

To see ourselves as others see us.

Are there parallels elsewhere or does the way we present ourselves give no future for our Dances

Having only recently joined the Society, coming from a mixed background of Welsh Father and Manx mother, also having spent most of my life in England predominantly Yorkshire, it could be asked "What right have I got to comment?"

So a much abbreviated biography to give myself some credence: -
I began to perform Traditional Dance in approx 1968, though my family has been involved in Dance since as early as I can remember. I have (Yes all English I know) done NorthWest Morris, Cotswold Morris, East Anglian Molly, Yorkshire Morris, Yorkshire Longsword, being both team member and teacher of some of the teams and originator of others. I still teach regularly to Festival Workshops and individual teams. I am currently the President of the Morris Federation, an organisation with a membership of nearly 350 teams from all over the UK, plus some in Eire and abroad. I have researched NorthWest Morris and published one book about it, with a second in preparation. I am also a clogmaker with just over 25 years in business, specialising in the Dance market.

Ok, so to Clogs then... Well there is a separate article elsewhere in this magazine which deals with technical stuff re clog soles and a further article to follow on uppers and construction, so I wont go on too much here but will keep my comments to Dance.

It is intriguing to see parallels in claims to ownership of dances. Broom Trick Dances are fascinating and I was confused to be told they were a Welsh tradition. Confused because for the last few year I have danced with Seven Champions Molly team who perform East Anglian Traditional Dances in hob nailed boots, and by Golly do a Broom Dance with exceedingly similar moves to those shown on the Society's Clog Stepping Video! On showing a friend who does Cotswold Morris the tape, she commented that she was surprised to see that dance done in Clogs when the Fools Jig (as she called it) was always done in shoes! She believes it to be an English dance!

Drovers, Gypsies, and the Movable Tradition: -

Rhiannon and I have a passion for walking the old Drove road in Wales. I have also walked Drove roads in Scotland and East Anglia. Scottish cattle went to Carlisle market and East Anglian geese had their feet shod in pitch and sand before they were driven to market in London. There are many more examples of this activity. Drovers often had a reputation for liking a drink and would often stop their drove en route near a tavern to refresh themselves! Song, merriment and dance no doubt took place. Gypsies are renown travelling peoples, often working their way around the nation doing odd jobs, even clog block making. They too had merriment and dance at festivities such as horse fairs (Appleby, Cumbria etc). The East Yorkshire style of Step Dance (in shoes and clogs) was maintained by Gypsy families in the Holderness area. Obviously it is recorded that Gypsies were the repositories of Welsh Clogging too.

Is it too much to think that these two groups of travelling peoples came across each other at some point and picked up steps and style from each other? If

competitive dancing is normal, how does one become the best competitor? Surely by 'borrowing' a good step from here and a flamboyant step from there and putting ones own style on it? Any dancer would subsume a good move into his repertoire so he could come back to his home area with something new and flashy. These possible meetings would be the ideal places for such interaction between travelling peoples. Fairs and taverns are 'natural' places where different societal groups intermingle and interact. Transmission, even if unconscious, must have occurred, particularly if there was any competitive spirit to the dancers. Just because a dance was done like that on Monday doesn't mean it was the same on Tuesday or Sunday does it? Can you preserve a dance in aspic without it loosing some of its spirit?

Would a dancer necessarily give their best moves away? So to stay the best new ideas must have evolved somewhere, some time....

If the steps weren't borrowed, someone must have created them. They cannot have just magicked themselves out of thin air? So, what is so wrong about writing steps now or borrowing? Yes maintain a Welsh style by all means but if there is no development, can there be survival?

Did the Broom dance move from Wales to England or could it have moved from England to Wales?

Too lighten this discourse a little, the Welsh clog style has much emphasis on toe and heel beats (as does Lancashire). Why? Could it be loose clogs? Not as daft as it may seem as most clogs were big so you could grow into them, and would often be stuffed with hay or bracken to fill them out. So would the movements used for toe and heel ensure the foot was shoved into the clog to hold it on? Ok, so Toby steps are the exception! Pat Tracey, an accepted and recognised teacher of Lancashire stepping, gives this as the reason for the Lancs style of heel and toe.

Where does the costume come from?

Clasp clogs are often regarded as suitable and correct for Welsh stepping but the first recorded mention for a clasp was not until 1790 in Manchester. It is regarded as a cotton mill workers clog, and not thought to have moved into North Wales till the late 1800's. Certainly a low boot styled lace up was the most common in the quarries and mines. There are no records but many in the trade feel some of the english styles of clogs were brought into Wales by the merchants who took the Clog blocks out. There are references in literature to indicate clogmakers moving in to Wales from Lancashire and making finished soles for the english market, thus avoiding shipping the wood that would need to be trimmed off if it was just a block. After all, why transport firewood so far? Did these men bring the Clasp style with them?

The whole costume debate is a minefield and I do not feel qualified to find my way through but I do wonder about the constrictions placed on a body by heavy and close fitting clothing. I am sure there is a whole doctorate to be written on Male chauvinism and domination /womens rights/social pressures, etc. Is the concept of women dancing more demurely than men not just a middle class ethic? Is there no record of women getting carried away in private? To argue that women should not do physical moves seems to go against all the history of Ballet. Did a man design the accepted womens traditional costume??

Male and Female bodies have a different musculature, and thus must move in different ways but where does the boundary between lifeless and gauche lie? While a man can get away with more overtly physical moves, should this preclude a womans

exuberance? Both have a centre of gravity, and if this centre is not balanced, we tend to fall over, so in dance the centre must always be over the contact point with the ground. This does not mean bending but does mean the body cannot be totally rigid (anyway is this not the Irish style?). Is this not a situation where the clog sole itself makes a body move a certain way? Wear a flat sole and it is very difficult to get onto your toes without straining the calf tendons badly. A clog sole should have a curve that supports a body's weight without stressing it. A dancer who has to pull themselves up can't execute the movements with any grace. Take a video of a dancer from the side and then watch just how the body moves when doing each step. Rigidity cannot come into this. Compare two people doing the same step from the side, one with flat soles and one with curved. Watch how differently the bodies move! Owen Huw's clog soles are from the era of the Maud family owning the factory where they were made. Though worn down a bit, they still have more curve than the soles produced currently at the factory (there is a whole separate article on the trials and tribulations of the clog Sole Factory!!!). The position of the top lace hole is also critical but more on that in the Clog upper article appearing here soon!

Any conclusions yet?

Sadly, no just more questions!

As Devils advocate, can I forward these thoughts? Where are we going with the strictures of competition and judgement? Does it not lead to isolation and atrophy? There has been a long tradition of the Welsh being revolting(!) Cannot that attitude move the dance forward too? What would be the result if a conference were held with all attendees being Non experts but just those with a passion and a faith in the maintenance of our dances as a living tradition? All Europe's' dances started off with the Medicis in Italy anyway, what with their Court theatre and presentations, and we moved on from there, so why stop now? What would have happened to Ballet if Petipa had stayed in control and Ivanov not re written Swan Lake?