



Laura Connolly and Beth Beamer. Steps for Success conference, EFDSS. Photo: Roswitha Chesher

The folk dancing

In March 2018, the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) hosted Steps for Success, its first conference on the practice of social folk dance for several decades, in collaboration with People Dancing. The Dance for Parkinson's Partnership UK proposed the inclusion of a workshop exploring how folk dance might be adapted for people living with Parkinson's.

Anna Gillespie, co-founder of Musical Moving, was approached to forge new connections and explore these possibilities. Here's what she found out

Folk dance can sit very comfortably within the inclusive philosophy of community dance but this doesn't mean it is necessarily accessible to all.

Folk dances often rely on communal pattern making and not managing to perform one of the parts can result in the whole pattern not working. I remember a woman arriving at her first class for people with Parkinson's saying how she had loved to attend folk dance events in the past but could no longer take part. With this woman in mind I felt inspired to look for new bridges between dance for people with Parkinson's and English folk dance.

I was very lucky to undertake this venture with Martina Schwarz. Martina is not only a wonderful accordion

player with a knowledge of many folk styles but she is also a singer, an active member of the Natural Voice Network and someone with many years' experience in delivering music for dance in health settings. Our first step was to attend some EFDSS classes held at Cecil Sharp House, in Camden, led by tutor and caller Mike Ruff. It was particularly helpful that Mike had already taught in care homes and other community settings and was open and generous with his ideas.

Our lessons with Mike were wonderful but dancing these dances clarified the challenges. The steps were simple and could easily be translated into seated or adapted standing movements but the intricacy of the

pathways was challenging. I felt as if I was in a beautiful knitting pattern but nervous that I'd drop a stitch and muck the whole pattern up. The clarity and elegance of the geometry, aligned so satisfyingly with musical phrases, was central to the experience, with each dancer responsible for their part – the precise reason that the dancer with Parkinson's, who I mentioned earlier, felt she could no longer belong in this dance context.

Despite this the sense of community between dancers and musicians was overwhelmingly inspiring. Mike's delivery was illuminating and made us feel that we owned our dance. He talked about being connected through time and



Left to right: Martina Schwarz and Anna Gillespie; Anna Gillespie (left) and Cassie Tait; Colleen Bartley (assists Anna) and conference delegates Sara Rose and Liz Schol. Dance for Parkinson's workshop, Steps for Success conference, EFDSS. Photo: Roswitha Chesher

location to people throughout the ages.

How infinite each dance was in terms of possible variation and how each dance wove its way through different times and through different bodies to arrive at 'now'. We were the 'folk' folk dancing, we were part of something that had lived for hundreds of years. In order for us to embody the dance with more depth and understanding he referred to costumes, architecture, locations, literature and even courtly behaviour. At the same time he encouraged us to dance our own dance and enjoy our personal variation and experience. This approach was certainly an enriching and embodied experience that I felt I could relay to the dancers with Parkinson's in Camden.

Martina and I spent three weeks with the Camden Musical Moving Parkinson's Dance group, playing with ideas before bringing some of them to the conference. Our starting point was to create simple translations of dances whilst preserving and respecting the tradition in order for integration to be possible in the future. We made a seated version of Hunsdon House, a beautiful slow lyrical 17th century square dance. As we were seated we were spatially secure which enabled our timing to be more individual and at the same time retain the geometric precision of the dance. The chairs, set in a square, helped us clarify our spatial orientation, our pathways translated into gestures and shifts of focus and the dance emerged in the central space through the projected connections between us.

In many ways our Hunsdon House dance kept the ingredients that gave this historical dance its identity but at the same time a lot seemed to be missing. With nobody moving through the space it meant it lost its gliding

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lyricism and we lacked the social play that is so central to all social dance. So, we decided to dance another Hunsdon House but this time as an improvisation with the option of standing, moving through space or sitting. It was a far more playful dance and lots of fun – recognisable as Hunsdon House in style but free from geometric precision.

Each dance that we explored lead to endless possibilities for improvisation, 'Parkinson's friendly' translations, vocal work and play and we were delighted to have Mike visit and dance with us in our final week. His expert knowledge and folk dance practice gave gravitas to our experience and consolidated our feeling of being part of something greater than an average Monday afternoon in Camden.

We were uncertain about how our creative and Parkinson's-specific approach would sit at a conference that was about folk dance events for the general public and we were relieved to be thanked by Rachel Elliott, EFDSS Education Director, "for leading an excellent and very well-received session." However, the experience brought into light for us the question of integration. While specialist dance classes for people with Parkinson's are growing in numbers and enjoyed by many people, should we also be looking for ways to support people with Parkinson's to dance in dance events and classes aimed at the general public?

Classes aimed at people with a particular health condition often

create a space where a great solidarity between people develops and they also allow the practitioners to focus on helping with common challenges. However, this needn't be the only dance experience on offer.

The delegates at the conference expressed an overwhelming passion for English folk dance and music to be experienced within a safe and inclusive dance event for all. This made me wonder – could more folk and social dance events be supported by practitioners who deliver specialist dance classes throughout the country? Perhaps, rather than leading these sessions; their role would be to assist and offer new and accessible versions of dances within the folk/social dance event itself. There is the possibility that new versions of dances will emerge from these inclusive events, evolving the dances and developing tradition through inclusive folk dance.

I hope that this is a beginning rich with possibilities and that soon dancers with Parkinson's and dancers with other conditions will be comfortably finding their way back into folk and social dance. Certainly, the social/community/folk dances would be a more accurate representation of our societies/communities and the folk with whom we share our lives.

Info

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