Left: Rachel Elliott.
Photo: Malcolm Taylor.

Activists in the community

Rachel Elliott explores the rich past and thriving present of England's folk dance scene

Joining the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) as its new education director in July, 2008 introduced me to a new world of community dance. It parallels the one in which I've worked for a quarter-century as a dance artist and educator. The change has caused me to reflect upon, and question, many of my previously held assumptions about folk dance, and about community dance as something that emerged in the 1960s with roots reaching back to the work of Laban and other modern dancers decades earlier.

It seems that English folk dancers - dynamic people like Mary Neal (1860-1944) and Caroline Daking (1884-1942) - were actually in the vanguard of community dance activism. Neal, for instance, used morris dance as a tool for personal empowerment and social change for deprived young women in London's King's Cross via the work of the Espérance Club, which she ran from 1895 to 1915. Daking (1) employed English folk dance to help rehabilitate injured and traumatised post-combat soldiers in Le Havre, France. Both of these remarkable women were doing this a hundred years ago!

Re-reading Frank McConnell's article in Animated (summer 2006) I connected strongly with his observation that folk dance is perhaps the original, and currently under-recognised, form of community dance. He was puzzled as to 'why there were no representatives from the English traditional folk dance world' at Country Dancing?, a symposium held by Dance South West in partnership with the Foundation for Community Dance in May 2005. I, too, have been asking myself why, after 25 years of working continuously as a dance professional, and collaborating with dancers and dance forms from all corners of the globe, I've had so little direct contact with English folk dance during that time?

As a child in the North East of England I went to many ceilidhs, and subsequently studied some traditional English dance as part of ISTD National Dance examinations. But I've experienced very little since then. In my new role at the EFDSS I've loved the process of learning about many highly regionally-differentiated dance treasures from across the nation. Rapper dance, for example, is not a form of hip hop as the name might suggest, but rather a dynamic,

"The evening concert … highlighted Mary's belief in 'the power of people to connect through song and dance, of social exchange and the bursts of creative energy that provide life with its moments of inspiration and re-invention."

Left: Mary Neal's Espérance Club, King's Cross early 1900's. Photo: Mary Neal Project courtesy of Vida, Cicely and Dorothy, daughters of Florrie Warren.

Above: Folk dancing with rehabilitating troops, Le Havre, First World War. Photo from Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection.

percussive dance from my native North East. Originally the preserve of men, but now performed by both genders, it's a dance of intricate figures in which participants hold, and are connected to each other by, flexible, wooden-handled metal strips, or rappers.

Some background about the organisation that employs me might be useful here. The EFDSS was founded in 1932 from the merger of the older Folk Song Society (1898) and English Folk Dance Society (1911). The EFDSS is a national organisation with around 3,000 individual and group members. In the past couple of years it's committed itself to a process of reinvigoration and restructuring to re-create itself as a dynamic, outward-looking and 21st- century arts organisation. With a new chief executive, Katy Spicer (who also has a background in contemporary dance), and a growing staffing structure, many changes have been laid in place. At the beginning of October it became a Regularly Funded Organisation of Arts Council England's music department, consolidating its role as a leading folk arts development agency. EFDSS is based at Cecil Sharp House, a folk arts centre in Camden, London. It opened in 1930 as a state of the art dance house, and as the home of the remarkable Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, the most extensive folk arts collection in the UK. The building was dedicated to the prolific and hugely important folk dance and song collector Cecil Sharp (1859-1924) who, according to the foundation stone laid on Midsummer Day, 1929, 'restored to the English people the songs and dances of their country'.

Forging dance-based partnerships with mainstream organisations is one of the best ways that the EFDSS can challenge preconceptions about, raise the profile of and introduce new people to the folk arts. In February 2009 we worked with the Mary Neal Project (2), headed by Lucy Neal (Mary's great-niece and former director of the London International Festival of Theatre), to present The Mary Neal Day at Cecil Sharp House. This was a celebration of Neal's sterling work in the fields of folk dance and social education, and also marked the donation of the Mary Neal archive to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library. The event shed light on the work of this tireless pioneer of the early 20th-century English folk dance revival. A peer of Cecil Sharp's, and of equal importance, she was previously unrecognised as such and therefore long-forgotten. The day included a plethora of talks and workshops.

Additionally, children from two schools in King's Cross and Hampshire worked with morris dancer and folk musician Laurel Swift and contemporary choreographer Freddie Opoku-Addaie on an educational project to uncover and communicate Mary's story and dances, and to create and present a new work. The evening concert featured morris sides, leading folk musicians and Laurel and Freddie performing a new contemporary morris dance devised in an open studio environment during the day. This highlighted Mary's belief in 'the power of people to connect through song and dance, of social exchange and the bursts of creative energy that provide life with its moments of inspiration and re-invention,' as Lucy Neal wrote in the event's programme.

In early April we created exCHANGES: morris/contemporary choreographic project, a week-long professional development initiative which sought to explore the creative potential of morris dance as source material in contemporary dance. Led by choreographer Kate Flatt and morris practitioner Dr Anthony Allen, it provided four choreographers - Adesola Akinleye, Yael Lowenstein, Bim Malcomson and Kieran Sheehan - with an opportunity to work with 16 contemporary dancers and six morris musicians/dancers, and to experiment with morris dance vocabulary within a contemporary choreographic framework. At the end of the project an invited audience from the worlds of morris, contemporary dance and music education attended a sharing at Cecil Sharp House. Paul Reece of the Morris Ring, one of England's three main morris organisations, described it as 'a stunning presentation... (which) very respectfully explored the morris as a resource >

Left: Sarah Hedge, exCHANGES morris / contemporary choreographic project 2009. Photo: Eileen Barnett.

for contemporary dance… to deconstruct and reconstruct what many of us take for granted. One amazing acrobatic interpretation explored a fusion of morris meets street dance (3), an inspirational wow for our younger potential jiggers.' The sharing was followed by a discussion about the value in understanding and appreciating folk and traditional dances for contemporary artists, and the possibilities for choreographic development of the morris form within its traditional setting and values.

In May we partnered with Sadler's Wells on Folk Art, Let's Dance. This was a weekend of transatlantic folk music and dance performance and workshops inspired by Alex Reuben's US folk and vernacular dance 'road movie' Routes. For four days that same month Kerry Fletcher (a Kent-based step and traditional dance artist) and Vivien Moore (a Canada-based contemporary dance artist and clog dancer) undertook a mini-residency at our headquarters to explore the choreographic potential of these forms of dance. At the end of the week the two dancers joined me in conducting a workshop for the Lilian Baylis Arts Club at Sadler's Wells. There they also premiered, to a rapturous reception, a new six-minute clog/contemporary piece created during their residency.

Since coming to the EFDSS I've discovered other, contemporary examples of what I term folk dance activists – people using folk dance in ways that resonate for me as a community dance practitioner. Our work as an organisation is to champion, engage with and, where appropriate, partner with them. Their work, in turn, is as vital today as that of pioneers like Neal, Daking and so many others who cared and loved English traditional song, music and dance and wanted to note it down, pass it on and, in a number of cases, use it in radical ways. Here are some examples of what's happening nationally now:

Katie and John Howson at the East Anglian Traditional Music Trust are encouraging the practice of, and pride in, step dancing and particularly from within the traditions of the gypsy/traveller community;

Laurel Swift, head of the youth folk arts organisation Shooting Roots, is committed to providing youth-led spaces for young people to engage in folk arts at festivals, and to exploring the theatrical presentation of morris;

Damien Barber, based in Yorkshire, is introducing rapper dance to young people and pioneering its performance, along with other forms of English traditional dance, in performance by Demon Barber Roadshow;

Liza Austin Strange has run the influential Fosbrook Folk Education Trust in Stockport for three decades, introducing generations of young people to the clog dance and music of the North West;

John Russell has taught the adult morris class at Cecil Sharp House as a volunteer for the past 22 years; an excellent, spritely dancer and exacting teacher now in his 70's, he's been astonished and delighted by the emergence of Sharp morris, a dynamic new mixed-gender morris side that sprang out of his class in January 2009;

Gordon Phillips has helped bring the molly dancing of the Fenlands (a distinctive form of morris) to a whole new generation in a series of school-located projects based on a powerful combination of dance and storytelling infused with heritage education, and often in a wider, cross-cultural context - for example, drawing on Polish and Indian dance;

Jane Pfaff who, after retiring as a deputy headteacher, has taken up a vigorous new career teaching English folk dance to children in schools across London.

Looking to the future, EFDSS is currently developing a youth folk dance project and is in discussion with a number of dance agencies about it and other community dance initiatives. We're working to ensure that English folk dance is on mainstream dance maps and that we continue contributing to the development of the form, widening the contexts in which it takes place and raising its profile. On 5th February 2010 we will host the inaugural and annual Mary Neal Lecture at Cecil Sharp House. Delivered by Lucy Neal, it will explore how her great-aunt's ground-breaking work connects with, and can inspire and inform, those of us involved in participatory arts practice today.

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The post of EFDSS Education Director is supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

(1) Caroline Daking (sometimes known as Daisy Daking) was a dedicated and energetic folk dance teacher who worked all over England. During the First World War the YMCA formed a branch of the EFDS at Le Havre, and Caroline Daking was the first teacher sent out by the Society. The Daily Mirror, July 1918, carried her photograph with the following caption: 'Folk Dancing' Miss D. C. Daking who has been introducing folk dancing for convalescents. Army gymnastic instructors are copying her method.' It seems that her attempts to repeat this innovative work during WWII were not encouraged by the EFDS

(2) For more information visit: www.maryneal.org

(3) Created and performed by dancer Leroy Dias dos Santos.