

Marketing Your English Dance: Don't Blame Jane!

by Lisa Brown, Country Dancers of Rochester



Kathleen Suher and Dan Seppeler (foreground) dance past Kathryn Pedersen and Julia Nelson at the 12th annual Jane Austen Ball in Rochester, NY in April 2018 (photo by Dave Boyer)

Nearly two hundred years after her death, English author Jane Austen (1775-1817) changed the fortunes of the Country Dancers of Rochester (CDR). With the right marketing and outreach, she can change your organization's prospects too.

For 25 years, beginning in 1984, CDR held small monthly English country dances while the contra series flourished with well-attended weekly dances. Less than five years after holding CDR's first Austen event in 2007, the English series had skyrocketed to weekly dances, moved to a larger hall and offered four balls each year, two of which were co-sponsored by the local Jane Austen Society. Jane Austen kickstarted this growth and can help your organization boost attendance.

Austen's six witty, ironic novels, unfinished works, sarcastic published letters and hilarious juvenilia all feature country dancing. The entertainment industry cranks out film or television versions of her books every few years causing a continual renewal of interest. Her enthusiastic, devoted fans are legion, already familiar with English country dancing and predisposed to like it. Half your job is already done.

The first step in marketing to Janeites is to look for Jane Austen clubs in your area. Start with the Jane Austen Society of North America (jasna.org). JASNA has over 5,000 members and more than 78 regional groups in the United States and Canada. There are also hundreds of more casually organized Jane Austen clubs in almost every

city in North America. Seek out Janeite gatherings on the internet and social media. Ask them to include a link to your organization on their website or blog. Engage with them on social media to gain more visibility with their members and establish connections to other Janeites.

Give an English Country dance demonstration at Jane Austen club meetings. Partner on future projects and special events; name one of your special dances or balls after a ball or location in an Austen novel. This will draw Janeites from near and far as well as home schoolers to your event. Pool your resources by sharing labor and expenses on special events. In Rochester, the Central & Western NY region of JASNA underwrites the student scholarships at our Jane Austen Ball. CDR and JASNA also share business cards; one side has JASNA information and the other ECD details.

This collaboration will be more fruitful when there is at least one person who is a member of both groups. When new folks attend a local JASNA meeting, CDR members immediately invite and encourage them to attend a dance. If your organization doesn't currently have any Janeites, take steps to embed a dancer in area Jane Austen groups.

There are national and regional Jane Austen conferences throughout the year. These gatherings almost universally include an English country dance. Contact the organizers about teaching a class, giving a demo or calling a dance. The Country Dancers of Rochester has a demonstration team for marketing purposes. The majority of their performance requests are Jane Austen related and the team's name, The Meryton Assembly Dancers, reflects



(l-r) Eve Jasinski-Whitehead with Jere Brubaker and Lisa Brown with Eric Borresen at the 12th annual Jane Austen Ball in Rochester, NY in April 2018 (photo by Dave Boyer)

this interest. English literature programs at local colleges book the Meryton Assembly Dancers every year to teach country dancing to their Jane Austen or 18th century literature classes. Public libraries are always looking for book related activities and a demonstration of country dancing meets their needs.

Each of Austen's books has been turned into theater productions with country dancing a big part of the show. In the Rochester there is at least one scholastic production of *Pride and Prejudice* every year. The directors always need guidance when staging English country dancing. This is a perfect opportunity to market our dance organization. Professional theatre productions of Austen pieces are always popular and draw large crowds although they aren't as frequent as student productions. Working with a touring professional production gives country dancing a wide audience.

There are currently two Jane Austen mini-series in production in the UK. Those series will eventually be shown on public television on this side of the pond. Begin to establish a relationship with your local PBS station now so your organization will be familiar to them when it comes times to promote the latest mini-series. The premiere of these shows will ramp up interest in Jane Austen making this the perfect time to debut your own Jane Austen event.

The topic of Austen in the country dance community is frequently contentious; in online dance forums her name is often met with either silence or derision while dance historians sigh and moan at the very mention of her. The disparagement is mostly based on the use of inappropriately dated dances in the films and the love of Janeites for those dances. "Jane Austen never danced to 'Mr Beveridge's Maggot!'" is the cry of the naysayers. Consider the disinformation about country dancing during the Regency era as an opportunity to engage with Janeites about the history of English country dancing.

Janeites may try country dancing because of Jane Austen but they come back again and again for the dancing.

Lisa Brown is president of the Country Dancers of Rochester and past coordinator of the Central & Western NY region of the Jane Austen Society of North America. CDR offers both traditional New England Contra Dances and English Country Dances each week with live music. cdrochester.org.