

## REVIEW

by Prof Aneliya Yaneva

South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Institute for Arts Studies at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences  
on dissertation work for awarding the educational and scientific degree

"Doctor" to Riolina Petkova Topalova

with dissertation titled: *Development of modern dance in America and Europe. Comparative analysis of the established techniques*

**Academic supervisor:** Prof Daniela Dzheneva, PhD

The doctoral student Riolina Petkova Topalova is enrolled in the Department of Choreography of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" with a period of study from 04.07.2016 to 04.07.2019. She was discharged with the right of defense on 04.11.2019.

The doctoral student has a professional career as a ballerina - teacher - tutor - choreographer. Graduated from the National School of Dance Art as a ballerina, Riolina Topalova received Bachelor's degree in Ballet Pedagogy in 2004 and a Master's degree in Ballet Art in 2008 at AMDFA. Tutor and choreographer at the Sofia Opera and Ballet in the period from 2006 to 2022. A choreographer of performances, concert programs and dance projects, she is also a teacher at AMDFA -Plovdiv (since 2011), and the head of the methodological association Classical Dance, and a teacher at the National School of Dance Art in the disciplines: Classical Dance, Theory and methodology, Repertoire, Learning practice, History of dance, Composition and improvisation, Acting, Historical dances (since 2012).

Riolina Topalova's dissertation *Development of modern dance in America and Europe. Comparative analysis of the established techniques* was discussed and appointed for defense at a meeting of the Choreography Department of AMDFA, Plovdiv, held on 10 June 2024. It was approved at a meeting of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Musical Folklore and Choreography on 24 June 2024.

The thesis, within 175 pages, divided into Introduction, five chapters, Conclusion, Conclusions and Contributions, attempts comparisons between different dance techniques united by the common definition of *modern dance*.

The term *modern dance* is not new. It unites different dance styles built in the 20th century as an opposition to the classical dance of the previous century. The choice of the topic is more related to the insufficient literature on the topic in the Bulgarian language. And to some extent, there is a risk that the dissertation will become only a translation of foreign sources. In fact, the total number of sources on which the dissertation is based is only 45, including many Internet sources. And that is why it sounds strange that as the first contribution it is pointed out: "The work covers the study of a **huge amount of**

**material** (emphasis mine - A. Ya.) from publications not translated into Bulgarian (translations from English, Russian and German)". It remains debatable whether 45 sources is a **huge amount of material**!?!

In the **first chapter** of the dissertation, the purpose and tasks of the research are announced. Literature on the subject is not commented on.

The **second chapter** presents the main stages of the emergence of the modern dance and the work of important choreographers of the 20th century, with R. Topalova making the following distinction: "*The modern dance is a trend in the dance art that developed in Europe and the USA at the beginning of the 20th century, whose leading representatives are Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Mary Wigman, Hanya Holm, Jose Limon, Lester Horton, Eric Hawkins, Anna Sokoloff, Loy Fuller, Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn. The postmodern dance is a trend in the dance art that developed in the USA and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, whose leading representatives are Merce Cunningham, Alvin Ailey, Alwin Nikolais, Paul Taylor, Tricia Brown. The contemporary dance is a trend of the dance art that includes dance techniques and styles from the middle of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, formed on the basis of American and European modern and postmodern dance. In this direction, dance is seen as a means of developing the dancer's body and forming his individual choreographic vocabulary.*" (p. 38, A; p. 83 D). It is noticeable that prominent artists such as Maurice Bejar, Mats Ek, Matthew Born, John Neumeier, etc. are missing. The doctoral student divides the representatives into two main groups: **creators-improvisers**; those who leave their pedagogical school; and of **artists** whose style becomes an individual choreographic signature. Important for the modern dance is the generalization that "*the essence of the dynamic processes of the body in space depend on the transition, not on the position*" (p. 27 E).

I'm a little confused by R. Topalova's statement that "*The modern dance is a relative term and each time period has its own musical culture that conducts new types of dances*" (p. 12 D). Whether musical culture is responsible for the emergence of new types of dances (?!?) - I am not at all convinced. However, R. Topalova claims: "*Although the concept of modern or contemporary dance is relative, each period of time has its own musical culture, which gives birth to new types of dance, and accordingly each dance can be called modern or modern for its time, since they are current for the relevant period*" (p. 16 E) and thus dance styles are mechanically attached to styles in music without, however, clarifying them.

The **third chapter** is dedicated to **jazz dance**. Here also there are inaccurate formulations such as: "*...jazz is danced to a wide range of music*" (p. 43-44 A). The author reports distinctive features in the jazz techniques of Jack Cole, Luigi, Gus Giorgiono, Lester Horton, Matt Mattox. Among those who are more associated with "black" jazz are Pearl Eileen Primus, Kathryn Dunham, Lester Horton. Choreographers who have developed their own style are also reported, such as Alwin Nikolais, Paul Taylor, Twyla Tharp. Special attention is given to Alvin Ailey. But unfortunately, basic concepts such as

**performance** and **dance** are confused here as well - "*His performance 'Revelations' is perhaps the most frequently staged modern dance in the world.*" (p. 54 A).

Styles and distinctive features in jazz-dance are commented on - Classical jazz; Afro jazz; Broadway Jazz; Step Jazz, Lyrical Jazz; Flash; Street jazz. Several stages in the development of jazz dance are distinguished.

R. Topalova points out as the **main principles of modern dance** "... *the use of gravity and work with body weight, the lack of desire to hide the effort expended during movement, violation of the vertical axis of body retention, focusing attention on the center of the body and working with it*" (p. 59 A). And also "...*spinal mobility work is at the heart of many modern dance techniques*" (pp. 59-60 A). Important jazz-dance principles are analyzed and *polycentricity, polymetrics, multiplication* are commented on in detail, along with the traditional jazz-technique *isolation, coordination, relax* (p. 113-115 E). By looking for a similarity with the classical exercise, an example construction of a jazz-exercise (p. 115-118 E) as well as movements for developing the mobility of the spine (p. 118-120 E) is offered. In these specific proposals and tasks, the dissertation is valuable and convincing.

The **fourth chapter** substantiates *basic movement techniques* - swing, spiral, bounce, impact, drop, continuous movement. It also defines the *basic concepts in modern dance* - such as **Isolation, Relax, Contraction, Release, Collapse, Coordination, Opposition and parallelisms. Impulse. Multiplication. Shake. Bump** – Pushing the pelvis forward. **Slide** – slide out with bent knees and maintain a collapsed posture. **Body**. It is assumed that the torso, upper body and knees are bent. **Body roll. Kick. Rubber leg. Drop. Arch. Walking turn. Skipping turn.** The turn with a jump or jump in a turn. **Pivot turn. Air turn.** All classic pirouettes and tours can be used for stage choreography. **Thrust. Swing. Head tiff, Head thrust, Head accent** - Thrusts, ejections of the head with accents. **Sundari. Twist. Tilt. Flat back. Deep body bend. Side stretch. Brash. Layout. Catch step. Step ball change. Flatback. Table top. Limbo. Stretch. Touch. Flat step. Jump. Hop. Lip. Push. Dip body bend. Roll down. Roll up.** This detailed review leads to the conclusion that "*Modern techniques interact with each other. . . . Regardless of the technique, a single terminology is used, despite the different principles of body movement*" (pp. 72-73 A; 167 E).

#### **My objections are threefold.**

1. In general, I would allow myself to recommend **clarification of the concepts and the terminology used**, which has long been clarified and attempts to introduce new meanings into established concepts usually lead to unnecessary confusion. Including the use of *dance* and *performance* as synonyms (p. 54 A - !?) This is especially evident in the second and fourth chapters. As in the final Conclusion. For example, in the second chapter the author once claims that the modern dance appeared as an alternative to the classical dance – "*This type of dance, at the beginning of the 20th century, became an alternative to*

*classical dance.*" (p. 8 A; p. 10 E), a few pages later she makes the opposite conclusion - "*Modern dance is the general name of dance art, appeared in the first half of the 20th century, and is based on the classical dance*" (p. 9 A; p. 12 D.); "*The roots of modern dance start from classical ballet dance*" (p. 16 E) In the final Conclusion, the author claims that the *modern dance* is a *direction* (!?) based on the classical ballet. - "*Modern dance is a direction based on classical ballet*" (p. 168 D).

I want to clarify that **dance** and **ballet** are not the same and are not synonymous. And it is strange to declare the modern dance a *direction*. It is similar in the fourth chapter, where *swing* is defined once as a **movement technique**, and a second time as a **basic concept in modern dance**. It is good to clarify the terminology used. I leave one more quote to ponder: "**The modern dance** is a *dance of the soul.*" (p. 73). What can we say about other types of dance, about poetry, music. Aren't they soul related??? And after a few sentences, "*the modern dance is a consistence of freedom of thought and creative expression.*" Finally - is the modern dance about the **soul** or the **mind**?? I also find the statement: "*The modern dance is a philosophical trend, without any limitations - physical, emotional, abstract and borderline, sometimes extremely avant-garde.*" (p. 79 A) - (!?)

2. Since part of the goals set in the dissertation are "*The goal of this work is the search, summarization, analysis and systematization of the existing printed materials on the historical development of modern dance in the twentieth century and the techniques created*", let me remind you that, in addition to those included in the bibliography monographs of **Galina Borisova** (Borisova, Galina. *Dance performances and artistic preferences*. S.: NBU, 2011, 403 p.); of **Dilyana Nikiforova** (Nikiforova, Dilyana. *Dance theater and dance techniques /History, modernity and future/*. Sofia: Nikiforov Studio, 2011. 203 p) and **Teodor Popov's** research on German free expressive dance (1997; 2000, 2002), there are other sources in Bulgarian language that are related to the topic. I will mention some of them, which I consider fundamental (arrangement is in alphabetical order): **Anelia Yaneva** (Yaneva, Anelia. *Interactions between classical and modern dance in Bulgaria. Processes in Bulgarian ballet*. Sofia: Express Print, 2004, 296 p.) ; **Ani Vaseva** (Vaseva, Ani. *What is contemporary dance? Theatrical life of contemporary dance in Bulgaria between 1989 and 2010*. Sofia: METEOR, 2017, 538 p.); **Margarita Bozhilova-Andonova** (BozhilovaAndonova, Margarita. *The actor's body - a book inspired by philosophy*. Sofia: Center for Semiotic and Cultural Studies, 2014, 27 p.); **Mila Iskrenova** (Iskrenova, Mila. *The taste of your body*. Sofia: Scalino, 2014, 318 p.; Iskrenova, Mila. *The joy of the body*. Sofia: Black Flamingo Publish, 2012, 270 p.). But apparently these studies have eluded the doctoral student. And it would be interesting to comment on them.

3. I do not agree with the statement of the doctoral student - "*The scarce information from Bulgarian printed materials and the books by authors of dance literature are only a reference for specific events related to biographical data.*" (p. 5, D), because in last decades have been published numerous

works dedicated to the structuring and details in the construction of dance productions (in this list I will also remind one of the last ones - **Yaneva, Anelia**. *Architectural principles of choreographic direction in the art of ballet*. Sofia: Institute for Arts Research, 2020, 268 pp., which analyzes and compares productions from the last three centuries). I guess the candidate saved herself the trouble of reading what was written before her. Given the sources and scientific publications presented above, I strongly disagree with contribution No. 2 highlighted by the dissertation student - "*For the first time, information is given on the main techniques used in modern dance*".

Contributing to the dissertation are the detailed comparisons in the subdivisions of the modern dance and the distinctive features of the created dance techniques (p. 123 – 154 E) - by **A. Duncan** (regarding the impulse to movement); of **M. Graham** (with inhalation - exhalation); of **Doris Humphrey** (fall - rise); of **José Limon** (related to the feeling of "heavy energy" in the body; to the dynamics of falling and recovery; to breathing and the flow of energy; to the concept of "swing"); of **Lester Horton** (synthesized elements from Native American folk dance, Japanese hand gestures, from the dances of the islands of Bali and Java isolation of the upper body - eyes, hands and head; elements from Africa and the Caribbean, such as circles with the hip, etc.); of **E. Hawkins** (based on the principles of movement in kinesiology and somatic practices for acquiring "thinking feeling", sensory awareness of the body); the **Release technique** (based on reducing tension and excess stress in the moving body and using breathing and momentum to support movement); of **F.M. Alexander** (a contemporary concept of eliminating unnecessary muscle tension when changing the body by freeing the intervertebral space and mastering a correct physique with the application of coordinated breathing, through self-observation and conscious control); of **Thomas Hanna** (in the *Somatics* direction, which includes elements of previous techniques, but conceived as a means of mental and physical health); of **Joseph Pilates** (as a system of muscle control and tension relief) and quite a few of their derivatives, analyzed in the third chapter. As well as the analyses of the individual movements from the modern dance, published in the fourth chapter (pp. 159-166 E).

The **abstract** corresponds in terms of meaning and content to what is written in the dissertation. There are also the required **three publications** in Plovdiv editions: **Topalova, R.**, *Improvisation in contemporary dance - help or hindrance for professional dancers*. – In the collection "International Scientific Conference", Science, Education and Innovations in the Field of Art, Plovdiv 12-13.10.2017, pp. 327 - 332, ISBN 978954-2963-23-3; **Topalova, R.**, *Rudolph von Laban - founder of German free expressive dance and creator of dance notation*. – In: Collection "Spring Scientific Readings 2017", Plovdiv, pp. 189 - 196, ISSN 1314 -7005; **Topalova, R.**, *The Icon of Contemporary Dance Martha Graham. Creator of the main dance technique of the 20th century*, In: Collection "Spring Scientific Readings 2019", Plovdiv, pp. 250-255, ISSN 1314 -7005.

I would like to especially congratulate the research supervisor Prof Daniela Dzheneva for the skillful guidance of the candidate and for the successes achieved, while I still insist on noting that self-study training is almost always controversial.

Regardless of the significant inaccuracies in the wording and some gaps in the research, I believe that the description of the terminology and methodology of basic movements in modern dance and its influence on physical and mental health (contributions 3 and 4) have a place in the scientific literature in Bulgarian and I propose to the highly respected Scientific Jury to award Riolina Topalova the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 8.3. – Music and Dance Art.

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Prof Aneliya Yaneva