

# The Road to a Performance

by Linda Golaszewski

Last June a very interesting email crossed my desk. I work at a university teaching nonprofit management (the day job) and am the fore or artistic director of a local morris team. It was in this capacity that the email caught my attention—it was a request for proposals (RFP) from artists to propose visual or performance pieces for the inaugural celebration of a new transit line in Portland, OR—the Orange Line.

Well, that sounded cool. And doable. And came with a bit of funding. How hard could this be? My famous “last words.” Did I mention I was about to go out of the country for three weeks?

Some elements would come together pretty easily but first I needed to test the interest of the team and the availability of musicians. Without musicians, there would be no point in even applying. I am also in the university “community choir,” a non-auditioned chorus of faculty, staff, alumni and the occasional student. The next brainstorm that occurred to me was to combine both these performing groups into a kind of people’s performance celebrating both transit and the history and nicknames of our city. Portland has quite a lot of nicknames! Of course, now I would need to get the chorus on board as well, a little more difficult since the performance was scheduled for September 12, before our school year begins.

June was thus spent drumming up interest and developing a proposal, with both the deadline for submission and my personal deadline looming. But I felt solid about the thematic framework (nicknames) and with some thinking, could develop a program that fit into that framework: The Wild before the City, Stumptown, City of Roses, Bridgetown, Beervana, Keep PDX Weird, Portlandia/Orange Line in Bloom (not a nickname but the overall theme for the performance).

I actually was not overly optimistic about being awarded a grant. I’m not teaching performing arts and my background is in counseling, but I was excited about the opportunity to join two community groups together in celebration.

About two weeks before I was scheduled to leave we received word that we were funded. Then I went away.

August 1 we returned—six weeks till due date. I had a tentative outline of the performance and a very,

very tentative idea of dances and songs. For the chorus, I was able to draw on songs we had performed the previous term, a good thing as it turned out since we had a somewhat unexpected transition in leadership. Our music directors are grad students and our previous director, Jason, had moved on to another grad program and, gasp, a real job. He was no longer available to direct us either beforehand or on the day of performance. Very lucky for us, Tim, our new director, had just moved to Portland and was available to both rehearse us and direct on the day of. He didn’t know the material but we did, and that proved to be of some help.

But the road didn’t get automatically smoother. The twenty or so members I expected when I polled in June had dwindled. There was even talk from some about pulling the plug but I was determined that this was a great opportunity for the chorus and got permission to get “guests”—friends of mine that could fill in. I started with about six of these but eventually had three people who stuck with it. That however, did help round out the sound. All told we had 15 singers, three doing double duty as dancers.

On the dance front I had much more to do. I had promised a newly composed dance—Orange Line in Bloom—for the performance. I also needed to link up dances with the nickname themes at least in some plausible way. Oh, and compensate for the fact that eight of my dancers, including some of my most experienced, would be off at a Revels rehearsal.

I had eight dancers including myself, three other experienced morris dancers, one returning dancer (also experienced but who had not been dancing for a while) and three newcomers with less than nine months dancing under their belts.

It was easy enough to match up dances with some of the nicknames. “Stumptown” framed Lumberjacks, a dance I learned at the Midwest Morris Ale from Maroon Bells Morris. “City of Roses” was also easy enough as I just tweaked the name of Flower of the North to Rose of the North. We had a song and a dance (John Barleycorn) for “Beervana.” And I used “Cuckoos Nest” as the dance equivalent of the historic naming of Portland which was decided on a coin toss by two founding city fathers. But I was stumped by linking three themes to dances: The wilderness, Bridgetown, and Keep PDX Weird.

I was surprised to find that there were no extant dances about bridges. But even if I had found one I was already teaching the team two new dances. (I think I mentioned we had six weeks to practice.) And while my teammates are quick learners, learning more than two new dances probably would have been a stretch especially given the makeup of the group. So I settled on identifying dances in our repertoire that could (maybe remotely) reflect the “certain something” in the themes. I chose Windmills, an eight person dance we learned from Berkeley Morris because of its change in direction and sense of wildness in the sticking. Bridgetown got linked to Sheriff’s Ride, the hankies in the chorus of that dance come up to form an arch à la “London Bridge is falling down” and I chose a five person Borderish dance (Domino 5) we learned from Rant and Raven Morris in Alaska because it is kind of “weird” being a very atypical morris dance for a prime number (five) of dancers.

Ah, but what about Orange Line in Bloom? August 1 and I had absolutely no idea what this dance was going to look like. I knew what I wanted—something additive/subtractive, like people getting on and off the train, a dance that might change directions (the train starts east turns south, then east, then south again), and that might have an element that looked like a blossoming outward. There is already a Sherbourne dance to the tune Orange in Bloom but we didn’t know the stepping AND it didn’t do what I wanted this dance to do. Although I liked the tune and figured we could use the tune at least as a starting point.

I can’t really pinpoint when the most important “how” of this dance came to me. I knew what I wanted and what music I was using. I knew it could have standard figures, mostly, but that the chorus would have to be irregular given the music. It could be built around standard Fieldtown figures (mostly) and I realized I could adapt the chorus from General Ludd (also called Ludd’s March) that I had already adapted for a dance we do to the song Country Life. These two dances change direction on the chorus.

So I had two parts of the framework set: the blossoming and the direction change. I also had a sense of figures, in general, and chorus. Now I just had to tackle the additive/subtractive element to begin with one, then to get eight people at some point on and off, ending with only one. I did this by primarily adding and subtracting people two at a time using opportunities in both figures and chorus to do so. Ultimately leaving #1 at the last stop to depart the “train” alone.

Sometimes what you do in your head doesn’t always quite work on the ground. But this did pretty much.

I had to make a few adjustments as to who danced what positions. We didn’t start tackling this until the middle of August as it took me that long to get it set. So I was relieved that four weeks proved enough time to be performance ready on this dance as well as the seven other dances we were performing.

And I was more than a bit nervous.

It was 90 degrees and we danced and sang over the noon hour resplendent in our special orange kit and hankies. I think we put the bloom in the Orange Line.

The final program looked like this:

**Celebrating the wild of this bend in the river**  
 Emerald Stream, Seth Houston 1991 PSU Community Chorus  
 The Wind (Windmills, Randall Cayford) Renegade Rose

**Portland comes into being**  
 Coin Toss 1845 (Cuckoos Nest, traditional) Renegade Rose  
 Stumptown 1847 (Lumberjax, Maroon Bells Morris) Renegade Rose  
 500 Miles, Peter, Paul and Mary PSU Community Chorus

**Settling in**  
 City of Roses 1888, first Rose Festival 1907,  
 Rose of the North (Flower of the North, Redtail Morris) Renegade Rose  
 Bridgetown 1908 Railroad Bridge, 1920 Hawthorne (Sheriff’s Ride, traditional) Renegade Rose  
 Beervana 1985 (Legislature approves brewpubs) John Barleycorn ( Hunter’s Moon Morris) Renegade Rose  
 Merry Little Hop Renegade Rose and PSU Chorus

**Keep Portland...**  
 PDX 1987 as domain for PSU (Domino 5, Rant and Raven Morris) Renegade Rose  
 The Road Home (shape note tune adapted by Stephen Paulus) PSU Community Chorus

**Let’s celebrate**  
 Orange Line in Bloom 2015 (Linda Golaszewski) Renegade Rose  
 Balia Ii Sehu, Ety Toppenberg PSU Community Chorus



photo courtesy Linda Golaszewski