

Leading a Contra Dance Role-Swapping Workshop

by Erik Erhardt and Tina Fields

Introduction

This article offers concrete “hows” for experiencing even more joys in contra dance. A workshop that encourages dancers to play in both dance roles is a fun opportunity that also helps evolve the skill of your dancers. While swapping roles initially seems like an advanced skill, it is often learned quickly and improves a person’s ability to dance well in either role.

We first provide swapping principles. In the online version of this article, we provide a selection of swap points in three scenarios, then we offer a workshop outline that you can use, based on the “Gender Shenanigans” workshop we gave at Stellar Days and Nights dance camp held in the mountains of Colorado in February 2015.

While this type of workshop works well as part of a weekend dance camp with most dancers in “traditional” dance roles, small doses have proven to be popular at local dances, too.

Swapping principles

It can be very fun to cultivate the ability to be “ambidancetrous;” that is, to be able to dance either role and even to switch roles multiple times during a given dance.

When considering role swapping, the first thought that arises might be the simple puzzle of body mechanics in the various moves. But first and foremost in community dancing is actually the need for consideration—for good dance etiquette. Etiquette is the art of making someone else feel comfortable, and this includes not only obtaining consent from your partner, but also being aware of the expectations of the entire dance line.

Always dance with **respect for your neighbors**. It is our observation that the essence of truly excellent dancing isn’t making fancy moves, but matching the needs and energy of each person met. Just as the elderly or disabled may need shorter, gentler swings, attention and courtesy must be given to each person encountered when swapping. Be in the right place on time for the next move, and confidently project to approaching dancers, particularly beginners, which role you’re dancing. This can be done by making eye contact, clearly offering the appropriate hand, and

additionally saying “I’m the gent/lady” if helpful. If you’re swapping, you shoulder extra responsibility for dance excellence. If we follow this “prime directive” of respecting the line, role swapping will continue to grow in acceptance and popularity, even among those with little desire to do it themselves.

Partners choose together (consent) when to swap or continue roles. Discussing briefly before the dance starts helps. In a same-gender or “ambidancetrous” pairing of any genders, decide who will dance each role and for how long. (Examples: “I dance both roles. Do you have a preference?” “Want to swap roles throughout the dance?” “How about dancing one role until we reach the end of the line, then swapping?” “Okay.”) Don’t force your partner.

Vet the dance as it’s being taught, and decide if it’s a good choice for swapping or not. **Exert caution during unbalanced or complex dances**, such as those involving opposite or changing directions of travel for each role (e.g., gents face in, ladies face out for a Rory O’More long waves, then rolling in different directions on different sides of the set). These can involve too much thinking to really be fun when swapping and can lead to repeated mistakes, thereby alienating your neighbors. Best to wait for the next one.

If you decide to swap multiple times throughout a dance, it can be helpful to **dance your original role two to three times** through before swapping to be clear about which role does what. It can also be helpful for each partner to dance both roles early on, while the dance is still being called all the way through.

Line awareness is important. If you notice or know that your next neighbor prefers to dance with other “gender norm” neighbors, you can help them be more comfortable by being in your traditional role when you progress to them. Do the same with known beginners: the visual cues of a beard, say, on the one dancing the gents’ role in an opposite-gender pairing can help them go to the right place. When in doubt, dance the “traditional” role; **connection trumps novelty**. Avoid dropping hands to swap (for example, when circling) since you’re breaking the connection from people who need you. If someone gets lost and you’re in the remaining trio of dancers, make a friendly fuss and have the lost dancer find you. If the line is breaking down around you, stop swapping and dance “traditional” until order permeates. Assess the line’s health and needs during the recovery points

during swings, long lines, heys, and whenever you're waiting on the side while your partner interacts in the middle.

Start playing with swapping by choosing **simple and obvious swap points** (e.g., at the end of the line or during a long swing). This allows the new role to be established and claimed by both partners in time to do the next move correctly. Later, when both are more comfortable with swapping, find a swap point where you might **surprise your partner** but where you also take the next active move (for example, put yourself into the lady role for a chain). This will give awe without giving immediate responsibility. Finally, when both partners know both roles, swap as much as you want without deteriorating the dance experience for yourself or others around you; do so artfully without excess. Some dances work better with swapping every time. Note that if a pattern of swapping has been established, then not swapping is a new surprise.

For a shadow dance, **warn your shadows** (a dancer you see each time who is not your partner, a.k.a. trail buddy) that you and your partner may swap, and try to indicate who they are. Because a shadow is an "anchor" to whom you repeatedly return, an unannounced swap can really confuse a shadow. But if your shadow knows they'll have two shadows, and can easily identify both you and your partner as such, swapping rarely poses a problem and often confers extra delight.

For callers, swapping as a dancer can enhance your skill. It's imperative for a caller to understand how everyone moves and interacts on the floor, and there's no better way to do that than actually dancing a figure from every dancer's perspective. The experience will often give you insight about figures new dancers may experience as confusing or frustrating "trouble spots." Swapping can, therefore, improve your teaching by helping you discover which words the dancers in each role need to hear, and when, in order to more quickly have success and enjoy dancing. As callers, we also want to encourage dancers to "dance with who's coming at'cha."

For all dancers, the increasing prevalence of role-swapping changes the game: encountering an unexpected person in a dance role doesn't necessarily mean they're in the "wrong" place. Instead of worrying or trying to correct the situation, assume they are where they belong and enjoy the dance, confident that any confusion will work itself out. It's the dance position/role (not gender) that determines the interaction between dancers. All of us can be anything we want, when we want—what power!

In the full-text online article available on the CDSS News page,* we provide a list of swappable moments with your partners, provide some cautions about neighbor swapping, and discuss the advantages of prearranging shadow play along the contra line and the games to play. Finally, we illustrate a 90-minute three-segment workshop to emphasize the basics of dancing both roles, swapping with your partner, and swapping with your shadows.

Conclusion

Besides the fun factor, it is hard to beat the learning that can be gained by dancing the other role. One quickly realizes what makes for good, enjoyable dancing (or not) by experiencing one's usual technique from the other side. For example, dancing the gent's role for the first time, Tina learned just how hard a swing can be on the right shoulder to bear the weight if the lady leans back too far in a misguided attempt to create momentum. This new awareness changed her dancing in the traditional ladies' role for the better from then on. And dancing the ladies' role, Erik discovered the welcome relief and connection of a standard courtesy turn following a whole line of gents twirling ladies at every possibility. Now he occasionally offers the simpler, sweeter basic move as a novel surprise.

We hope this article will encourage all dancers to be less intimidated when encountering neighbors in swapped roles in a contra line, for the curious to try dancing the other role with a willing partner, and if up for the mental challenge, for the courageous to then try swapping roles with that partner multiple times in a given dance. We also strongly advocate for attentive kindness in all forms of dancing, particularly when engaging in any sort of anomalous play.

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* **WEB EXTRA!** Read the full article at <http://www.cdss.org/programs/cdss-news-publications/cdss-news>.

The passion of human beings gathering together, whether to dance, play music, or sing is powerful. Embrace the power.
Dance. Play. Sing.