

Problems of Doing Research in Dance History

When faced with the fact of doing a beginning dance history research paper, I thought of it as a series of steps. At the beginning of the project, the process seemed pretty clear: (1) choose a topic, (2) research the topic, and (3) write the research paper.

I thought nothing could be more interesting than to study my own Swedish heritage and its dance customs. I chose to focus on the dances that were brought with the immigrants to America when they settled in the Swedish colony of Lindstrom, Minnesota.

Only after seemingly endless telephone calls and countless trips to places such as libraries, the Lindstrom Chamber of Commerce and the Swedish Historical Society did reality hit me. I began to see problems that I never imagined that made research into dance history so difficult. I realized how wrong I was in assuming the research I needed to carry out was a simple 'step process'.

When I began to ask for help, the first thing I realized is that people did not want to help me because they had the idea there was no point in pursuing further study into my topic. When I tried to use oral sources, i.e. librarians and others, to find out about Swedish dancing in Minnesota, these were some of the responses:

"Good luck in finding anything on that!"

"Why would you want to study that?"

"Do something more interesting" and,

"If I were you, I'd pick something easier."

Since I'm a dancer and of Swedish extraction, pursuing the study of Swedish dancing was (and still is) interesting to me, but unfortunately I was being discouraged by people when I really needed help from them.

On my own, and taking Gore's statement, "In the construction of dance histories a number of analytical considerations are important" (1994: 72), I tried to contact a leader of a Swedish dance group (The Kichi-Saga Dancers), but the leader had just passed away. When I asked about other possible leaders, there was no one else I could come up with.

Although my attempts to speak with someone who knew of Swedish dance had failed, I did find some written material I had been searching for. By accident, I found some songbooks written for young children. By this time, I realized I had to broaden my topic to 'Swedish dance and research' instead of pursuing the study of Swedish dance in Minnesota. It frustrated me to do so, but there wasn't any information available for me to use in connection with my original research topic.

Problematic Source Materials

In trying to do research on Swedish dances in Minnesota, I had to use some oral sources. I talked to librarians and a historian at the Swedish

Institute in Minneapolis (which has a branch in Lindstrom). I couldn't find anything about the origins of Swedish dancing in this state. The only references I discovered were about Swedish dances in written and visual forms. The written sources contained music and dance notations.¹ According to Layson,

Descriptions of village dance festivals and society balls often occur in historical novels and other fiction and appear authentic. Nevertheless, such literature is solely a primary source for the period in which it was written and cannot be regarded as evidence for the period about which it was written (1994: 21).

Written historical records contain choreographed steps and formations, and because of these, it is possible to gain some historical perspective on the recorded dances by comparing and contrasting them with what is going on today.

But, this is questionable, because how does one assess the authenticity and accuracy of the document? Accuracy may be difficult to determine, so authors have to say things like this:

There is in fact no general written introduction to English traditional dance to be recommended which does not suffer inaccuracies or speculations. Hugh Rippon's (1993) *Discovering English Folk Dance* is perhaps the best and most concise introduction to date and is particularly illuminating on the interplay between 'the tradition' and 'the revival' (Buckland 1994: 48).

The visual materials I found on Swedish dancing in Minnesota were very old photographs and drawings -- delicate sources to use as exact records. As Layson points out, sketches, although often considered to be primary data, need to be used with considerable care and understanding: "Knowledge of artists' personal styles and art movements or schools with which they identified may be required" (Layson 1994: 22). Furthermore,

In the light of difficulties that arise in the use of visual works of art, it might be assumed that photographs of dancers would be accurate and, consequently, impeccable primary sources of material. Yet this would not allow for the fact that many of the technical problems encountered in the early days of photography such as exposure time and capturing movement accurately, remained unsolved until well into the twentieth century. ... [U]sing photographs as historical evidence it is important to distinguish between posed and action photographs and establish location ... (1994: 22).

Because mainly secondary sources were available for me to do my research, it was difficult (if not impossible) to make research thorough. With written histories and knowledge of the histories very sparse, there were only a few texts with little information to be found. The majority of the texts I did find were written in old, outdated Swedish language which isn't comparable to present-day Swedish language, which made translation almost impossible.²

Historical studies of dance that cross language divides necessitate using translations if texts cannot be read in their original form. Translations made by non-dance

specialists may place the dance essence of an account in jeopardy. Even when bilingual dance authors ... undertake a translation, caution has to be exercised because some dance terms and nuances do not translate readily (Layson 1994: 25).

Other major problems I encountered with written source materials were (1) books missing pages, so they were incomplete; (2) resource no longer in circulation, and (3) old ink print in some sources no longer legible. In spite of these difficulties, I was able to gather some information, summarized in the following sections.

Early History

There is no reliable authority for the presence of the dance in Sweden until written history begins. In the medieval *Erik's Chronicle*, it is stated that when King Valdemar, son of Birger Jarl (founder of Stockholm), celebrated his wedding in the thirteenth century, dances were part of the festivities. Considered the greatest occasion of any man's life, wedding celebrations went on for several days. Still celebrated today, most other customs would have disappeared except for their inclusion in marriage feasts (Salven 1949: 7).

Dance went on to expand as a part of Swedish rituals and ceremonies of worship. Sword dances, for example, were performed during funeral ceremonies and ancient chain dances were done in circles to the singing of songs. These ancient rituals were slowly replaced by various cultural influences in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Then, in the sixteenth century when the Lutheran church had surpassed the Catholic Church as the national religion, neither church encouraged the continuation of the old rituals, dances or music. Industrialization and the disappearance of village life led to the decline of old celebrations. As wealthy and royal classes grew, many dance influences were brought from the courts of southern European countries. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, all but a few ancient rituals were replaced by court dances among wealthier classes and only the folk dances were done by peasants.

Swedish Dances

From what I was able to gather, dances in Sweden can generally be divided into three classifications. these include (1) the song-dance and the *langdåns*; (2) the village dances; and (3) the figure dances. The *langdåns* and the song-dance are the oldest forms of dancing in Sweden.

The *langdåns* is a line dance that is variously done through the rooms of a house and then around the midsummer pole outdoors. It is performed in a snake-like fashion. It is also done at holiday time around the Christmas tree. For the *langdåns*, the steps consist of light running or soft walking steps. The dancers hold on to each other in a line. Musical accompaniment for a *langdåns* is often provided by a fiddle, but it can also consist of humming or singing "la-la" (Casey 1981: 265).

Song-dances are usually done at special times of the year in connection with special holidays. The songs are sung by the dancers and they contain

directions about the dance. The subjects of the songs are often pantomimed in dance form. Often, dancers are in a ring until they find each other, at which time they dance in small groups or couples.

The most frequently performed dance in the villages since the seventeenth century has been local variations of the *polska*. It is derived from Sweden's intimate relations with Poland since (about) 1600. The *polska* consists of many figures, usually with the first part including slow walking steps followed by a faster second part of couples turning and pivoting. This dance was composed of simple steps and springs, sometimes hopping. During the turning figures, men's and women's steps are usually different, but merge together anyhow. Found throughout the various provinces of Sweden, the *polska* has many local variations. The old *polska* was danced in one spot on the floor, while the newer versions have couples moving around the room counterclockwise.

'Figure dances' were brought to Sweden through the efforts of the nobility. They elaborated existing movements by introducing steps and patterns from older village and song-dances. These 'figure dances' used various formations such as the quadrille. In the Götlands quadrille dancers formed two parallel lines of three couples each. Men are on the left side of their partners, holding the woman's left hand with their right hands. The lines are four steps apart and face one another. The patterns of movement usually involved the musical choruses and verses. During the verses, the whole set usually danced followed by a ladies' section, then the men, then the whole set danced again. Sometimes *polska* or mazurka steps were added to the quadrille. In the end, men formed a circle around the ladies. Everyone walked around the circle in opposite directions, releasing hands, halting, and facing their partners. The dance was repeated as many times as desired, although each time with a new partner (Burchenal 1913: 36).

Children's dancing consisted of Swedish song-plays which were games along with singing. They often danced at events such as Easter Eve, Christmas, and around the mid-summer maypole. There was no record of a dance performed only by little boys, although there is a dance called *Seven Pretty Girls* performed by little girls, who dance around in circles singing "Seven pretty girls in a ring, no prettier girls can be seen here among our pretty playmates" (Burchenal 1913: 43). However, there were dances such as *Gustaf's Skoal* performed by little boys and girls together. Dances performed by these children were done at men's and women's social events. I find it interesting that there is little information on children's dances, especially since some of the resources I found were written for children.

All dances performed displayed the strength of men and demure, feminine behavior by women. An example of this is the dance called *Three Men Polska*, done with a total of nine people, three men each with two women at their sides. Other common dance themes are circle and line dances usually done to singing and couple dances that include much turning and spinning. The steps in the dances are relatively simple (kicking, galloping, pivoting and

sliding) but the patterns were complicated. The set formations include rectangular and circular group formations. Dances often consisted of eight parts lettered A through H, each consisting of eight measures, except 'H' which may have as many as twenty measures. The last section could be repeated to allow for inclusion (if desired) of women's solos followed by men's solos before the re-partnering of men and women at the end of the dance.

Music

The accompaniment to Swedish folk-dancing most often was provided by fiddles, played in groups, with the fiddling 'dialect' being so distinct that there was great variation played in the different provinces. In some regions of Sweden the 'key fiddle' (*nyckelharpa*) or the 'wooden shoe fiddle' (*traskofiol* - an instrument made out of a wooden shoe) were utilized, usually accompanying other fiddles or vice-versa. Other instruments used to play songs and sometimes dance tunes in the old days included willow whistles and flutes, cow horns and clarinets. But the 'right' instrument for village dances such as *polskas* would almost always be fiddles only, played according to the regional 'dialect' from the time when the dance and music originated (Casey 1981: 266).

Costume

The people of Sweden are proud of the great variety and beauty of their regional costumes. Newcomers and newly married couples must adopt the costume of their parish. The man's waistcoat and girl's bodice are of weaving designs often found in tapestries of that district. Blue is the predominant color. Girls wear light-colored caps; married women wear dark caps. Married women could not allow their hair to be seen, so they wore a thin piece of decorated lace over their heads under the cap. Single girls wore a similar cap, but with no cover. The girls' dresses had silver buckles on the bodices to keep them on and a long skirt often of an embroidered floral print. Young men wore short jackets, their elders wore a long coat (Salven 1949: 17).

Writing Dance History

For me, the biggest aspect of doing research in dance history was the time and patience it required. In the beginning I thought I would just find my sources and go from there; that is, write the research from there. I now realize you can't rush when you are trying to find something as important as sources for a research paper. If others are not willing to help, then you have to depend on yourself. You're not always told what you need to know, and I think this makes research difficult.

I was not able to find enough sources of information connected with my original idea, and had to change my original concept because of the lack of source material. You have to take time and explore every angle, then retrace your steps until you find what you need. Because I couldn't find suitable

written sources where I expected to find them at the Swedish Institute and the Lindstrom Chamber of Commerce, I continued to search at several libraries where I unexpectedly found several sources in the Children's section. I find it interesting that the subject of dancing is so often included in the Children's section.

People didn't seem to respect the research that I was doing. I can't say that I'm satisfied with the sources I finally had to use. I feel there should have been more sources available on Swedish dances. I think other people, especially my family, would be interested and more informed if more sources were available. I was also not at all satisfied with the reactions I got while trying to pursue my work. The negative reactions made the work difficult. It was easy for me to get discouraged and I almost wanted to give up, although I didn't.

I feel the contributions of the Swedish immigrants to Minnesota have been considerably overlooked. It is unfortunate, especially in this part of the country where such a strong heritage exists. Because of the few resources I had to use, it was difficult to assess the value of what I read and it was hard to figure out what the authors were trying to say. My thoughts are best summed up by a statement by June Layson, i.e. "The importance of source materials in dance history research cannot be overstated" (1994: 29).

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Notes

¹ By 'notation' I refer to little drawings of floor plans and foot patterns, not movement-writing as in Labanotation.

² There was the another problem: I am not fluent in Swedish, but one of the librarians at the Swedish Institute explained about the language to me.

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