered by chef Hristo Kolev. I never expect good catered food, so it was a bit of a surprise to find minestrone soup made with fresh vegetables. The main courses included vegetarian options. Baklava, sometimes joined by brownies, was always available for dessert.

I have been to Kolo Festival only three or four times in 15 years, because family activities usually keep me at home that weekend, but the teachers this year were too good to miss. I hope to be back next year, with all my old friends, and a few new ones I made this weekend.

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