

Jeanette Mollenhauer: “Fifty Years of Remembering: Blato’s *Kumpanjija* in Sydney, Australia”

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Abstract

The *kumpanjija*, or chain sword dance, of Blato, Croatia, is also danced each April in Sydney, Australia. This paper explores the perpetuation of the *kumpanjija* in Sydney since 1965, culminating in the fiftieth anniversary performance in 2015. Based on data from ethnographic fieldwork, the paper provides an ethnochoreological analysis of this event and illustrates how the performance fosters experiences of bonding, embodies nostalgic sentiment and provides community focus. The relationship between the dance as performed currently in Blato, and the performance troupe in Sydney is also explored. This event demonstrates the significance of the annual event for this section of the Croatian immigrant community in Sydney.

Key words: *kumpanjija*, ethnochoreology, performance, nostalgia, community

“*Why are you still doing it*
[keeping the performance of the *kumpanjija*¹ alive in Sydney]?”
“*Because I love it. Simple: it’s in my blood*”²

The comment came from a senior figure in the community of immigrants from Blato, Croatia, who now reside in Sydney, Australia. This paper gives an account of the performance of the *kumpanjija* chain sword dance from Blato on Saturday 25 April 2015, fifty years after the first regular Sydney performance in 1965, and is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out as part of doctoral research at The Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney.³ The dance is performed at the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club, where I was most warmly welcomed,⁴ in the northern Sydney suburb of Terrey Hills, which is currently the only location in the world, outside of Blato itself, where this dance is perpetuated.⁵ Serendipitously, I was able to attend the 28th Symposium of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) Study Group on Ethnochoreology, held in Korčula from 7-18 July, 2014. On Wednesday 16 July 2014 the delegates travelled by bus to Blato. Following a short time at the ethnographic museum, we made our way to the piazza in front of the church to view both the *kumpanjija* and the *tanac*, the partnered dance which follows the *kumpanjija*.

¹ The word may also be spelled *kumpanija* but the spelling used in this article reflects what is used on the Blato *kumpanjija* groups’ website (Blato Kumpanjija 2014), and is the preferred spelling in that town (Dunin 2015). I use *kumpanija* only when referring to dances from all of the towns on the island of Korčula collectively.

² Mollenhauer (2014b).

³ Human Research Ethics Committee Approval Number 2013/895.

⁴ I would like to heartily thank everyone in the Sydney *kumpanjija* troupe and at the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club for their incredibly friendly and hospitable attitude to me, which made my work as researcher ever so much more pleasant.

⁵ Dunin (2014).

Thus I was able to see the dance *in situ*, in the piazza of the town about which I would hear so much during my visits to the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club earlier that year.

The paper commences with the history of Croatian immigration to Australia, the establishment of Croatian community clubs, and the role of these clubs in the lives of Croatian immigrants. It briefly outlines the history and nature of the *kumpanjija* as performed in Blato, to establish a point of reference for later comparison. The focus of the paper then moves on to the *kumpanjija* in Sydney. It is firstly discussed the dance itself, exploring the function of the dance as an embodiment of ‘muscular bonding’.⁶ Aspects of staging the performance event are then compared with previous work on dance in diaspora.⁷ Nostalgia theory⁸ is referenced when the paper includes participants’ reminiscences and observations about the role of the *kumpanjija* in the lives of residents of Sydney in 2015, drawn from ethnographic fieldwork amongst the dancers and other stakeholders in the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club.⁹ Finally, is examined the relationship between the dance troupe in Blato and that in Sydney, including the attitudes of the two communities towards each other.

Croatian Immigration to Sydney

The 2011 Census showed that in the Greater Sydney region, there were 14,820 people who were born in Croatia.¹⁰ Croatian immigrants first came to Australia during the period known as the ‘gold rush’ in the mid nineteenth century.¹¹ Of those who came to Australia during this period, thirty percent settled in New South Wales and Victoria.

⁶ McNeil(1995): 2.

⁷ Nahachewsky (2012).

⁸ Boym (2001).

⁹ To preserve anonymity in such a small participant cohort, I use the participant’s role in the group, for example, dancer, parent and so on, when referring to remarks elicited from either my fieldnotes or individual interviews.

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013).

¹¹ The colloquial term used to refer to the influx of people following the discovery of large seams of gold in various regions of Australia.

Out of the immigrants who chose New South Wales, around sixty percent decided to settle in Sydney.¹² After World War Two, many came to Australia as displaced persons, often seeking escape from the communist influence which had settled over their home region.¹³ A second wave arrived in the 1960s as a result of two factors: high unemployment in the former Yugoslavia, and the Australian government scheme designed to attract skilled workers from Europe to fill the labour shortage in Australia.¹⁴ The Croatian community in the northern suburbs of Sydney has a very high proportion of people from the town of Blato. Two sets of factors have influenced this community's migration: circumstances in Blato itself, such as political unrest and economic difficulties, and the attributes of Sydney, such as the attractiveness of Australia's climate and high general standard of living. The fact that Blato is a small town influences the nature of the community of settlers and their descendants in Sydney, since there is an emphasis on local community (within the group of immigrants from Blato), family ties and respect for paternal authority.¹⁵

Given the difficult circumstances faced by the working class immigrants such as the distance travelled to Australia and a new language to be learned, it is not surprising that intra-cultural links were a community priority. The Croatian Catholic Church has been a focal point for community activities, with fourteen Croatian Catholic parishes or centres being established around the nation. A multitude of Croatian-based cultural activity organisations have also been established; for example, soccer clubs have played an important role amongst the community and many players have risen to national prominence.¹⁶ The development of the various clubs follows the changing nature of the political environment within Croatia itself.

¹² Kosovich (2014).

¹³ Šutalo (2014).

¹⁴ Budak & Lalich (2008); Šutalo (2010).

¹⁵ Mesarić Žabčić (2014).

¹⁶ Šutalo (2010).

Many were established on the basis of the region of origin of those setting up the club; immigrants did not primarily self-identify as ‘Croatian’ but focused on a specific region within Croatia, such as Dalmatia.¹⁷ These community clubs have been foci for identity both at individual and group levels; “*a home away from home*”.¹⁸ They function as an important resource within the Croatian community: members generate social capital through notions of collective confidence, unification and networking.¹⁹

The *Kumpanija* in Blato

Sword dances are found in various forms in the towns on the island of Korčula: Korčula, Zrnovo, Pupnat, Čara, Smokvica and Blato.²⁰ The town of Korčula is characterised by a dance drama, the Moreška, while the rest of the villages’ dances are categorised as *kumpanija* or chain sword dances. The *kumpanija* was simultaneously a social, civic and military organisation of men who had a role in defence of the town from those who would intrude from outside.²¹ The dance presents the company of men as a symbol of what constitutes a community which is both well-organised and prosperous.²² Drill, dance and battle, have congruent features: all three activities involve unified and simultaneous human movements which, when repeated, produce ‘muscular bonding’ between participants.²³ All three are intrinsic to the *kumpanija*; the dancers rehearse, they dance and the dance represents a battle. The dance is a tool of inter-personal connection for the dancers, through the disciplined movements, and an embodiment of social cohesion for those who view the performance.

¹⁷ Colic-Peisker (2008).

¹⁸ Lalich (2004): 96. Italics in original.

¹⁹ Lalich (2004).

²⁰ Marošević (2001).

²¹ Lozica (2001).

²² Marošević (2001).

²³ McNeil (1995): 2.

The performance troupe has a long pedigree: the town of Blato itself is mentioned in the Statute of Korčula (*Statuta et leges civitatis et insulae Curzulae*) from 1214, while the ‘chivalrous society’ can be traced back to the 12th century. The company as it exists today was formed in 1927.²⁴ All sword dances from the island of Korčula vividly embody their military origins, with a captain leading his men in the dance choreography, a corporal who presents a report to the captain and a demonstration of combative prowess by two ensigns. The dance troupe displays similar characteristics to a military troop: these men once had a literal role to play in defending the villages and maintaining civic order; thus they represented values of honour, self-discipline and bravery to their fellow villagers.²⁵ The functions of the *kumpanija* also included community building works, social aid and organisation of leisure activities.²⁶

While the sword dances are performed by a group of males (*kumpanjoli*), they are, after the chain sword dance has finished, joined by a group of female dancers for further dancing, known as the *tanac*.²⁷ Musical accompaniment may be provided by the *mišnjice*, which is a form of bagpipe, and the *tambrlin*, a type of drum, which is played with both sticks being struck against the upper head of the drum. The drummer goes through the village, repeating a rhythmic pattern to announce that the performance is imminent. Once the dance begins, it is accompanied solely by the bagpipe until the combative sections of the dance are reached, when the drum begins to sound again.²⁸ In the past, the dance was performed at carnival times and on parish holidays; during the Communist period it was danced on public holidays.²⁹ Now, it is presented at the festival of St Vincenza on April 28th and also at other times during the

²⁴ Blato Kumpanjija (2014).

²⁵ Marošević (2001).

²⁶ Vitez (2000).

²⁷ Oreb & Oreb (2001).

²⁸ Marošević (2001).

²⁹ Zebec (2001).

summer months as part of the overall tourism industry on the island of Korčula.³⁰ The dance continues to be employed in maintenance of localised identity, but also acts as an attraction for tourists. Both of these roles, however, have the same underlying motivation: continuity and prosperity of the island's inhabitants.³¹ Importantly, even though the dance is now performed for a different purpose, that is, to attract tourists, the dance has resisted the pull of other locations and remained firmly fixed in its place of origin, Blato.³²

Fieldwork Methodology

This paper is drawn from the ethnographic fieldwork which forms the basis for my doctoral thesis. Ethnography is eminently suited to studies of dance groups and has been extensively employed in previous ethnochoreological studies.³³ My research interest is twofold: first, I am looking for ways in which traditional dance groups change their practices, such as pedagogical methods or choreographical changes, following immigration and re-settlement, and second, I am interested in what the continuation of traditional dance practices means to first and second generation immigrants as they form their personal cultural identities in Sydney. The *kumpanjija* troupe was one of three Croatian dance groups included in the study; the other groups are folkloric ensembles which learn dances from multiple regions in Croatia. I visited the *kumpanjija* group regularly between January and April of both 2014 and 2015, as they only rehearse during this period. Extensive field notes were made, including observations of the pedagogy, group dynamics, choreographical changes and information gleaned from the many informal chats I had with the participants. Still photographs and video footage were obtained. In 2015, when the group was more familiar with me and comfortable with my being at rehearsals, I

³⁰ Blato Kumpanjija (2014).

³¹ Lozica (2001).

³² Dunin, (2012).

³³ Niemčić (2014); Wilcox (2011).

conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with willing participants;³⁴ in all, nine males and five females in the group were interviewed. Data from all sources were analysed using a grounded theory³⁵ approach to identify emergent themes.³⁶

The Performance Event: *Kumpanjija* in Sydney

At a club tucked away in the region of Sydney known colloquially as the ‘Northern Beaches’, the *kumpanjija* of Blato is perpetuated. There were earlier performances of the Blato *kumpanjija* in Sydney in the 1930s, in Broken Hill, New South Wales, in 1941 and in Perth, Western Australia in 1946.³⁷ The troupe based at the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club rehearses from January to April each year, so they can present the dance at the festival of St Vincenza on 28th April. Most often, for the very practical reason of the modern working week, it is held on the weekend closest to 28th April; in 2015 the performance was held on Saturday 25th April, exactly fifty years since the first annual performance in 1965.³⁸ In this section, it will be discussed the dance in its performative context, reviewing the changes made in the diasporic setting. I then give some personal insights regarding the role and meaning of the *kumpanjija* in Sydney, as gleaned from participants through semi-structured interviews. Finally, it will be considered the relationship between the two communities, Blato and Sydney, and determine the role of the sword dance in the transnational connections between the two locales. These sections contextualise the dance as a socio-cultural

³⁴ All participants had been provided with Participant Information Statements and Consent Forms. Most interviews were individual; some involved two interviewees together.

³⁵ Charmaz & Mitchell (2007).

³⁶ I also gave the first draft of this article to the *kumpanjija* captain for his review and approval, prior to journal submission. I took this step to express respect for his position and to validate my representation of the group in this paper.

³⁷ Dunin (2012).

³⁸ Mollenhauer (2015g).

phenomenon to provide, according to the principles of ethnochoreology, “a deeper cultural understanding of the people who perform and participate”.³⁹

Figure 1

The dancers after their performance (Photo: J. Mollenhauer, 25 April 2015)



Post-immigration changes

There are multiple ways in which change may be manifested in dance performances in immigrant communities. A common occurrence is that strictly gendered boundaries in dance teaching and dance roles may become blurred or even de-constructed in a post-immigration context.⁴⁰ However, in consonance with Blato, the sword dance in Sydney is taught and performed only by males. Some of the young men told me one evening, when I asked if they would let a woman join in:⁴¹ “*No, never, ever, ever in the dance would that happen - it just wouldn’t be allowed!*”⁴² In other aspects of the dance, changes have trickled in at the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club, but always with sound reason. It has been noted that, at times,

³⁹ Foley (2012): 149.

⁴⁰ Cruz-Manjarrez (2008); Tabar (2005); Wrazen (2010).

⁴¹ I knew, before I posed the question, that a woman would not be allowed to join in, but I asked it because I wanted to hear how the young men expressed their answer.

⁴² Mollenhauer (2014a).

pedagogical practices may be transformed following immigration, often to the more formal and structured methodology of a class rather than the informal, osmotic learning style of a village locale.⁴³ In Sydney, however, the pedagogy and training regime of the *kumpanjija* has become *less* formalised than in Blato. Through the practical necessities of life in the sprawling suburbs of Sydney, where the young men may have to commute for an hour each way in order to attend, practice is restricted to Friday evenings from January until the end of April, when the dance is performed. Multiple weekly practice sessions are unsustainable in a large metropolis. As a result, according a senior figure at the club, standards of precision and coordination are, admittedly, not as high in Sydney as they are in Blato, because “*the subtle difference is [in Blato] they train four times a week all year round.*”⁴⁴

Micro-changes may also be introduced to the choreography of a dance in a diasporic setting, including a shortening of the timeframe of a dance, emphasizing or dramatizing certain features, adding a new spoken or written narrative before the dance performance, providing additional emphasis through rhythmic or melodic emphases.⁴⁵ The Sydney *kumpanjija* performance is shorter than in Blato due to removal of some motifs, resulting from reduced availability of young men each year to rehearse and perform. In 2014 and 2015, the dance was performed with only nine dancers, as opposed to the fifteen I saw in Blato in 2014.⁴⁶ Dancer numbers have fluctuated over the years, as varying levels of interest and the pull of other commitments such as work and family have exerted influence on dancers’ availability. Thus, the captain works with what he has,

⁴³ Walsh (2008).

⁴⁴ Mollenhauer (2014b).

⁴⁵ Honzlova (2012); Schauert (2007).

⁴⁶ Mollenhauer (2014c; 2015a; 2015c). In 2015, nine men rehearsed but one sustained a work injury a few days before the 2015 performance, so only eight men danced on 25 April 2015. This meant that one female dancer had to miss the performance as well.

and may omit certain figures which are unable to be danced without the requisite number of dancers. This therefore means that the performance length has varied in length from year to year.

However, the reduced numbers do not detract from the communal bonding aspect of the rehearsals and performance. The inter-personal bonding process forged through dancing in synchrony with the rest of the troupe, that is, the “*blurring of self-awareness and the heightening of fellow-feeling*” is still evident, and the “*significant social bonding that rhythmic moving together arouses among ordinary people*” is still produced in the context of the club building in northern Sydney.⁴⁷ This bonding occurs regardless of the lack of other forms of interconnectedness between participants, who are drawn from disparate social, geographical, economic and vocational strata: it cements the group into a self-differentiated, albeit temporary, entity. The dance performance continues to “*enhance ... emotional vibrancy*” and provide a “*fundamental cement*” of camaraderie amongst the young men who perform, in the same way as it does in Blato.⁴⁸

Musical accompaniment

The *kumpanjija* in Sydney is accompanied solely by the *tambrlin* because, currently, there is no one available who is able to play the *mišnjice*. In 2015, the *tambrlin* player was only able to attend the final practice due to work commitments, meaning the vast majority of training nights were conducted with only vocalised keeping of the tempo of the dance. The use of the *tambrlin* to accompany the sword dance in Sydney is a significant departure from usual practice in Blato, where the dance is accompanied by the *mišnjice*. In Blato, the *tambrlin* is used for announcing and heralding the dance and in the sections of the dance involving mock battle but not for the dance

⁴⁷ McNeil (1995): 8.

⁴⁸ McNeil (1995): 155-56.

itself, but it does not accompany the dance.⁴⁹ Employment of the *tambrlin* as accompaniment in Sydney arises solely from the pragmatic situation of not having anyone who plays the *mišnjice* available to accompany them. This lack presents a potential problem, since the performance of the chain sword dance involves a symbiosis between the captain of the troupe and the *mišnjice* player as they move smoothly from one tempo to another during the course of the dance.⁵⁰

While a recording of the *mišnjice* during the sword dance would be possible to make and obtain, any use of impersonal, unvarying electronic recordings would mean that this vital relationship would be lost. The Sydney group has decided that the relationship between the captain and the musician is more important than the instrument being played, and so they perform the dance solely accompanied by the *tambrlin*, whose player remains physically close to the captain throughout the dance so as to ensure a collaborative performance. A CD recording of the *mišnjice* is, however, used for the *tanac*, the partnered dance. This allows the instrument, so connected to the event in auditory memory, to still be heard at some stage during the evening, but the electronic music is reserved for the part of the performance requiring a lesser degree of interconnectedness between musician and dancers.

Costume

The costumes worn by the Sydney *kumpanjija* group and the young women who dance the *tanac* with them have, for the most part, been manufactured in Australia from locally-sourced materials but are as closely matched to what is worn in Blato as is possible. The men have recently acquired some hats, sent from Blato because, according to one dancer, “*they’re also happy to see us dancing internationally*

⁴⁹ Marošević (2001).

⁵⁰ Marošević, (2001); Mollenhauer (2014c).

and keeping the tradition from home.”⁵¹ Costumes can be used to strongly represent a sense of self (identifying the group’s past and the group’s rituals and icons) in contrast with the “others” surrounding the group.⁵² This is certainly the case in Australia, where the costumes worn by both male and female dancers provide marked contrast to the evening attire of the audience members and also the clothing worn by dancers every other day of the year. In addition, the costuming constructs symbolic links with the past. The use of exact replication by the group in Sydney demonstrates a strong desire to evoke a visual recreation of the Blato performance itself in the northern suburbs of Sydney. It is evidence of their firm commitment to a presentation which is, as far as is possible, congruent with the visual aspects of that which may be witnessed in Blato. Thus, in tandem with the evocation of auditory memories through the musical accompaniment, visual cues of reminiscence are provided for those who are spectators at the event.⁵³

Staging the Event

The physical environment and nature of a performance may provide avenues of linkage between diasporic and homeland locations. A previous ethnochoreological study of Ukrainian dance the Canadian diaspora provides a framework for analysis of aspects of the dance event to be discussed in this section.⁵⁴ First, the *kumpanjija* belongs in the category of ritual dance,⁵⁵ since it is always performed in connection with the festival of St Vincenza, patron saint of Blato. This connection with the saint’s festival day is maintained in Sydney, although the festival may be celebrated on the weekend closest to April 28, to accommodate work commitments of dancers and audience members. In 2015, it was held on Saturday 25 April. The

⁵¹ Mollenhauer (2015a).

⁵² Knific (2009).

⁵³ Ram (2000).

⁵⁴ Nahachewsky (2012).

⁵⁵ Nahachewsky, (2012): 14-16.

dance is not performed on a raised stage, but the Sydney setting mirrors, as far as possible, the setting in Blato, where the dance is performed in the piazza, in front of the church, surrounded by the audience. The line of demarcation between performers and audience members is, therefore, strongly laid out, as it is in the original locale. It is still a dance of spectacle rather than participation.⁵⁶

The *kumpanjija* is located within category of “*reflective dances*”, which make “*conscious references to their tradition’s past in current performances*” and where the dance participants are focusing on their collective past.⁵⁷ The dance motifs of the *kumpanjija* exist, along with the dance as a whole and the festival ritual, as autonomous items in the individual and collective thinking of members of the Blato diasporic community in Sydney. It possesses complementary facets: that “... *the participants in a dance tradition [are] metaphorically looking into a mirror to see their reflection, and their past*” and that the dance may be “*also quite engaging in the present moment.*”⁵⁸ Nostalgia theorist Svetlana Boym employs the descriptor “*reflective*” when speaking of remembrances which focus on “*the meditation on history and passage of time*”, concluding that reflective nostalgia concern “*the relationship between past, present and future.*”⁵⁹

The performance aligns with First Principle of Staging, since the dancers “*have a clear and accurate image of the dance as well as the whole environment of the vival setting*” and the dance is “*identified specifically with the imputed vival locality, often with the specific village.*”⁶⁰ As previously discussed, some motifs are omitted for practical reasons, but those motifs which *are* included are performed in an identical manner to the dance in Blato. As previously discussed, the costumes are also identical to those which

⁵⁶ Nahachewsky (2012): 143-44.

⁵⁷ Nahachewsky (2012): 26.

⁵⁸ Nahachewsky (2012): 27.

⁵⁹ Boym (2001): 49-50.

⁶⁰ Nahachewsky (2012): 193.

are worn in Blato. The process of imputation is, to a certain extent, left to the collective imagination of the audience. The images of Blato hanging on the walls of the ballroom (see Figure 2) are designed to evoke visual connections with the township, and a deliberate choice has been made as to the location of the dance within the space of the club ballroom. Rather than use the stage at one end of the ballroom, the dance is performed on the parquet floor in the centre of the ballroom, meaning that the audience is seated on either side of the dance floor, whether on the same level as the dance floor or in the first floor balcony area. This positions the dancers as being central to the audience, in the same manner as dancing in the piazza centralises the dance performance in the town of Blato.

Finally, it has been observed that in diaspora, dancers “...*often express a heightened sense of nostalgia and a desire to preserve something of their heritage and their old homeland.*”⁶¹ This has, in the case of the *kumpanjija* in Sydney, been exemplified through their dedicated desire to preserve the heritage through the sword dance, and the pride with which they choose dancers, rehearse intensely and take pleasure in the performance. The nostalgia elicited in Sydney is of a reflective nature⁶² where all stakeholders employ the dance to focus attention on memories (both individual and group), and especially on a recognition of the passing of time between the previous stage of life which was lived in the homeland, and on the current stage of life in a new location. The dance is the nucleus of the collective space, supporting the idea,⁶³ outlined previously, that community ties between immigrants from Blato are particularly strong.

This nostalgia involves a conscious, reflexive, viewing and acceptance of change, understanding it as a process to be

⁶¹ Nahachewsky (2012): 219.

⁶² Boym (2001).

⁶³ Mesarić Žabčić (2014).

experienced: an integral component of the act of moving forward through life. The sensory experience of the annual *kumpanjija* performance allows for memories of the past to be expressed in the present and anticipated as still being active in the future.⁶⁴ The staging of the Blato chain sword dance in Sydney, then, is not the result of a collective self-burial in times past, but rather an event which recalls past events and interprets those events through the prism of contemporary understandings.⁶⁵ The dance functions as a tool which gives agency in the processes of self-understanding in the context of twenty-first century Sydney: the mural hanging on the rear wall of the stage (see Figure Two) embodies the obvious and palpable “*desire of being there here*”.⁶⁶

Figure 2

Part of the mural showing the blending of elements of both Blato and Sydney
(Photo: J. Mollenhauer, 20 March 2015)



⁶⁴ Ram (2000); Shelemay (2006).

⁶⁵ Ray (2010); Stock (2010).

⁶⁶ Hage (1997): 108. Italics in original.

Personal experiences of the kumpanjija in 21st century Sydney

A simple Google map search yields the information that Sydney is 15,959 kilometres away from Blato; literally, the other side of the globe. How is it, then, that a dance steeped in local tradition could mean so much to young men in Sydney in 2015 who attend university, work in modern, technologically sophisticated jobs and are modern citizens of Australia? Does this dance still resonate within the hearts of the dancers and audience members when performed in a suburban hall halfway around the world from Blato? In this section, I draw upon qualitative data obtained during fieldwork to demonstrate the continuing relevance of community even in a novel and vastly different locale.

One senior member of the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club has been involved in every performance since 1965, first as a dancer and later, in a supervisory capacity. During the execution of the *kumpanjija*, he stands in place of the town leaders of Blato; it is to him that the captain comes to seek permission for the dance to be performed.⁶⁷ He explained that his role extends to the period of time before training commences: “...*the captain will ask all the captains before and then he would come to me for permission to even gather a group to train.*”⁶⁸ He has been, and still is, passionate about the tradition of the *kumpanjija*; when, in the past, the task of keeping the dance going seemed too hard to many, he answered them with “*Listen, we have to keep something-there’s enough of us here; we can do it.*”⁶⁹

Taken in isolation, these comments may be viewed as belonging exclusively to an older generation within the community. However, the 2015 group of dancers exhibits similar notions of dedication and perseverance, as exemplified in the following comments elicited through interviews:

⁶⁷ Mollenhauer (2014a).

⁶⁸ Mollenhauer (2014b).

⁶⁹ Mollenhauer (2014b).

“...us (sic) that have migrated to Australia, we try to still share the same values from overseas regarding tradition of *kumpanjija* and in all parts of life.”⁷⁰

“I do it because that’s the only thing I can do which is cultural in any sense.”⁷¹

“...always preserving it is the main priority.”⁷²

The dance event takes place in a crowded ballroom, witnessed by family and friends. When asked about the emotional response felt by their parents and grandparents, dancers responded:

“...when your family knows that you’ll be dancing...it’s an honour, because you’ll be visible to the entire village and you’ll pay tribute to previous generations.”⁷³

“... it means quite a bit to my father, to see the heritage passed on.”⁷⁴

“I think it means most to my Bubba [grandmother]; she’ll make an effort to come”.⁷⁵

The personal and familial reactions are congruent; there is a sense of individual and collective pride generated through either performing or witnessing the *kumpanjija*; it is a time to reflect on times spent in the small town of Blato, and to imaginatively re-create the sense of community bonding which has been lost through dispersion of the immigrants across the metropolitan area of the large city of Sydney.

Female participation occurs for only a small part of the entire performance, during the *tanac*. However, I wish to include the views of the female dancers as being of equal importance as that of the males.⁷⁶ They usually only attend the final few practices prior to the performance each year. Some of the girls had previously been

⁷⁰ Mollenhauer (2015a).

⁷¹ Mollenhauer (2015b).

⁷² Mollenhauer (2015d).

⁷³ Mollenhauer (2015a).

⁷⁴ Mollenhauer (2015b).

⁷⁵ Mollenhauer (2015d).

⁷⁶ Niemčić (2014).

involved with a Croatian folkloric dance group, and progressed to the *tanac*, while others were simply asked by friends to make up the numbers. Those I spoke with did not exhibit the emotional attachment to the dance shown in the comments of the male performers, but there was a strong element of honour for grandparents among their comments:

*“I mentioned that I might not dance this year and [my grandmother] almost cried.”*⁷⁷

*“I feel quite honoured to do it for [my grandparents]”*⁷⁸

While there is not the same level of emotional investment amongst the girls, they do make the time for rehearsals, and all of them have a familial connection with Blato on at least one side of their families. Preservation of tradition and family honour are strong themes emerging from the data, as these young men and women continue to provide a nostalgic polestar for the remainder of the community. Reflective nostalgia is that which “*does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home*”,⁷⁹ the immigrants from Blato are not seeking to construct Blato itself in the suburbs of Sydney. They could have, for example, built the Club building in the manner of buildings in Blato, or fabricated a ballroom which resembles the piazza in Blato, but they have not. I contend that they are, to varying degrees, nostalgic in their thoughts about Blato and yet, simultaneously, determined to forge a future life in Sydney rather than return to Croatia. They employ the dance event to remind themselves of Blato, to think about what Blato has given them, to remember family and friends still living in Blato ... and then they disperse and resume their modern lives in Sydney.

The Relationship between Blato and Sydney

Fieldwork in this study has exposed some interesting aspects of the

⁷⁷ Mollenhauer (2015e).

⁷⁸ Mollenhauer (2015f).

⁷⁹ Boym (2001): 50.

relationship between the residents of Blato and those who have migrated to Sydney. In 2014 when I first began to visit the Sydney group, one member told me that a group of young men had gone back to Blato in 2006, with the idea of them performing the sword dance there. To his consternation, the grandfather (still a resident of Blato) of two of his troupe members refused to allow his grandsons to perform the dance in Blato because they had not *learned* the dance in Blato.⁸⁰ This attitude may seem somewhat discouraging, yet it does not appear to be representative of everyone in Blato. A senior figure at the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club commented that “... *the kids’ relatives, their grandparents, had tears in their eyes ... that a bunch of skippies*⁸¹ ... *would come back and do it.*”⁸² The fact, as previously stated, that men’s hats have been sent from Blato to Sydney is further evidence of a degree of support (for the diasporic troupe) emanating from those in the original setting.

However, during my visit to Blato in July 2014, I spoke with a young man connected with the local *kumpanjija*.⁸³ I introduced myself as coming from Sydney and explained that I had visited the *kumpanjija* group there. His reaction was: “*they don’t do it properly there*”.⁸⁴ His ideal, it would seem, is the unvarying preservation of a centuries old traditional practice; any change would be viewed as detrimental. However, this young man has not experienced immigration and resettlement at all, so speaks from a different

⁸⁰ Mollenhauer (2014a).

⁸¹ One of the most popular, and most widely exported, Australian television programs of the 1960s was entitled ‘Skippy the Bush Kangaroo’. The term ‘skippies’ is employed colloquially to refer to those who are ‘truly’ Australian, although most commonly it refers to Australians of Anglo-Celtic heritage. Its use here indicates both the speaker’s personal affiliation with Australia and his recognition of a marker of difference between the Sydney dancers and those in Blato.

⁸² Mollenhauer (2014b).

⁸³ I have chosen to be deliberately vague about this informant’s identity, since I do not wish to cause animosity between research participants.

⁸⁴ Mollenhauer (2014c).

perspective to those who have journeyed to, and lived in, Sydney. The exposure of those who have emigrated to Sydney (and their descendants) to a different set of external influences has resulted in an attitude of heightened pragmatism: an understanding of both the limitations experienced in Sydney and the motivations behind the changes which have been made.⁸⁵ This diaspora-specific comprehension is, of course, beyond the grasp of those who reside in Croatia, where the dance has, as far as the ritual performance and selection of participants are concerned, remained within the confines of one small town.⁸⁶

There is evidence for a deferential attitude, in Sydney, to those who have learned the dance in Blato. One practice evening, the captain told me to watch a particular dancer because he was the only one who had trained with the troupe in Blato, and learned the dance there, prior to emigration to Sydney. His style of dancing was held up as being more fluid and graceful, since it had been learned in the original context.⁸⁷ There is also an acknowledgement of the more intense level of practice and training carried out in Blato; several dancers commented to me that the level of precision is higher in Blato because the troupe there trains more frequently, not being hampered by geographical dispersion across the greater Sydney metropolitan area and the large amount of travel required for many dancers to attend practice evenings.⁸⁸

The differences observed between the performances in Blato and Sydney are always founded on pragmatism rather than irreverence or carelessness. The musical accompaniment has already been discussed: in Sydney, they use what is available (the *mišnjice*) and have chosen to emphasize the relationship between the captain and the musician (drummer, in Sydney) rather than using the same instrument (but on an impersonal CD) as that used in Blato. This

⁸⁵ Shay (2006).

⁸⁶ Dunin (2012; 2014).

⁸⁷ Mollenhauer (2014b).

⁸⁸ Mollenhauer (2015c).

decision favours the spirit and purpose of the dance over a practicality, and seems to be the choice which is more sensitive to the heritage they seek to preserve. The omission of motifs which are unable to be performed in Sydney (due to an insufficient number of dancers) also seems to be closely aligned with preserving the meaning of the dance rather than its structure whenever there must be a choice between the two facets. The captain in Sydney could, in theory, enlist more men to be involved, in order to have the necessary numbers to mount the dance in its entirety, but if this course of action were to be taken, he would run the risk of having a troupe which is, overall, less proficient at the dance style. Coercion may also result in a higher rate of absenteeism on practice nights, meaning that the performance would be less polished in its presentation. Rather than mount such a performance, which would not be satisfying to anyone, he chooses to work only with those dancers who are proficient and committed. Such a practice is more closely aligned with the history and spirit of the *kumpanjija*.

So, the comment “*they don’t do it properly there*”, as enunciated in Blato is, in one sense, a correct statement: the dance in Sydney is *not* identical to that which is performed in Blato. However, the spirit of the dance is the same: those in Sydney show a similar sense of reverence for their heritage as those in Blato. The pragmatically motivated decisions have followed careful consideration; weighing up the alternatives and choosing the one which more closely aligns with the intent and purpose of the company in Blato. They have not introduced remarkable or offensive change, such as allowing women to dance with the swords; then, the residents of Blato would have justifiable reason for criticism. The very fact that 2015 marks fifty years since the first performance in Sydney demonstrates that the decision-makers *have* been successful in fostering a love of traditional practices within the community of immigrants from Blato who now live in Sydney.

Conclusion

The perpetuation of the *kumpanjija* by the dance troupe in Sydney is, admittedly, marked by multiple alterations within the dance event, when compared with the event as it is staged in its original location, Blato. The number of dancers is less than in Blato, necessitating the omission of some figures. The troupe only practices once each week, and only in the months prior to the festival in April. The musical accompaniment has altered due to a lack of appropriate musicians in Sydney, and some of the costumes have been made in Australia rather than in Croatia. Yet these changes have not dimmed the passion for continuation of the *kumpanjija* in Sydney. The qualitative fieldwork from this research project has shown that the elements of interpersonal bonding and community remembrances are maintained; while some physical characteristics of the dance have been changed, the essence and meaning of the performance remains.

It has been observed that “*groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localised.*”⁸⁹ The *kumpanjija* group in Sydney has, over fifty years, successfully provided a framework for the collective rememberings of the immigrants from Blato. The militaristic tradition, the drill-like nature of rehearsals and the unison of dancers during the performance are aspects of the dance which remain unchanged from the event in its original setting. Micro-changes have indeed been introduced, yet these changes, while multiple, have pragmatic origins and do not detract from the community-based sentiments contained within the event as staged for centuries in Blato. Through the performance, the dancers allow the entire diasporic community to “*situate what [they] recollect within the mental spaces provided by the group.*”⁹⁰ This does not mean, however, that the immigrants share a collective backward glance, but rather that “*the collective frameworks of memory appear as safeguards in the stream of modernity and*

⁸⁹ Connerton (1989): 37.

⁹⁰ Connerton (1989): 37.

mediate between the present and the past."⁹¹

The continuation of the *kumpanjija*, then, should not be seen as representative of the immigrants' reluctance to commit to life in 21st century Sydney: such a view would imply only polarity, rather than degrees of 'calibration'⁹² between the Croatian context of the past and the Australian locale of the present and future. Instead, the celebration of St Vincenza and the gathering of the community to watch the *kumpanjija* is more congruent with "*community moments*" which provide "*a significant space for negotiating relationships between and affiliations to 'here' and 'there'*."⁹³ While the community members have chosen to settle and move into the future in Sydney, this choice should not be seen to imply that adapting to Australia means forgetting heritage-based activities. Traditional practices such as the *kumpanjija* do not negate the participants' desire to reside in, be aligned with, and engage in activities which mark them as citizens of Australia. As the mural on the wall of the Dalmacija Club so poignantly illustrates, they are anchored in their heritage, but are, simultaneously, content with their present and future selves in the modernity of Sydney.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank her supervisors, Kathryn Marsh and Michael Webb, for feedback about the conference presentation from which this article has been developed, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments.

⁹¹ Boym (2001): 53.

⁹² Ramnarine (2007): 11.

⁹³ Lewis (2010): 572.

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Sažetak

Ovaj rad se temelji na etnografskom terenskom istraživanju koje je izvršeno kao dio istraživanja za doktorat 2014. i 2015. godine, a bavi se izvedbom plesa *kumpanija* (mačevalačkim plesom u krugu) u Sydneyu u Australiji. Takva vrsta plesa se može susresti u dosta gradova na otoku Korčuli, i tradicionalno se izvodi još od srednjeg vijeka. Hrvatsku migrantsku zajednicu u Sydneyu čine većinom ljudi koji su doselili nakon 2. svjetskog rata, često da popune manjak radne snage i da pronađu lagodniji život u Australiji. U sjevernom dijelu Sydneya postoji veća koncentracija ljudi koji su došli iz mjesta Blato s otoka Korčule i koji su tu osnovali ne samo Hrvatski klub "Dalmacija-Sydney", već su također nastavili održavati svake godine izvedbu plesa *kumpanija*. U travnju

2015. obilježena je 50. obljetnica od prve izvedbe ovog plesa u Sydneyu. Neke promjene nastale nakon iseljavanja bile su neminovne u izvedbi ovog plesa. Plesači iz Sydneya nisu u mogućnosti vježbati onoliko često kao plesači u Blatu, zbog zemljopisne raspršenosti njezinih članova, ali i zbog radnih obveza. Neki od koreografskih motiva su izostavljeni zbog nedostatka dovoljnog broja plesača koji bi ih mogli otplesati. Zbog nedostatka glazbenika koji bi znali svirati *mišnjice*, mačevalački ples se izvodi uz pratnju *tambrlina*. Snimka *mišnjica* se koristi kod partnerskog plesa. Odluke o ovakvim promjenama rezultat su pragmatične potrebe, ali su opet tako osmišljene da nastavljaju duh i značenje izvedbe. Izvedba demonstrira višestruke odlike koje su vidljive u plesnim izvedbama unutar dijasporskog konteksta, uključujući i činjenicu da se ovdje radi o ritualnom plesu, koji je odraz prošlosti interpretiran na sadašnjoj lokaciji u izvedbama koje evociraju slike originalne lokacije proizvedeći usredotočenost kolektivne nostalgije koju proživljavaju i izvođači i promatrači. Odnos između dvaju lokacija je kompleksan: u Blatu postoje oprečna gledanja na grupu u Sydneyu, dok migranti u Sydneyu promatraju trupu iz Blata s poštovanjem. Zaključci izvedeni iz intervjua s plesačima iz Sydneya pokazuju da je njihovo sudjelovanje odraz poštovanja prema vlastitom kulturnom nasljeđu kao i nasljeđu njihovih obitelji. Ples kuje snažne veze između plesača i daje priliku za razmišljanje o vezama između bivšeg i sadašnjeg mjesta stanovanja ove zajednice koja je odlučno usmjerena prema svojoj budućnosti u Sydneyu dok nastoji održati sjećanje na vlastitu kolektivnu prošlost.

