

NURTURING THE SHOOTS

Seven years ago I started a Children's Class in Bournemouth. There was a desperate need for youngsters to replace us "Oldies" in the future, and I hoped that by starting young, they would be fired with enthusiasm for SCD, and thus "hooked" for life! Those original 5, 6 & 7 year olds are still with me, having formed the Macaulay Display Team, and helping with the newer recruits. Our class now numbers thirty-eight 5-15 year olds, and boasts an almost 100% attendance each week.

Classes are held on Thursday directly after school, and I have the invaluable assistance of Margaret Robson. The first hour is open to all ages and abilities, whilst those ready for improvement stay for the second hour. One evening a week we have a 2-hour class for the very advanced, and in all classes we adhere to a strict "No Parents Present" policy. Families do join us at the end of the summer term, to watch progress and see the awards of trophies and medals. At Christmas, we hold a Children's Dance, inviting families, Branch members, and our adult display team. All join in audience participation, and displays are given from every group. Seeing dancing well performed is a good incentive for improvement.

With regard to teaching, I treat the children as equals. They enjoy a challenge, and being stretched mentally and physically. The class is continuous, so no one has a chance to be bored or mischievous! Apart from simplifying language, no allowances are made because they are children; and I never under-estimate their capabilities. Don't accept faults, as these will stick — especially with phrasing — after all, children can count! Above all, make the classes fun. I include some Highland because it adds interest, and the children really enjoy it.

Two years ago, I created a competition of devising dances to encourage the class in their understanding of the theory of SCD. The Macaulay Collection Vol. I was the result, and Vol. II is forthcoming. The annual Slough Festival has brought us great success, and raises standards all round. The Macaulays have also won the local Opportunity Knocks for the last two years. In April, the Branch holds a combined Children's & Adults' Beginners' Class, with an open invitation to all dancers, and it is a well-attended occasion with 80 plus. Each July we attend the Cardiff Festival — the weekend being spent camping in a Scout Hall (minus the Scouts!). It's great to see the friendships developing and strengthening. The Macaulays are allowed to display in the adult section as well as the children's, and they thoroughly enjoy the Evening Dance, sailing through the programme with ease, as they are fully conversant with ballroom etiquette. This year it was an extra thrill for them to display at the Garden Festival alongside our adult team.

Our Branch has always been supportive, and has accepted the juniors at all Branch functions, including the Day School — ability not age being the crucial factor! The children have never made a conscious leap to adult dancing; it was a natural transition. At our Autumn Dance, as I was watching them dance and mix so well, it struck me that what I had set out to do seven years ago had happened. In front of me were a dozen teenagers filling that "gap" with another 25 shoots ready to spring up!

Hopefully, next year will see our first youngster attending Summer School, and already, she has ambitions to teach. I'm proud to think that in a few years, some of these students will be teaching alongside me! I trust that more than a little of my

passion for SCD has sustained their interest. They certainly have a sense of pride in belonging to a Society such as ours. An excerpt from a letter sent by one of the girls would appear to sum up everything: "... the more I learn, the more exciting it becomes. I love going to the Adult Balls — my life revolves around SCD. I don't ever want to stop, and want to learn much more, and continue dancing until I can dance no longer (when I'm really old!!)." That's enthusiasm.

That's enthusiasm.

Marilyn Watson
Bournemouth Branch

We are delighted that Marilyn has been appointed to the sub-committee looking at Junior Membership of the Society for under 16 year olds.

THE DANCE MAKARS

(Part I)

Roy Goldring tells us how he sets about devising some of the most popular dances in the repertoire.

Doreen and I started to teach in 1976. Not long afterwards I began to think of re-grouping existing dance formations in the hope of devising something different. I have been fortunate in several ways. Doreen has a good feel for what is likely to dance well, what is generally within the capabilities of dancers plus a very keen sense of tradition. She is also a sound judge of dance prose. We have had many a spirited discussion about this — I detest writing out the instructions for a new dance.

Over the years we have had a class with a fair number of experienced dancers who have been very willing to try out new ideas, usually after hours. It is one thing to picture a dance in the imagination but the reality can be different. On one occasion, the link between two figures seemed to work quite well until a dancer backed into place at the end of the first figure and made the transition much more difficult to manage. In retrospect, I was grateful for this; if one (experienced) dancer can have such problems, so can others and the sequence may be too fragile for social dancing. I have been lucky too in that a number of teacher friends have been willing to give me a second opinion on a new dance. I can rely on them to say exactly how they feel and one or two pass on the unexpurgated views of their class members.

I work in two ways. Sometimes odd phrases occur to me when I'm listening to dance music or even when I'm dancing. It then becomes automatic to try and think of other movements which would make a good match. After a few mental experiments the idea may be developed or abandoned. There are various reasons for scrapping a dance including impracticability, lack of distinction or simply because the combination of phrases may be too similar to something already published.

It can take a long time to resolve a particular problem. The last 24 bars of the Argyll Strathspey (Book 35) were devised quite quickly — probably within a matter of hours — but it took me more than 2 years to think of the kind of entry into the circle which I had been seeking. I find that I cannot force the pace; I just have to keep trying different phrases in the hope that something suitable will turn up.

My other approach differs in that it starts from a wish to write something specifically for class use. We started to accept beginners into the Ilkley class in the mid-1980s when we had only a few books containing dances aimed specifically for their use. I therefore began to put together extra dances; some were designed to practice steps or figures, others were fairly easy fun dances. People naturally like to feel that they have achieved something at class and we like to finish each evening with something simple

but jolly. Although new dancers need to be stretched in order to develop, they also need some easily digested sweetmeats in their diet. I am also a strong believer in incorporating some easy dances in social programmes.

Which comes first, the music or the pattern of the dance? In one sense the music must come first because it provides the essential life force for the dance movements. Yet I rarely attempt to set a dance to a tune.

I have no musical skill and limited knowledge about the suitability of tunes for dances but fortunately I have friends who are fine musicians. All I have to do is to outline the pattern of a dance, indicate whether it is likely to be quick or slow and the result is either the offer of a new tune or a suggestion about the use of an existing one. When I was putting together the square set reel which was chosen to mark the Leeds Branch 30th Anniversary, I changed the beginning from 2 bars pas de basque, 2 bars skip change to 2 bars skip change and 2 bars pas de basque. The upshot was that Muriel insisted on providing a completely new tune.

Although I try to ensure that one figure flows naturally into another, I believe that flow is an overrated virtue. One of the pleasures of many of the old dances comes when everyone in the set works together to make the whole thing come alive. This can also happen with modern dances but the spirit can be lacking if the pattern is so complex that the dancers' primary concern is survival. However, I should confess that my current plans include square set dances suitable only for the (mentally!) advanced.

The fact that a series of movements can be danced without serious problems does not make the end product a satisfying dance. What may have seemed like a good idea in theory may not amount to much. I remember being in a class where the teacher went through a string of his new dances. Most of those present were competent but the session became a struggle. After one hectic dance had been negotiated the teacher said with some relief, "You see, it really does work." But that is only one factor; another question would have been whether anyone wanted to repeat the exercise and, in particular, to dance it socially.

When a dance has a character of its own, a degree of originality and a tune which is memorable then it probably merits some popularity. If it is satisfying to dance then it may not matter greatly if the joins show — indeed that may be part of the attraction. I like a dance to have light and shade and not be a relentless travelling exercise (although I have to admit that I have been guilty of this more than once.)

The world is not short of good, enjoyable dances and I have little doubt that further breeding will continue. Just as there is a continuing tradition of composing Scottish music for dancing, it can be argued that devisers are following suit. I have a vested interest in supporting the inclusion of some modern dances in class and social programmes but I do not like to see so many that older dances are elbowed out. However, in the last analysis, the good dances of all vintages and sources will probably survive and the best will be danced socially. The vast number of worthy but not completely inspired works may well be useful material for teachers at weekly classes and weekend schools.

Finally, let me assure you that I enjoy and admire the work of most other devisers. Some had already published classics of the genre when I was still struggling to learn the basics of dancing.

John Drewry will share some of his tricks of the trade in the next issue.