



Knights of King Ina

Basic Technique

Introduction

As part of their ongoing instructional The Knights of King Ina looked at good dancing basics, the ideas herein are what we like to think we do, but, in truth, it is more likely that which we aspire to do.

However experienced a dancer is there is value in occasionally going back to the fundamentals of stance and safe practice if only to prolong the dancing years.....

Morris is a lively and energetic dance and one is encouraged to look after one's own safety whilst performing it. Learning too many things too quickly and trying to keep up with experienced dancers will lead to injury – many dancers have achieved their level of proficiency after many years of constant practice and instruction hence they know the moves and the easy way to perform their dances. With that in mind learn a few things at a time and repeat them often to make the nerve reflexes remember the movement, this leaves your consciousness available to learn the next thing.

There are some tricks to help but the big secret – practice!

Health and safety / injuries

With any exercise there is the possibility of stresses and strains. Below are some considerations but they are not exhaustive.

Checking that your **feet** are not flattening (eversion injury), and supporting them with orthotics if they are, will aid balance and spring, after a time you may find that you no longer need the orthotics! Keep a straight foot and ensure the weight is delivered to it straight down through the shins, this prevents inversion strains (turning the ankle over).

Knee injuries; The more one thumps down when dancing, dancing heavily, and the more weight you carry, the more likely you are to put wear into the joints or damage the joint and supporting structures, turning on the knee whilst weight bearing, especially with the knee bent is a certain way to damage the menisci – make all turns and twists that could affect the knee whilst in the air and deliver the supporting forces directly down into the knee. This is particularly true of the Galley but also a twizzle and when a sudden change of direction is needed.

Sidesteps; where a side bend of the knee occurs when the weight is moved in a sideways fashion whilst weight bearing will cause ligament injuries; a sidestep is a step to the side rather than a drift sideways on a weight bearing leg, also often advised is turning the body to face the side movement being used the feet still make the sidestep movement but the body faces forwards which reduces knee issues.

Without adequate **abdominal muscle integrity** injury will occur in the lower back as the posture aberration here is to lean backwards and “sit” on the lower spine, this leads to wear and tear as well as more acute impacting conditions.

Develop a style that lands lightly on the toes, use the knee bend and ankle to calf spring to absorb shock. The best dancers in the morris are almost silent when they dance. Carrying oneself in the centred manner, described elsewhere here, will assist with achieving this.

One of the most obvious things that give the impression of a lazy team is their lack of disconnect from the ground, shuffly morris; it is not possible for everyone to get lots of air and be really high off the ground but it is possible to be precise, elegant and very clearly highly competent as a dancer.

Footwear; light shock absorbing footwear with a degree of longitudinal arch support allows the foot to be supported whilst maintaining the natural foot shape, any “extras” like Achilles supports have been shown to be detrimental and are removed in by runners! Little or no heel is preferable as this allows greater use of the ankle range of movement.

Achilles Tendon strains take 2 main forms; a pull of the muscle from the tendon and a tear in the tendon. A combination of rest and light stretching will resolve most but be careful to give the repair long enough to occur and don't push too hard too soon.

Shin Splints; a condition where the front of the shin literally feels Splintered is caused by inaction of the ankle allowing the calf to pressurise the front of the shin from behind, increasing the ankle movement and reducing the landing shock will prevent this condition.

Blisters; poor footwear that rubs or squeezes will induce blistering of the skin - the best solution once you have one is to puncture and tape it over. If you are susceptible - tape the area from the outset – prevention is better than cure.

Over time you will develop the fitness, strength and flexibility to dance well but bear the considerations noted here in mind and dance safely.

Warming up – physiological trickery

The trickery involved is in making the body alter the focus of blood flow from the organs when at rest to the muscular system used for exercise. The whole of physiology is based on survival and once this is fully understood then one can choose to make one's body act appropriately to choice.

For our purposes the need is for the majority of the blood flow and resources to be sent toward muscle tissues and brain so as to perform our dances with vigour and engagement and our full awareness of the complexity of the movements being made; (at rest our bodies are concerned with re-supply to maximise the availability of the nutrients needed during exercise, hence the abdominal and organ focus at rest).

Gradual engagement of the muscles to encourage this alteration in blood flow and to mobilise the joints and tissues has been considered a good idea in exercise for some time, studies have offered some insights and it is known that bringing oneself to the maximum of the effort to be expended should be about the same as the duration of the maximum effort. Similarly warming down after a dance is also important to wash the tissues to remove the waste products of the energy production needed to perform the exercise and to replenish the supplies in the muscle tissues that might be immediately required again.

Enhancing exercises

There isn't a single muscle group that is more important to work on in dance, done well it is an all body expression. That said, we do rely heavily on the thigh, calf and breathing musculature to give shock absorbing and height in the jump.

If one was called on to ensure an enhancement of any muscle group it would be to work on the abdominals and the diaphragm. The abdominals will provide a degree of lower back protection and reduce spinal shock, the diaphragm will assist with shifting air more efficiently than use of the ribs alone. General exercise rather than specific exercise is of more use to ones development when seeking to perform a Morris.

Some exercises to focus on are

Abdominal strength

Abdominal Breathing

Calf and Hamstring stretches

Tai Chi / Yoga – to enhance the control of the muscles and move the joints through their full ranges of movement

Balance – standing on one foot for at least 2 minutes.

Alexander Technique – for postural enhancement.

Body language and Posture

Try this exercise repeatedly to get an internal sense of where you dance from. We are looking to achieve the sense that you move from your "centre". This is situated just below the diaphragm high on the abdomen where the breast bone finishes. When you move focus on this being the part you move or carry around, if you can maintain this and feel that your movements originate from here the poise and posture achieved when you dance will look graceful.

The **Posture** exercise, informed by the Alexander Technique, is to stand with the weight on both feet evenly and get the sense that your hips are above the front of the shins; tucking the tail under and holding this, place the shoulders in line over the hips, you will likely feel as if you need to draw yourself up in height.

The bone behind the ear lobe (mastoid) should then be held on this line often one needs to raise the crown of the head to achieve this and avoid the "looking down the nose" posture. It is often easier to practice this with the eyes closed but make sure that you have something in front of you to hold onto as the eyes are often relied on for balance.

Gesture – when performing it is often necessary to over emphasize the gestures – even when one feels they are performing and emphasized caricature of what needs to be done; to the observer it looks like they are doing the movements necessary, actors and performers are aware of this and do this in performance. If one learns by copying then unless trained to copy exactly it is usually the case that they will display a diminished version of what they are copying.

Other elements of body language will give away much about your dancing – the basic “centred” posture mentioned above will give you confidence and stability in more than the physical sense; proud but not arrogant or aggressive, not apologetic or shrinking either.

Your dance will be an **expression of yourself** – if you are naturally expansive and tend to use a lot of space then dance in that way rather than force yourself into a tight and neat format. The opposite is true as well, this knowledge may inform you of the traditions you might consider to dance – e.g. the flamboyant mobile person would benefit from the freedom and movement in Bampton dances where the angular and precise dancer might favour Bucknell, those who move with glide and grace would look at Fieldtown and so on.

Facial expressions are a giveaway to those around you of the turmoil in your head – especially in Jig Dancing! There are no errors in a jig, only elements you included, variations you made at the time

you danced it; if it wasn't in your original plan it is easy to grimace and give away an "error", if you don't let them know, the audience will never know!

Hankies

Size - there is much debate on the size a hanky should be in the Morris Book (CJS) gives that the hanky when held in the hand by one corner, with the hands by the side, should leave the tip of the opposite diagonal corner touching the ground. This is dependent on the height of the dancer, in practice a standard width of suitable fabric will give 2 hankies to its width and the hankies should be a square of fabric.

Weight - In modern times Cotton Drill or Polycotton is used, in antiquity they probably used the cheapest fabric available that made their usual gents pocket handkerchiefs. This may have been thin 100% cotton or perhaps a light linen. Fabric weight will have a profound effect on the float of the hankie and its performance in the flick and snap required in some dances.

Hold – there are many holds to the Hankie, the one we use in KOKI is as follows – hand palm up, hang the hankie between the index and middle finger by one corner, then wrap the hankie over the middle finger and between the middle and ring finger. Keep the fingers together and turn the hand palm down, the main part of the hankie will fall on top of the hand. Keep the fingers together to hold the hankie but the fingers can be bent and straightened whilst held together to move the hankie;

Flick – is accomplished as with the above hold the hankie becomes an extension of the hand and fingers; timing the flick of the fingers under the hankie at the end of an arm extension movement will make the hankie fly onward and accentuate the movement of the arm. This translates to forward movements as well as upward movements of the hankie.

Float – with the hold above and the turbulence created by opening a gap between the little and ring fingers, air can be made to collect under the hankie giving it some lift and it will then fall more slowly to the side.

Pattern of the dance on the ground and to the audience.

Whether a set dance or a jig, there is often audience all around but we still have the habit of "Dancing Up to the Music". In jig dancing you are showing off, show off to the audience – they probably have not seen it before; chances are your musician has, possibly so many times that they are completely bored with it!

Include the whole audience – make sure to look at them rather than just dance toward them, people like to feel special; if the dance allows dance around some members of the audience.... Makes for a good show.

There is a certain satisfaction about getting some symmetry in the dances we do, the path you take makes a shape and this can be used to give an impression of completion in the dance pattern.

Some of the other tricks

The illusion of height when Jumping by bending the knees slightly and using the thigh, then calf and finally toes to propel you upward you will achieve the maximum height you can, the power in take-off and your own weight being the main factors in how far off the ground you jump.

Lifting the knees up and kicking your heels up under you will actually reduce the upward distance but gives the illusion that you are further off the ground – timing this at the apex of the jump will add to the illusion. The arms, timed correctly, will similarly give the illusion of extra height - timing

the arms to “push” you up as you approach the peak of the jump gives the image that your head has continued upward to do this the arms will be coming down as you reach the peak height in your jump.

Turns and spins are made easier by drawing the arms in as the turn or spin is performed, use this in Galleys and Twizzles and greater turn is achieved, to slow down and hold the stop, allow the arms to go out to the balance position again. Keep the head over your centre over the feet, keep that line vertical and over your base – this will prevent you from toppling or being off balance when you land. Avoid drooping the posture line as this will allow you to become off balance easily.

Ballet dancers use a technique called spotting – focus on one point and maintain that as you turn, once your head will no longer allow you to hold the point whip the head around and focus again on the same point, this will reduce giddiness.

Coming on and going off is just as important as the dance – how do you announce yourself? how do you hold yourself during the “once to yourself”? and when you have finished how do you leave the dance area? As you come on you are a dancer so walk in with the posture forms described, greet your audience, make eye contact with some, decide how you want the once to yourself to be and when you have finished thank the audience and **remember your musician!**

Good Stepping Practice.

Most dancers simply get told what to do rather than have it explained. Either that or they copy others – and not always a good example to copy. In LB there is a passage by Maud Karpeles (secretary and fellow collector to CJS)...

(LB) p xvii

“The change of foot, as well as the hop, is made with a light spring, i.e. the weight of the body is raised from the ground before each step so that the change of foot takes place in the air. The dancer alights on the ball of the foot with the supporting leg held straight under the body. At the same time, the free leg is swung forward from the hip, the lower leg hanging loosely from the knee. The free leg remains in this position until the next change of foot. It is then swung sharply back and the foot takes the ground under the body” (Maud Karpeles)

Danced as indicated, landing lightly on the toes, using the ankles and knees as shock absorbers, moving the core as the focus of travel in the dance is what is aimed for here the expression of oneself, matching traditions with character and showing well to the audience you hold will give you “stage presence” you will be notable whether or not the dance you do is complex or simple.

The easiest dances to dance are the hardest to make look good.

References

Include

32 years of Osteopathic practice and training!

Warming Up Exercises for Morris Dancing - Information Series; Sue Graham; Morris Federation

Cotswold Morris Basics Workshop - Roy Dommett

Cotswold Basics v3 Roy Dommett

Various Notes on the Morris - Roy Dommett including papers on giving Morris Workshops