

## DO-IT-YOURSELF

The personal aspect of dance-leadership supplementing the information contained in pamphlet No 1 'Handing-On' compiled by Douglas and Helen Kennedy and published by the EFDSS.

A Guide to enable folk dance leaders to tune up their natural dance technique. This personal aspect of leadership was omitted from the pamphlet 'Handing-On' as not everyone need be interested in the inner secrets of folk dance action.

We have written this guide not only to help the leaders to help themselves, but with the hope that their increased effectiveness will improve folk dance technique generally. The leader must be careful not to 'teach' this 'tuning up' directly to his pupils. He should keep the 'inside' knowledge as the leader's asset which is at the back not in the front of his mind when presenting dances. He must aim always at giving the best picture of the dance for this visual picture is the leader's most potent 'medicine', remembering that the average folk dancer, as with the general run of ballroom dancers, is content at first with his own standard of performance, mediocre as it may be.

The observations that follow are based upon our appreciation of traditional processes and methods in folk music, song and all types of folk dance. These always reflect a whole-heartedness and utter absorption in the expression. Nothing is done just for effect or in the pursuit of some aspect of beauty, but everything is concentrated on living the part. Beauty is undisputably present in the easy sureness of performance in the economy of action and the dignity of bearing that accompanies true skill, but above all in having something important to say and saying it with complete sincerity.

Folk dancing is something more than just walking about to traditional dance music, but it must be built upon the basis of everyday human action and must preserve that naturalness. The word 'dancing' calls up a vista of moving particles, and as applied to a person one pictures sparkling eyes, a buoyant air, with the body 'lit up' and all the particles in a state of excitement. This condition one sees in native primitive dancing and in some folk dancing, but for a large proportion of folk dancers in England the chief satisfaction seems regrettably to be limited to mastering the unusually rich variety of figures and patterns. It is only the few who get 'lit up' and sparkle. 'Sparkle' is a quality that seems to have been gradually declining with the march of civilisation. No doubt this quality and other 'folk' qualities of dance have been better preserved among the country folk themselves by the conditions of rural life, with its calls upon bodily vigour and its education of bodily skills and dexterities. Can these disappearing qualities which are associated with the folk tradition be recaptured even in the all-pervading urban outlook and circumstances of today? We suggest that the remedy lies to hand in the recreative properties of the dance itself. These include the youthful energies which constantly seek outlet and appear as jive, rock and roll, and other forms of relatively unbridled rhythmic dancing practiced by our young people today. These energies can be harnessed and guided through folk dance channels to increase enjoyment and improve performance. Folk dancing when 'lit up' is completely infectious, prompting onlookers to join in. From long experience we are convinced that this infectious element of 'good dancing' is best transmitted through the visual picture of dancers in action. Such transmission has always been the traditional method of passing on style and character in performance from generation to generation. In

these days of ubiquitous TV, presentation by the visual method is as readily acceptable and more appropriate than ever. Verbal descriptions of dance-action by themselves are quite inadequate, and any talk about folk dances can't describe much more than the form, where you go, which way you come back, and practically nothing about what is happening to you while in transit. This internal happening the leader and teacher must know about and be able to show vividly by dramatising his own actions. Therefore his own dance action must be as good as possible and look robust, yet effortless, rhythmic and fluent, still keeping his own personal idiom.

Our aim here is to prompt the individual leader to conduct his own self-analysis and try and do his own tuning. He can improve the tuning of his instrument, his own body, to speak with such effectiveness that a dance group, observing him demonstrate dance action, gets the right idea of its style and character more or less unconsciously. He must clearly remember that this analysis is a private examination of himself and we repeat that he must not inflict directly this inner knowledge upon his group.

Alongside his own infectious dancing he must of course see to the other requirements that affect the responses of the group. Congenial surroundings, persuasive music, relaxed atmosphere of enjoyment and a gay light-handed touch, all help to free the passages for dance impulse. It is not, however, sufficient to place the onus wholly upon the music, which after all is only a part of the the basis of dance expression.

Passing on dance quality by infection can be done in a number of ways. In the case of Morris and Sword Dancing, when the leader often is dealing with a set at a time, his own performance within the set is his best method of tutoring. In the larger social dance gatherings he has to 'dramatise' the qualities in the picture so that the infection can reach further out into the whole company. He will be all the more effective if he can find ways of making his own music, or even just rhythmic sounds, to match his movements. For one thing, this enables him to show action 'in slow motion', an essential aspect of his visual picture of the dance.

The self-analysis which is recommended should be made by the leader in private, and when practising he should recollect that he is not really a soloist, for his actions must be shaped to fit his partner and be related to the movements of other couples in the set.

"Do-It-Yourself" may be conveniently summarised under four technical sections which we will develop in more detail later. These are :

1. *Wholesale (Holism)*

The whole person is involved in actions, whether small scale or large scale, with the power of the whole body behind them.

2. *Float on Air with Propulsion*

The propulsion of a buoyant, elevated and air conscious body.

3. *Feeling Ahead*

The bodily skill which depends on anticipation of movement (feeling the next action in advance).

4. *Joining in, or Participation*

The spread of infection from part to part in the body, from partner to partner and to others in the dance, and ultimately to whet the appetite of onlookers to join in and be part of it.

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## THE BASIS OF ANALYSIS

### 1. *Wholesale Holism*)

The dancer's instrument is his whole person, body and soul. All of it must not only be able to 'speak' but the action, large or small, must spring from the centre. As an old Morris Dancer had it, "It isn't the legs as does the dancing - it's the 'hitch-up' of the body". The hitch is not just a physical lift. With that goes the inner lift - the sense of elation. This wholesale character in folk dance movement is not unfortunately as general as it should be. Too much of what we see is leg action and even that is confined to motion from the knees downward. Coupled with this restricted gait goes the discouraged posture of downcast head, sagging shoulders and lack-lustre expression. Such prim, half-hearted movement is the very antithesis of folk dance tradition. 'Dancing' implies the participation of all bodily particles in an animated exercise. So long as all parts of the person are capable of taking a share not all parts need be equally involved. But the *feeling* of animation must pervade all parts. Even when action is limited to a minor gesture, such as a laugh, a wink, a handshake or a clap, the gesture, to be expressive must be warmed by the participation of the whole person, who is then 'putting his heart into it'.

### 2. *Float on Air with Propulsion*

The 'natural' dancer (and the well trained one) works from high level and descends from that level to brush the ground lightly or powerfully with rhythmic step tracery. He knows that he has to be up before he comes down to register his footfall with the beat. The layman's false picture, very prevalent, is that he must launch himself up with the beat instead of landing down with it.

With a buoyant carriage not only are the legs freed for wholesale action, but the 'hitch-up' enables the supporting foot to start its drive with a comparatively weightless body already on its way. The pulsation spreads from the body centre out to the extremities undulating through the joints to the feet. Freed from the usual 'daily' burden, the body at once gains a new sense of poise. The head, balanced sensitively, also ceases to be a burden, and immensely heavy as it is, now helps to guide and control the bodily action, giving it added power if need be. Meanwhile, shoulders, neck and arms all share in this more skilful balancing act and each part learns to carry its own weight. A dancer so elevated and poised finds a new and almost cat-like facility of movement.

The good dancer is also more conscious of the air, the medium in which he moves, just as a swimmer entrusts himself to tangible water, and treats it as a friend, rather than as a foe to be brushed aside, so the buoyant and elevated dancer moving more above the surface of the ground, gets some support from his more tenuous medium. The higher ceiling in which the dancer floats gives him the scope to drop to ground level with steps of strength or tenderness according to mood. Moreover there is within the dancer a ballooning faculty enabling him to rebound back into his air ceiling. This ballooning gives the appearance of effortlessness so characteristic of all fine dance action. To launch his person into the air and to keep himself on the rebound requires the skilful propelling movement of the supporting foot, a fact which is often not understood. Next we need to encourage the fullest scope of leg action so that the thighs as well as the lower part of the leg participate. Mountain folk habituated to walking uphill are noted for the full scope and buoyancy of their step. Those who live in flat countries, and even more, the city dwellers, are content with a

restricted action, from the knee downwards, particularly noticeable among women.

### 3. *Feeling Ahead*

It takes an appreciable time for a feeling of movement to reach from the centre to the extremities. A slap in the face, to be dramatic, depends on the build-up of emotion that triggers off the act of slapping, the 'flow' of the slap proceeds with a growing crescendo that reaches its climax with an effect that is all the more remarkable for its delay and because by this time it is expected. The sensitive mover can anticipate each movement through the faculty of knowing what his body is going to do before he acts. Knowing the feeling, he can even safely leap before he looks. By comparison with such anticipation your quick 'thinker' is slow. This impulse of anticipated movement, so characteristic of all animal life, is in us in danger of becoming extinct, a fact most noticeable in folk dancing. As grown-ups we learn to stop and think. When we apply this attitude to such a primeval act as dancing we develop anxieties as to details of our dance journey and can't enjoy the travel. Dance, as children know very well, is an enjoyable adventure in expression and they relish every particle of motion on the way. This old enjoyment of our early ancestry has to be regenerated as an essential part of dance experience. 'Knowing' beforehand what a movement feels like becomes largely a matter of practice and experience. With the growing knack, one recovers also the sharper sense of rhythm and the combined skill shows up in a noticeable absence of effort. Traditional folk dancers never appear to be grappling with a difficulty. Rather they look as if something was gripping them. This picture of easy effortlessness is rather different from the view prevalent today of dance as a synchronisation of a piece of movement with a measured piece of music, and showing as a concentration of willpower to keep the action in time. Such effort in fact is ill-timed, for it wastes energy instead of conserving it, being against rather than with the waves of rhythm. The dancer then, instead of being lifted and thrilled by the waves, fights for his passage.

### 4. *Joining in, or Participation*

Participation in dance is another of the primeval sensibilities tending to wither under the stresses of modern life. The all-pervading warmth or elation felt by the animated dancer should be not only shared with his partner, but also with the company that composes the dance set. Such a sharing of 'life' within the dance set increases the depth of participation which then becomes strong enough to melt the crust of any shy and self-conscious ones who find it so hard to forget themselves when just on their own. In the exchange of moods with others in lively participation these shy ones find loss of self a surprisingly easy matter. Such dance experiences are commonplace, but even so they often exceed all expectations, for the powers and energies that can be unleashed in dance participation can be prodigious. It is the harnessing of these energies that produces real team-work. This energy of expression, when set free, refreshes and recreates not only the dancers themselves, but it affects the musicians, and they in turn are stirred to new inspiration.

The effect on the onlooker is to prompt him to join in and it is this compulsion that accounts for the tenacity of the folk dance and which has kept it alive in a world that has in other respects grown far away from country life and country custom.

The ritual folk dances - the Morris and the Sword dances - without this effect on the onlooker, become meaningless exercises.

## DO IT YOURSELF

### *A catechism for the leader to test himself*

We have set out this more detailed analysis in the form of common failings (which produce a mediocre standard of performance) together with certain questions to test existing levels of performance with a view to improvement.

#### ***The Body as a complete dance instrument***

If any part of the body is 'left out in the cold' and does not participate it may well be a hinderance to the full expression of dance, which always comes from the body centre.

(Common failings : Actions confined to legs and feet. Not using the complete limbs, limiting arm actions to forearm and hands, (eg.clapping), limiting leg action to the part from the knees downward. Restricted movement is often due to anxiety or doubt of ability to cope with forms and patterns and to get these completed in the requisite time)

1. Do you feel your dancing increases your animation?
2. Do you start all your movements with an actual swing of the body or with the sense of body weight?
3. Can you 'track' flow of movement from the centre outwards? Does your movement flow right out through thigh to foot and through shoulders and arms to hands?

#### ***Buoyant carriage takes the weight off the feet***

Elevated poise 'lifts' the level and helps to keep the body alive and relieves feet of their burden.

(Common failings : Passive carriage, bent head, lifeless arms, lack-lustre eyes and a generally sagging aspect often 'gone' at the knees)

1. Can you extend your body without exaggerating and thus starting the sense of lift and relieving weight from legs? (Egg out of egg-cup)
2. Do you habitually look out at eye level or do you feel it safer to watch the ground?
3. Are your arms passengers? Can you use them (carry them) so that they help buoyancy without being flamboyant?

#### ***Air-borne and Air-conscious***

The air is friendly to the 'good dancer' as water is to the good swimmer. It is not to be ignored or regarded as an obstruction to be thrust aside.

(Common failings : If the dancer fails to 'breast it' and 'float' he tends to bob up and down and drop like a stone 'denting' the floor surface when he seeks to be forceful. Without the power of delayed approach he misses the pleasure of 'poetry in motion')

1. Are you conscious when moving?
2. Can you reach your high level in time to drop onto the first footfall?
3. Can you do this for instance in the Schottische step with continuity in the alighting, or are you content to take a step and hop, soon tiring?
4. Do you know how to delay this drop-on-to-ground in dancing to gain expressiveness - like swearing - Bl...ast! or for a tender approach, like placing the best teacup on the shelf?

5. Is you body poised above the working leg and foot, so exercising control for lightness and power?
6. Can you vary your dance passage in speed and strength so that your motion 'talks' (intelligently) in phrases?

### ***Propulsion***

Positive 'drive' is needed for the initial impulse and for continued motion - like a guided missile. This drive comes directly from the supporting foot. The dance-walk step calls for this conscious propulsion, more forceful in the American Western-style of square dancing. There is more time to give zest to the step and propulsion in the Hornpipe rhythm than there is in the fast Reels and Jigs.

**(Common failings : The failing of putting out a foot to take a step, the body trailing after with no propulsion)**

1. Can you transfer your walk into expressive dance with a chuckle before each footfall?
2. The 'Pas de Basque' step is the essence of propulsion. Can you propel yourself off your stationary foot, from rest?
3. Are you conscious of the two beats in the 'Rant' step and can you vary the emphasis to suit North Country and South Country dances?
4. In all the double steps, can you give added expression to the second pulse?
5. Are you satisfied that you invariably propel yourself into dance and keep moving with propulsion?

### ***Feeling Ahead***

Dancers must 'feel' before they leap ; as the eye in reading is in advance of the utterance, so the 'sense' of dance gesture is ahead of the action.

**(Common failings : The inexperienced dancer almost invariably seeks to coincide his dance step with the metrical beat. For true dance movement this is too late, the time for expression being expired before the feeling of it has begun)**

1. Does your body 'know' the action that lies ahead in every movement?
2. In clapping do you anticipate the climax of the handclap and give it feeling and meaning, or do you aim to coincide the clap with the pulse, which usually has the effect of hurrying the rhythm?
3. When dealing with a partner can you (as the man) give your partner the warning sense of anticipation and confidence in movements such as Promenade and other forms of leading?
4. Can you also give anticipatory warning in turns and spins?
5. Can you (as the woman) be ready to follow and give the necessary weight and momentum? : but not too ready!
6. In the pivot swing, can you anticipate and rotate head, shoulders and upper body smoothly round, making partner share this feeling before you move off the propelling foot?
7. Have you had waltz trouble, which usually arises from the lack of feeling of anticipation? Can you again rotate your shoulders and those of your partner with the anticipated pressure off your supporting foot before taking the sequence of waltz steps which, when started correctly, tend to

take care of themselves?

***Participation and Teamwork***

In the folk dances the teamwork grows out of the human actions of individuals infecting each other, stimulating them all to a higher level of performance. The absorption in the shared experience does not mean coming down to a common level, but on the contrary, unleashes a new source of hitherto untapped energy (as in various forms of sport).

**(Common failings : restricting expression by conforming to a common drill - dressing straightlines etc instead of expanding into the surge of the communal rhythm)**

1. Do you share your rhythm with the rest of the team?
2. Do you enjoy the sense of sharing movements with your partner in a country dance, or do you isolate yourself?

NOTE : The guidance given above is directed at social folk dancing in the true folk dance tradition, based on the relationship of man and partner. In England however the dances have also been widely used in children's and adult education, where dancers are frequently of one sex. Nevertheless, our advice in general applies also to leadership in these fields. Our written descriptions may read with a cold-blooded effect, but they must not be allowed to discourage the light-hearted amateur. Technique should be taken with a grain of salt, for it is essential that the leader, at all costs, preserves his own light-heartedness and the sense of fun inherent in the social folk dance.

Finally it must be again emphasized that this guidance is only for personal use and that the leader should never endeavour to impart it directly on social occasions.