

Turning Points

A Brief History of the Burnaby International Folk Dancers

Where

Why did we start folk dancing? Why did you want to learn and perform and teach ethnic dances? The simple, slow ones? The ones so complex and fast that even taking the smallest steps leaves you breathless?

For some of us, the toe-tapping rhythms and exotic melodies called for movement. Others like the challenge of coordinating the brain and the body in exercise in which accomplishment is readily apparent. For others, the adventure of dancing in costume, having fun with friends, or meeting someone special is the attraction. Preserving a bit of culture motivates others.

Some of us danced, and still dance, with the Vancouver International Folk Dancers in Stanley Park each summer, and the present church gym during the rest of the year. Others joined the Surrey group lead by the dynamic duo, Joyce and Bob Simpson.

For these reasons and more, in the late 1970s, potential folk dancers signed up for the Burnaby Parks and Recreation folk dance sessions offered at the Burnaby Arts Centre, now the beautiful Shadbolt Centre, in Century Park, now Deer Lake Park.

The first instructor, Jolie Mayer, favoured now-familiar Israeli and Eastern European dances. The following session, Judith English introduced more dances which are still favourites. In the spring of 1979 Judith announced plans to leave Vancouver, and suggested we continue as a club. Seed money for the group came from teaching on summer Sundays outside the Arts Centre in a program sponsored by the Parks and Recreation Department.

The introduction to the first minutes book of the Century Park Folk Dancers tells us,

As a club we could finance a collection of music tapes and choreo-graphies and have a variety of teachers throughout the year....

We want to keep a social atmosphere in the group which would be possible in a club.

Who

We started with members who willingly shared their skills and divided all the projects required in a new organization. Some of those members from the early years are here tonight. Ariel Eastman, Margaret Hansen, Jane Kupfer, Shirley Miller, and Bev Neilson all contributed for the first several years, then, for various reasons, lapsed for several years, then returned, bringing the old interest and new skills to keep the group vibrant. Miriam Stevenson, now Honorary President, has been a constant in the group since the beginning.

Where

Tuesday evenings found the group in various rooms at the Burnaby Arts Centre including

- Studio 3 on the main floor, with the leaky roof and the playing card pinned to the high ceiling.
- The upstairs room just behind the James Cowan Theatre control booth where we had to dance quietly during performances on the stage below.
- The long narrow rooms west of the hallway where dance circles became ovals, and lines of facing dancers might touch knees when they moved to the centre.
- The painting studio up a few stairs at the end of the hall where the setting sun filled the large bow window making the room toasty warm.
- The drafty second floor studio of Mather House across the lane from the Arts Centre.

When the Arts Centre could not fit us in anywhere, we were grateful to dance

- Around the posts in the basement of New Vista Care Centre. (May, 1981)
- In the large, but carpeted hall at St. Paul's United Church on Smith at Lister.
- In the gymnasium at Edmonds Elementary School. (Mar. to June, 1994)

In 1995, with the opening of the Burnaby Arts Centre as the expanded and improved Shadbolt Centre for the Arts, we thought we had found the perfect home in Studio 200. It was ideal for eight years until our Tuesday evening time slot was booked by the Parks Department for one of its own programs in the summer of 2003. We had to move. The challenge of scouting several halls, weighing our options, and deciding on Charles Rummel Centre over just a couple weeks shows how well the group works together. Being forced to reexamine our assumptions about meeting spaces went from being a crisis to being a constructive exercise concluding in a larger space for less rent in a convenient location, once you find it for the first time.

When

1979 Formed as the Century Park Folk Dancers.

1979 - 1981 Taught outside at Century Park on Sunday afternoons.

1982 Joined the Burnaby Arts Council as an associate member.

1982 Taught and danced on Thursday evenings on the parking lot behind Arts Centre.

1986 Changed name to Burnaby International Folk Dancers when the name of the park changed from Century Park to Deer Lake Park.

Late 1980s Low membership and financial problems threatened the group but the late Philippa Turner, an excellent dancer and teacher with good organizational skills, kept us going.

1992 - 1996 Casino License project to benefit the Arts Centre expansion and BIFD.

- Operated two casino nights in August 1993.
- Invested in sound equipment, costumes, teachers, indexing, and publicity.
- Started using the logo designed for us.
- Produced posters and flyers and started distributing them regularly.

1999 Developed first Introductory Folk Dances booklet and CD kit.

2000 Completed the first T-shirt project.

2003 Moved to Charles Rummel Centre.

2004 Developed constitution and guidelines.

What

From the beginning, the Burnaby International Folk Dancers has had four primary purposes:

- Learn dances from a wide range of cultures.
- Teach some of those dances to community groups.
- Perform at events and institutions.
- Enjoy dancing with other dancers at parties.

Bringing folk dances to the community has been exciting and rewarding.

We have met the challenge of nine dancers practicing in a shopping mall storeroom, of spending a fall evening rehearsing in the carport of the Burnaby Arts Council because one of us left the key at home.

We have strained our voices so a hundred Girl Guides in a school gym can learn Zemer Atik.

In care centres we enjoy seeing a dozing member of the captive audience brighten when he hears a familiar tune from the old country.

We continue to perform regularly at care centres, teach groups of Girl Guides, and participate in Burnaby Civic celebrations at Burnaby Village Museum, and Discovery Day.

Some performances present extra challenges. Finding the venue is now easier with maps printed from the Internet. Sometimes the challenge is the heat, or a costume crisis. One Discovery Day, Ariel reached Shadbolt Centre and started to change into her Norwegian costume only to find that the skirt was probably still in the car half a kilometer away. What to do? Looking around the dressing room, she saw a blue skirt which would do and asked the Girl Guide leader who was wearing it if she could borrow it. The leader generously said yes, trapping herself in the room in her slip until our performance ended.

Although performing and teaching for community groups add to the excitement and fun of dancing, not everyone participates in those aspects of the group.

Learning new dances and trying to remember the old ones on Tuesday evenings is our central activity. Within the Burnaby International Folk Dancers, the talent pool of dance and teaching experience is deep. Interest in dances new to all of us is generated by "outside" teachers. The list of those generous dancers from Vancouver and Surrey International Folk Dancers and from local ethnic groups contains names respected by every folk dancer in the region.

In the early years we were helped by, in alphabetical order, Prunella Barlow, Joe Chan, Spencer Gallagher, Denis Laplante and Teresa Gagne, Genevieve Lundquist, Violet Moore, Eric Pearson, Beryl and Len Sawyer, Fred Schulhof, Joyce and Bob Simpson, Marcia and Bob Snider, Richard Spratley, Hugh Thurston, and Gisela and Jim Welsh. We thank you all for getting us off on the right foot.

In recent years our feet, brains, and hearts have responded to the instruction of George-Anne Buchalter, Tihomir Donchev, Mimie Ho, Zelig Jamploski, Greta Kos, Lori Larsen, Dawna Martyniuk, Dragan Paunovic, Nada Putnik, Naomi Taussig and several others. We thank you for the skilled presentation of so many exciting dances.

Our popular potluck finger-food parties, with lots of dancing, in December and May give everyone a chance to request favourite dances and to try dances from the past. Food is always an attraction at our business meetings, too.

Our next new experience happens this year, on November 15, and 16. The Vancouver International Folk Dancers and our group are cooperating to host Tineke Van Geel of The Netherlands for two Armenian dance workshops.

Conclusion

Just as in many dances, when we look back, we must swivel to look forward. Our challenge in the earliest days and today is to find creative ways to balance needs of the beginners with the interests of long time dancers.

Some aspects of being part of an independent group require considerable time. We would like to express our gratitude to our families and friends for their understanding and support as we head off to another practice, and make another phone call for the Burnaby International Folk Dancers.

Prepared by Jane Kupfer, September, 2004