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Table of Contents

President's Message.....	1
Draft Minutes of June Members Meeting.....	3
Coming Events.....	5
Summer Solstice Party.....	7
Report Card—BFD and World Dance.....	7
Teaching Schedule—July 2007.....	7
Thank You! Thank You! Thank You!.....	8
Member Profile—Marilyn Bookbinder and Burt Levy.....	8
Trial Dance Selection Night.....	10
From the Archives.....	10
Upcoming Members Meetings.....	12
Staff.....	12

[To go to an article, hold down the CTRL button and click on the article.]

President's Message

“The Future of BFD – and of Folk Dancing”

I'm worried about international folk dancing (IFD). Berkeley Folk Dancers is by far the largest and healthiest IFD club in this country – and even we are gradually declining in membership and participation. Today we have 173 members (including 7 on leave); five years ago, we had 224; 11 years ago we had 244. As Bill Lidicker reminds us in his article on page 10, the second largest club has only about 75 members. And the average number of folks dancing each week per group remained at just over 22. BFD is healthy compared to other groups, but that's small comfort since we are not nearly as healthy as in the past.

There's a great deal of discussion going on in IFD circles about what can be done to revive this wonderful form of recreation. I'm going to very briefly summarize an online discussion sent to me by Mel Mann. For more of this discussion, go to <http://www.dance.demon.co.uk/AGC/Articles/IsIFDDead.html>.

There are too many dances and they are too long and complicated. Dancers feel daunted. In the golden age of IFD, back in the 1940s and '50s, folk dancing was much more relaxing and fun because there was a lot less to learn, before there were so many folk dance camps. IFD should concentrate on a relatively short list of "classic" dances that have stood the test of time. Veteran dancers should always accommodate beginners and create an encouraging atmosphere for them. Dance groups should cultivate a sense of community. Generic dances should be emphasized. A good dancer should be seen as one with grace and good styling, not as one who knows hundreds of dances with complex steps.

I agree with just about all of this. And for the most part I think BFD is already following these suggestions – which probably accounts in large measure for our relative success. Our club DOES have a strong community feel. The 4-level structure really succeeds in creating a welcoming space for beginners while accommodating the needs of more experienced and skilled dancers, including the many members who dance at more than one level. Those who just want to do the simpler dances can stay forever at the Intermediate level. And we keep many classic dances in our repertoire for 20, 30, even 40 years. Our repertoire includes generic dance forms as well as choreographed dances. We devote one evening a week to request night, where classic and relatively simple dances turn out to be the ones most frequently requested. We have cleaned out our repertoire (quite a while ago) of the most artificial, showy, overly complex dances, such as Red Boots and Russian Peasant. We have greatly reduced the over-all size of our repertoire, especially at the Advanced and AI levels.

I can think of a few additional things we could consider doing to move BFD more in the direction suggested by the online discussion and hopefully make us a more attractive club.

- * We could reduce the annual number of new trial dances (12) and the smaller number of new repertoire dances and dropped dances each year. Do we have just the right challenge, especially for the AI and Advanced levels, between challenge and boredom?

- * We could reduce the size of the beginners' repertoire, especially the number of dances taught in September and October, when many newcomers leave, perhaps because they feel overwhelmed.

- * We could ask teachers to put more emphasis on styling, thus trying to shift the definition of "advanced dancer" from "one who is willing to try to learn complex dances" to "one who dances with grace and ethnically authentic or correct style." (I must say, though, that previous efforts to emphasize styling have not had much impact.)

- * The Dance Committee could do a better job of placing the most complex dances at the higher levels and the simplest dances at the lower levels. Am I the only one who thinks some of those Intermediate dances are awfully complicated?

- * We could allow people to stay forever at the beginners' level, doing the most classic and simple dances (though this would interfere with the main function of the beginners' class, which is to provide a lively place to welcome new beginners to the club).

I welcome your comments, ideas and additional suggestions. If BFD could discover the key to growing its membership again, we could share that experience with the whole international folk dance community. Wouldn't it be great if IFD came to be seen by people of all ages and ethnicities as the latest exciting new form of dance?

The above is an extract from the BERKELEY FOLK DANCERS Newsletter
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