

The Morris Men: Dancing on the far side

Group puts a modern twist on ancient Druid dances

By JOHNNY DODD

Picture Baryshnikov swinging a tree limb on North 40th Street. Imagine Fred Astaire clad entirely in white, except for scores of red, yellow and green ribbons and some red high top tennis shoes, leaping off a curb with a New Guinea tribesman.

Throw in a screeching fiddle, some rhythmic moanings from a concertina and you'll have an idea of who was dancing in the University District last Wednesday night - The Mossyback Morris Men.

The Morris men perform a ridiculously complex series of dances, whose steps are based partially on fertility rituals from the ancient Druids - only with a slightly modern twist. For hundreds of years such dances were performed during agricultural festivals held in small English villages.

Today, the 20-member group -nearly half of whom work at the Boeing Co. as engineers and programmers - do much of their dancing from pub to pub and on busy city streets. And though the setting has changed somewhat, their attire, made up of jingling bells, white pants, red suspenders, shoes, red kerchiefs and baseball hats, is a symbol of their ancient past.

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"Sure, I suppose you could say the white we wear is a symbol of purity, although the idea of a pure Morris Dancer is something of an oddity," said Fremont resident Ken Smith, team captain.

Although its origins have been traced back to 12th century Spain, the folk dance was almost killed by the Industrial Revolution when the lure of jobs and money pressured many to leave their villages in search of work in city factories.

By the turn of the century, however, the dance was eventually revived and began meandering through other European cultures. By the mid-1970s it had attracted the attention of a small group of Americans. Smith estimates that nearly 2,000 people in this country perform the dance. The Mossyback Morris Men team, begun in 1979, is one of two Morris Dancing teams in Seattle.

"Sure, I was a little self conscious at first walking around in all those ribbons and stuff, but you get used to it," said Fremont resident David Trine, 35. "The toughest part is learning the difference between your left foot and your right."

Trine had been a folk dancer for several years before he learned to Morris Dance. "I've done all types . . . swing and modern, but if I had to give them all up and just keep one, this would be it."

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A group of Mossyback Morris Men cavort and leap about on 40th Avenue Northeast In the U-District last Wednesday evening. Morris dancing was performed for hundreds of years In English country villages, but thanks to groups like the Morris Men, it can now be seen in pubs and streets around Seattle.

For other team members, not as adept in the pastime, the decision to hop around in front of strangers came after some deliberation.

"When a friend asked me to do this, I told him I couldn't dance; but when he reminded me that I like to drink beer and have a good time, I said I'd give it a try," Ravenna resident Hank Lieber said.

"The toughest part about all this is trying not to get your fingers smashed." Smashed fingers, a concussion and broken teeth are a few of the injuries resulting from the use of the thick maple branches team members often slam together while dancing.

"The sticks make a loud noise and a great show," said Smith, who's been hit in the head three times. The bashing sticks also lend a bit of good-natured phallic symbolism to the routines which Smith described as sometimes almost "x-rated."

Other props such as feather dusters, chalk, a miniature cricket paddle and an inflated pig bladder are occasionally used in their performances.

Last week's outing in the University District served as a celebration of sorts for Trine's upcoming marriage. "What intense psychological need has caused you to resort to such a long-term commitment in the form of matrimony," Claude Ginsburg asked Trine while team members prepared themselves for their upcoming performances with several pints of ale. [continued top of next column]

"My only advice is that you always make sure she knows who wears the bells in the family."

Trine shook his head in agreement and filed up the stairs to the intersection of North 40th Street and University Way Northeast, where he and the rest of group would begin their first dances of the night. Pedestrians stopped, windows in nearby buildings were opened and people stared in disbelief as the men hopped and cavorted about in the west-bound lane of the street.

At one point, a dancer spun out in front of a passing Datsun, but the car stopped in time. "What's with these guys . . . is this some new type of cult?" an elderly man asked the woman standing beside him.

"I've seen lots of different type of folk dancing but nothing like this," said another bystander, Irene Pruzan, visiting Seattle from St Paul, Minn.

And then, just slowly and nonchalantly as the event began it was all over.

"Thanks for watching us" Smith announced to the crowd "If you have nothing better to do follow us up to Noggins (a nearby pub) and buy us a beer."

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