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Belgrade Breakdance Girl: Breaking Gender-Specific Stereotypes with Dance

This paper is based on the life story of one of Belgrade break dance dancers who started dancing and competing in early youth, but later she ceased to dance. I was interested in motives which influenced that young person to begin to deal with the break dance, what she expressed by that, what the reaction was of social environment to the dance and what factors influenced her to stop dealing with this dance.

Key words:
gender-specific stereotypes, dance, break-dance girl, Belgrade

This paper is a part of a wider anthropological research of modern hip hop culture in Serbia.¹ The article is based on my own field research during February and March 2009 in Belgrade. After meeting with the current Serbian scientific bibliography I found out that there was a lack of anthropological studies of contemporary dance forms. I felt the need to make empirical researches and look into the situation from the *inside*. I interviewed hip hop dancers, dance instructors and judges. I came to the data that the dominant position of the breakdance is that it is a primarily male game, which expresses manhood. However, ever since this dance appeared in Belgrade there were girls that dealt with it, and deal with it today. The aim of this research is to examine which factors influence a girl to start dancing, so to say, a *male game*. The question is how men view the appearance of such girls in *their* world, what are the reactions and acceptance in a wider community.

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Hip hop culture originates from the United States. Breakdance (also known as breaking, b-girling or b-boying) is a street dance style that evolved as part of the hip hop movement that originated among African American and Latino youths in the South Bronx of New York City (USA) during the early 1970s.² It is arguably the best known of all hip hop dance styles. The term break-dancing is associated to the breaks in music and the movements that can be performed in these breaks. When this occurred, dancers would fill the break with corresponding moves. Break dancing soon moved from the clubs to the street, where rival gangs in the South Bronx would, in theory, replace actual fighting and turf disputes with a break dancing battle. The theory was sound, often with the best dancer being the best fighter due to large quantities of strength needed for both activities.³ The godfather of break dancing was the soul superstar James Brown. In 1969, he was getting down with his big hit "Get on the Good Foot". He accompanied it with the acrobatic, high energy moves that later inspired many a funky break party. The "good foot" became the new dance style and soon was renamed the "B-Boy". Dance battles were already established when the B-Boy became popular but its high energy and almost acrobatic nature was ideal for the competitive and heated nature of battling. Afrika Bambaataa is the legendary grand master DJ whom history has marked as the man most responsible for the successful growth of break dancing. The actual break dancing has evolved considerably from the old-style due to the addition of new ideas and techniques. It involves moving the feet sideways and onto the toes, spinning on the knees, head, elbows, hands, and mocking fighting moves (i.e. kung fu). There are hundreds of moves but 10 of the more frequently used are listed below: 1. Headspin 2. 180's 3. Handglides 4. Backwalkovers 5. Flare 6. Crab 7. Six step 8. Windmills 9. Backspins 10. Freeze.⁴

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Former Belgrade breakdance girl, Marija Sindjelic was born in 1986 in Belgrade. She lives in a part of the city which is called Visnjicka banja. She started dealing with the break dance at the age of fourteen, at the end of the eighth grade of elementary school. This happened because her brother's friend started dancing break dance. She saw how guys were dancing and liked that *different kind* of steps.

She says for herself that she is interested in everything that is unusual and that she is a rebel. She is attracted to extreme sports, although she has never tried to do one. On the classes of physical education in school she always liked rings, dangerous exercises. She expresses herself by anything that contains dangerous acro-

² Paul Du Noyer (ed.), *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Music*, Flame Tree Publishing 2003, 334.

³ <http://www.ultrakick.net/id10.html>

⁴ <http://www.ukhh.com/elements/breaking/intro.html>

batics. In things that act as impossible for a woman she enjoys to show the opposite. People do not see her like that, nor does she. Marija has a tiny constitution and she is very feminine.

Guys who danced with her formed the dance group called “Break zone group”. They were in high school then and they were between fifteen and seventeen years old. They learned brake dance by watching music videos, and then tried to imitate steps, i.e. to perform the same. Boys practiced in the school hall during breaks. They also had rehearsals outside the school. Quiet places with the floor where they were able to whirl were suitable for practicing. Among other things, economic factors influenced Marija to deal with the brake dance. Trainings for other types of dances included monthly membership fees. In the case of brake dance dancers practiced irrespective of a hall. “We were like tramps. Where we found the free place we whirled. For example, during one period we practiced on the terrace of a shopping centre because it was covered by very good ceramic tiles. The most important thing to them was the company. Except for the permanent members of the group, about ten of them, there were temporary ones that stayed for two to three months. Apart from the high school pupils children in primary schools also came.” Some were talented, “like they were made of rubber.”

When the group has just been established nobody was able to perform a trick with whirling on the head. When she was in the kindergarten Marija was taught by her father how to stand on her head. Therefore, she was one step ahead of the team: she was a girl and she could stand on her head. She only needed to learn how to whirl when she was standing on her head. Since they were self taught, without an instructor, they had to find out how to whirl on their heads. In the beginning they applied the wrong technique, so there were a lot of falls. Although she put pieces of sponge under her clothes to lessen the fall, she regularly got bruises.

Boys accepted her as a younger sister. Everybody took care of her. Whatever she did they were satisfied. Since she was a girl, even if she made a mistake in her acrobatics, the audience would be more satisfied then with the men who made perfect performances. For example, one summer the group had a performance in the Belgrade club “Barutana.” However, because some dancers were missing, choreography was quite empty. Marija was in the audience, she did not come with the intention to dance. Group members who were her friends literally pushed her to the podium. Although she hadn’t danced for a long time her performance woke up the audience and she got the biggest applause. She always gained the biggest applause because she was a female, and that was unusual. According to Marija brake dance is a difficult dance, “it is more like a rampage, buffoonery, tossing, which is more appropriate to male sex than women. There are a lot of tricks where physical strength is required, a lot of persistence. It is a hard work.”

In the rival group “Break dance squad”, there was also a girl by the name of Yuliana. They got along well, there was no conflict. The first break dance competition in which the “Break zone group” participated in and won was on 16th of February 2001.

To Marija's friends her dealing with break dance was interesting. They had a very positive attitude. They considered themselves untalented for this dance, but they respected her. However, she didn't spontaneously dance alone to the public, for example, in the school corridor, like boys were doing it. She felt that something like that would be inappropriate for a female, "at school I was a normal girl, I was not so extreme."

At home she demonstrated what she had learned to her parents. Her father was into physical activities recreationally. She forced him to try to perform acrobatics telling him: "See, I can do it! Can you?" However, her parents felt that her break dance time is reducing her time available for learning and therefore they rose their voice against it. They had trainings late in the evening when they were all free after their daily activities. They practiced until midnight. Her parents thought that their 14-years-old daughter shouldn't stay out so late. In this period she had a problem with history classes. It was difficult for her to learn the material and she got the F mark (lack of evaluation). Her parents told her: "Success in school first, then everything else." She tried to explain to them that the poor success in the field of history had no connection with the dance and that she would always have problems with those things. However, she had to give up and she stopped dancing. After that she occasionally came to trainings, but she didn't dance actively.

For Marija's current boyfriend the fact that his girlfriend danced break dance in the past is not encomiastic (praiseworthy). For him, the break dance is "a rampage, non-feminine. He finds nothing interesting in it. He sees a female as a fragile being who needs protection, not as a rebel. He thinks that dance must have practical use. So, oriental dance is boring to him, but Latino dances are not."

Marija is currently a student at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade in the Dutch language group and she is simultaneously studying at the Advanced Medical School. Today she likes all types of dance, especially Latin. She is glad she danced break dance, because she has a lot of good memories and friends.

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Originated on a remote North American continent, break dance in Serbia encountered fertile soil. Young people full of enthusiasm copied movements of dancers shown by mass media. For Belgrade teenagers this dance was a good way to express energy and to get together.

I talked here about the girl who tried to overcome the prejudices about the division between the men's and women's dances by dancing break dance. To Marija's current boyfriend break dance is not feminine, because women are the *weaker sex*, and acrobatics is not for them. For her, the break was a way to show that women can perform dance acrobatics as well as men. Marija is not mannish, she is feminine and skilful. She had a great support from her male colleagues. Her female friends respected her, although she was different from them. The audience had a very positive attitude and gave her more credits than to male dancers. To her parents dealing with their daughter's dance was likeable. However, since they were

worried about the future of their child they insisted that she should stop with the break dance. So, although the economic factor in the beginning had a positive effect to begin dealing with break dance – because she wasn't obliged to pay classes – it played a negative role in the future. The break dance is not considered to be a profitable and remunerative job.

In the end I would like to add that Marija started dancing this product of American culture immediately after the bombing of Serbia by the United States and the member countries of NATO. Like other young people who dealt with hip hop in Serbia she testified that dance goes beyond the narrow boundaries of prejudice and politics.

Гордана Благојевић

Београдска брејкденс девојка: брејковање (ломљење) полних стереотипа плесом

Кључне речи:

полни стереотипи, плес, брејкденс девојка, Београд

Овај рад представља део ширег антрополошког истраживања савремене хип хоп културе у Србији. Чланак је настао на основу сопствених теренских истраживања током фебруара и марта 2009. године у Београду. Након упознавања са постојећом српском кореолошком литературом, увидела сам да недостају антрополошка истраживања савремених плесних облика. Сматрала сам корисним да обавим емпиријска истраживања ради увида у стање *изнутра*. Интервјуисала сам хип хоп плесаче, инструкторе и плесне судије. Преовладава став да је брејкденс првенствено мушки плес за изражавање мужевности. Међутим, у Београду су се, одмах након појаве брејкденса, и девојке њиме почеле бавити. Циљ овог истраживања је да испита који фактори утичу на то да једна девојка почне да игра, условно речено, *мушку игру*. Поставља се питање како мушкарци посматрају појаву овакве девојке у *њиховом* свету, какви су реакција и пријем шире друштвене заједнице.

Истраживање је базирано на животној причи једне београдске брејкденс плесачице, која је почела да игра и да се такмичи у раној младости, а затим је у једном тренутку престала да игра. Занимало ме је да утврдим који су били мотиви ове младе особе да се почне бавити брејкденсом, шта је она

тима изражавала, каква је била реакција друштвеног окружења на њену игру, и који су фактори утицали на то да се престане бавити овим плесом.

Поникао на удаљеном северноамеричком континенту, брејкденс је у Србији наишао на плодно тло. Млади људи су са пуно ентузијазма копирали покрете плесача које су видели путем масмедија. За београдске тинејџере је овај плес био добар начин да избаце вишак енергије и да се друже.

Некадашња београдска брејкденс плесачица Марија Синђелић покушала је, играјући брејкденс, да превазиђе предрасуде о подели на мушке и женске плесове. Брејкденс је за њу био начин да се покаже да и жене могу изводити плесне акробације као и мушкарци. При том, Марија није мушкобањаста, већ је женствена и спретна. Имала је изузетну подршку својих мушких колега. Пријатељице су је поштовале, иако је била различита од њих. Публика је имала веома позитиван став и одавала јој је веће признање него плесачима мушког пола. Родитељима је бављење њихове ћерке овим плесом било симпатично. Међутим, ипак су, бринући се за будућност свога детета, инсистирали да прекине са брејкденсом. Дакле, иако је економски фактор у почетку позитивно утицао да ова девојка започне са бављењем брејкденсом (није морала да плаћа часове), на плану даље будућности одиграо је негативну улогу: брејкденс се не сматра занимањем од кога се може живети.

Марија је почела да игра овај производ америчке културе непосредно после бомбардовања Србије од стране Америке и земаља чланица НАТО-а. Тиме је, као и други млади људи који се баве хип хопом у Србији, посведочила да плес надилази уске границе предрасуда и политике.