

GYPSINESS AND GENDER IN THE HUNGARIAN FOLKDANCE REVIVAL

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It is Saturday night, and the “Kalamajka *táncház*” [dance house hosted by the Kalamajka Ensemble] is getting underway in a crowded youth center downtown. The evening begins with gender-segregated teaching: the men are near the bandstand working on the intricate men’s solo dance [*legényes*] from the Mezőség region of Transylvania, the women are in the back in a circle learning some of the basic steps for the couples’ dance from that area. The women’s leader is quite helpful, and I am finally starting to get those heel turns. After a time the men’s leader and women’s leader pair up, as do members of the two groups, as we form a circle of couples. As there is a surplus of women, some of the women “become men.” I choose to “remain female,” as I can barely follow, much less lead; I am also not sure I care to “dance in drag,” and apparently neither do some of the others, so in the end there are not enough “men” to even out the circle. I struggle to use the steps I learned in the women’s circle while following my partner; the teaching is now less helpful, as it is now directed almost entirely to the “men.” We rotate partners every so often, and most of the men I dance with are also less than competent, so our efforts are occasionally halted by an almost disastrous misstep. I and a few of the other “extra women” eventually step out and watch.

It is another Saturday night at the Kalamajka *táncház*, a few weeks later. The dancing is in full swing, though I am not dancing tonight – I am still a rank novice, I know only a few people, and once again, there are not enough men. But as the band strikes up a Transylvanian *csingerálás*, or “Gypsy *csárdás*,” the gender imbalance suddenly becomes irrelevant, because in the *csingerálás*, unlike the other couples’ dances that appear in the Hungarian *táncház*, the partners do not touch. The traditional reason cited for this fact is the long-standing modesty taboo in Roma culture. Here, as the dancers take on the “mask of Gypsiness,” it serves another purpose: the *csingerálás* becomes a *women’s* dance; for once, one does not need to wait for a male partner. Moreover, the women who take the floor for this dance seem far from modest: they move between partners – a few men, but mostly other women – at

will, move their hips and chests, play flirtatiously with their skirts.

The gender hierarchy within the Hungarian folk music and dance revival, usually known as the *táncház* movement, in many ways reflects the patriarchal character of rural Hungarian society. Ethnicity, however – both real and assumed – complicates this picture. Not only do musicians like the members of the Kalamajka Ensemble rely heavily on knowledge gained from “data-providing” [*adatközlő*] rural Romani musicians, but dancers, particularly female dancers, use the mask of “Gypsiness” in ways that interact provocatively with questions of gender. In this essay I use examples from my fieldwork to explore how women challenge “traditional” gender relations enshrined in the *táncház* through the image of the Gypsy, the “quintessential Other” (Silverman 1996b: 233), and how one group of Rom performers reinterprets this image for itself.

Defining the *táncház*

The folk music and dance revival known as the “*táncház* movement” began in the early 1970s when a handful of educated Hungarian musicians and dancers began reviving the informal dances of rural villages for the urban public. The movement reached a height in the 1980s, when it also acquired a flavor of political opposition (Frigyesi 1996, Halmos 2000), in part due to its grass-roots origins and in part due to its celebration of Hungarian cultural expression from Transylvania, under Romanian rule since the end of World War I. Though some of the political urgency that energized the movement faded after 1989, still today anyone who likes may come to dance Hungarian traditional dances and to live music almost any night of the season in Budapest and on a regular basis in many other cities from Romania to Japan. There is usually some teaching available during the *táncház*, as described in the opening, or one may attend a special workshop or camp.

What has made the dance house relevant for most of its participants is that the movement “claimed and proved that social and performing context of [traditional peasant] music...is not necessarily only the music of...the past” (Frigyesi 1996: 58). The dance house invented a new tradition for this traditional repertoire – created a

new context for it, one relevant for modern urban life. What made this new context “relevant” is not just a new kind of recreation, but also an intellectual framework for it – an appeal to roots and authentic tradition, typical of many revival movements. (See Rosenberg 1993) Therefore, it should not be surprising that the *táncház* appeals largely to the educated middle class, not to the agrarian or urban working class whose art and culture it enshrines.

The *táncház* as locus for masculine display

In the past, village dances – the “archetype” on which the *táncház* is based – played an important role in defining gender relations, including courtship, and in defining young people as adults. As Sándor Borbély wrote in 1891, “The youth (16 years old) or girl (14-15 years old) who *takes part in the dance* is no longer a child, but a *lad or girl* ... [Parents’] application of corporal punishment after this is more rare... the lad may keep a sweetheart, he may go to her house and pay court to her; the girl is permitted to receive [such a suit].” (Cited in Martin 1997: 23) While both women and men must be athletic and skillful to master the dances found in the Hungarian *táncház*, there is little doubt that the men’s parts are more difficult and showier, a fact that impacts every dancer from the beginner to the expert. Novice male dancers are expected to practice on their own, where female dancers probably are not. Lectures and films shown in *táncház* settings may emphasize how village men were judged by the quality of their dancing. The most skilled men left their imprint on dance music for future generations, as their names became attached to favorite tunes for the *legényes* or men’s (literally lad’s) dance (Martin 1997: 22).

Although the majority of the time at the *táncház* is devoted to couples’ dances, these men’s dances, with their rhythmic clapping, kicking, stomping, boot-slapping, and general strutting, most clearly demonstrate the dominant role of the male in Hungarian folk dancing (See Figure 1.) The men may also add steps like these as “ornaments” within the couples’ dances. Though women’s parts are also quite vigorous – sometimes dizzyingly so – they always follow the lead of their male partner and their movements are more restricted. There is little to no bending, and perhaps the greatest challenge is simply being where one is directed by one’s partner. While a man is performing his “ornaments” to a couples’ dance, the woman stands to the side and sways to the music, cooling her heels until he is finished

(see Figure 2). What Jane Sugarman observes about Prespa Albanian line dancing is the rule in most Hungarian folkdance as well:

In contrast to the stiffer, more circumscribed movements of women, [men] move their bodies more freely ... A blatant physicality is thus an express component of men’s performances, although it is a physicality that stresses strength and agility rather than sensuality... whereas women highlight modesty, propriety, and grace in their dancing (Sugarman 2003: 91).

Male dominance in couples’ dances is further underscored by the fact that teaching instructions are directed almost exclusively by the male teacher to the male students. Teaching couples are often billed simply as “John Smith (well, Smith János) and his partner”; the partner – the woman – is a necessary, but largely mute, appendage.

This male dominance holds even though the demographics of dance mean that *táncház*es from Pennsylvania to Transylvania are often undersupplied with men. Women without partners can choose to dance with each other in couples’ dances, but it means one of them must learn a different, more difficult set of steps, take responsibility for the lead, and transgress her gender identity – “be the man,” or “dance in drag.” Since people go to a *táncház* mostly because they like to dance, women often do dance with each other, but it is seen by most as a poor substitute. Many women would rather sit out than dance with another woman.

During most workshops a significant amount of time is devoted to teaching the men’s dances of a particular region, which sometimes leaves the women with time on their hands. To join the men’s class or not? The men’s dances are challenging and thus attractive to some accomplished women dancers, but doing them in any serious way again requires “becoming a man.” Rarely does anyone say explicitly that women should not do men’s solo dances – in fact some North American dance camp advertisements explicitly say that women are welcome in the men’s dance classes – but I have seen only a handful of women participating fully in these classes, most of them non-Hungarians in North America, and I have never seen a woman take a dance solo in front of the band. The solo dance certainly invites the gaze of onlookers in a way that would not be quite proper in a woman. During the men’s solos, the appropriate,

“traditional” thing for women to do is to shout encouraging or teasing rhymes (*csujogatás*), thus adding their voices to their gaze in focusing on the man dancing, or to link arms and circle quickly, looking inward at each other, not doing anything particularly complicated or drawing too much attention away from the male soloist.

Leading and following

A defining element of Hungarian couples' dances – like other couples' dances – is “leading and following.” Flyers for some dance workshops list this aspect of the dance (rather than basic steps) as one of their main points of focus; the importance of the male lead is what makes it possible for a couple to teach with hardly a word from the female teacher. The lead begins with the man's invitation, following with the woman's acceptance. This ritual is even occasionally taught in workshops, such as one I attended in suburban Washington, DC, in 2001. The male teacher demonstrated the invitation as a jerk of the head; his partner – in this case his wife – then came forward bashfully, but with a coquettish turn. Once the dance begins, the man controls the space (or lack thereof) between the dancers. There is a basic set of steps and variations that go with any particular dance dialect, and the man dictates the order in which they are combined. Hungarian folkdance thus has something in common with ballet, despite a very different vocabulary of movement: what Judith Hanna calls “a recurring message of...male domination and protection of women through partnering...: a strong man supporting and manipulating the woman” (1988: xiv), though in Hungarian dance he turns her on her heel rather than her pointed toe.

In one sense, surrendering to the male lead is comforting for the novice woman dancer – and here I include myself. Once she knows the basic steps, she can rely on her partner to make the decision about exactly what step will come next, to guide her through the steps, and to steer through the crowded floor. Anything that goes wrong is assumed to be the man's fault, and one can learn, even from a partner who is not entirely pleasant. (I learned some new steps and variations this summer from someone who not only had extremely bad rhythm but who also at one point punched me in the face as he tried to turn me.) With a good partner, the dance can be exhilarating – a combination of sweaty exertion, extended physical proximity, and a sense of working well together.

But the security of not having to make one's own decisions goes only so far for some women – here I also include myself, as well as some of my Hungarian and North American informants. One can be torn between the bodily exhilaration of the dance and occasional frustration stemming from its strictly gendered roles. At some point one wants some control over one's own body and dance space. This is where the *csingerálás* comes in.

As mentioned in the opening, the *csingerálás*, or Transylvanian “Gypsy *csárdás*,” is, like other versions of the *csárdás*, a couples' dance in which the partners do not touch. In this couples' dance, each partner embodies the traits appropriate to his or her gender, though in a different way than in a Hungarian *csárdás*. Paul Nixon, based on his observations in the Gurghiu Valley in 1979, described the male role in this dance as follows: “Skill was appraised on the basis of personal resourcefulness in inventing rhythmic slaps, claps, kicks and leg-swings performed to chordal accompaniment on the viola.” (Nixon 1998: 388) The female role, as in the linked couples' dances associated with ethnic Hungarians and the Prespa Albanians' line dances, is more contained, with small, sometimes almost mincing steps (though these can be lightning fast) instead of kicks or leg-swings, and finger-snaps instead of much louder claps and slaps.

But the style of movement in the *csingerálás* can be more sensual than that in women's parts to Hungarian *csárdáses*. In almost all Hungarian couples' dances the woman holds her body erect, and she or her partner places her arms wherever they need to be for the next move the man wants to execute, or perhaps she holds the hem of her skirt – as much to keep it out of the way as to show it off. In the *csingerálás*, by contrast, women can bend their bodies, play with their skirts flirtatiously, move their hips (if very subtly), raise their arms to snap their fingers – but bringing attention to their breasts in the process. Also, the separation of partners requires the woman to choose the order of steps herself, and to steer herself around the dance floor – which allows for new possibilities. She and her partner can play with the distance between them in a way that is not possible with couples' dances that require a close hold. She can decide to move closer, then move away. She can change partners in mid-dance, or as noted in the opening, she need not have a single partner at all. She can use the dance to display her own skill, to flirt with a musician, to draw in someone who is on the sidelines or just passing

through on the way to the bar, to cut off a male dancer who is taking up more than his fair share of time dancing solo in front of the band. Women can dance flirtatiously at each other, which in this heteronormative environment the men often interpret as "for their benefit," whether it is or not. For all these reasons, and despite the fact that in Romani contexts this dance was a couples' dance, in the Hungarian *táncház* the *csingerálás* usually becomes a *women's* dance, even a women's solo dance – the only traditional dance from the Carpathian Basin² (the source area for *táncház* repertoire) that can be used in this way.

***Táncház* as festival / *Táncház* as carnival**

I refer to certain localized phenomena in the *táncház* as a masquerade: non-Roma dancing the *csingerálás* as donning the "mask of Gypsiness," women who take men's roles as "dancing in drag." There is a sense, however, in which all the participants in the *táncház* are taking on a role. The most usual role is the "peasant," underscored by wearing elements of folk costume (though usually not a complete costume).

This masquerade is one of the components of the carnivalesque mode, "celebrat[ing] temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions..." (Bakhtin 1968: 10) *Táncház* rhetoric tends to emphasize its role in teaching and perpetuating "authentic" traditional Hungarian culture, but at least as important is the attraction of a lively social environment. This element can be particularly important at folk music and dance camps, where campers gather not only as cultural pilgrims traveling to worship at the altar of "authentic folk culture," but also to have fun in a relaxed, usually rural setting. A regular urban *táncház* similarly combines pedagogical and social functions but within the context of the everyday – people cannot stay out too late or act too crazy if they have to go to work or collect the kids from grandma the next morning. The Arcadian retreat of camp is time out of real life, justifying the "liberation from the established order." As with other carnivals and masquerades, folk music camps can have a "libidinous freedom" about them, diffused with a "spirit of sensual liberty" (Castle 1983-1984: 159-160).

The range of masks available, though, is limited by the boundaries of ideas of "authenticity" and gendered notions of propriety. In an ordinary couples' dance, the male dancer in

the *táncház* plays an archaic version of "himself": the macho Hungarian village man strutting his stuff, to the accompaniment of the "Gypsy band." The woman's proper role is as his partner, following his lead, or on the sidelines alternately cheering him on and teasing him in rhythmic rhyming shouts: the village girl, enthusiastic but basically modest and compliant. The most radical role available is the racial Other. A woman dancer who steps onto the floor to engage the "Gypsy band" without a male partner transgresses the gender-appropriate role for the female peasant, and to do this she must perform a Gypsy dance.

The "Mask of Gypsiness" in the Hungarian context

Part of the fun of the *csingerálás* relies on borrowing the sexualized exotic image of the Gypsy woman we are so familiar with from Hugo's *Esmeralda*, Goethe's *Mignon*, and *Merimée* and Bizet's *Carmen*, among many others. Images of brightly colored skirts and sashes and flashing dark eyes are part of the selling of this image. On the one hand, Roma are the most marginalized minority in Europe; even in North America, where Roma are an all but invisible minority who make up only a tiny fraction of the population, they fare quite poorly. In fact, in the 1989 General Social Survey, in which 1537 respondents in the U. S. were asked about the social standing of 58 ethnic groups, Gypsies were rated at the very bottom – more disliked even than a fictitious group, the "Wisians."³ On the other hand, the non-Romani majority is drawn to the "mythical attractions of the mysterious gypsies" (Brown 1985: 19). Again, even among North Americans who have probably never met a Rom, many want to be Gypsies – for instance, "the Gypsy" is a popular Halloween costume.

In Eastern and Central Europe, where Roma are the largest, poorest, most visible and most marginalized minority, the simultaneous repulsion and attraction many non-Roma feel for the "Gypsy" elements of their culture is all the more fraught. Social scientists and activists within the region and without (notably the European Union and the Soros Foundation) have pushed for the alleviation of discrimination in law enforcement, employment, and public services; the prosecution of perpetrators of racial violence; and the improvement of sometimes desperate living conditions. Meanwhile, the Roma continue to be essential to vernacular culture, especially music, as they have been for at least the last 150 years.

The tense intertwining of Rom and non-Rom elements in Hungarian music and dance bears further scrutiny. Here scholarship on racial appropriation in the United States can serve as a model, as the sometimes reverent, sometimes distasteful appropriation of the Rom by the non-Rom follows patterns very similar to those found in white Americans' appropriation of the African-American and the Native American. In his 1993 *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott finds minstrelsy qualities much more complex than the simple racist ridicule it might appear to be:

...it was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure. (6)

Roma and non-Roma have often noted the parallels between Roma and African-Americans as marginalized yet alluring people with fantastic musical gifts.⁴ More specifically, Hungarian *táncház* enthusiasts – like many other non-Roma over the past two centuries – exhibit a “fascination” for “Gypsies” and their cultural contributions, yet along with the “pleasure” they produce, there is certainly “anxiety,” if not absolute terror and panic. At the Székelyföld Folk Music and Dance Camp in Felsősfalva (Ocna de Sus), Romania, which I attended in 2003, the Romani musicians who were the star attraction were both honored as the “guardians” of instrumental music traditions [*hagyományörzők*] and policed carefully as potential agents of pollution, lest they introduce elements of newer popular styles (Hooker 2004). Meanwhile, admission charges and guarded gates prevented local non-musician Roma from taking part in dance events, and participants pointedly warned each other to keep an eye on their valuables.

Masquerading as the Other is also a major feature in Philip Deloria's 1998 *Playing Indian*, in which the author demonstrates how “a host of ... Indian performance options” (7) contributed to the formation of different kinds of American identity throughout history. Although these images morphed over time, Deloria writes,

... in the end, Grateful Dead Indians, Boston Tea Party Indians, and those who came between drank from the same well of meanings: Indianness offered a deep, authentic, aboriginal Americanness... To

play Indian has been to connect with a real Self, both collective and individual, and there was no better way to find such reassurance (183).

Interaction with the Rom also acts as a way to “connect with a real Self”; as Martin Block put it, the “Hungarian or Romanian ... needs Gypsy music to exteriorize the state of his soul.”⁵

The marginal figure of the Rom performer is one of a stream of performers through the ages who are celebrated for their skill in evoking emotion in their listeners and who also embody otherness in one way or another. Either they are members of some outside group (Rom and Jewish musicians in Eastern Europe and the Middle East and Muslims in Hindu regions of India, for example), or they mark their difference with special clothing, like the medieval minstrel in motley, or deviant behavior, like today's pop star (Van de Port 1999: 293). To invoke the soul-transforming power that is so often attributed to music and dance appears to require an extraordinary soul; respected members of the majority culture, it is said, simply don't have the mysterious but necessary quintessence “in their blood.”

For this and other reasons, beginning in the eighteenth century, Hungarians in cities, courts, and villages eventually delegated so much of the performance of their entertainment music to Romani musicians that it was difficult to imagine Hungarian music without the Gypsy musician, or to put a finer point on the matter, to imagine Hungarian music played by Hungarians. As an Austrian visitor recounted of Count Károlyi's household around 1900, “no one in the family ... played music. Why should they? ... that was what the Gypsies were for.”⁶ When the Hungarian National Folk Ensemble was formed in 1950 the orchestra was made up, not of Hungarian musicians, but of “town gypsy musicians,” in spite of what the Ensemble's chronicler describes as the urban musicians' “distorted,” “sentimental,” and “over-ornate manner of playing” (Gulyás 1974: 20) – all ways in which they had presumably polluted Hungarian traditions “almost past recognition by their oriental fantasy.” (Bartók 1911 (1976): 301)

The (predominantly male) scholars who watch over the *táncház* movement take a patriarchal approach to protecting the tradition, which we might cast in the feminine role, from the “danger” posed by urban fashions or by “Gypsies” “Oriental fantasy.” They thus assert

not only the “hegemony of European ideas about the Orient.” or in this case the Oriental within, but also “reiterate European superiority over the Orient.” The control scholars sometimes seek to exert over Romani musicians and their repertoire is rationalized by claims both of superior knowledge and superior claims on the repertoire. In the *táncház*, the primary motive is not to transport the soul but “to salvage for future generations the viable elements of *our* [emphasis added] disappearing – or worse yet, transmogrified – traditional cultures” (Halmos 2000: 29). That salvage effort is supported by vast collections and scientific analyses of “authentic” performances of village music.

Since Hungarian villagers, like those of most ethnicities in the region, have largely entrusted their instrumental music making in general and their dance music in particular to Rom (Gypsy) musicians for centuries, the chief value *táncház* discourse finds in rural Rom musicians is their role as sources of scientific data (traditional Hungarian repertoire and style), and as transmitters of that data to the musicians and scholars of the *táncház* movement. On recordings and in advertisements for performances in concert and *táncház*, scholars and organizers hail rural Rom musicians as “tradition bearers” [*hagyományörzők*] or “providers of data” [*adatközölők*]. Organizations affiliated with the *táncház* movement have brought many Rom village bands to Budapest to record and to play for dances; a smaller number have toured around the world, with the sponsorship of the Hungarian cultural establishment, as living exhibits of Hungarian folk traditions. Still, Hungarian music scholars since the mid-nineteenth century have denied the contribution of Rom musicians to Hungarian national music or kept it at arm’s length, and their scholarly heirs in Hungarian musicology and in the *táncház* movement have usually followed them. As groundbreaking ethnomusicologist Bálint Sárosi put it,

... the music played by Gypsies ... is only their music in the sense in which the Hungarian spoken by them is their language. ... Even if there had been anything authentically Gypsy in their music ... their success depended on strict conformity to the requirements of their Hungarian audience. (1997:133-134; see also Hooker 2005)

To a North American scholar this statement is troubling, and it becomes even stranger when we realize that Sárosi labeled his

fondly remembered experience playing viola for a soldiers’ leave-taking party in his home village as “becoming a Gypsy for one night” (Borgó 1996: 9). Through the scholarly debate on the ownership of Hungarian music, we see in action the “cross-racial desire” combined with “self-protective derision” that Lott described in minstrelsy. Against this background, in which the Romani role in the *táncház* scene is simultaneously rejected and embraced, women dancers’ use of the “mask of Gypsiness” is all the more provocative.

Through the Looking Glass: Felsősfalva 2003

Thus far I have focused primarily on the appropriation and manipulation of the images of Gypsiness by non-Roma. But in the words of Mattijs Van de Port, despite the knowledge that “the Gypsiness of Gypsy [performance] is a construct on the perceivers’ part,” it is also “elaborated and commodified by Gypsy” performers themselves (1999: 292). Deloria noted how Native Americans “participated in white people’s Indian play, assisting, conforming, co-opting, challenging and legitimating the performative traditions of aboriginal American identity” (1998: 8). Rom musicians also play an important role in legitimating the performative tradition of “village music” in the *táncház*. In the performance that I discuss now, a group of Rom musicians and dancers both conformed to and challenged expectations of “Gypsy performance.”

In a gala presentation for the “*táncház*” audience on the final evening of the camp in Felsősfalva, one of the bands that had played for dance classes during the camp – a mixed (Rom and non-Rom) band from the nearby village of Székelyszenterzsébet (Eliseni) – accompanied a group of young Rom dancers from that village in a performance of a song in Romani, followed by their version of the *csingerálás*. As for the groups from nearby Hungarian villages performing that night, they wore “traditional” costumes for their performance (see Figure 4).

But these costumes were not *too* traditional. Though the girls’ colorful skirts went almost to the floor, thus covering the lower part of the body properly, all but one of the girls had a bare midriff and one of the boys left his shirt dramatically unbuttoned. One gets a sense that these Rom teenagers, like their non-Rom counterparts in some *táncházes*, were themselves “performing Gypsiness,” adopting some of the erotic/exotic stereotypes for effect.

tells this story in the context of teasing out the relationship between the Hungarians and Hungary's German and Jewish minorities: immediately thereafter, his source quotes Count Károlyi as saying "As we keep the Gypsies to play music for us, since we are too lazy to do it ourselves, so we keep the Jews to do the work for us." [54]

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Photos

Figure 1. Men's dance from Szék. Hungarian Folkdance and Folk Music Symposium in Enon Valley, Pennsylvania, June 2000. Photograph by the author.

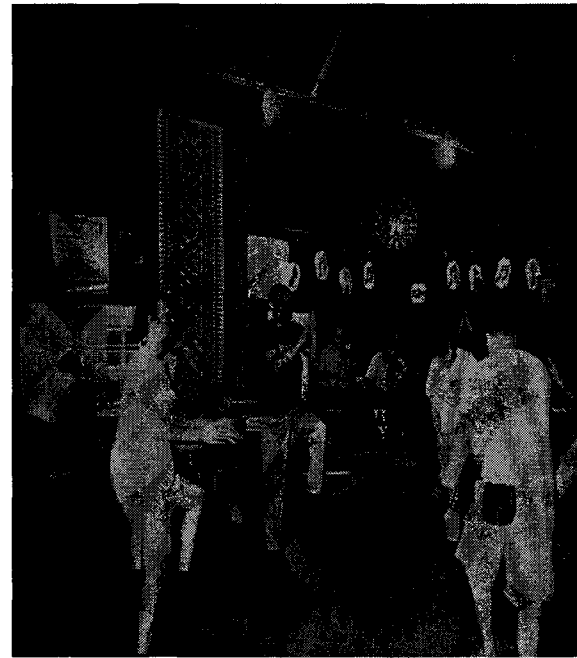


Figure 2. A male dancer performs high kicks while his partner stands to the side. North American Hungarian Festival, Montreal, 2003. Photograph by the author.

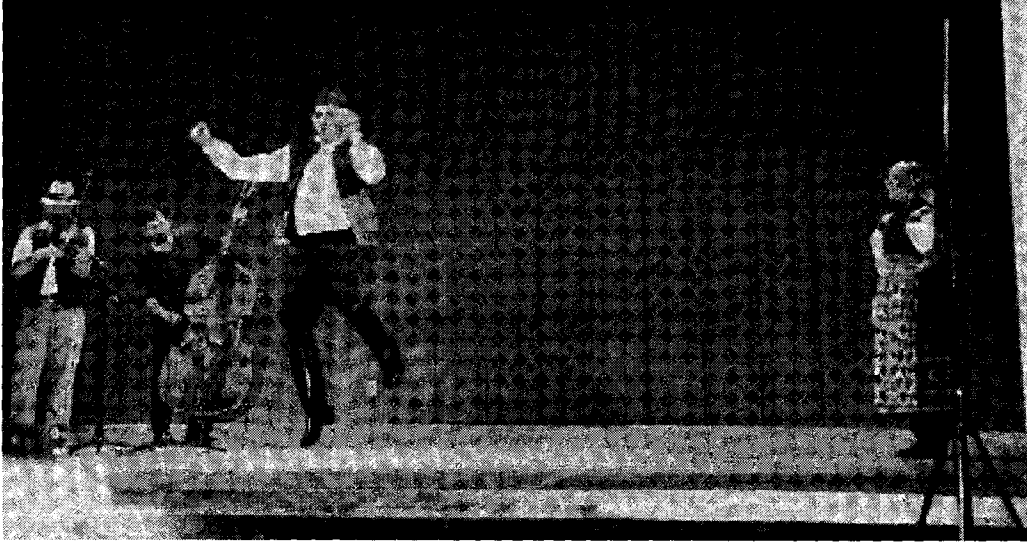


Figure 3. Non-Rom women doing the *csingerálás*. International *Táncház* and Musician Camp, Jászberény, Hungary, 2004. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4. Dance performance by group from village of Székelyszenterzsébet (Eliseni), accompanied by Géza Koré and His Band. Székelyföld Music and Dance Camp, Felsősfalva (Ocna de Sus), Romania, 2003. Photograph by the author.



Figure 5. Bandleader Géza Koré and wife dancing with dance group from Székelyszenterzsébet. Székelyföld Music and Dance Camp, Felsősfalva (Ocna de Sus), Romania, 2003. Photograph by the author.

