

Bringing the Castle to Life: Dance at the Bauska Castle, Latvia*

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What does becoming a historical dance master and teacher entail in the 21st century? Where to begin, and how historically accurate can reconstructed dance be?

I have been working at the Bauska Castle Museum (in Latvia) as a museum educator since 2006. Both the research work of the museum specialists and the educational programmes offered for visitors to the castle centre around the time when the castle was actively used, from its construction in the mid-15th century until the time it was destroyed and abandoned at the beginning of the 18th century. As I started working at the museum, I also started researching and reconstructing historical dances. The process began in 2006 with research of the available materials, acquisition of related literature and learning the practical skills. In 2007 the historical dance group “Galms” (The Court) was established in the Bauska Castle, with support of the museum and me as its artistic leader. The repertoire of the group consists of court dances and dances of the common people that originate in the 15th-17th-century period. A non-governmental institution “Galms” was founded in 2009 to prepare projects for the attraction of extra funding, in order to create period costumes, footwear and props, such as lanterns, from various organisations and the local municipality.

Working with people of various ages, one must have good knowledge not only of the dances of a certain period, but also of the historical and cultural context of that period. Before the practical training starts, it is essential to do one’s research. It is important to understand what I wish to give others and the goals I want to reach, and they are as follows:

1. To bring life to the castle and the historical period by connecting the dance, costumes and properties with the castle, its milieu and exhibitions.
2. To excite the curiosity of the public and to educate them through adventure and practical activity.
3. To create a visitor friendly museum, open to local residents.
4. To shape a sense of belonging to a particular place in the local residents.

The Bauska Castle historical dance group “Galms” has both employees of the castle museum and residents of the Bauska region with no previous experience in dancing as its dancers. Motivating people to partake in historical dancing is a great challenge, which includes breaking erroneous ideas about the nature of period dance and the meaning and look of the costumes. It takes courage to start something completely new and very important for the whole country. There are several aspects behind the successful activity of the group:

1. The possibility of working in a real historical environment; belonging to a place – the castle, an object of heritage value with its own history, and creating a symbiosis of the performance and the environment. Regular lessons and taking part at the themed events and concerts organised at the castle.

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2. A chance to perfect oneself making use of the knowledge of specialists, literature, quality recordings etc. Involving specialists of various areas, such as directors, make-up artists, etc., as well as the advice and vision provided by specialists help make the dance more understandable and attractive for modern audiences. The dance steps and their complexity is not the only challenge a dancer faces: using various props adds to the experience of the dancers, and enriches the audience's understanding of the diversity of the dance (ceremonial, masquerade dances, etc.).
3. The professionalism and visual appearance of the dance teacher evoke the trust of the dance group. Thanks to perfecting myself in various workshops led by knowledgeable teachers and researchers, I can clearly justify the criteria the repertoire is chosen by (choice of dances, interpretation of steps, choreography). The specialists of the Bauska Castle Museum take part in choosing the cut and materials for the costumes, thus shaping the visual appearance of the group within the confines of the particular period. The prototypes of the chosen people, as well as their costumes, are connected with the Kettler dynasty of dukes of the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia.
4. Participation in the lessons is free of charge. The participants pay nothing for the lessons; however, they invest their money in the reconstruction of costumes, which motivates them to be long-term members of the group.

Problems in regard to reconstructing dances with my group

Creating court dance choreographies for my group, I do, of course, take into account important factors, such as:

Authenticity. Doing the reconstructions, I am bound to follow the descriptions and musical sources of the dance masters (*Fabritio Caroso, Cesare Negri, Stefano, etc.*), but, as soon as I stray from original, it asks for a justification and a commentary. The history of Latvia is rather complicated (the dominating role of the German culture in the 15th-18th century, many wars, changes of governing powers, lots of heritage lost, etc.), which accounts for the fact that we have so little information about dancing in the territory of Latvia in the 15th-17th century. Researches and translations of documents regarding the courts of the relatives of the Kettler dynasty, and culture within those courts in the territory of Latvia provide us only with a few phrases and programs of celebrations that mention types of dances with little explanation (a mass dance in a circle or in a line) and the properties used. I venture in trying to use these findings in our dance group, combining them with whatever choreography material is available for the period and what little we know about the nuances of dance in the territory of Latvia. Some of the researches mention members of the family or court of the Courland dukes going on study trips to the other courts of Europe, including courts in Italy, Germany. A French dance master by the name of Duval¹ worked in the court of the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia under the rule of Jacob Kettler (b.1610 – d. 1682). James I was Jacob's godfather.

No less important are the *reconstructions of historical costume*. When reconstructing the costumes, every detail of the costume (chemises, farthingales, corsets, jewellery) is made with great care. The particularities of the costume are taken into account when choosing the dances, as the costumes affect the dancers during performance. Sometimes the costume lets you guess the right way of doing something, for example, by demanding a certain distance and space among dancers.

The repertoire. When creating programmes for concerts, lessons or other events, the first thing to take into account is the potential public. Technically demanding dances are a challenge for the dancers, but they are not always interesting for the viewer, thus I need to

find the right balance between dances of various degrees of difficulty, and write a commentary to explain every separate dance.

The use of props during dancing. Both European and Latvian sources mention dances, the performers of which have made use of torches, lanterns, masks, cups of beer, etc. Also the props need to be made or found as similar to those used in the historical period as possible.

Skills and particularities. The movements and character of every member create the general look of the group and make the performances individual. Every dancer has their own peculiarity, which makes them interesting for the public. Just like in court, everyone preserves their individuality within the frame of established rules of behaviour.

The *musical accompaniment* to dancing. Being accompanied by live music is a rare privilege, and the Bauska dance group “*Galms*” most often makes do with music recorded using authentic instruments. I make an extra effort finding music performed using authentic instruments only, to create a more accurate impression.

Conclusion

At this moment in time I am at the very beginning of my journey. Bit by bit I am trying to reach the following degrees of development, using original studies and my experience in workshops and summer schools as my ladder.

References

1. J.Juškevičs // Hercoga Jēkaba laikmets Kurzemē// Valstspapīru spiestuves izdevums, Rīga, 1931.gads, 83.lpp