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Orpheus Trip to Greece a Great Success

By Effie Tsaltas

By now the luggage has been unpacked, jetlag is a distant memory, suntans have faded, and life, for the most part, has regained its sense of normalcy. A challenging and exhilarating trip that had been in the works for several months came and went all too quickly in one whirl-wind, fun-filled week.

This summer, the Orpheus Hellenic Folklore Society made its third trip to Greece since its inception in 1989. Approximately two hundred Orpheus members and their families visited the Peloponnese, specifically the city of Kalamata. Highlights included three suc-

cessful dance and choral performances, meetings and workshops with local officials and dance groups, as well as several excursions around the Kalamata vicinity. "Going to Greece with the Orpheus dance group has always been one of our goals. We had been waiting long enough," commented Kostas Economou. "What better way to celebrate our heritage than to visit Greece? Having the chance to present dances, songs and music in the place where we get all of our inspiration and material from was indeed a great motivator!"

Accompanying the Orpheus dance troupe were members of the Chicago Hellenic Choir, directed by Eftihia Papageorgiou.
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The last performance took place at Kastro Amphitheatre in Kalamata. At the conclusion of the presentation a Kalamatiato dance was performed by all participants. In attendance were the Mayor of Kalamata Mr. Panayiotis Nikas, Mr. Christos Tomaras and members of the Lyceum of Ellinidon of Kalamata.

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Orpheus has been working with Eftihia, practicing and presenting a variety of traditional and modern Greek songs, adding another dimension to the dance troupe. Selections included "Gerakina", "Thalassaki Mou" and "Tora Pou Pas Stin Ksenitia" performed to live music, courtesy of Eftihia and the Orpheus music ensemble. "Having worked with the Orpheus choral group for over two years, I knew that that the trip would be an amazing experience and a huge success," said Eftihia. "Orpheus has been one of the most organized, committed, and hard-working organizations with which I have ever been involved. I knew that the organizers would meet everyone's expectations and would rise way above them. And they did."

Extensive media coverage featured the troupe in local newspapers (*Eleftheria*, *Simaia*, *Foni*, *Epikairoitita*), radio (ERA Kalamata), and television channels (NET Messinias, Star TV). Orpheus President, Yannis Economou, and Youth Group Coordinator, Bessie Grosso, were invited to City Hall to meet with the Mayor of Kalamata, Mr. Panayiotis Nikas, and Deputy Mayor, Mr. Theofanis Kleidonas. Also present was ex-Vice President of S.A.E of North and South America, Mr. Christos Tomaras. Mayor Nikas was pleased that Orpheus chose Kalamata as its destination this year, and congratulated the troupe on its efforts in preserving Greek culture and traditions in the United States.

The troupe's first performance was in the town of Finikounda. On their way to the beachside venue, the performers marched through the streets singing a traditional Greek song, "Eis Ton Afro Tis Thalassas" as onlookers clapped, cheered and sang along. Yannis Economou recounts, "I vividly remember a couple of elderly women, overlooking the scene from their balcony, clapping and asking, 'Where did you come from?' The response, 'We are from Chicago, from America,' left them astonished because they could not believe how



One of the most memorable moments of the trip was walking down the streets of the sea-port village of Finikounda while singing Greek folk songs. People came out of houses, restaurants, and shops to join the Orpheus members on their way to the beachside theatre.

a group of 'Greeks' from so far away could offer such a spectacle!" He continues, "The locals could not even recall the last time their village, which has now become a popular tourist destination, experienced such a scene. It felt as if our presence restored their sense of pride, tradition, and past history." Dignitaries who were present also marveled at the troupe's performance. Mr. Michelis, Mayor of Methoni, and Deputy Mayor, Mr. Kourvelas, were in attendance. The crowd enjoyed the lively, animated performance, while Mayor Michelis congratulated the troupe on their efforts in preserving Greek culture and traditions abroad.

The second performance was given in Ancient Messini, in the town of Mavromati. Besides the energetic singing and dancing, members of the troupe gave insightful and moving speeches about what this experience meant to them. Many of the dancers, particularly the younger ones, commented that this trip was exceptionally meaningful to them. Not only were they first-time visitors to a country with such a remarkable history, magnificent scenery and centuries old traditions and culture, but

more importantly, it was an opportunity to proudly give a dynamic, traditional performance in the birthplace of their grandparents and parents. "My grandfather's relatives live in a village on the other side of that mountain, and they came to see us sing and dance," remarked Youth Group member, Andrea Nicholson. "I was very proud to perform for them and for everyone else that night because I was chosen to lead one of the dances. The dance I led was very fast moving and I felt like I was flying as I led it." Similarly, dancer Alexander Benziger commented, "Showing pride in my ethnic background by dancing in front of those who live that life everyday was an amazing experience. I was able to experience a rush I have never felt dancing for a crowd before. The audience was true Greeks, born and raised there, and having them watch us, and feeling their pride that the Greek heritage is carried on so strongly in Chicago, felt awesome." Eftihia Papageorgiou added that as she watched the younger members perform, she understood the depth and magnitude of their experience. "They were experienc-

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ing Greece as deeply as they could possibly experience it, through all of their senses, both literally and metaphorically. They were able to see all the places they had heard about, especially those children who had never been there before. They heard their own Greek singing voices and dance steps echo against ancient Greek ruins." Furthermore, Mr. Demetrios Kouvelakis, President of the Cultural Association "I Arxaia Messini", expressed similar sentiments as Mayor Michelis, and thanked Orpheus for participating in "Ithomaia 2007," their annual festival.

The last, and perhaps most remarkable, performance took place in Kalamata, at the famous Kastro Amphitheater. "The final performance at the Kalamata Kastro made a lasting impression on Hellenes from both sides of the Atlantic. First, the final Orpheus performance brought home to Ellada, and Kalamata in particular, that Hellenic culture is alive and well 10,000 kilometers away in Chicago," commented Nick Nicholson. At the conclusion of the performance, the troupe received a standing ovation from the audience, who was impressed with the professional, enthusiastic and moving production. Yannis Economou observed, "The performances impressed the spectators beyond any expectations, particularly the personal reflections read during the presentations that brought many to tears." After the performance, the Mayor's office hosted a generous reception for Orpheus, their families and friends.

The enthusiasm, anticipation and energy in the air prior to and during the performances was undeniably intense. Both the performers and their families felt the overwhelming rush of pride and exhilaration each time the show was about to begin. "I felt the nervous, excited sort of feeling one gets when they are about to perform", said Andrea Nicholson. "I felt fortunate that I was selected to sing a solo that night, especially since it was one of

my favorite songs. I thought it was fun because my friends and I were doing what we loved to do in front of at least a hundred people that truly seemed to enjoy what they were seeing." Andrea's father, Nick, echoed her sentiments, describing the performance in Finikounda as "...more magical than a Walt Disney World night". He continued, "During the entire second performance, the Mavromati winds felt like the dancing spirits of our departed ancestors, who decided to gleefully join in the Orpheus festivities". Despite the heat, rigorous schedule and physical demands, Orpheus members, particularly the younger ones, proved to be troopers, as their dedication and love of Greek folk dance and songs motivated them to do their very best. Yannis Economou noted, "The dearest memory of all was the kids themselves. They gave their hearts out, despite the extreme warm weather, the early set-ups, rehearsals and workshops. They are truly the inspiration for whatever we do. Their proud and glowing faces will be a guiding force behind our mission".

Members of the Kalamata branch of the Lykeion Dance Group met with Orpheus for several workshop sessions. "Our collaboration with the Lykeio Chapter in Kalamata and their dance instructors during the dance workshops, dinners, and casual

dancing felt like being with long lost friends who shared the same passion for Hellenic culture. It was a warm partnership where both benefited in meaningful ways", said Yannis Economou. In addition to demonstrating variations on the traditional Peloponnese dances, Kalamatianos and Tsamikos, Director Tasos Mihos also taught the troupe some local songs to accompany the dances. Likewise, Agis Tsakalagos introduced versions of the popular Tsamikos dance, along with Sygathistos from Thrace. Representing material from Kalimnos, Anna Mavrou expertly exhibited traditional dances from this island. Along with Nikos Petroulias, Ms. Mavrou also conducted youth group dance sessions. The Lykeio instructors commented on Orpheus' strong and extensive dance skills, and how organized and disciplined the group was, especially with so many younger members. "They were impressed with the organization of our group as well as our use of that little device called iPod that helps us access our dance music files so effectively", Yanni notes. "From our end, we cannot forget how willing they were to offer their own personal time to share their knowledge even though they were in the midst of practicing every night for a major performance of their own that took place a few days after ours at the same venue!"

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Several dance workshops were given by Lyceum of Ellinidon of Kalamata dance instructors. Orpheus youth members pictured with Lyceum of Ellinidon instructors Anna Mavrou and Nikos Petroulias.

Orpheus Takes Part in the Annual McDonald's Thanksgiving Day Parade

It seems that 2007 will be remembered not only as the year that we visited Greece, but also as the 'year of the parades'. After participating in the Columbus Day Parade a month earlier, the Orpheus dance group was invited to participate in Chicago's annual McDonald's Thanksgiving Day Parade, along historic State Street.

It was a great opportunity to showcase and represent the Greek-American community in such a celebrated event.

Created in December 1934, by the State Street Council, as a cheery response to the hard Depression years, Chicago's Thanksgiving Day Parade continues to be a welcoming start to the holidays for Chicagoans and visitors from around the world.

November was a hectic month since over ninety costumes needed to be packed and distributed. Numerous other details needed to be taken care of, including the daunting task of coping with the cold and snow that was expected on Thanksgiving Day. But everybody was up to the task, and a



Orpheus made its present felt as the energy level and spirit were really high before, during and after the conclusion of the Thanksgiving parade.

strong contingency of youth and adult members, along with the support of many parents, made its presence strong. They filled the parade route with Greek spirit and energy, proudly waving Greek and American flags.

Tens of thousands of spectators lined the parade route, from Congress Parkway to Randolph Street, to cheer over 100 parade units that included an impressive contingent of gigantic balloons, high-stepping marching bands, majestic equestrian troupes, fabulous holiday floats, spectacular performance groups, national celebrities and local personalities.

Chicago's Superstation, WGN, televised the parade nationally to millions of home viewers. It is one of only three parades in the country that are covered live, in their entirety, on a national television broadcast. And it proved to be true as relatives and friends from Florida to California were able to recognize many familiar faces.

It was a great experience for everyone that had the chance to participate, and we hope to have the chance to do this again in the future. ☐

spotlight

on Orpheus
Youth
dancers...

Andriana,
Angelica,
Pinelopi



Hometown:

Northern Chicago Suburbs

Parents/Family From:

Our parents were born in Chicago, Grandparents from Corinth and Kalamata

Time Dancing with Orpheus:

3 years

Thoughts on Dancing:

It's fun and great way to meet new friends and learn about Greece

Favorite Dance:

Issios

Most Vivid OHFS Memory:

Dancing at the Kastro in Kalamata Greece

Dance Workshop with Andonis Platis

The Orpheus Hellenic Folklore Society had the pleasure of welcoming dance instructor Andonis Platis to Chicago. Andonis has been teaching Greek folk dances in his parish community of St. Demetrios Church in Tucson, Arizona. He has participated in numerous FDF (Folk Dance Festival) competitions in the West coast and has been a regular participant in the dance conference scene in the US and Greece.

Andonis was invited by OHFS as a guest instructor in order to share some of his knowledge with his Orpheus counterparts. He has conducted his own dance research in various regions in Greece, and he was awarded a dance research scholarship by FDF in Greece.

He has visited the island of Mykonos several times as part of his research, so naturally, he was asked to showcase material from that island as well as other areas.

Even though Mykonos is known as one of the most popular tourist destinations in Greece, it has an impressive depth in folk traditions via its dances, music and songs. The *tsabouna* (island bagpipe) and

the *toumpaki* (percussion instrument) are the predominant instruments that produce a unique sound. Andonis shared part of his videos where locals are shown dancing, playing music, singing and just explaining their own experiences on the island. Andonis also brought a sample of a male and female costume from the island, and explained the different pieces as Orpheus members tried them on.

The workshop sessions were both informative and entertaining and a lot of knowledge was exchanged. The Orpheus Hellenic Folklore Society is continuously looking to expand its repertoire, and Andonis provided in-depth insight to a lot of new material. We can not thank him enough for his time and dedication in providing our instructors the fruits of his research.

Next, is the Winter Dance Conference 2008 in Tarpon Springs, which promises to be another memorable educational and social experience. ☐



Andonis Platis (left) showing dances from the island of Mykonos to members of the Orpheus dance group .

Favorite Greek Dish:

Pastichio

Favorite Place in Greece:

Kalamata

Hobbies/Sports/Other Interests:

Ballet/Jazz/Tap dance, basketball, softball, soccer, music

Nobody knows we:

Went to Graceland for spring break

Best childhood memory:

When we got our dog

The perfect weekend:

On the beach in Marco Island Florida

Someone we'd like to meet:

Walt Disney

Favorite spot in Chicago:

Buckingham Fountain

We're currently looking forward to:

Going to Greece again.

We stay home to watch:

Spongebob

Prized possession:

Our dog, Ethan

Where I heard about Orpheus Dance Troupe:

Our brothers, John and Costa ☐

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In addition to swimming in the warm waters of the stunning beaches of Stoupa and Finikounda, Orpheus members had the opportunity to visit various archeological and natural wonder sites around the Kalamata area. The itinerary included excursions to Ancient Olympia, Methoni, Diros Caves and Ancient Messini. Needless to say, all the sites commanded attention because of their unique, fascinating, overwhelming attributes and historical significance, but some sites made a greater impact than others. "The time I felt the most overwhelmed with history had to have been when we visited Ancient Olympia", recalled Alexander Benziger. "What really brought the significance of the site down on me was a shield that was in the museum. It had an engraving on it, and as I looked at it, I was struck dumb by the thought that thousands of years ago someone had actually made that shield, hand carved it, and it has survived thousands of years." Along the same lines, Eftihia Papageorgiou observed, "The trip to Kalamata served as the ultimate Greek experience. It was a cultural lesson, a history lesson, a geography lesson, a language lesson, and more.

And all of those lessons were 'hands-on', 'ears-on', 'eyes-on', and 'hearts-on'. It doesn't get any more real than that."

All of the participants undoubtedly had certain expectations as they embarked on this trip. Were their expectations met? Was this experience, specifically the performances, as moving, impressive, and impactful as originally thought? Saying that the trip greatly surpassed everyone's expectations might be somewhat of an understatement. "Performing in Greece was the 'King Size Candy Bar' of Halloween", according to Alexander Benziger. "Being able to perform in Greece was nothing like performing in the USA. Performing in a completely new environment in front of people who have grown up in the culture I have only tasted gave a new confidence and 'oomph' to my dancing experience". Nick Nicholson adds, "There was a homecoming spirit that you don't get with a U.S. performance. This spirit was manifested through the celebration of the Greek traditions with my children's performance in front of the descendants of their great grandparents' siblings, cousins, friends and neighbors". One of the underlying objectives of this trip was to prove to the

Greeks in the motherland that the Hellenic spirit and pride is most definitely alive and well in Chicago. The Orpheus Hellenic Folklore Society certainly succeeded in demonstrating this. "The experience impacted all of us deeply, and at the same time we impacted those around us. We were able to demonstrate with pride that we do all we can to keep the Greek spirit alive and pass it on to our children", said Eftihia Papageorgiou.

Indeed, a plethora of vivid, everlasting memories were created on this trip that will live on for a lifetime. "Who can forget the chills that everyone felt during our descent towards the beach of Finikounda in full costume, singing, lead by the young musicians?" Yannis Economou recalled. New friendships were forged, while existing bonds of friendship and camaraderie were strengthened. Yanni continues, "Getting to know the Orpheus members and their families was a precious experience. Adults and children enjoyed each other's company and we felt a special bond knowing we were representing not only ourselves, but our fellow Greek-Americans back in the U.S. as well as our past ancestors that lived in Greece." Alexander Benziger recalled, "While the performances were a real treat on the trip, and a huge highlight, there were other things that blaze like a beacon in my memory. I would go back in a heartbeat if I could. Meeting all of my family for the first time was amazing. The beautiful ocean, the quaint village, and the gorgeous countryside are emblazoned into my memory. I can shut my eyes and picture the village just as it was when I left". Likewise, Kostas Economou observed, "It was a trip of a lifetime. We could not have asked for anything more. Seeing the joy and pride in the faces of not only the performers but their family members and friends is a special experience. It feels like we have come full circle and that a new circle begins with a new sense of excitement and determination". ☐



Among the numerous sights that were visited during the trip was a trip to Ancient Olympia. Members had a chance to do a mock run at Olympia's ancient stadium. During the 2004 Athens Olympic games, the men's and women's shot put took place at the ancient stadium.



Members of the Orpheus youth group singing New Year's carols during the annual Christmas Around the World festival that took place at the Museum and Science and Industry in Chicago.



Orpheus President Yannis Economou and Youth Group Coordinator Bessie Grosso were invited to City Hall to meet with the Mayor of Kalamata, Mr. Panayiotis Nikas (center) and Deputy Mayor Mpsanidis (left). Also present was former Vice President of S.A.E of North and South America, Mr. Christos Tomaras (right).



There was time to relax and have fun at the beaches of Finikounda and Stoupa.



Lyceum of Ellinidon of Kalamata instructor Agis Tsakalatos (bottom) with Peter during a demonstration of Tsamiko variations. Agis also demonstrated dances from the region of Thrace.



Orpheus members and the director of the Lyceum of Ellinidon of Kalamata, Tasos Mihos. Mr. Mihos instructed variations of the traditional Peloponnese dances, Kalamatianos and Tsamikos.

performance schedule

Winter Dance Conference

Thursday-Sunday, January 3-6
Tarpon Springs, Florida

Vasilopita Celebration

Saturday, January 26
St. John The Baptist Church
2350 E Dempster St
Des Plaines, IL
6:00 p.m.

Greek American Parade

Saturday, March 29
Greek Town - Halsted Street
3:00 p.m.

Skokie Festival of Cultures

Saturday, May 17
Oakton Park
4701 West Oakton St.
Skokie, IL
4:30 p.m.

Chicago Hellenic Choir Concert

Saturday, May 17
Northside College Preparatory High School
5501 N. Kedzie Ave.
Chicago, IL
7:30 p.m.

End of the Year Youth Event

Sunday, May 18
St. John The Baptist Church
2350 E Dempster St
Des Plaines, IL
3:00 p.m.

Performance schedule and times are subject to change. For the latest information visit <http://www.ohfs.org>.

practice schedule

Orpheus Adult Group

Beginner/Intermediate:

6:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.

Intermediate/Advanced:

7:30 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Every Thursday at:

St. John Lutheran Church
3020 Milwaukee Ave.
Northbrook, IL
(one mile north from the
intersection of Lake/Euclid
and Milwaukee Ave.)

Orpheus Youth Group: (September through May)

Every Thursday at:

Session I: 5:30 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.
Session II: 6:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.
St. John Lutheran Church
3020 Milwaukee Ave.
Northbrook, IL

Every Saturday at:

2:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.
New Church
Multipurpose Room
74 Park Dr., Glenview, IL
(one block west of Shermer/Glenview Rds)

Youth Group: Members ages 10-14 (Northbrook and Glenview locations).

Beginners: Members with little or no previous dance experience.

Intermediate: Dancers who have shown progress in the beginners' class attend the last hour of practice. At the discretion of the instructors, the intermediate level dancers will be practicing in a separate line.

All dancers, especially beginners, are encouraged to obtain a personal CD of the music used for performances, in order to practice on one's own and become accustomed to the music. Please provide Yannis or Kostas Economou with a blank CD.

Submissions for the Spring issue of *Lyra* will be accepted until March 15, 2008. We are always interested in educational essays/articles dealing with the subjects of Greek folk dance, folk music, and folk traditions. We continue to accept personal announcements and all other submissions pertinent to the dance troupe and its membership. If an individual wishes to contribute material on a continuous basis, please inform the Editor.