

Broom dance workshop

Sidmouth 1996

Leaders: Simon Pipe and Mark Rogers

Workshop notes by Simon Pipe

It would be helpful if dancers could read the introduction before the workshop; the rest of these notes are intended to serve as an aide memoire, and to expand on the workshop.

Introduction

This workshop is for experienced dancers, though not necessarily with experience of Cotswold Morris or Molly Dancing. The workshop will be partly improvisational; participants are encouraged to experiment, with a view to creating their own broom dances in the future.

It will be possible to participate using a stick if no broom is available. People with brooms may be asked to share them, at least some of the time.

Safety warning: please be aware of the people around you. Do not swing your broom in any way or attempt to perform even simple balancing tricks unless you are certain the space around you is completely clear and everyone is aware of what you are doing - in other words, only do it if you're asked to demonstrate. If the weather is suitable, it should be possible to practise such moves out of doors.

Please also take responsibility for your own safety. If you're working near an idiot, move.

This workshop is one of a series of four exploring ways of making the most of the modern morris repertoire. Though broom dances are not readily associated with Cotswold Morris, Bacon's Handbook of Morris Dances notes that Abingdon has a broomstick dance, and Sam Bennett of Ilmington was a solo broom dancer. Broom dances have been recorded in various parts of the country, including Dartmoor, and they're particularly associated with Molly Dancing.

All four workshops are also designed to seek new ways of performing the morris, giving it a greater appeal to modern audiences, whilst attempting to keep faith with the spirit of the tradition. Though traditional notations do exist, this workshop will not use them; the intention is to show dancers how to create new broom dances, based on traditional elements of the form. The workshop will use very simple stepping (in morris parlance, single- and double-steps).

Participants will not be taught a complete dance, ready for public performance; however, a dance of sorts will be created to show how moves can be pieced together. The view is that by tackling the challenge of creating their own dances, in their own time, dancers also develop their skill and insight.

If you have come to this workshop wearing a long, slender evening gown, you may regret it.

The basics

Broom dances can feature some or all of the following:

- balancing the broom
- sweeping
- swinging the broom
- passing the broom under the legs
- passing the broom around the body
- twisting (or "rattling") the broom
- twirling the broom
- stepping with the broom on the ground
- throwing or kicking the broom into the air
- special tricks (eg leapfrog over the broom, jumping "through" the broom)
- novelty moves (eg "riding the broom", or using the broom as a crutch, a la Long John Silver)

Some moves incorporate more than one of the above. Swinging and twisting the broom are distinctly different, but both can be done simultaneously.

Within any figure, it helps if the stepping becomes more elaborate/skillful/impressive as the figure progresses. As a rule of thumb, if the audience has seen a particular move four times, try to vary it thereafter.

Some of the ideas suggested here have never, as far as the author is aware, been used in performance.

Sweeping

This is what brooms are for, remember? Doing a broom dance without sweeping might serve as an obscure artistic statement, but one really ought to use the broom to its full potential. A figure spent simply stepping round and sweeping can be good for audience interaction, with scope for elements of foolery brushing between people's legs, polishing shoes, assaulting the musician, and so on. As an opening move, it can help establish the performer's territory. Odd sweeps can be worked into other moves - for instance, a quick brush can be fitted in after passing the broom under the leg. Also, the dancer can try twisting around whilst sweeping turning the body through 360 degrees, perhaps, while continuing to sweep in the same direction.

Floor work

Dances often commence with the broom placed on the ground, while the dancer executes a sequence of steps along the length of the handle, or - less commonly - around the head of the broom. For this to work with very simple stepping requires the skill of a characterful dancer, able to use personality, perhaps, to create the appeal. It's probably more effective to devise moderately complex or clever stepping. These examples will work with the dancer facing along the line of the handle (shaft):

- 1) Hopscotch. A step from a children's game, but you may find this version difficult. Start with both feet on the ground, astride the handle; then step on to the right; then on to both; then on to the left. Easy so far - but to be effective, the right foot needs to be placed on the *left* side of the handle (when the left foot is free), and the left foot on the right side. Furthermore, the upper body should NOT move from left to right with each step. Not so easy! For elaboration, try the same stepping, but when the weight is on the right, tap the toe of the left foot on the right side of the handle, behind the supporting foot, and repeat the other way round. Or try both feet astride, then three hops on the right foot - on the left side, the right, and back to the left. Then both feet, and three hops on the left foot.
- 2) Cross-jumps. Start with both feet on the ground, astride the handle. Then a small jump, and land with the feet crossed, right foot on the left side, left foot on the right. Then back to feet-astride, then cross the feet the other way. Make it more elaborate by going straight from right-across-left to left-across-right, or by turning 180 degrees and then 360 degrees through the air between each step.
- 3) Bacca-pipes step. Nimble heel-and-toe work is appealing, as long as it's reasonably elaborate and stylish - for instance, tapping the free heel or toe on every beat, perhaps so the right foot taps to the left of the broom shaft while the supporting left foot is on the right of it. Also, with the supporting left foot on the right side, the free foot can be tapped *behind* the supporting leg, on the left side of the handle. Confusing but nice.

A clever step dancer might achieve some percussive effect by shuffling and tapping the feet on the handle itself.

The pick-up

Floor work presents the dancer with a problem: picking the broom up at the end of the figure. Simply stooping down to pick it up is too easy! For this reason, it's probably best to feature only one floor-work figure in a broom dance.

One pick-up method is to place the foot on the head of the broom and apply pressure so the handle rises up, ready to be caught. The danger is that the dancer will get a bloody nose (but the audience will get a good laugh). So try it facing away from the handle (credit to Julian Drury for devising this).

An alternative is to place the broom head with the brush on the floor, so there is a space at one end between the shaft and the ground. Work a foot into the gap, find a balance position, and briskly raise or kick the broom up, and take

hold of it. It may be possible to catch the broom and add in a quick twirl as a finishing flourish before the next figure.

A third technique: facing away from the brush, grip the handle of the broom between both feet, about 12-18 inches from the end; jump, flicking the broom handle into the air, catch it between the legs. This enables the dancer either to swing the broom through the legs and into another flourishing twirl, or to "ride" the broom, cock-horse-style, which may get a laugh. It's a matter of taste

If you *must* simply pick the broom up, it may be more stylish and less ungainly to squat down, Cossack-style, by bending at the knees at the hips, rather than by simply leaning over. While you're down there, why not toss in some Russian stepping?

Passing

Some of the most interesting things you can do with a broom involve passing it under your legs and around your body. Once you start exploring, myriad possibilities present themselves, some only slightly absurd. Ideally, you *should* explore, rather than simply going for the obvious moves. But to help you on your way, here are some pointers.

- 1) In or out? Different effects can be achieved from *inward* and *outward* passes under the legs. Passing from the right hand, under the right leg is an inward pass, ie, towards the centre of the body, or line of vision. Right hand under left leg is an outward pass, ie, away from the centre. This assumes the broom is passed from right hand to left. In an outward pass, the free leg is projected forward and then across the front of the body. This can be more elegant than the forward thrust in an inward pass, which sometimes has all the grace of a dog cocking its hind leg. An outward pass can also facilitate the exchange from hand to hand, because the leg can be swung over the broom from side to side. If a double-step is used (right, left, right, hop, or right, hop, left, right), the dancer can effectively perform a closed side-step between passes, which can be attractive.
- 2) The step. A single-step (right, hop, left, hop, etc) obviously allows twice as many passes of the broom as a double-step. However, the double-step can be easier to achieve, and more stylish. A combination of the two within a figure will help sustain the interest, because the stepping will become more impressive: so four or six double steps, followed by single-step passes to the end of the figure. A full figure of single steps means sixteen successive passes; unless some kind of variation were introduced (such as speeding up the music), this would be needlessly tedious. If double-stepping, the dancer may find it easier to put the hop at the beginning of the step (right, right, left, right, etc), especially if time is needed at the end of the figure to prepare for the next set of stepping. Double-stepping can also give scope for more ambitious moves, such as swinging the broom around the body between each pass of the broom under the legs.
- 3) Technique. The less the dancer has to bend down to pass the broom, the better. A stoop is inelegant, and not impressive. Therefore, the kick of the free leg needs to be as high as possible. A good bend at the knee - for both the supporting and kicking leg - will help here. Regular stretching exercises - not just during warm-ups before dancing - will also help. Dancers should beware of kicking very high without warming up. It's also important that the handover from one hand to another is not hurried or snatched, especially as this brings a high risk of fumbling the exchange. In fact, there's plenty of time for the handover, even in single-stepping, if the free leg is immediately kicked high on the first beat of the pass (beat one or three of the music), and kept high on the second beat, perhaps with a little extra kick to sustain the height. The leg can be brought down to become the weight-bearing leg just in time for the next beat. It's not necessary for the leg to achieve full height on beat one.
- 4) The pass. Simply slipping the handle from hand to hand is the obvious and safe way of doing it. But it's also possible to toss the handle from side to side, if it's done quickly - there should be no height to the toss. This only works if part of the broom, probably the head, is resting on the ground. If the head of the broom is on the ground, a flashy way to do it (but one that needs practice and good timing) is to toss the end of the handle forward; as it falls towards you, kick the free leg high, as for an outward pass, and thrust the receiving hand under the free leg (left hand under left leg), catch the falling handle, and whip it out of the way in time for the free leg to fall. This is called an under-the-leg catch.
- 5) The broom. Can be held in normal sweeping position, brush on the floor, but there are enough alternatives to allow every other figure of the dance to be a passing figure - helpful for giving the dance a conventional A-B-A-B structure. A common technique is to lift the broom off the floor and hold it horizontal, passing it under the legs from side to side. This can be a cumbersome manouvre if the broom is always passed, say, head first, and then

twisted between passes so it is also held head first for the return. However, if the dancer has the strength, its obvious difficulty can add to the audience appeal, especially if double-step passes go into single-steps. It's made easier if the broom is passed head first from one side, but handle first from the other, with no awkward twists in between, but this might look too easy. With double steps, the really ambitious dancer could try twirling the broom, majorette-style, between passes. Alternatively, the broom can be placed with one end on the ground and held completely erect, so the dancer has to kick very high to achieve the pass. This can be done first with the brush on the ground, then with the brush in the air, which is slightly more difficult. A nice touch is to release the broom during passes so that it is free-standing, with the brush squashed into the ground, some brooms can be persuaded to stay upright, in a perfect, unsupported balance. This looks great, but probably can't be relied upon.

- 6) Anti-static. It's possible to swing the broom around the body between passes, or do passes whilst travelling along the ground, sweeping. The dancer doesn't have to remain static. Dancers should spend time playing with their brooms: it may take many sessions for a brilliant idea to emerge.
- 7) Foot-note. If you want to be really flashy, it's possible, in passing figures, to catch the broom with the foot, rather than the hand. The author's own broom dance includes such a figure. Work it out for yourself!

Swings

Nothing difficult here: swinging is simply a matter of holding the end of the handle and turning the broom around the body, fully extended. It's useful because it's a very big movement. You can either keep the handle in one hand and swing it over your head and round, or you can pass it from one hand to the other behind your back; or both, within the same figure. Be warned, though, that it's easy to lose your grip if you swap the broom from hand to hand, meaning the broom goes flying towards the audience, probably at the eye-level of the cutest child. Practice makes for a better grip, but how's your public liability insurance?

Twists

Start with the broom in the conventional sweeping position, and then, with a firm grip on the handle, draw it in a circle around the body, passing it over the head in the manner of a helicopter rotor, at all times keeping it in the same hand. As you do so, watch the head of the broom: with each complete circle, the broom twists through 360 degrees. This twist can be deliberately accentuated by applying spin at the start of the swing, especially if one begins with a bold sweep outwards to propel the broom into the air. Obviously, the twist can be created in either direction, though experiment will show which is most comfortable. If there isn't space to swing the broom, the same effect can be achieved if the dancer turns under the broom handle, in the way the a woman turns under her male partner's arm in jive dancing. Or the dancer can turn one way while swinging the broom the other. A combination of twisting and sweeping makes a good figure in its own right, but twists can also be applied to other techniques; it's even possible to twist the broom while passing it under the leg.

Twirls

Stand with the broom in your strong hand, with your arm held out to your side and raised 30-40 degrees above shoulder height. The brush should be 18-24 inches from the hand, so the point of balance is slightly towards the brush. The broom handle should be as near as possible in line with the arm.

First, allow the broom head to fall so it hangs vertically, behind the line of the arm. Do this by relaxing the grip very slightly so the shaft is held between thumb and forefinger, not too tightly, and by turning the palm towards the sky/ceiling. The brush should fall through a curve, as if following the circumference of a circle.

Try this in front of a mirror or large window, or watching your shadow, so you can be sure the fall is curved. If it isn't, the broom shaft may not have been sufficiently in line with the body.

Once you've achieved this - possibly after one attempt only - repeat the drop, but this time boost the motion of the broom so the brush continues on its path, up past the shoulder and out again to its original position. This may take two or three tries, gradually increasing the boost. You've now completed one "shoulder circle".

For the second twirl, or shoulder circle, the brush should fall in front of the arm, and up and out in the same way as before. To facilitate this, the palm should be turned back, instead of up. Make sure, before you try this, that the head of the broom isn't going to make contact with your own head!

If using twirls between under-the-leg passes, it may be necessary to draw the brush towards your head and then project it upwards and outwards.

Throws

One way to throw the broom is simply to hold it roughly horizontal, with the palm roughly upwards, and project the broom into the air in the manner of a drum major.

It's also possible to throw the broom from a twirl. As the brush comes out of the second part of the twirl, in front of the arm, simply project it skywards. The broom should turn through roughly 360 degrees. This takes practice to become consistent, which it needs to be for public performance, but it needn't be dangerous in responsible hands. However, you can expect to get hit on the head a few times before you become comfortable with this. If anyone has to suffer for your art, it should be you, not the audience.....

It would be possible to create a figure from twirls and throws: (bar 1) right hand twirl, (2) throw, (3) left hand twirl (4), throw, etc. Or simply create a figure of twirls with a single throw at the end.

Kick-ups

These are spectacular, but best learned direct from someone who's proficient. Any juggler who works with clubs will know the principles of the kick-up - it's much easier with a broom, and more impressive (jugglers who do club-swinging will also know how to do the twirl).

Balances

Audiences will be more impressed by a simple balance-the-broom-on-the-palm gag than by anything you do that is actually difficult. This most certainly is not remotely difficult, except possibly when you first try it. Simply stand with your partly-outstretched palm facing up, held a little below shoulder-height, place the tip of the broom handle on the palm, with the brush in the air, and balance it. Simple. Note, to recover the balance when you start to lose it, it may help to lower your palm quickly. Now do it while stepping. Practise appearing to lose control over the broom, so it starts toppling towards the audience, and then heroically recover the balance just in time. They'll love you for it.

There are other ways of balancing a broom. With the palm balance, try boosting the broom vertically into the air, and then catching it with the other palm, keeping it balanced. This takes more practice.

It's also possible to balance the broom off the elbow (out to the side) and the knee or the foot. This latter can be very effective in a low-ceilinged room, or on a windy day. With a little practice, it's possible - even helpful - to keep up a steady hop throughout this balance.

The author's own broom dance starts with a vertical head balance. The combined height of broom and dancer is approaching ten feet - it looks good. The height of the broom and the width of the head make this balance relatively easy (the author is particularly bad at balancing other objects). Start by learning the palm balance. When you're ready, place the tip of the handle on your forehead, roughly at the hairline (if you have one). Stare directly at the head of the broom and adjust the balance as in the palm balance. You will need to walk forwards and backwards - learn to do this from the outset. If allowed to fall freely, there should be very little risk of the broom poking you in the eyes. It will hit you on the head from time to time, but the pain passes. A woolly hat may be a good idea. Learn how to get out of the way.

The broom can also be balanced horizontally. Try this on the foot in fact, try catching it on the foot, in a horizontal balance. This can also be done with morris sticks. The trick is to draw the foot quickly up to meet the broom, and catch the handle with the foot as descending, to lessen the impact.

Foolish dancers should try a horizontal balance on the head and then spin the broom, helicopter-style. It should be possible to manage things so the broom always falls to the same point.

Jumping the broom

Can lead to childbirth (as part of a traditional marriage ceremony) unlike leapfrogging the broom, which can prevent any prospect of it. You simply grip the shaft of the broom with hands about shoulder width apart, and jump through the circle they create. If your back bends sufficiently and you can jump more than six inches off the ground, you can do it; if not, you can't. It looks daring, but it isn't really: if it came to a choice between letting go of the broom or landing flat on your face, which would you choose? There you are, then. One suggestion - if you're not very brave, try practising with rolled-up newspaper first.

Leapfrog

Rest the broom on the ground with the shaft held vertically and the brush high and leapfrog over it. *This is not recommended* and besides, it only looks good if the broom is tall in relation to the dancer's own height. The author "invented" this move because he couldn't jump the broom, but he weighs well under nine stone, uses a very strong broom, and can jump high enough to avoid putting much of his negligible weight on the shaft. He never, never tries this unless someone else is nearby, preferably medically qualified. And it scares him every time (just a little).

Structure

Broom dances can look like a succession of ideas strung together, with no particular logic. It need not be so, though the structure may not be obvious to the audience. The author's own broom dance begins with a preamble (head balance, fancy work passing the broom handle from foot to foot, and then a tricky under-the-leg routine), ending with the broom kicked high into the air. Thereafter, the dance follows the conventional A-B-A-B structure for six figures, alternating between under-the-leg moves and twisting moves. A logical construction will help you remember which bit comes next - learning the dance can take almost as long as the initial creative bit.

Two's company

A two-person broom dance presents so many creative, spectacular and comic possibilities that there's no point even starting to describe them here. The answer lies in creative play have several improvisational sessions, simply messing about with the broom and seeing what ideas emerge. Don't simply intellectualise time spent "doodling" will produce fresh possibilities. Not all will work; be prepared to scrap more than half your ideas, even after you've spent a long time practising. The same goes for solo dancers.

But that's not all

It's possible to go on playing around for ever. At some stage you do actually have to piece together a dance, work out how the different elements go together, shuffle them around a bit until they work, and learn to perform it. It doesn't have to be brilliant - once you have a structure, you can embellish and change it. Don't be afraid to throw some figures out to make way for better ones. And equally, don't ever regard your broom dance as "finished" - leave yourself open to new ideas, and let it evolve. It'll help keep you interested.

Being able to execute all the figures doesn't mean your great work is ready. You then have to add the style that turns it from a functional demonstration of skill into a living, characterful dance. If it ain't that, it ain't nothin'.

Your broom dance need not be fabulously clever, especially if you perform it well. Even a simple dance will help bring variety to a dance show. In fact the less complex and demanding it is, the more likely you are to be able to dance it with flair. If you're going to create a masterpiece, though, you must be sure you will have plenty of opportunity to perform it - unlike most other jigs, a difficult broom dance needs regular practice if you're to keep it in roadworthy condition.

But then, a good broom dance is worth all the effort you put into it (probably).

For further thoughts on creating new solo dances, and broom dances in particular, visit the following site on the World Wide Web: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/PaulMillennas/simepipe/htm>. Paul Millennas's own pages make fascinating morris reading

Dear Simon,

Here are some comments on those of your workshops that I attended which might be of some future use to you. In general the attendees were poor on posture, balance and dance technique and I assume that providing a good model is very valuable, if attention is drawn to it.

BACCAPIPES

There was proper encouragement to construct their own dances but too many would not have any real idea of what was a suitable length and variety. The value of existing dances is that they provide an indication of what people have got away with in the past. I have assumed that a dance needs about five figures before it gets too long.

You concentrated on one basic stepping rhythm, and hardly mentioned the broken or cross tapping rhythms. I would have mixed them in a dance for greater contrast. Perhaps this is wrong. I have not seen a very exponent of that approach for comparison to form a judgement. There is also the issue of where to use more complex Heel-&-Toe steppings, without appearing to be a step dancer. I understand that the English step dance world has a growing interest in dances dependent on stepping but using implements, which you might be able to exploit.

Real long clay pipes (church warden's) are quite late in origin. My friend David Cooper who demonstrates pipe manufacture at the Amberley Chalk Pit Museum in Sussex finds that there are tricks in the manufacture of long pipes that have been lost and he and his contacts are trying to rediscover them. Then he may be able to make and sell a dance pipe with a solid core. At present they cost about £10 a pair, but they often have a slight twist along the stem.

The baccapipes competitions at Bampton used to spread flour or sand under the pipes so that the toe or heel taps left marks from which the closest without touching the pipes could be used to judge the winner. I remember seeing winkle-pickers being worn in the pubs!

I remember seeing men dance with their bodies more over the pipes than stretching their legs forward, so that seeing the pipes was more difficult, and giving the impression of not looking down. But I never saw anyone dance blindfolded, as done with the egg dances, where it was a matter of precise length of step to avoid treading on them.

I mentioned that a US side Rural Felicity from Brasstown in farthest North Carolina often danced entirely in simultaneous pairs, and that in this year's English tour they had a version for six, with the pipes placed in a circle. They start on the inside, and do a foot up and back outwards between the pipes, then a figure over the pipes facing out, then a dance round going once around their own pipes and then around the outside of the circle of pipes two places to end facing inwards, or at least on a diagonal. They then did another figure over the pipes, danced around these pipes once and moved round two more places outside but ending inside the ring facing out. Ad lib.

More thought is needed about arm movements or positions during the jig. The high scottish position looks effective, the opportunities for arm swinging seem limited.