

WHY STOCKTON FOLK DANCE CAMP STILL PRODUCES A SYLLABUS

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- Loui

Why does Stockton Folk Dance Camp continue the practice of writing dance descriptions and providing a syllabus at Camp each year? Why not rely on the videos that are made of the dances?

The first drawback to video is that we don't know what its shelf life is going to be. Stockton has been filming dances since the 1970s and, during that time, we have used 8 mm and 16 mm film, VHS tape, and now DVDs. In addition, there are videos available of many dances on YouTube and elsewhere on the Internet. There has been film on reels, and film in cassettes of various sizes. There were many pieces of equipment used to play these films/videos. You can now get your videos as mp4 computer files. The bad news is that what was recorded on some of that 8 mm and 16 mm film and those VHS tapes *cannot be viewed today* because they have deteriorated so badly. Some dancers have VHS tapes they cannot view because they no longer own a VHS tape player. Technology changes very quickly. We may think today that DVDs and mp4 files are the end of the line and are the best there will be, but not so long ago many of us had a collection of music on cassette tapes or mini-discs. And don't even get me started on the accuracy of the videos posted on the Internet!

On the other hand, dance descriptions are printed on paper. We still have dance descriptions that were prepared using typewriters 70 years ago. We have books of dance descriptions that were printed over 200 years ago. Somewhere there are probably papyrus scrolls describing ancient dances. There are no guarantees that the DVDs and computer files we have today will be viewable in another 100 years. There is a good chance that paper that has lasted this long will still be around.

Many dance teachers object to preparing and editing dance notes because it is time-consuming and arduous and tedious. I have written dance descriptions myself so I can attest to it as well. Public school teachers don't like to prepare written lesson plans, and students don't like doing homework. Police officers have to write up reports of what they investigate. Doctors have to dictate and later review the notes of their interaction with patients. Professional cooks complain that having to write down precise quantities of ingredients and times and descriptions of processes stifles flexibility, spontaneity and improvisation. Yes, there are parts of every job that are tedious and boring. The dance teachers didn't complain about writing dance descriptions in the 1980s when there was no alternative. They are complaining now because an alternative has presented itself. However, I believe video is not a *substitute* for written dance descriptions, and that both play a part in preserving the dances we are learning.

I am not anti-video. I believe both are needed, and for several reasons. Yes, a good video can be a quick way to check a nuance of hand gesture or foot position which was not

fully described in the written dance notes. On the other hand, when a movement or combination of steps is complex or fast, a good description that accurately describes what is done on each beat can be just as good as, if not better than, a video. For example, figuring out the last slapping pattern in Chef (Cristian Florescu's dance) proved to be easier for me to grasp in the written description than watching the video over and over.

There is also the ease-of-access issue. If all you want to know is whether the last beat of measure four in the second figure is a slap or a stamp, you can pull out written dance description (whether it's on a computer, a single printed page in a binder, or the entire syllabus) and check the specific spot in a minute or two. If a video is all that is available, you need to locate the video clip on a piece of equipment (DVD player, computer, iPad, smartphone); wait for it to load, and then play the video until you reach the specific spot, or move back and forth along the video stream to find the precise spot. It is doubtful that can be done in less time than looking at the written description.

It has also been suggested that the syllabus be eliminated and participants at a dance event be allowed to video the dances because, if the purpose is to promote dancing, it should be as easy as possible for participants to get dances quickly back to their groups. They should be allowed to use their smartphones, and the salaries of the teachers could be increased to compensate for lost revenue through sale of a DVD. Those who want to video can do so, and those who want written dance descriptions can write their own at the time they learn the dances, or later after viewing a video.

Have you ever been to a high school graduation? If you have, you know what happens when videotaping is allowed at a public event. Do you know what a dance session will look like if videos can be made by anyone present? You'd have five people dancing and 45 people standing on chairs or otherwise jockeying for position around the dance floor trying to get a good video with their cellphone or camera. What chaos! I don't want the Stockton Folk Dance Camp experience to deteriorate to that level. I hope we all come to dance, not to record dances while other people dance.

As for having people write their own dance descriptions, all that will do is multiply the inaccuracies inherent in the process. One person will describe a slap as a stamp, another will fail to mention that a step is done while backing up, and two others will inaccurately describe the rhythm. The dance notes will be duplicated and passed around and who is going to say which description is accurate? On the other hand, if you have one set of dance notes that is authorized by the teacher to begin with and reviewed by people who care about their accuracy, the resulting product has at least a fighting chance of being accurate.

And while we're on the subject of writing your own dance descriptions, have you tried making handwritten comments on a video - or even on a PDF of the syllabus? On the other hand, I have added corrections and comments and rated the dances as to their appropriateness for my classes - by scribbling on the printed syllabus.

Some Stockton Folk Dance Camp participants have said they resent having to subsidize the production of a syllabus when it is something they don't want or need or use. There is a lot that happens at Stockton Folk Dance Camp that not everyone wants or needs or uses. You pay for the dance classes you don't attend; you pay for the singing class even

if you don't sing. You pay for the dance parties that you skip. Unless we institute a "Pay at the door" policy, all of us are in the position of paying for some things that we don't use.

There is that saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. By extrapolation, a video is worth tens of thousands of words. That doesn't make the words unnecessary or less valuable. Stockton Folk Dance Camp does not plan to abandon the written word or our written dance notations. Let's allow videos and written descriptions to work together to maintain an accurate record of our dances.

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