

## ATTITUDES TO PLAYFORD

It is my view that there are plenty of opportunities for dancing at this festival and that the objective of a workshop is to provide tuition and insight and that it should not merely be another dance.

I should like to start, therefore, by giving you some insight into my background. Having done this I feel that you may appreciate better why I say what I say and do what I do.

My folk dancing career did not start until I was 19 when I went to University and for my starting at all you will have to blame Dick Playll from Sussex.

My interest in Playford dances arose quite accidentally. From my limited dancing at the University Folk Dance Club I was aware of "pretty" dances called "Playford" and when I heard that the Students Union was looking for a cheap cabaret for the Queen Mother at the annual Union Ball I offered a costumed folk dance display. As a matter of total irrelevance you may like to know that Lance Percival was paid £1000 at the previous year's ball -we were paid £13!

It fell to me to organise and rehearse this display and I soon realised that although I had danced these dances I didn't remember them properly. Fortunately the University was London University so that I had easy access to Cecil Sharp House. I therefore went to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library to look these dances up. Now, whether by accident or design I do not know, but when I looked up the entries in the catalogue I asked the librarian to get me the originals and not Cecil Sharps transcriptions.

When I tried to work the dances out I soon realised that there were differences, some of them considerable, between what I was working out and what I had been taught. It was only then that I discovered that what I had been taught came from the Country Dance Books and not from the original texts.

I therefore have an important confession to make - I was never properly indoctrinated in the teachings of Cecil Sharp.

The next fortuitous event in the development of my approach to Playford was my teaming up with Nicola Gaines, then a student at the London College of Dance and Drama and now teaching at the Royal Academy of Dance and at the Royal Ballet School. Nicola was from the dance world and most importantly was specialising in baroque dance under the tutorship of Belinda Quirey herself the pupil/demonstrator of Melusine Woodthe celebrated early dance researcher.

I was also very fortunate in that at our University Folk Club I had come across a virtuoso recorder player, Peter Robinson, who had studied at Trinity and was a baroque music specialist.

For several years, therefore, we had a triumverate: myself researching primarily into the dances, Nicola providing insight and tuition in seventeenth century movement and attitudes to dance at that time, and Peter providing "authentic" music. Out of all this I developed a growing interest in serious dance research as well as an awareness that EFDSS

Playford was the laughing stock of the dance world.

From this research a number of points emerge which I do not have the time to substantiate today but I will be happy to do so outside of today's workshop.

First, and foremost, these dances which we call Playford must be considered as part of the dance continuum. They are not part of any "folk" continuum.

Second, these dances are social dances - used for recreation by natural communities of people. This is true for the 17th, 18th and nineteenth centuries - covering all dances which might be referred to as "Playford". It is only in the 20th century that we get unnatural communities, eg. folk dance clubs, whose sole purpose is to do these dances.

Third, a dance is not just a collection of figures. In the context of social dances each dance is movement laid upon music with both the music and the movement conforming to certain standards which vary over time but which are consistent at any one time. These standards cover both the technical performance of the figures and the style in which they are performed. This last point can be demonstrated with an analogy from Morris. Take for instance Westminster Morris Men who do dances from both the Longborough and Bledington traditions. If you observe closely you will see that there is a distinct technical difference between the galley in Longborough and the hook in Bledington which Westminster make quite clear, although this is not true for all morris sides. However, if we contrast Old Spot or South Downs Morris with Westminster you will not fail to see a distinct difference in the style in which the two teams perform the same dances from Longborough.

The Fourth point I wish to make is done by referring to an individual dance rather than all these dances collectively. Let us take a dance which we do today, Jacks Maggot for example, and then assume that it has been danced without any break since it was first published around 1700. You would find that even if the figures hadn't altered over time everything else would have altered: instruments, speed, style of dancing, clothing worn etc. Thus Jacks Maggot in 1750 would probably be quite unrecognizable to a dancer in 1700 and so on.

Now, where does all this lead. Well - let us look at a Playford Ball or a folk dance group dressing up in costume and giving a display in public. Amongst others, the program contains Nonesuch, Portsmouth and The Bishop. These three popular dances, popular that is in 20th century folk dance club terms, were published as follows: Nonesuch 1651-1690; Portsmouth 1701-1728; Bishop 1778.

The first thing to note is that there is no possibility that the same person would have ever danced all three of these dances, indeed, it is most unlikely that anybody would have even danced any two of them.

Next we must remember that the style in which each would have been performed would have been different, the music would have been different, the instruments used would have been different, the clothing worn would have been different and so on.

Yet our display team is doing them all in the same clothes (usually hugely inaccurate in historical terms) to music which is played on the wrong instruments (eg. accordions) in the wrong style and in the wrong pitch, with a movement style which is completely wrong and

in most cases using interpretations of the figures which are demonstrably wrong. To show just how wrong these interpretations are I will take you through Nonsuch and Portsmouth in a moment but in fact the Bishop is the worst of the three. The authors have chosen a quite different tune with a different rhythm to the original, changed the order of the figures and added figures which do not appear in the original.

So what, I hear you say - what does it matter what consenting adults do in the privacy of their own folk dance clubs or folk festival marquees. Well, I think that certain things matter a great deal.

First of all, notice my use of the word adult. How many of your folk dance clubs have young people coming to them. In most cases the answer will be a resounding no. But this isn't because young people don't want to dance there is an absolute explosion of dance going on in the real world outside of the folk world and even in the folk world look at all the young people going to ceilidhs like the Late Night Extras, dancing in clog and morris teams etc. It is my belief that the attitude to dance in folk dance clubs puts off most people from joining or staying and that folk dancers attitudes towards Playford are an epitomy of what is wrong.

Second, never mind what you dance or your attitude to it, just look at how you dance. Given the same figures, same music and same instruction your average folk dance club dancer will plod their way through the dance whereas your average non-dancer who has not had the benefit of being taught how to dance by their local folk dance club will react to the music and let the music dictate their movement which is what dancing is all about.

Third, we don't do it in private. You often get yourselves up in fancy dress and give public displays where even if you know that what you are doing is widely wrong, and even if you tell your audience that what you are doing is a load of rubbish, they wont believe you because your costume gives you authority.

Finally, many of your leaders and other members will be going out into the wide world endeavouring to persuade an unsuspecting public brought up on Hot Gossip, Wayne Sleep and disco dancing that the EFDSS plod is what they should be doing.

Well, my diatribe is over and it is almost time to start dancing. Let me finish on the positive side by stating what I would like to see.

My overwhelming message is that whoever wrote these dances, whoever published them, whoever originally danced them, whenever they were danced they are now late 20th century dances and should be danced in a late 20th century style to appropriate music in appropriate clothes etc. The only exception to this is where it is desired to be authentic in which case it is necessary to discard all that we have and to go back to square one with regard to costume, choreography, music, movement etc.

My next message is that there is more to dancing than ever more intricate figures. Real dancers get far more pleasure from dancing simple figures to good well fitting music. Dancing is not, as an unsuspecting observer from another planet watching Phoenix might think, a branch of orienteering. It was well understood in the Renaissance that dancing was much more than the sum of its parts - there is a spiritual synergy to be gained which is what leads to the deep satisfaction that dancing can bring.

Last of all, a plea. Please do not go away saying Mike Barraclough says that you must do it this way. What I will be doing now in the practical session are my interpretations of instructions for dances which were last danced as part of a living tradition several hundred years ago. I will defend them as more accurate in a historical sense. I will defend them as better choreographies for dancing. I will defend my view that the style in which these dances should be danced should be no different from that used for Dorset Four Hand Reel or Waves of Tory.

Finally, please remember that my work is primarily aimed at the dance world and not the folk world. However, if you like what I am saying and you wish to use my interpretations, whether it is the choreography or the style to be used, then I shall be delighted but I cannot force you to change and would not wish to.