

Early Greek Dancers Worked Hollywood

By Steve Frangos

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That Americans know more about artists of Greek descent than the general Greek-American community is a commonplace that deserves close study. Why the Greek American community would so whole-heartedly support "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" and so generally ignore its dozens and dozens of professional and struggling artists is a critical research topic awaiting research.

This curious blindness Greeks possess about their artists sees no better example than the undeniable contribution of Greeks in the domain of American popular dance. Hermes Pan (Panayiotopoulos), arguably America's foremost choreographer during the Golden Age of Hollywood is a performer

without a widely known life story. Nonetheless, at the very least, many Greeks, seem to know Pan had a Greek born father. At the same time it is sad to report that just a handful know anything about the four Condos brothers while Athan Karras is the only person I have ever even heard of who not only knew Demetrius Vilan but was conversant about this man's extremely diverse career. That Karras is himself an internationally known dancer and actor hides more than it reveals about his friendship and respect for Vilan's complex body of work.

Each of these six dancers (as well as Athan Karras) deserves individual study all I can do here is offer a broad survey. That I can not add a women's name to this list is also revealing. I have always heard that a Greek-born woman was one

of the original dancers around Isadora Duncan and appeared in this fabled dancer/choreographer's very first productions of the "Greek Dance." That is all I know, fragments of rumors. All I can do here is offer what I know and trust that those who follow will add to our collective understanding of Greeks and the Arts.

Hermes Panagiotopoulos was born in Memphis and raised in Nashville, Tennessee. The exact date of Pan's birth varies from one source to another. Some cite June 10, 1905, others claim, 1909, 1911 and 1913. All accounts agree that young Hermes was the son of Spiros Panagiotopoulos a prosperous merchant and Greek council. Inexplicably his mother, whose ethnicity and last name are never dis-

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Greek Dancers Made Their Mark on F

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cussed, was named Maria. Pan loved dance and received formal and informal training along with his sister Vasso. The two young people formed a brother and sister dance team performing in exhibition ballroom dancing and on the vaudeville circuit. The duo made it to and in New York City as professional dancers. It is at this point in all Hermes Pan biographies that I have managed to locate that we lose sight of his sister Vasso.

Hermes Pan's wider career is, I believe, unfairly overshadowed by his work with Fred Astaire on nine dance films produced at RKO Radio

Pictures from 1933 to 1939. Pan received the 1937 Academy Award for his choreographic work on "Damsel in Distress" starring Fred Astaire and Joan Fontaine. All tolled Pan worked on some fifty Hollywood musicals. After the late 1930s, Hermes Pan went on to continued renown as a choreographer for Hollywood, Broadway and as time went on Los Vegas and numerous television specials. Such is Hermes Pan's enduring artistic legacy that other choreographers still gauge their work in terms of his accomplishments. I will let others write more on this venerable artist's life.

I do wish I knew more about

how Hermes Pan reckoned his own ethnicity. I did locate two news items that offer tantalizing suggestions. One is simple enough. Entitled simply: "Greek Service Men's Canteen" the short announcement reads: "The first canteen designed especially for American servicemen of Greek origin will be opened tonight at the Three Hierarchs Greek Orthodox Church, 1724 Avenue P, Brooklyn. Katina Paxinou, Hermes Pan, Perry Voutsos, Val Arms, Manolis Diamantis and Joan Dexter will provide entertainment (New York Times April 3, 1945)."

For those too young to know what a 'service man's canteen' was they can actually see some of them on DVD. As part of the total war effort of World War II Hollywood movie stars would go to military servicemen clubs around the nation and entertain the troops. So popular were these live shows that several canteen films were made in Hollywood (as feature films of such performance events) and then shipped overseas for our troops to watch. The Andrews Sisters are in at least one of these canteen films.

While 1945, on the surface, seems rather late in the war it is today recognized as a low-point economically and psychologically for the nation. It also illustrates which performers had no difficulty announcing they were Greek.

In another earlier account we can hear something of Pan's upbringing and presumably self-understanding. For the time period and the Classical-to-Modern connections Greek-Americans of this era always invoked. It even sounds like one of the speeches a Greek consular typically makes.

"Military strategists probably have sounder and more imposing technical explanations to offer regarding the Greek army's rout of Il Duce's legionnaires, but Dance Director Hermes Pan of Twentieth Century-Fox credits the success of his warring compatriots to their devotion to Terpsichore. "The Italians haven't a chance; nobody has a chance against a Greek soldier except maybe another ballet dancer," Mr. Pan declared in all seriousness to a United Press reporter in Hollywood the other day.

By way of explanation Mr. Pan, whose father was a Greek consular officer in Nashville, Tenn., posited out that the dance became an art in ancient Greece, that every Greek soldier is expert in executing the twirls and pirouettes of the ballet and consequently "he can handle a bayonet like no other soldier in the world. He leaps from crag to crag with all the surefootedness of a goat and, thanks to his training in the dance; he never makes a lost

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motion." On the face of things it would seem there's more logic than meets the eye in that last phrase, at any rate (New York Times December 15, 1940)."

That Hermes Pan was not the only self-identifying Greek performer or choreographer on Broadway or in Hollywood is never considered.

Demetrius Vilan's career definitely indicates how wrong-headed such notions are in terms of dance. Demetrius Vilan was born in Smyrna on November 1, 1909. The circumstances of Vilan's early life and the personal factors leading to his immigration to North America are for the moment not publicly known. That Vilan may have known and worked with Jean Varda (1893-1971), who began his career as a dancer in Smyrna and later France, is an intriguing thought for diaspora studies that can only be mentioned in passing.

Vilan's career in New York City

encompassed various artistic roles. Over time Vilan became a Broadway performer, director, producer, choreographer, and even dialogue coach/director making his name on Broadway and at the Radio City Music Hall. That Vilan moved back and forth between roles; first a director and then a performer or from a Broadway musical to a Hollywood film and back again illustrates not only this artist's devotion to a work-ethnic few today adhere to---it also makes it hard to chronologically chart his career. As far as I can determine Vilan was an active performer whose professional career began in 1928 and ended in 1958. I make no claim for all inclusiveness here, only an honest effort to offer a representative survey of this one man's documented career.

First and foremost Vilan was a dancer who aside from various styles and forms of dance was very well versed in Modern Dancer as it was understood at that time. Vi-

lan's first documented performance was in the short lived 1928, Broadway production of 'Ballet Moderne.'

On March 17 and 24 1929, Vilan gave two dance recitals at the Guild Theatre in New York City, entitled "The Sixth Sense." John Vassos (1898-1958) the noted Greek immigrant artist and designer created all the sets and costumes. Various New York critics hated the show and let everyone know it. But good reviews as well as bad reviews were part of Vilan's nearly 40 year career. Certainly an early triumphant was in Prokofieff's ballet arrangement "The Prodigal Son" at New York City Dance Centre. We hear theater critic John Martin report that: "Demetrius Vilan gives a first-rate performance in the title role. He is not only romantic in appearance but resents the character in a thoroughly winning and sympathetic way (New York Times March 12, 1932)." By all accounts Vilan always pushed himself into new ever more challenging artistic performances.

Two other notable Broadway musical comedies in which Vilan performed are 'Gala Night' (1930) and "Saluta" (1934). The 1937 production of 'On Your Toes' was a musical comedy in two acts and thirteen scenes. Vilan danced as the Beggar in all 315 performances of this comedy. George Balanchine was this production's choreographer whose star was on the rise. We can judge this in part by the fact that at "Balanchine's insistence, 'On Your Toes' was the first Broadway musical to credit staged dances as choreography (a practice common in Europe), and is considered the first musical in which dances were integrated into the plot, performed by dancers who were also dramatic characters. In choreographing for Broadway musicals, Balanchine often used ballet, tap, and ballroom steps, in combination and separately (<http://balanchine.org>)." Vilan was singled out for his never failing dash and energy.

So little is left to us on Vilan's private life I can only report he was first divorced in May 1941. During that same period Vilan was romantically linked to actress Tallulah Bankhead, by no less a figure than Hedda Hopper the original Hollywood Gossip columnist. As far as I can determine Demetrius Vilan's last Broadway production was the short-lived 'Jane Eyre' (May 1, 1958-June 14, 1958). Demetrius Vilan died in Beverly Hills, California on September 29 2000. I wish I knew more of this dedicated dancer's life. Demetrius Vilan's contributions to American Dance have yet to be fully reckoned with.