

SECTION 6: STYLE, SELF-EXPRESSION AND BASICS

STYLE, SELF EXPRESSION AND BASICS

Often general comments on standards of dancing, performance or presentation fail to separate the different issues involving skills, group activity and showmanship. First, should one comment at all, as it is often said that the tradition did not have to worry about these points. It is not true of course even if the evidence is very limited. The absence of what the tradition thought and did in the collectors' minds is the collectors' fault not the traditions. In the era of collection, the collectors could not be aware of such matters through their lack of experience.

A typical major difference between today's clubs and yesterday's tradition is that then dancers lived in the community with other dancers. We could cultivate links with other dancers but we can never know what it is like to spend our ordinary life alongside other dancers both active and retired. It was once thought that before the best people had left the countryside, a higher percentage of people with relevant talent danced the morris, if only because there were far fewer competing activities. However surviving comment and biographical studies suggest that they were always of a pretty mixed standard. Should this matter to us today? It might be so if we are using the past to justify present day actions. As a question it does beg the issue of what standard is actually needed today.

A strong motivation, in the absence of a living local tradition, is to recreate something lost, either as museum like replication or to restore and develop a "tradition". Now the preservation of the roots of this ephemeral activity has to be done by someone both as a reference and as a jumping off point for innovation. But restoration needs an outside standard and an accumulated understanding of the why as well as the what. Revivals usually lack all this and so become a new thing in their own right.

Even if the question of why to recreate can be answered, there is the problem of what to recreate - is it to be Cecil Sharp's EPDSS teaching, Pre WW2 Ring or Postwar Ring, a personal "relook" or an interpretation based on minds? The last two choices are quite acceptable if the honest aim is to be different from other sides. The original is unknowable - even Sharp's teaching is now unreachable. Surprisingly the only authentic sources are the active dancers and what we can know of the traditions from their dancing and understanding. How many of today's dancers have this sense of responsibility? The written word or even professional dance notation is inadequate. The morris is the occasion as well as the steps and stylistics. No one suggests that we recreate the atmosphere of these early stages of the morris revival.

There is a visible tradition with an element of continuity, although the existence of the rest of us has changed it considerably, although it probably would not be there at all without the revival. To be of any use to the rest of us it needs to be seen and analysed, so we must feed on and, I suppose, both modify and erode what sustains us.

There are the village based sides with continuity of place for inspiration. They tend to be less inhibited with their chosen tradition than we might be, allowing

themselves an evolution from what was done, but seldom influenced by why it was done. They are often examples of what can be done by expert dancers using secondary sources, as witnessed by the revival of several "new" traditions in the last 20 years. The "dance" bit of the tradition, which is essentially the basics underlying the reconstruction, does not come from mss but is injected. In other fields this is just the element of interpretation and expression brought to it by the great dancer. It would not be "folk" to credit the choreographer but the debt should be recognised.

One is led to the question of whether some sides are more "authentic" than others? It depends on what is being looked for, but in general it must be a "yes" if the method of transmission of style and detail of the dance is considered important. Good dancing is not the same as slavish following of perceived tradition, so copying good morris is not necessarily getting close to the original. The fine detail that makes a dance has seldom been recorded, it lies in the expressive part that Sharp found so difficult to pin down. It is possible that this, as done in the mid 19th century, has not been transmitted to us at all !

Any group is unique and therefore its group expression in the dance will be unique. Just think of the year to year and team to team variety at Bampton where everyone is as immersed in the tradition as it is possible to be today.

We should recognise that style covers standard movements and quirks, really elements of self expression. The Cotswold morris allows individual interpretation within certain limits of pattern and rhythm, even if your squire does not see it that way. In general movement can be classed as positive, that is "dancing", or negative, which I shall call "slacking". Dance lies in the spring in the step, the expressive movement of arms and body, in the flow of movement and the emphasis on lifting not downward actions. The degree of effort needed requires fitness and some element of physical training. Slackness comes with a weak step, slow acceleration off the mark, very little body rise and limb wagging. Unfortunately it is easy to practice slackness, and most of us are experts in self justification for it.

In my opinion it all comes down to good basics - if these are right the rest looks good and no one is going to argue over it. Height in stepping comes from ankle flexure and in jumps from bending the knees a little. Jumps should be done so as to "drive" into the next movement to give excitement to the dance. Big arm movements come from big handkerchiefs not from flailing the arms. The contrast between different basic steps should be remembered and practiced.

In summary we have lost our absolute reference, if we ever really had one, so that judgements today must be as much on artistic grounds as any other. Uniqueness in the individual and the team is inevitable, even attempted copies are different. But good basic training, often revisited, will ensure that all is accepted and perhaps someone will want to try and copy you. Remember a "sloppy" dance produces a "sloppy" audience, but then you are caring about those watching and would not let it happen. Or would you?

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