



an interview with

BRUCE TAYLOR

by Jovana

BRUCE TAYLOR is an American citizen living in Norway, working as a computer programmer at the University in Bergen. He was born in Chicago, educated in Oregon and Washington, and was in Germany in the service when he decided to bicycle through Scandinavia. He returned to the United States to finish his education and to learn Norwegian and then went back to Norway about 2½ years ago. Bruce currently teaches a class in International Dance and is a steering member of a Norwegian dance group which does only Norwegian dances. He taught some of these dances at the 1973 Stockton Folk Dance Camp.

o0o0o0o0o0o

IS THERE AN INTERNATIONAL FOLK DANCE MOVEMENT IN NORWAY?

You wouldn't call it a movement; there exists a club in Oslo, one in Trondheim, and I have a course going in Bergen. A good question is, 'Why isn't there an international (movement) in Norway?' Part of the answer is that Norwegian folk dance is so widespread and so satisfying. Also, international dancing, which I consider a kind of recreation, is relatively young, and you must find someone who can teach, who can get material, dances and records, and create enough enthusiasm among the people. Otherwise, I have no idea why it's not more widespread.

HOW ARE NORWEGIAN DANCES DISTINGUISHED FROM OTHER SCANDINAVIAN DANCES?

Good question. Perhaps the most important distinction is that there is to a minor extent dancing traditionally alive in Norway. This is not the case in Finland, or in Denmark, and it's almost not the case in Sweden. Within those roots of a living tradition, we have about five families of dance in Norway. One of those families is very strong; we call it the Bygdedans, normally translated as 'Village Dance'. Members of the Bygdedans group, Ryddle, Oslo, Rurøspols, Springar, Halling, and Ganger, are very much alive and very vibrant. This means that when you throw a dance on a Saturday night at the dance hall, you dance these dances. It means you don't learn these dances, you just do them.

WHAT ARE THE ORIGINS OF NORWEGIAN DANCE?

You can trace two or three movements: Songdance is an artificial dance, created (or re-created) around 1900-05. There existed long ago in Norway a number of ballads with many verses, 50-75 verses. It's believed that these ballads were danced to, in a long chain dance, with a very simple step, a very boring step, & the purpose of the whole thing was the song that you sang. That dance form died out, and the ballads themselves died out. Then early in the 1900's an authoress, Hulde Garborg, decided to hold the ballads alive. In part it was the National romantic movement; the idea was to be 'Norwegian'. She also figured to inspire a Norwegian Folk Dance. So she took an old ballad and used a step which is still alive on the Farroe Islands, between Iceland and Norway. She used this simple, rather boring step for the verse, and then in the chorus changed to something interesting, like turning around or clapping your hands.

This form is completely invented; it has no basis in tradition, but this is what's normally considered Norwegian Songdance today. It's redeeming virtue, and it's really quite a virtue, is that it's a very social dance. The dances are rather easy, you only dance when you're singing, and it makes your participation much greater. They're always couple dances, and you always have a good hold on your neighbor. The dances are done in a ring with people facing in. It gives a great deal of opportunity for playing with your neighbor, to a much greater extent than dancing a waltz, for example, where it's just you and your partner. With Songdance, you have one person who's leading the dance, someone to decide 'What we'll dance now' and to find the pitch. So the dance floor is acting as a group with the leader. Songdances are very strongly social, so even though they're a new invention, they certainly are more than justified to continue.

GAMALDANS, the old couple dances, waltz, polka, schottische, mazurka, found their way to Norway & acquired a Norwegian flavor. This happened during the 1800s; the polka craze in Paris was 1839, something like that. There's also some connection with the coming of the accordion [invented in the 1820's], an instrument louder than the fiddle and to a certain extent more versatile, so that it often made inroads on fiddle music; people would rather dance

to the accordian than the fiddle. Also, it fit these Gamaldans better than fiddle music. So today, musicians very often use an accordian, or perhaps a trio with accordian, fiddle, and base, for Gamaldans.

ARE YOU SAYING THAT MOST OF THE DANCE IN NORWAY, EXCEPT FOR THE SONGDANCE, MIGRATED THERE, OR WAS ANYTHING INDIGINOUS?

That's a very hard question to answer. We normally consider the Bygdedans as the pearls of Norwegian dancing, because they've been there the longest; they've acquired the strongest Norwegian flavor. But just the same, there's a very clear tie between Springar and Gangar (which are about the same dance in two rhythm and three rhythm; Ganger is twos, and Springar is threes) and the Laendler of Austria.

And POLS (even though the dances are called 'Polska', that doesn't mean they're decended from Poland), a turning dance, is a newer form, where you're face to face with your partner, turn rapidly, & progress around the hall. It's the same sort of thing you do in a waltz, but you use only two of the three beats, like the Hambo. Pols is another one of the Bygdedanses, which we consider much more indiginous Norwegian than the Gamaldans.

There's another category, the FIGURDANS, which are very clearly related to European dances, with influences from Germany, France, England. If I recall the story properly, there was a soldier who had been off to war somewhere in Europe, & he came back with two or three dances, around 1850. Those dances survived in his village, and later when Klara Semb [the collector] came around and began writing down the figure dances, those are the dances she wrote down. So there is a very clear path of how these dances acquired a Norwegian flavor, the music being played by Norwegian fiddlers with their own style.

Figurdans often involves floor patterns, a square of four, perhaps a six-man reel, and it has a set pattern of steps. For example, you know that for six measures I'm going to do this, and on the 18th measure I'm bound to clap my hands. That's the essence of a Figurdans, that the dance measures are specified.

THE OTHER DANCES THAT YOU'VE TALKED ABOUT ARE MORE FREE STYLE?

Right. Gamaldans, the waltz, you can turn one way and the other way, it's up to you. And Bygdedans, you have much more variation; oftentimes there are more figures. You can come loose from the girl, she turns for a while, and the boy does a little show-off, then you come back together and turn in place for a while without progressing in the hall; that's a very old form. Then you take another hold and begin to progress. So there you have absolutely the greatest amount of individual freedom.

One more group is children's Song-games. This is a kind of singing dance, but different from Songdans. You sing a sing, and you play a little game. [LIKE RING-A-ROUND THE ROSIE?] Exactly. There are a large number of these, and we use them more and more among folk dance circles, because they're very simple and very 'real', as opposed to Songdanses, which are very social.



HOW HAS NORWAY'S GEOGRAPHY AFFECTED DANCE STYLES?

The villages are isolated, one from another, which means the styles are different, one from another. This is most important when talking about Bygdedans, Springar and Ganger. For one thing, there's often a critical difference in dance rhythm between villages. A fiddler from Tillemok playing Springar, which is a dance in threes, at about the same tempo as a fellow from Valderes, for example, playing his Springar, and a fellow from Western Norway, also playing a Springar, wouldn't allow a dancer from one area to dance to the fiddler from another area, because the rhythm is so different.

If you look at Norway, it's shaped like a spoon, with the handle in the North (very little happens north of Trondheim) and the spoon in the West and part of the South is the Hardanger fiddle region; in the East you find the usual playing fiddle, flat violin; and until just recently, in this century, those two regions did not overlap. And their very different techniques for playing meant that they had very different dance styles. That is to say, in the flat fiddle region you don't have Springar in the usual sense of the word. You find Pols, and you find something called Springleik, which is perhaps a very simple Springar. And in the same direction, in the Hardanger region you don't find Pols. However, Turdans is spread overall.

DO LAPLANDERS HAVE THEIR OWN DANCES?

I've been told, several times, by people I think should know, that the Lapps do not dance. I've never seen it written.

IS TRADITIONAL DRESS WORN ANYWHERE IN NORWAY FOR EVERYDAY WEAR?

Yes, by a very few people in Hallingdal, a few in Setesdal, southern Norway, & by the Lapps, of course. It's really a living

tradition there. I have a friend who saw a Lapp girl in her costume with plastic knee-boots, which fits, because it's living. The finest shoes she could get were these plastic boots. She wore what we would consider a full costume and then this brutal break in style, hyper-modern plastic boots. That's the way folk costumes are. A costume is what you want to wear, what's in fashion, and for her those two passed together.

Women often have national costumes in Norway for Confirmation, and they often wear them on the 17th of May, the National Holiday, and on their wedding day, when they use the normal Fest costume and gussey it up a little with a crown and perhaps a chestplate. There exist special wedding costumes, red skirts instead of black, but you could make out without that. Not all women are married in their costumes. The majority of the population are married according to Western European styles, long silken gown and veil.

WHAT ARE THE BEST PLACES TO DANCE IN NORWAY?

In the summer it's very difficult. There'll be tourist programs, depending on how you luck out, perhaps you'll be invited along to dance as part of the program. That's a common thing; first you show the tourists a lot, and then you invite them to Songdances, and everyone dances. And with a good percentage of Norwegians to carry the song, you can have half to two-thirds foreigners. But that's not really very satisfying; you're handled at the level of a tourist. The normal dance clubs don't meet during the summer; all they do is operate tourist programs. In the winter, if you have a week to spend, that's no problem, because most cities have dance groups which meet once a week.

Perhaps I should tell you about the organization of Norwegian folkdancing. There are two major groups. First, the National Association of Fiddlers, formed 50 years ago. They found out that there was very little point in fiddling unless you had people to dance to your music, that, in fact, the old tunes are seriously distorted unless you have the corrective influence of dance. So there's a very close association between people who dance Bygdedans and the fiddlers.

Second, there is Norway's Young League (Norwegsungdomslag), which is a very large organization (membership is about 25,000); it deals with more than just folkdancing. The individual local clubs began to form in 1895-1905, a time when education beyond the 6th grade was not readily available to people, & a time when peasants began to feel that they should have some say in society. They began to form local youth leagues, and such a league would build a meeting house & hold programs, debates, or cultural programs. It was a very strong cultural influence in the community, operating roughly in parallel with Christian organizations. And what they operate with today is amateur theatre, folkdance, and youth work, in general.

The Norwegsungdomslag could give you addresses of the local leagues, and they would probably have a good idea of when dancing is in the major cities.