

Dancing the Dance, an essay

by Tom Webb

When does dancing arise in the dance? What elements make the difference between going through the motions and being fully caught up in the music, figures, style, other dancers, and the dance? Nikki Herbst inspired this question by her demonstration one morning at English Week at Pinewoods 2012 when she plodded down the dance floor, then turned, and after two steps began to glide back toward the stage. The moment of transition was quick enough to be imperceptible, but the transformation of her movement into dancing took my breath away. That shift on her part, however, is only one element of what it takes for dancing to arise in an English dance.

Let me attempt to chronicle the evolution by describing my own transition from getting through the figures to dancing them when learning a new dance. Having found a partner, I stand in a longways line and wait for the instruction to begin. Listening to the music is a good place to start if the teacher calls for a few bars of the tune. So much of the spirit of the dance comes across there. Then she or he tells us the figures, which we walk through, and they provide the scaffolding for the dance.

But here the sense of dancing can get lost. The figures are often taught in a disconnected way, and I can get fixated on trying to memorize them and their sequence. As the dance begins, I am often working to remember the first figure and what comes next. My timing can be off, especially when going from the initial figure or two into the next. As I move around looking

at my partner, corner or neighbor as the dance requires, I may not feel a connection or be moving in synch—most other dancers are also searching, testing and feeling for how the dance flows. Before long I emerge in my progressed place when the first full sequence of the figures ends, and I am ready for another try.

What a wonderful gift from our dance form that it repeats the figures and movement not once but many times. I get to discover the choreographer's genius (or not) in making one figure lead into the next as I face and partner with the different people in my set and sometimes the next set. I also begin to look along the line and move in concert with the other dancers as well as opening to the music and the tune as its phrasing tells me about timing and, well, phrasing of the figures. Meanwhile, underneath it all is the style of my dancing that carries me, whether in a glide like Nikki's or in a rant step or skip depending on the music and the dance.

Now it's the third time through, and I seem to have the figures sorted out along with their transitions being better timed to the music, and I am relating to my partner and each new second couple in turn. The dance has gained a cohesiveness and a spirit with its changes in pacing from swift to still or alternatively with its continuous flow. I can feel myself becoming part of it as the world spins about while my eyes meet my partner's and sparkle with hers as we both sense a charge from getting "it." Like magic, I have stepped through some boundary where

time expands and I move from another place while feeling the pull outward and inward to where just the dance resides—that space held in the meeting of our eyes as we turn together or gypsy. We release into the dance and music and catch the flow from one figure effortlessly into the next, and the music fills our beings.

What is fascinating is that exactly how I am dancing the dance can vary with my partner. I love the sense of symmetry and timing. If she chooses big sweeps and an open style, then I work to match her. On the other hand, if she is taking it easy and conserving her strength, then that will set my style. I love this variety in the dancing. What a great feeling of being met or being able to meet another dancer with my version of her dancing. We may be setting together in a slow waltz, and just timing my body to sway with hers can bring the dance alive. Sometimes she is playful and then we have a whole other thing going. Maybe she casts a mock stern look for some misstep or improperly offered hand or arm, and I realize that I must imagine her in her flowing gown and act accordingly by standing a bit taller and taking a more aristocratic air. Now we are in synch and the tone is set. We have escaped back over two hundred years and transported ourselves to a hall in England. It's a waking dream until the dance ends with a bow and curtsy. Suddenly we stand face to face in t-shirt and shorts and smile our goodbye. All around us the shuffle starts as others partner for the next dance.