

## Morris Presentation & Set Awareness

The Morris Ring as an Association does not seek to direct its member clubs how to dance. It can offer help, encouragement and stimuli to aid sides in exploring new territory and in presenting Morris dance as an attractive and disciplined art form, enjoyable for the performers and appealing to its audiences. It is for individual sides to determine the content, style and presentation they wish to adopt.

These notes are an aide-memoir for good practice, intended to illuminate features of the performance that should be second nature but that may have fallen fallow due to complacency or over familiarity. They are written not as a technical handbook; rather as an interpretation of what might be deemed 'classy' from the audience perspective.

### **Walk on and off**

Every dance has a beginning, middle and end. The middle is the section from the foreman calling for the dance to begin ('once to yourself,' 'this time' or some such) through to the cessation of dancing ('all up' etc). No matter how proficient the performance of this section, a sloppy beginning and end can undermine the impact of the display. A 'shamble on' at the start and 'shamble off' at the end is unprofessional and unappealing.

Attract the attention of your audience by approaching the dance arena in a purposeful, dignified and orchestrated manner. The easiest way to do this is the 'walk on'. I suggest preparing the 'walk on' as follows:

Gather the performers in an appropriate spot off the dancing stage. This is a perfect opportunity for the foreman to focus the minds of his set on the dance to come. Once the set is formed and ready to walk on, he can briefly highlight the salient features of the dance to be demonstrated (eg. 'Gentlemen, this dance is Sweet Jenny Jones, Adderbury. To start, face in, sing & dance round. Right foot start throughout).

When happy that the set is prepared, issue the command 'walk on'. This is the point at which the performance begins and the set is on show to the audience. Shuffling places, dashing offstage to retrieve forgotten hats, deposit tankards or spectacle cases, waving to Auntie Mary in the crowd etc detract from the aura that has been created.

Similarly at the finish of the dance, hold the finish position for a few moments to encourage the crowds to applaud and shown their adulation before relaxing. Wait for the foreman to call 'walk off' and then follow him **all the way** off the dancing arena. Not just two steps and then dash to the pub! The performance does not end until the entire set has completely vacated the stage.

An excellent way to instil this disciplined approach to presentation is to incorporate walk on and off into your practice sessions. At Harthill for instance we gather in the corner of the hall, walk on, dance and then walk off back to the corner for every dance we do throughout the winter practice. It becomes second nature and thus carries through into the dance out season. It works!

To add variety, some traditions embrace a processional dance that may be used as a 'dance on/off' rather than walk on/off. Hey-diddle-dis, Bledington is an example. Dance into the arena, finish in a set formation, perform a Bledington (or other) dance and finally dance off again with Hey-diddle-dis.

### **No one is perfect**

In a perfect world, we should all be perfect dancers however the reality is that some are more accomplished than others and factors such as injury or age will deny perfection. This need not necessarily detract from the performance in the eyes of the audience. Be aware of what

they are likely to focus on and hone those elements of your performance. A spectator will not notice if you started off on the wrong foot, slipped in a feint step or performed a galley instead of a hook leg. In fact they will hardly look at your feet at all. They see feet moving all day long and thus recognise nothing exceptional 'down below'. Seeing arms being thrown into the air apparently extended by the adjunct of handkerchiefs and accentuated by an accompanying caper is unusual and more likely to draw the eye. Similarly the brain likes symmetry and a set of dancers moving as one in a tidy, coordinated pattern is much more appealing than a chaotic and haphazard group.

### **The top line**

So if it is the top line that the audience watch, aim to perfect this component. In addition to learning uniform hand movements, incorporate a couple of tricks of the trade to further enhance the display. Make sure that in high capers the arm is fully extended. Hankies are usually tied around the middle finger and extend out of the back of the hand. As the arm reaches the zenith, flick out your fingers. This will have the effect of opening the hankies to full extension adding extra height. Tip your head up a little and look at your hankies. Your eye will draw the audience to look up also, particularly if the whole set is coordinated in this.

### **Lines and set positions**

Nothing detracts more from a good display than lack of shape. It is the responsibility of **every** dancer in the set at all times to ensure that he is in line. Don't pre-empt moves by turning into them before the music (eg. in rounds). Glance up and down the line at every opportunity and adjust position as necessary. On completing a corner movement, ensure that you return to the appropriate position in the set. When dancing a hey, make sure that you travel in parallel with your partner across the set. Avoid exceeding the boundary confines of the set – the further you travel the further it is to get back and the more rushed it looks. If you are ending a dance sequence with a hook leg or galley, aim to get near to your destination with the morris or sidestep and hook on the spot rather than trying to execute a 'flying' hook leg. Ensure that rounds are circular and dancer spacing is even. In a round of 6, each dancer should just be able to see his opposite across the circle out of the corner of his eye.

### **Homogenous Morris**

Every audience member has a limited attention span. This is extensible by exposure to an interesting and varied programme. Alternate stick and hankie dances. Encourage activity of fools, beasts and characters. Engage with the audience using an announcer with a big voice and sense of humour! Above all, avoid 'Homogenous Morris' where every dance is in the same style of 'Bledingfield Quarry'. Each tradition has its own style of dance and presentation. Examine their essential characteristics and accentuate them to make each identifiably different. Bucknell is sharp and staccato, Fieldtown softer and slower, Headington Quarry brisk and so on.

Finally, be mindful of the words of Cecil Sharp:

*When he is dancing, the true Morris-man is serious of countenance, yet gay of heart; vigorous yet restrained; a strong man rejoicing in his strength, yet graceful, controlled, and perfectly dignified withal.*

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