

TACTalk V. 14 No. 2 September 1989

Devising Dance Programmes

By Bob Campbell

Many dancers and teachers know Bob Campbell's name because of his popular dances. But before his death in 1993, he was highly regarded for his knowledge of dancing and his generosity in sharing that knowledge with correspondents and teachers worldwide.

This article (which the editor remembers inspiring her in her early teaching and programme-devising days) was published in TACTalk, Volume 14, No. 2, September 1989.

Regardless of personal taste and preference in the choice of dances or music, Bob's article offers some common sense and practical advice from which all teachers can benefit.

Many years ago, some of our members observed that the selection of dances for ball and dance programmes left a lot to be desired. As a result, a few notes on the preparation of programmes were drawn up and circulated in the newsletter at the time (TACTalk was still in the future). Later, with many new teachers making up programmes, the problems were again observed, and the editor of TACTalk reissued the notes. Many years have passed since then, and from recent comments, we can only conclude that the problem has reared its ugly head again. As an example, at a recent ball, one dance was so complex and unfamiliar that the dancers had to walk it through with instructions before they could perform it. In other words, what should have been a social moment full of gaiety became a lesson. How should we select the dances for a programme, and how should they be placed so that the evening goes with a swing?

As we are part of the RSCDS organization and depend largely on the books they have issued, most of the programme should be made up of RSCDS dances. Most of the dances should be fairly easy or of average difficulty so that dancers of all ages and levels of ability can enjoy the evening. Do not include more than one or two difficult dances and only those likely to be known by those expected to attend. In the case of a dance after a workshop, a difficult or unusual dance taught during the day's classes may be included. This does two things. It helps the dancers familiarize themselves with the dance and adds to the programme's variety. As teachers, we must remember that a ball, a monthly dance or a workshop dance is a social event, and dancers should be able to meet the others present between dances rather than having to study crib sheets, pocketbooks, Pillings or the like.

If it is known that many who will attend are past their prime, be cautious about using 40, and 48-bar dances. Although many older dancers are sprightly and can handle a long dance, it is best to space them out in the programme.

Most dancers appreciate a chance to warm up, start the evening, and each group of dances after an interval with an attractive, easy three-couple reel, jig, or hornpipe to set a lively spirit. A strathspey has sometimes been used to start the second half of a programme. Some dances which

have worked successfully as starters are *Light and Airy*, *Hooper's Jig*, *The Jubilee Jig*, *The Laird of Milton's Daughter*, *White Heather Jig*, *Roaring Jelly* and *The Gentle Shepherd*. (It is most curious that these are all 6/8 dances!!) The last dance of each section and the evening should be a lively, popular three-couple fast-time dance. Some dances which have worked well in these spots are *Maxwell's Rant*, *The Montgomeries' Rant*, *The Sailor*, *Jessie's Hornpipe*, *West's Hornpipe*, *The Duke of Perth*, *Davy Nick Nack*, *The Australian Ladies*, *The Irish Rover*, *Mairi's Wedding*, *Reel of the 51st Division*, and *Shiftin' Bobbins*. (It is again most odd that these dances are all in 2/4 or 4/4 time!!)

When selecting the dances, the aim should be to have the greatest possible variety of figures in the programme. Many figures should appear only once; others may appear twice or perhaps three times if spread out and in dances of different musical tempos. (A poor selection a few years ago had reels of three in eight of the twelve dances on the programme.) Another example would be to avoid having the same figure or figures in consecutive dances, e.g., *Dumbarton Drums*, *Monymusk* and *The Gates of Edinburgh* (reels of three and setting three-and-three are common to all.)

A device can be used to avoid a conflict of figures. Take a sheet of columnar paper with a heading section at the left and twelve columns. The name of the dance can be inserted at the left together with the type and source, and the column section is ruled to provide six spaces. Enter the dances to be considered at the left, then insert a shorthand form for the figure phrases in the columns, 4 for 32 bars, 5 for 40 bars and 6 for 48 bars. The shorthand used to describe the figures can be of one's own making, and it is surprising how quickly a system can be worked out, for instance, RL for right and left, a circle with a 4 in it for four hands round, X for hands across, X for hands across and back and so on. The letter U can be used when a figure is unique and occurs in no other dance. One then does not have to look to see if it appears elsewhere. In this way, when all the dances are filled in, it can be seen at a glance where repetitions occur or where there is a lack of variety. When making a selection, be cautious about including a dance which has appeared on programmes in the area over an extended period of time. Dancers tend to become bored with such dances, and bands become tired of playing the tunes.

It is sometimes helpful in the interest of variety to include a dance which, although not particularly difficult, includes a tricky bit of phrasing or technique. One such dance which has been used successfully is *Lady Susan Stewart's Reel*. The first figure is rushed and hard to phrase and usually surprises those who have not danced it before. There is also a tricky bit at the end of bar 16, where the first couple have just set to partner up and down the dance. They have to modify the setting by advancing towards first corners to turn properly on bars 17-18. Another dance that has been used to stimulate interest and have a bit of fun is *Argyll's Bowling Green*. The transition in the footwork required between bars 24 and 25 is a challenge to anyone.

If the floor is expected to be crowded, avoid dances which include a figure that would interfere with the dancers in adjoining sets, e.g., *There's Nae Luck about the Hoose* and *Up in the Air* with casting off behind own lines and casting up; *Madge Wildfire's Strathspey* and *Lady Jean Murray's Rant* which require a wide set to phrase the four-bar crossing properly; etc. If the crowding is likely to leave less than the usual arm's length between dancers on the sides

avoid two-couple dances in which a dancer crosses over to perform a figure on the opposite side e.g., in the second repetition of *Red House* or *The Duchess of Atholl's Slipper* there would not be enough room to dance two reels comfortably on the same side of the set.

Most teachers making up programmes select a sequence of dances to give variety, e.g., reel, strathspey, jig or hornpipe, jig, strathspey or again, reel, medley, jig, etc. Select dances with an eye for variety and contrast in the music and the figures. Consider how different the music is in the following jigs or other dances in 6/8 time.

The Gentle Shepherd
The New Rigged Ship
Just as I was in the Morning
Hamilton House
Haddington Assembly
The White Heather Jig
The Maid of the Mill

or reels and other fast-time dances in 2/4 or common time;

Red House
The Australian Ladies
West's Hornpipe
Mairi's Wedding
Kingussie Flower
Reel of the 51st Division
The Duke of Perth
Petronella

or again, strathspeys.

The Braes of Breadalbane
Miss Catherine Allen
The Birks of Invermay
The Village Reel
The Balquidder Strathspey
The Glasgow Highlanders (not strictly a strathspey)

It is best to have one person responsible for preparing a programme, although he or she may consider suggestions made by leaders or teachers of classes, groups, clubs, Branch Teachers' Councils, etc., depending on the circumstances. A programme prepared by a committee or made up from a list of dances submitted for the purpose by a number of teachers is usually inferior.

A fair amount has been suggested about dances that could be included in a programme. Are there any dances that should never be included? Yes, there are. Here are a few.

Genevieve's Jig (Book 32 No 7) This dance can only lead to complete confusion.

Miss Devon's Reel (Book 20 No 6) It is not possible to dance two reels of four on the side at the same time in the second repetition.

Miss Heyden (Book 17 No 6) Utterly uninteresting.

Lucy Campbell (Book 17 No 7) Too difficult for the ballroom.

Twenty-first of September (Book 17 No 11) Too difficult for the ballroom.

A Trip to Holland (Book 19 No. 9) is rather dicey. The phrasing of the leading figures is awkward.

The Golden Pheasant (Book 16 No 9) is too awkward and strenuous.

You will no doubt be able to think of many more. Therefore, please take great care in preparing your dance lists, whatever the function, and earn the gratitude of everyone who eventually dances to your programme.

REMEMBER! Happiness is a well-planned programme.