

# Dancing the darkness away

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The man sitting next to me at the top of the bleachers in the Barnard gym was obviously not a member of the English Country Dance Society. As we watched a huge, hot, jolly crowd of people working its way through the longways dance, "A Trip to Paris," he said, "It's such an anachronism—I mean, I never would have believed that there were this many people in New York who'd do this kind of thing."

I remember thinking the same thing years ago when I attended one of the society's regular sessions, but the annual Christmas party really knocks the message home. Here were these people of all ages and sizes come together, not just for each others' company—although they plainly enjoyed that, and not for the cookies and Hawaiian they consumed buckets of both, but because they love these dances.

Most of the dances are those whose fiddle tunes were written down by John Playford in the 17th century. The tunes, pretty and fresh and sprightly, found their way into a lot of important English music—Purcell orchestrated some of them. The dances have little fancy footwork; their beauty lies in the complex patterns the dancers must weave with their turns and passes and circles. Each is set up in a particular way: longways, square sets, sets of five couples, sets of three couples, and so on. Most of them are couple dances, but an occasional one may have more unusual "Walpole Cottage," for example, has a circle of alternately facing sets, each of which consists of one man and two women. The names are terrific: "Parson's Farewell," "Hole in the Wall," "Mr. Isaac's Maggot."

The Christmas Festival featured country dances for everyone, a few complicated ones ("for those who know it," said the program firmly) and three American square dances. A lively little ensemble played the tunes, and Director Genevieve Shimer (I believe it was she) and Director Emeritus May Gadd talked the dances in hearty, unflappable British voices.

In spite of party fervor, the people were wonderfully industrious about their dancing—the awkward teenagers being given helpful shoves by their elders, the elderly show-offs, the worried ones, the ones with so little sense of space they went clear through their own sets and into the next one down, the hoppers and stampers, the cool stylists. Most of all, I liked watching May Gadd, who is small,

round, and white-haired, execute the requisite "jaunty walk" for "A Trip to Paris"—maintaining a smooth glide underneath a hint of a bounce, twisting slightly to eye her partner with her whole body as he passed. Properly done, the dances

have a charming sobriety, a sturdy, country cleverness.

I arrived at Barnard as the first interlude was ending—just in time to see the Morris dance, the "Nutting Girl Jig." A large group of the men, all wearing white shirts and trousers and black hats trimmed with holly, resplendent with red ribbons and bells, capered and pranced in a circle with skill and spirit. There are no drums or cymbals; the dancers' feet and bells prick out the rhythms against the supple and lively solo violin. Big jumps that spend one of their three counts in the air soar surprisingly out of the one-stamp-to-a-beat texture.

The second interlude featured the Uckfuss Mummers' Play and "The High Walbiggen," a sword dance. The play, like most of its kind, features sweetly inept rhymes and rowdy comedy, with contemporary colloquialisms grafted oddly onto the remnants of an ancient rite concerning the death and resurrection of a vegetation god, the spirit of the year. The brief Uckfuss play begins with Father Christmas as a kind of narrator, St. George as a loud and pompous hero, and Simon Simplethefool. To St. George is opposed the King of Egypt and his son and champion, Bold Slasher. In a tight circle of onlookers, St. George and Bold Slasher fight. In good school pageant tradition, the latter falls with the hero's sword grasped firmly under his arm. With stirringly simple eloquence, the king of Egypt laments his dead son, "Alas, you've broken his tool and ended his life." After much horseplay with a giant pill, the doctor, a genial quack ("I have a bottle under my belt that makes young girls feel better than they ever felt") resurrects the dead. Then the Tommy and the Betty (a man and a man-woman) lead on the sword dancers.

In the last mumming I saw, the sword dance was the means of killing; this time it was pure exhibition. Five men carrying the special flat and flexible swords keep up a lively jigging step, holding their own swords with the right hand, the tip of another with

## dance

by Deborah Jowitz

their left. By a series of complicated knotting passes over and under each others' arms, they make the swords into a locked star pattern that one of them can lift and display to the audience. There are many ingenious ways in which they achieve the star; one, for example, involves three of the men backflipping the other two over the swords. It's fast and intricate and unbelievable thrilling.

Two boys of about 16 were sitting next to me with their mouths hanging open, and everyone applauded each pattern breathlessly. At the end, the sword dancer-

s—again of all ages, men who'd been dancing all evening—were cheered loud and long by their friends. By all of us. It was an occasion for both laughing and unobtrusive weeping because of the beauty of the dance itself, of the trouble the men had taken to learn it, the skill they had achieved, and the love which they and their audience had for dancing. And the pride in it. What they were doing didn't involve any kind of remote virtuosity, but a degree of excellence—greater than, but no different from—that of everyone who was there to dance that night. It made up for a lot of dancing that doesn't get done in America. And if spring comes, I'll write them a thank you note.