

Hearing Oz Strine
Rude thoughts on 'polite conversation'
as demonstrated in Australian folk and heritage dance

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Australian English

Australian (Oz-Strine)-English is what we speak in Australia and 'Bush Dance' is the name we give our Anglo-Celtic folk dance. This dance dialect has not been the subject of much academic curiosity, perhaps because it is the expression of the dominant culture and thereby normalised and invisible to many people. In this paper I intend to discard that camouflage and reveal some of the messages I hear from this dance genre.

This paper reports on two of the places which made distinctions apparent: the archives of dancing done in Australia before the 1939-1945 World War, and dancing in the United States of America, because it began, too, as a colony of English-speakers.

When I have described some of the distinctive characteristics of Bush Dance and verbalised their embodied meanings, you may recognise that some of those meanings are professed by other nations/cultures, leading to my conclusion that Bush Dance's 'Australianness' is a product of its time as much as of its place.

Polite conversation

In colonial times within a set dance, dancing couples took turns to dance whilst others waited. At such times, the text books advised that one engage in polite conversation with one's partner (Christison, 1882, p. 20; Read, 1876, p. 15; Routledge, 1865, p. 19). You may have seen this demonstrated in films such as *Pride and Prejudice* or *Gone with the Wind*. These dances are included in the repertoire of colonial dance groups in Australia. This polite conversation among performers on stage is one of Australian folk dance's distinctive features, extended by some performers to applauding at the end of a dance. Australian dancers clap even when they are using recorded music. (Video clips shown of this) I suppose it shows that they enjoyed the dance.

I have seen folk dance performances from Spain, USSR, Mexico, Africa, Canada, USA, Israel, and Denmark, as well as those by NZ Maori, many Aboriginal Australian groups, and many Australian-migrant groups. In none of these dances did the dancers talk to each other on stage during a performance or clap at the end of their own dancing, though it would be just as 'authentic' for them as it is for us. In fact, often the dancers would go off stage if they were not included in the dance. So I believe it to be unique to Bush Dance, and interpret it as an expression of casualness and informality and an unwillingness to be intimidated: a 'take it or leave it' attitude.

Bush = Country

For non Australians, I need to explain that in Oz-strine 'bush' means 'country', so bush dance is Australian country dance. In our verbal language if someone is 'in the bush' she isn't confused: she's merely travelled to the countryside. 'Bush Dance' is what our Anglo-Celtic-Australian folk dance is called: but it is not what it expresses.

Oz country dance speaks 'town'

Michael Roe described the actual situation in Australia this way: 'the appeal of the bush has been the great myth of Australian history whereas the appeal of the city has been the great fact' (1962, p. 364). Most European people in Australia live in towns and cities and they always have. It should, therefore, be no surprise to find that urban, or perhaps sub-urban, values colour the dancing, despite being called 'Bush Dance'.

One factor that drew traditional social dancing toward the towns in Australia was the gender imbalance: the population of Sydney and the larger country towns had more women than men whereas the outback areas and the gold diggings had more men than women. When men wanted the company of women they converged on the towns where dancing was one of few ways of socialising with women in the days prior to World War II.

Early Australian social dancing clearly reveals its concurrence with ballrooms and dance halls: areas with smooth and often slippery floors. I have analysed bush dances and discovered that almost half of them have sliding steps in them – slip steps or chasse turns¹. Chasse steps slide along the floor and are not suited to performing on uneven grassy locations.

It is clear from the stepping alone that Australian dances developed inside. A majority of other folk dance languages in other countries evolved in rural settings and whilst a rural setting is a place, I would argue that Australians express sub-urbanisation partly because that is where we are, but also because of the fact that Australia's white population exploded with the discovery of gold in 1851 and thus our culture began after the industrial era had started. The folk revival of the 1950s when the collecting, recording and proselytising began is also influential.

Archives

To research the embodied style of our folk dance in the past, I examined the Australian Film and Sound Archive. Trolling through the films of private parties and picnics, and newsreels of festivals and celebrations, did I find 'Waltzing Matilda' (a.k.a. Circle Waltz) 'The Heel and Toe Polka', 'Circassian Circle', or even 'The Pride of Erin'? No, I found something quite extraordinary. Anglo-Celtic-Australians, the English-as-a-first-language speakers, when they did their folk dancing, put up Maypoles!

In the archive, I found nine film clips prior to 1939 of Anglo-Celtic-Australians performing folk and other kinds of social dancing; the earliest from 1905². In seven of them the dancing is very similar and includes only girls, some primary age and some teenagers: girls in white frocks skipping around Maypoles, except for the last, in 1938, which shows boys and girls skipping round Maypoles. When I say 'Maypoles', I mean 'massed Maypoles'. The film from 1924 in Adelaide has 1000 schoolchildren dancing, as does the one in Sydney. There are also recordings from Melbourne and country towns in the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. In England dancing around one Maypole in a village was traditional. In Australia we invented something called 'massed maypoles'. These performances fairly shout, 'we are English'.

Bearing in mind that filming at night without intrusive and expensive lighting was impossible, I do not conclude that these films were a representative sample. Merely that it was unexpected given my post-war English-migrant experience and indeed it surprises other bush dancers given our reliance on Shirley Andrews (see below). We should also remember that a mere 54 years separates the huge influx of free migrants in the gold rushes commencing in 1851 and the first of the films in 1905. Before the Second World War maypole dancing in Australia seems to have been ubiquitous: after the war it virtually disappeared. I found only one later film of maypole dancing: from 1960. This change coincides with the demise of the British Empire and the creation of a Commonwealth of Nations (Empire Day became Commonwealth Day in 1958).

Andrew Milner dated this change from the era of 'Greater British Imperial culture', to the fall of Singapore on 15th February 1942 during the Second World War (1991, p. 117). Abandonment by the mother country is very likely to create a crisis of identity and the abandonment of massed maypoles by Australians could be interpreted as evidence of his proposition. Six weeks earlier Prime Minister Curtin, quoted by the *Melbourne Herald* (Ward, 1965, p. 125; Horne, 1972, p. 222), was already indicating that because of the Pacific War against Japan, Australia's fighting plan would be made 'free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom'. The Australian identity as separate from mother England is a post-war phenomenon.

A 1944 film of National Fitness campers in Victoria dancing shows that while still only girls are dancing, the dances are from a variety of European traditions. The dances included according to the voice-over, are Highland Schottische, a Dutch dance called Hendrix Scholl, the Hungarian Czardas and the Circassian Circle.

Folk revival

After the war, a folk revival occurred in Australia, as it did in other countries, with the First National Folk Festival being held in Melbourne in 1955. At that festival three dances were performed: the Varsovienna, the Waltz Cotillion, and the Circassian Circle (Andrews, 1984, p. 2).

Shirley Andrews, the first researcher and historian of Australian folk dance, began her folk dance collecting in 1959 and by then, it seems, maypole dancing is all but completely absent. There is no mention of it in her 1974 book *Take Your Partners*. Andrews reports that she discovered in 1963 in the town of Nariel in Victoria evidence of a continuous tradition of Australian social dances (Andrews, 1984). But by 1984, at the First National Folklore Conference, Andrews is stressing the multicultural origins of our dances. Her paper called 'Our Dancing Is Different' directs our attention toward the multicultural roots of our dances. I was therefore surprised to find in the archives Maypole dances as almost the sole representative of folk dance before 1939!

Multiculture

In 1972 the Whitlam Labor Government dismantled the White Australia Policy³ and in 1973 Al Grassby, the Minister of Immigration, proposed a multicultural policy. The previous policy of assimilation was replaced by a policy of separate visibility. Migrant minorities and Aboriginal clans that previously had been coerced into apparent invisibility were no longer ignored: there appeared the rainbow colours of cultural diversity. Whereas previously cultural groups other than English had been invisible, now the English cultural group was threatened with invisibility by the multitude of different cultural groups⁴.

The folk revival was by then well underway and fertile ground from which to grow a certain 'traditional' Australian folk music and dance. The bush music clubs of Victoria and NSW, which had begun around 1954, led to this dance becoming known as 'bush' dance. From whatever culture this bush dance derived it proclaimed itself to be anything but English; Andrews' 1984 paper 'Our Dancing is Different' being a clear example. The fact that Australian literature is written in English is taken to be of little consequence, and likewise the derivation of our dancing.

English-Australians, in consequence, have created their own folk dance groups, including many Morris dance groups of each gender and of mixed genders, English Country Dance groups, and Playford groups. Some of these groups are adamantly not English either. The Sydney Morris Men, when I interviewed them at their practice in Balmain, delighted in explaining how different their dance was from English Morris, as did Molongolo Mayhem Morris when I questioned them at the Illawarra Folk Festival⁵.

I was privileged to witness the artistic direction of Australian Nell Challingsworth as she honed the Australian Heritage Dancers, and I came to recognise, in hindsight, how the dancing became what it was because of

Challingsworth's sensitivity in collaborating with other Australians. In some cultures it may be possible for the artistic director to order dancers around, but that way of behaving would contravene the egalitarian sensibilities of Australians and Nell Challingsworth was a consummate diplomat. Some of the young men were expert Scottish dancers; some were ballroom dancers and others were not; several were well over six feet tall; others were much shorter; some of the women were grossly overweight and others sickly thin; and one couple in their later years had not the pliability to spring off the floor. Yet all of them expected to take part. Challingsworth's solution, rather than cull the dancers, was to present folk dance as a dance of the folk and not as an excellent precision display of only the very best dancers. It was her artistic direction which encouraged young children into performances; to encourage a Chinese-Australian to take on the character of a well known tea trader, and a rather stilted dancer to take the character of a local preacher who rarely danced. Inevitably this made the concept of a uniform costume, so usual in folk dance groups, obsolete. Challingsworth, working with other Australians, created a performance embodying individuality, inclusiveness, and equality.

Country and Western Line Dance

Someone less subtle than Nell Challingsworth, deliberately trying to create an Australian folk dance, might have chosen horse riding as a theme, to reference the Australian icon of the stockman (cowboy) in the bush.

In my presentation at the 2008 World Dance Alliance Global Summit conference, I asked the listeners to stand up and mime someone riding a horse; to start by putting a foot in the stirrup and swinging up into the saddle, turning 90 degrees. Then to ride along – say for 6 counts – and to repeat the sequence: step up and swing into the saddle again and ride for 6 counts, and to repeat this sequence. From that sequence, I suggested that they had performed the basis of rudimentary line dance.

Line Dance is an American folk dance genre. According to Joe Mac Manamon (1997) Line Dance arrived in Australia with American troops on recreation leave during the Vietnam War (1959-1975) and continues to deliberately celebrate American values - music, clothes etc.⁶ In Line Dance, the body weight is over the heels as it is when riding, the rhythm is 1,2; 1,2; 1,2; like horse riding, or 1 & 2, 1 & 2 like trotting, the hands are held low or near the belt, and the gaze is ahead. On to this basic form more elaborate choreography is woven becoming intricate when done by accomplished line dancers.

Line dancers perform in groups, but quite independently of each other. There is no lead couple to demonstrate how the dance is done and nobody holding your hand and pulling you along with the group. Neither is there anyone to hold you back or spoil the integrity of the dance for you. There is no hierarchy and no differentiated gender roles. The dancers are 'on their own' although they dance in a group in unison. They do not face each other: instead all dancers face a 'mysterious something out there'. In this sense, Line Dance appears to be a more performance genre than a social genre. It is this posturing, I think, that alienates Bush dancers. In Bush Dance the turn taking

of the prevalent English and Scottish dance styles appear frequently, as does acknowledgement of others and the interweaving patterns amongst the dancers. These socialising aspects are absent from Line Dance.

United States country dance

Juliana Flinn wrote of the distinctions she found between USA Western dance and USA country dance in non-performance contexts (Flinn, 1993). Most of her findings apply to Australian line dance compared with bush dance. There is one real difference between USA country dance and bush dance and that applies to gender roles. Flinn complains that in country-dance 'many aspects of traditional American gender roles are evident in the language, movement, and etiquette. ...a dance call is directed to the man, such as "turn that lady". ... Women do much of the decorative moves such as twirling, with men theoretically directing these twirls' (Flinn, 1993, p.100). In bush dance neither the calling nor the dancing preferences men, except where men lead in a waltz. Women are instructed to indicate they do not wish to be twirled by offering a low hand. (A film clip of bush dancers doing a *Virginia Reel* shows the women and men dancing in each others' places with the men twirling – an illustration of the redundancy of gender roles.) Normally, the *Virginia Reel* is written for a long line of men facing a line of women. In a stage performance Australians usually would show it that way, but despite this, the steps are in fact not gender based.

The context of time rather than place

Art historian, Norman Bryson (1997) reports that in his opinion visual art history responded to social processes of 'urbanisation, the proliferation of spectacle, and the development of commodified leisure' (1997, p. 69). He concluded that abstraction in painting and dance could be an expression of industrial modernity rather than a new artistic concept. He sees 'not the rhythms of the body but the rhythms of the machine, and above all the three great, hammering rhythms' of fragmentation, repetition, and velocity (1997, p. 72). When he speaks of 'abstraction in dance' I believe he is speaking about abstract dance art. I mention it because it is so striking that he finds time such a major factor in what is expressed. I have come to the same conclusion looking at bush dance. Urbanisation, as in visual art, is easily identifiable in bush dance. Bush dance is inclusive, egalitarian, unsophisticated, casual, and social. It shows that we are sub/urban and that we consider uniformity and gender unimportant. These values are not unique to Australia.

My thesis is that most other nations/cultures, excluding perhaps 'the new world', codified their traditional way of dancing earlier in history than did Australia. Some of those other cultures might have different values now from that earlier time, and I do hope someone will investigate this. As Buckland (2006, p. 7) states: 'The political significance of history has ensured a continuous emphasis on selecting dance forms with long histories of performance tied to place or ethnicity.' Folk collectors in the past believed they were collecting 'relics of antiquity' as Buckland puts it, cultural images frozen in time that would be 'contaminated by modern civilisation' and would disappear 'in the wake of urbanisation and industrialisation'. The date of the

earliest report of any European dancing in Australia comes from a newspaper of 1803 (Andrews, 1974, p. 17). This is early in terms of the date of the first European settlers in Australia at the end of the eighteenth century, but very recent compared with the long-standing folk dance traditions of Europe and even of the United States. Therefore one can argue that Australian folk dance expresses relatively recent influences because we have a 'younger' colonial history. Indeed we extol this in our national anthem: 'we are young and free'. It seems to me that our bush dance says that too.

Time before place

It is evident therefore that unconsciously in our dance we Australians reveal our place in time before our place in space. My research confirms the proposition of Jane Desmond that '[t]he body is the repository of all the multiplicity of meaning in our existence. Not only will movement styles reveal our group identification, they will reflect changes over time' (Desmond, 1997, p. 31). This conclusion surprised me because I expected that our national dance would express our place in the world, but instead I find that time is more fundamental than place in shaping our dance language: the 'when' of Australian identity is as important as the 'where'.

Notes

¹ In Shirley Andrews (1974), *Take Your Partners*, there are 67 dances. Of these, 7 are waltzes and another 22 have either slip steps or chasse turns or both; that is 43%. In Lance Green (1986), *Bush Dance Instructions*, there are 39 dances. Of these, 2 are waltzes and 18 have either slip steps or chasse turns or both; that is 51%.

² I cannot authoritatively state that there are no more than nine film clips of Anglo-Celtic Dancing in the archive. Social dance and /or Bush Dance can be hidden within news clips of all kinds of celebrations. I was able to uncover nine – see National Film and Sound Archive References.

³ The White Australia Policy refers to the contrivance of Australian governments to exclude further Chinese immigration, and later Pacific Islander immigration into the country. The Immigration Restriction Act, which imposes a dictation test on aspiring immigrants, was legislated by the Federal Government in December 1901. One rationale for the policy was the fear that such immigrant workers would undercut the wage rates of the existing white Australian workers.

⁴ A repeated comment made to The Australian Heritage Dancers (AHD) by audience members after their appearances, 'It's so good to see our culture included!' The author is a foundation member of AHD.

⁵ From filmed interviews by the author with The Sydney Morris Men, 28th November 1998, and with Molongolo Mayhem Morris, 18th April, 2003.

⁶ In the filmed interview with Line Dance teacher and adjudicator, Pat Wilcock, 19th May, 2004, she states that they actively try to be 'American'.

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Films at The National Film and Sound Archives

1. Rack No. AVC 009324 Title no. 267054

Empire Day C1905 – Melbourne. 2 minutes, 98 seconds of girls dancing around maypoles. No sound. They are skipping with hands on hips. They do a grand chain in which the hands/arms come over the head. They skip and wind ribbons around the May pole. They also do spring points *en place*. The girls are wearing smocks with pinafores and hats. I thought they were probably 6th class. A group of slightly older girls are dressed similarly in white dresses with on over dress of a contrasting colour (film is black and white), possibly red or blue, and a hat reminiscent of Morris dance or of a jester. There is another group of older girls wearing similar but different over dresses and pillbox hats. They are doing the same dance. Each May pole is supported by four boys sitting on the ground facing the pole.

2. No. 7956-02

Camperdown, Victoria, C1922. 6 minutes and 21 seconds. Girls in pairs, in white frocks, white knee high socks, white bows in their long hair, and coloured sashes, skipping with hands on hips anti-clockwise around Maypoles. Then holding hands around the circle they skip anticlockwise for 8 counts and then clockwise for 8. They skip around their partner holding right hands, arms extended. We then see them skipping holding the wide May pole ribbons above their heads with two hands apart. They skip backwards out of the circle for 8 counts. They skip once around their partner taking the ribbon with them. Spring points for 4. They skip in to the pole for 4, do spring points for 4, and skip out for 4 counts.

3. *Maypole dance in honour of queen of the May*, Australasian Gazette. AVC 006246 VR 009752-003 c.1924

4. *Adelaide 1000 school children give Maypole display at Returned Soldiers' Carnival.* ID 005741-01 AVC006552

5. Empire Day Celebrations, *Folk dancing display at Sydney Cricket Ground.* Title No 54048 SOV 000691, 1924.

6. AVC 002116 135039

'Footing it lightly in the Lancers' 1933 in the Sydney Town Hall. Dancing in ball gowns and black bow ties. It shows one set of adults dancing parts of the fifth figure of the Lancers.7. AVC 000380 130998

'Wallflowers'. 1933. This is ballroom dancing in ball gowns and white tie and tails. It claims to solve the problem of 'wallflowers' by having several women in tandem dancing with each man, a solution, which seems not to have caught on. It shows little dancing.

8. *Australia Day* 1937

9. *Bathurst Sesquicentennial* 26th January, 1938

Biographical statement

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