

## THE PARADOX OF AUTHENTICITY. FOLKLORE PERFORMANCE IN POST-COMMUNIST SLOVAKIA

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The book on the Slovakian authentic folklore movement by the American scholar Joseph Grim Feinberg working in the Czech Republic is a special treat for those interested in dance anthropology. It is always inspiring to look at social and cultural phenomena about the East-Central European region through the eyes of a researcher who is an outlander; this applies to the realm of music and dance, too. The title suggests two fundamental issues that may be interesting and important for Hungarian readers acquainted with the world of folk dancing. One of them is the authenticity of folk-dance related practices; the other is folk dance politics, a topic addressed extensively in the international world of dance anthropology.

Let us first see how the author has approached the complex group of phenomena about the Slovakian movement of authentic folklore all through the text. His book consists of eight text items. The way he labels these hints at the structure of the book. While the first two chapters (preface, introduction) and the last two chapters (coda, non-scientific postscript) only bear titles, the four chapters in between are numbered from 1 to 4.

The preface written shortly before publication in 2018 comments on the social and political changes that occurred in Slovakia since the field research period, and it sheds a different light on the whole text, suggesting that the authentic folklore movement has been made to take up political content, a development the author could not foresee.

The introductory chapter presents the research topic and how fieldwork was initiated. It outlines the book's conceptual framework that draws on references from philosophy, aesthetics, and folkloristics. One of the central issues Feinberg scrutinizes is the problem of authenticity, its elusive nature, and the paradox that the more one aims at it, the less possible it becomes to achieve. He signals a way to meet this challenge through a shift of emphasis from the notion of 'performance' towards the partially overlapping notion of 'participation'.

The introduction outlines the origins of the Slovakian authentic folklore movement that has interesting Hungarian connections. In the early 2000s, Ervin Varga, an ethnic Hungarian dance educator from Slovakia, helped introduce to the Slovak dance community the Hungarian-style authentic folk-dance houses already existent at the time among ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia. As Feinberg relates, the subsequent Slovakian authentic folklore movement defined itself in opposition to the

Soviet-style, politicized, stylized, and staged folklore performances characteristic of the communist period, and it intended to give authentic folklore back to the people. A Hungarian folk dance expert and choreographer, László Diószegi, has presented the Hungarian case and given important hints as to how one may think about staged folklore performances of the communist era (Diószegi, 2014).

Joseph Grim Feinberg spent a year and a half doing fieldwork in Slovakia between 2010 and 2012. Most of his empirical data are presented in the four numbered chapters of his book that provide a detailed description and analysis, a classical ethnography of the Slovakian authentic folklore movement. These four chapters also offer a chronology of field research as the author dives further and further into an unknown world, becoming an observer and an active participant in it. The first of the four numbered chapters introduces readers to the world of dance houses from the perspective of the foreign visitor inexperienced in the world of dancing. The second presents and analyses the tiresome process through which the researcher becomes a member of and dancer in Hornád<sup>1</sup>, an amateur folk-dance ensemble in the east-Slovakian town Košice where he also gets integrated into its intimate bonds of friendships. Chapter 3 guides readers to the world of summer folklore festivals. An intricate process is revealed and analyzed in the next chapter showing how setting up and applying a system of rules, archived authentic folklore material may become the key ingredient in the Hornád folklore ensemble's work: its quest for authenticity. The two concluding chapters leave empirical data behind. In Coda, Feinberg returns to his work's central statements and the complex problem of authenticity, drawing attention to the social significance of the movement's attitude towards authenticity. Stepping away from the case study presented in the previous chapters, his 'un-scientific postscript' invites contemporary American fiction and rock music to elaborate on the problem of authenticity in modern man's life.

It may be fruitful to dwell a little longer on the four fieldwork-based chapters that are especially interesting and valuable. The research methodology followed more a classical model than an innovative, experimental one. However, it is important to draw attention to Feinberg's choice of topic and fieldwork focus. Besides concise historical works, ethnological and anthropological research in Hungary have already produced studies that targeted the social aspects of Hungarian folklore movement related to the phenomena (see for example, Bíró & Gagyí, 1987; Fábri & Füleki, 2006; Simon, 2015). Nevertheless, considering how massive the phenomenon of amateur and semi-professional folk ensembles is in the region, and to what extent participation transforms members' lives and identification, further dance anthropology projects would be needed to see these movements in a comparative perspective in the region.

Feinberg's venture is exemplary, in spite that his work has not shown a marked interest in the social context of the Slovakian authentic folklore movement. This may be accounted for by his initial engagement with the less empirical data-based discipline of philosophy. For example, it was talking about his personal experience of entering a folk ensemble at an older age than customary as readers find out that members typically joined at the age of 15-20. Having spent a year and a half in the field, he was likely to have owned the necessary data to outline the sociological

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<sup>1</sup> The internet site of the Hornád ensemble is available at: <https://www.fshornad.com/en/>.

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profile of Hornád members, yet it may also be noted that he did not hide the real identities of his interlocutors in this monograph. Discussing the amateur folk-dance ensemble's inner life and its impact on members' everyday lives in Chapter 2, Feinberg notes how very much time they spend on ensemble-related activities. He refers to the work of Slovakian ethnologist Maroš Červenák who studied three semi-professional ensembles closely in Bratislava. Červenák did measure how much time participants dedicated to authentic folk dancing and found that during each month of the rehearsal and performance period, they spent 66 hours rehearsing or preparing for rehearsal, they spent further 32 hours performing, 16 hours socializing with their ensemble, and 20 more hours socializing with members of other ensembles (Feinberg, 2018, p. 108). This information aids imagination about the everyday reality of participation. Chapter 3 offers a vivid description of Hornád's participation in folklore festivals. It discusses how liminality and a carnivalesque atmosphere that characterize festivals contribute to a sense of community and to the identification with the dance by ensemble members and festival visitors.

The last empirical chapter opens the window to a creative process of analysis and learning. Hornád's ensemble leader and its dancers analyze archival records of authentic folk dances; they break up the dance and movement into motifs and study the rules and practices of connecting the motifs of the dance. This way, they do not simply reproduce what they saw in the original recording but also acquire the key to achieving authenticity that is the ability to improvise. However, this method is not a new invention, and it may be familiar to most readers in Hungary who are acquainted with Hungarian folk dance research or its practice. Ensembles in Hungary learned this from the works of György Martin and Ernő Pesovár (1960) and the representatives of Hungarian ethno-choreology who followed in their steps (see for example Martin, 1999). In an endnote Feinberg mentions Martin and Pesovár's article published in English as early as in 1961, and at halfway in Chapter 4 he mentions that a Hungarian speaking Slovakian contributor and fellow dancer helped the ensemble translate and adapt the methods of Hungarian folkloristics to assist their work. In my view, a more detailed exploration into the regional embeddedness of the ideology and the methodology that characterize the Slovakian authentic folklore movement would have served its better understanding. Let me refer to another example of what I mean by this. Discussing the different kinds of challenges a Slovakian dance house visitor must face during his first visits, Feinberg mentions that instead of teaching major regional dance forms, the folklore movement, from its very beginning, is characterized by teaching dances of small regions, individual villages, or even village neighborhoods, making it particularly challenging for newcomers to follow. This approach became dominant among folk ensembles in Hungary, and the shift also took place in the dance house movement during the early 1990s. So, it was where it had become the norm by the time the dance house institution was adapted in Slovakia in the early 2000s.

Let us finally return to the Slovakian authentic folklore movement's politics outlined in the preface and several other book sections. Feinberg argues that the social movement he describes has defined itself by its opposition to the politicized and staged folklore of previous decades and presents authentic folklore as a source

of joy for the people of our times. Based on his field impressions and empirical data, he shows the movement during his fieldwork as a markedly apolitical social environment, the major attraction of which lies in love for the dance activity and in having an authentic experience. This approach is similar to the one taken, for example, by Serbian-America ethnomusicologist Mirjana Lausevic's in her memorable monograph on the Balkan folk music and folk-dance movement existent in the US (Lausevic, 2007). In the preface written in 2018, the author takes note of the political developments in Slovakia since the time of his field research that has had direct consequences on the authentic folklore scene and suggests a reinterpretation of the social phenomena he observed and described in his book.

There is another issue or condition related to the politics of the Slovakian authentic folklore movement that is not tackled by the American scholar. He writes about the movement as if it had not developed and operated in a multi-ethnic space based on the adaptation of a similar system designed by a coexisting ethnic group, although he briefly refers to the fact that the movement was based on the Hungarian example. Only concerning folklore festivals does the author refer to ensembles' parallel presence representing coexisting ethnic groups' folk traditions. I find this lack of focus and subsequent lack of analysis unexpected as the researcher did have an eye for the minute detail of multi-ethnic situations, such as the Ruthenian-Ukrainian-East-Slovakian episode he observed at a folklore festival in North-east Slovakia (Feinberg, 2018, p. 139). To sum up, I find it necessary to note that as folklore is intimately tied to ethnic group identification, its politics cannot be understood and interpreted exclusively along the communist-post-communist dichotomy.

Joseph Grim Feinberg's book presented and analyzed a phenomenon from an outsider researcher's perspective with many of its advantages and only a few of its constraints. His work yet again reminds us that it is worthwhile to study these dance related social institutions and practices from the perspective of dance anthropology, thus nearing the parallel local worlds of dance research and social sciences.

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