

## TACTalk V. 18 No. 2 September 1993

### **The Right Words: Telling 'Em Like We Want It**

*by Cecily and Geoffrey Selling*

The moment remains vivid. The time: about fifteen years ago. The place: Whitby Gym in Washington, DC. The occasion: a Sunday after-ball dance with Stan Hamilton playing. A young woman briefed the first dance, Flowers of Edinburgh, reminding the second couple to "jump in there, in time for a poussette". The dancers did just that - they "jumped in there", and the dance looked a little like a hillbilly hoedown. The next dance, Up in the Air, was briefed by Anna Holden, the guest teacher from Scotland, and she instructed the first couple to "cast off for four bars and then cast back to top place by bar seven so that first, second and third couples could 'melt' into a three-couple promenade". We chuckled at her words ("How RSCDS!" we thought!), but the dance flowed so smoothly as the couples teamed up for a silken entry to the promenade.

That experience taught me the power of words in teaching Scottish country dancing. Linguists have long known that language both patterns and reflects our learning and that words can have a significant impact on our actions. Advertisers, political movements and groups where persuasion plays a role know that the choice of words is a key factor in their work. The same is true in dance teaching, and dancers are influenced by the connotations and tone of our instructions.

Our goal in teaching Scottish Country dancing should be to promote a spirit, gaiety and friendliness - all in the context of urging and demonstrating good dancing. One of my personal criticisms of the RSCDS is its excessive rigidity and its emphasis on correctness for correctness' sake rather than as an enhancement of the dance. But I worry that we North Americans have a somewhat cavalier attitude towards the traditions and forms of country dancing. Americans, and perhaps to a lesser extent Canadians, are part of a culture based on the pioneering spirit, the "invent it for yourself:" approach and we are less encumbered by long, often aristocratic traditions. This pioneering spirit has lent great life to the Scottish Country dance movement in North America but has also played free with some of its unique legacy.

In our choice of words, teachers can subtly urge and influence our dancers to more graciously and mannerly dance without dampening the obvious enthusiasm. To this end, it is important to consider the words we use and how we describe dances and formations. Some phrases that have recently prickled my ears were the following:

- Stick out your hands into a wheel (Shiftin' Bobbins)
- First couple scoot to the bottom (West's Hornpipe)
- First man goes down the middle (Burns Hornpipe)
- Grab the hand nearest to you (Bob Campbell)
- Dash across to your corners (Miss Cahoon's Reel)
- Get into the allemande by bar 9 (Ca' the Ewes tae the Knowes)

Is my concern just picky formality, or in fact, would not our dancers be better served by being asked to:

- Give hands on the side
- Dance quickly to the bottom
- Dance down to meet your partner
- Take the nearest hand
- Cross the set in time to face first corners

Dancers who are urged to 'grab the nearest hand' will do just that - grab it, while dancers who are asked to 'take hands, or melt into an allemande, or dance down the middle' are much more likely to capture the elegance and style of Scottish Country dancing. Teachers' words should subtly remind the dancers of the points made in class. Our goal is not to have our dancers merely get through the dances but to dance with good handling, spirited teamwork, and a friendly social spirit.

Another linguistic liberty I frequently hear is borrowing terms from other dance forms - especially English country, contra and square dancing. Phrases like "end improper", "do a California twirl (Miss Allie Anderson)", "active and inactive couples", "the Texas star (Buchan Eightsome)", and "gate your same-sex dancer", etc. can be helpful because many people recognize them, and they often are succinct and helpful. Yet I find that keeping Scottish Country dance terminology helps to keep the uniquely Scottish flavour of our dancing.

America and Canada are great melting pots, where varied cultures often lose their identity and take on a unicultural similarity in an "anything goes" society. The traditional RSCDS terms, which may be stiff, suggest a genteel time. Careful wording implies attention to good manners and courtesy, which are never out of fashion in any culture. Let us use correct terminology where possible because those words influence not just the execution of the dance but also its tone and atmosphere.

We also need to think more connectively in our briefings. I recently listened to a briefing of Ladies' Fancy that described the last two formations as 'right hands across and left hands back, and then first and second couples poussette'. In almost every set, the first two couples danced their hands across, finishing on the sides and then leapt into the poussette, almost as an afterthought. Yet, when that same combination is briefed: 'first two couples dance right hands across and left hands back, finishing in the middle, ready for poussette', the dancers generally do just that.

Our briefings need to be more than recitations of sequenced formations. Since more mistakes are made as formations connect to one another than in mid-figure, our briefings need to stress the choreographic glue that cements the figures together. Rather than naming formations, we must state where and how to begin and end them. If a briefing tells the dancers to 'finish a track in second place and then dance corner partner', we have failed to give our dancers the key information that they must finish facing corners. Lacing our words with the connective tissues of the dance will make for smoother and less breathless dancing in the ballroom.

My final observation concerns the language of handing. One of the things that distinguishes good dancing is the use of good handing. Firm and correct hand grips at the

right height with a comfortable mixture of guidance and eye contact make country dancing a delight to watch and perform. Yet, so much of our instruction is about footwork and geography. It adds scarcely a second to a briefing to say, 'Taking hands on the sides, the first three couples set and dance six hands halfway round to the left' (Strathglass House), yet without that reminder about hands, a surprising number of sets will omit this move, making the setting look disjointed and the circle awkward to enter because people are groping for hands. Briefers can save confusion (is it inner hands or right hands?) and improve the dancing with the seemingly inconsequential addition of phrases like: 'taking nearer hands, use a two-handed turn, taking hands across the dance, etc.'

Once we become teachers, we are always teachers, whether in our class, briefing a dance at a party or ball, or even by our example on the dance floor. It is the teacher's job to encourage a good standard of dancing—not merely to get people through without injury. In an era when manners are often neglected, and speed can easily displace courtesy and gentility, our voices can slow things down and add a civilizing tone to the dance. We can spread an old-world charm and warmth to the dance floor with only a few changes in the words we use and the expressions we choose to explain our dances. I believe this is part of our job.