

Some Thoughts on Experienced Dances

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The following is a copy of a letter I recently wrote to two of our local dance organizers. I view it as an open letter to the entire dance community, and am sending copies to selected callers, dance leaders and dance organizers around the country. It deals with an issue that I have very strong feelings about — the direction of American traditional dance in the years to come.

Many of these feelings are based on the direction that square dancing took in the 50's and 60's. For those of you who don't know me well, let me give you some background. My father, Paul Kermiet, ran a summer dance camp, the Lighted Lantern, for 30 years during the time that I was growing up. The Lighted Lantern was a mecca for square dancers, who came from all over the United States and Canada to spend a week dancing, learning new dances, figures, styling, etc. The square dances in the 50's were still the traditional squares that you would recognize — the ones that you probably do, at least occasionally, in your local community dance.

During the 60's, all that changed dramatically. There was a confluence of forces that drove the dance form toward greater complexity — many of which are touched upon in the accompanying letter. Many of these forces and tendencies seem to be affecting our contra dances today. The danger is that we may go the way of the modern square dance — away from a social community dance and toward a complex activity for a well trained cadre of dance aficionados.

Today, as a result of the complexity of the dances, and the training required even to dance at a "Mainstream" level, modern square dancing is dying. They are not attracting new people to the activity. And the existing dancers, most of whom learned to square dance in the 60's, are now growing old together, and [are] literally dying. We can smugly think that this won't happen to us, that our traditional dances are heartier, and the contra dance movement [is] healthier. But will it be that way 10 years from now, or 20?

If present trends continue, I don't think so. These concerns are the reason for sharing the accompanying letter with you.

An Open Letter to the Denver Organizers of the Zesty Contra Series

To those of you reading this letter who are not familiar with developments in our local dance community, I will give you a brief update.

In October of 1994, two members of our dance community took it upon themselves to organize a "Zesty Contra" night as a once a month addition to our regular Friday night dance series. They originally conceived of this as a dance for experienced dancers — a dance with a minimum of instruction, short walk throughs, and with the assumption that all the dancers present would know all the standard figures, so that no teaching of figures would be necessary. This dance was seen as an attempt to meet the needs and desires of many dancers to have a dance where more challenging dances can be tried. As our dance community matures, and dancers gain more experience, they naturally want more challenging dances. This is a normal tendency. It is happening in other dance communities around the country.

I have some real problems with this concept, though. Here are a few of them.

For one, it tends to split the dance community, with the more experienced dancers going to the advanced dance, and skipping the regular weekly dance. In a community such as ours, where we have a fairly large number of dancers every week, these new dancers never get to meet many of the more experienced dancers on a social basis — and I believe the dance is still first and foremost a social event, where the emphasis should be on the sociability of the evening, rather than on its aerobic or intellectual challenges. And, in addition, the new dancers don't get the valuable experience of dancing with the more experienced dancers. It is here that they should be learning to dance with better timing, with graceful and flowing movements, etc. The learning curve of the new dancers is much improved if they have the opportunity to dance with the more experienced dancers, and the whole community benefits from these interactions.

Second, and in my opinion, even more important, an advanced dance is less of a community dance. It is, by

definition, a dance for an "in crowd." It's a dance for dance aficionados, most of whom know one another, who have favorite partners they want to dance with, who book partners several dances in advance, etc. A dance such as this is not welcoming to new people, whether experienced or not, who might walk in the door. It is a much more closed community, and starts to resemble a modern square dance club, where everyone is a "member," where new dancers are shunted into a "class" where they learn the "basic figures" which enable them to dance at a level equal to that of the rest of the dancers.

Do we want contra dances to go the way of the modern square dance? Do we want our dance community to become a closed "club?" Do we want to have "Mainstream," and "Plus," and "Advanced," and "Challenge" level dances? Do we want to have beginner's classes and lessons? This is where we seem to be headed.

A close look at the modern square dance can give us an idea of where we might be in 10 or 20 years if present trends continue. For instance, if callers and dance organizers give in to the desires of some of the more experienced dancers for more and more difficult dances, pretty soon some callers will start obliging them by creating new and more difficult figures and more complex dances, or borrowing figures from the modern square dance to use in the contra (both of these things are already happening). If this trend continues, dancers will soon have to know more and more figures. Soon there will be an explosion of new figures and new complex dances (exactly what happened to the modern square dance in the 60's).

The western tradition of "hash calling" was one of the factors that drove the modern squares in this direction. Hash calling simply means that the caller improvises the dance from figures or patterns that he knows, and the dancers have to listen and execute the figures. This is an exciting intellectual challenge for the dancers, and lots of fun if done with moderation. It does, however, de-emphasize dancing with the music. It also de-emphasizes the timing of the figures (getting through them quicker gives you more time to think about what comes next). And it emphasizes the need for all the dancers to have command of a broad range of figures and be able to execute them from a number of positions. There is no walk through.

Our contra dances are already heading in this direction with the "contra medley" where a second or even a third series of figures are started in the middle of a dance, and all the dancers are expected to "get it." It is only a matter of time before some caller will want to try a contra medley of 5 or 6 dances, or maybe even a new dance each time through the music. Then the caller's and dancer's skills will be emphasized and the beauty of dancing gracefully with the music, and enjoying the music and the flow of the dance, will be pretty much gone.

Another historical factor which led to the changes in square dancing which gave rise to the modern square dance movement should be noted. The great explosion of interest in square dancing in the 50's gave rise to a new phenomenon: the square dance "club" — organized and run by dancers. Previously, community dances had been organized by callers and bands, and in many cases, by granges or churches or other community organizations. They were community dances. The "clubs" organized dances for a more elite dancer. And the dancers, who then hired the callers, started to determine the direction of the dance form.

Now we come to the latest letter which I recently received from the coordinators of the Denver "Zesty Contra" where they state that they want "their dance" to have no mixers, or squares, or circle dances — just contras and couple dances. And they want dances where everybody is active most of the time. And they want nearly all of the dances to have a partner swing.

Here is my reply to these dance organizers.

As a caller with over 20 years of experience calling traditional squares and contras, I object to the idea of the dance organizers, however well meaning they are, try to dictate to the caller the contents of the dance evening. I can see where this is bound to lead. Also, as a caller, I see myself as one of the keepers of an important tradition of American dance. I don't want to see the contra dance go the way of modern square dance.

For example, I don't want to see the traditional square dance die out. Almost none of the modern club dancers has ever seen or done a traditional square. Squares have changed so radically since about 1950 that these two dance forms are now worlds apart. In our Denver traditional dance, squares and contras have always co-existed. At the dances 15 years ago, the mix was probably 1/2 and 1/2. Over the years, the contra dance has come to predominate, probably because it's easier for most new callers to learn to call a contra dance. But what will happen to the traditional squares if we all quit calling them and dancing them? Will they die out entirely? Will they be rediscovered and revived? This is an important part of our dance heritage that I don't want to see lost. I think the "zesty contra" dancers should do at least one "zesty square" during a dance evening. I think every contra dance should have at

least one square, or we run the risk of losing them entirely. I don't care what kind: New England, Western, or Southern. I think every caller should learn how to call them, and should do at least one during a dance evening.

I have even stronger feelings about the mixer. Especially at an advanced dance, which, as I indicated above is, by definition, less welcoming to new people. The mixer is critically important. It is one of the few opportunities to dance, however briefly, with someone new — someone you may not already know. Why, you might even discover that they are a good dancer, or that they have a nice smile. You might actually meet someone new, which is one of the purposes of a social event in the first place. You might want to have a dance with that person later on. Or that person who is new to the group might be you, and someone might ask you for the next dance, and suddenly you'll feel more a part of the dance, a part of the group. It's happened to me before. No one wants to be left sitting on the sidelines.

Now let's talk about the partner swing thing. I understand the attractiveness of the swing — the physical contact, the sense of balance and equilibrium with another person that's achieved, along with the mild sense of disequilibrium that's induced by rapid spinning. It's wonderful to swing lots of different people. Each swing gives a sense of connection with another person, and each swing is different, as is each person — there's connection and variety both. But do we need a partner swing in every dance? Where's the variety in that? I also understand the charm of swinging with a special partner. Oh-la-la! But is every partner in every dance that special someone? Maybe we should reserve the waltz with that special partner.

If we can take a longer historical look at the contra dance, we can find many older dances with no swings in them at all. In the older dances, more emphasis seems to have been placed on the figures themselves, and also on the balance. It seems that, over the years, the emphasis has shifted from the figures to the swing. And in the last few years it has shifted even more towards the partner swing.

Well, are we running a singles club or a community dance? Is the object to pick up someone? Or to have a sociable evening? Are we coming to make new acquaintances, or are we just on the make? Are we coming to the dance just to swing our favorite partners and stare intensely into their eyes in mock passion, or are we coming for the sense of community feeling, the natural high that comes from the combination of compelling music and graceful movement?

I'm afraid I have to come down on the side of the community dance, where all are made to feel welcome — young, old, single, married. Where all have a sociable evening. Where dancers are considerate to new people, where they ask them to dance and try to make them feel welcome. I like a dance where the caller encourages the new dancers to mix in with the more experienced and vice versa, and where there is an occasional mixer to help facilitate this social mixing.

I see the caller as not just the dance leader, but also as the social director of the evening. I think the caller can do a lot to set the tone. Perhaps by not expecting perfection. Perhaps by letting the dancers know it's O.K. if they make a mistake. (After all, it's just a dance, not a job interview.) By programming dances that are not too unforgiving, and by selecting dances that are appropriate for the median skill level of the dancers present. By bringing the new dancers along by slowly introducing new figures and new combinations, and by saving the harder dances for later in the evening. By not berating the dancers for doing something wrong, and not singling people out for making mistakes.

As a caller, I feel that I have a duty and responsibility for preserving and perpetuating traditional American dance — contras and squares. I like the idea of doing at least one of the older traditional contras during the dance evening. If we forget them or lose them, we will have lost an important link in our dance heritage. And I feel the same way about the traditional squares. Even during an evening devoted primarily to contras, I intend to do at least one square. And it's essential to keep the mixer. After all, our traditional American dance is a social community dance, where we dance in sets and squares and circles; not a partner dance like ballroom dance, where you spend the evening just dancing with your partner.

And so, one final word to the organizers of the Denver "Zesty Contra" dance series: I like to occasionally call a more challenging program. I think there's a place for it, and it may help fill the needs of a growing segment of our dance community. But if you hire me to call your dance, I am going to program the dance evening. I will include a "zesty" square, a mixer, and one of the older traditional New England contras. Not all the dances will have partner swings.

Should you dislike my program, your option is simple: hire someone else to call "your" dance. But I sincerely hope that we can think of this as "our" dance — our American dance — and that we are all a part of the movement to preserve and transmit this living tradition to future generations.

I realize that this letter is a pretty strong statement of my feelings. I know that these dance organizers are well meaning, and it's not my intention to try to single out or to offend them. I know how much effort it takes to start and run a dance series and I appreciate their desire to do so. It reflects a love of the dance.

My intention is to point out the problems inherent in having an advanced contra dance. And this is an open letter to the dance community, because it's not a local problem. These forces and tendencies are nationwide. The danger is that we may go too far in the direction of the modern square dance, with too many figures, unnecessary complicated dances, lessons, beginners classes, and an "in group" or "club" atmosphere, as opposed to the traditional open community dance, where all are welcome, no lessons are needed, and no partner or special costume is required.

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