

## Cécile Laye's interview by Sandra Stevens – [Histoire de bal](#)

Today I'm talking with Cécile Laye, who founded Chestnut. You may have seen her videos on Youtube, or even taken part in one of her costume balls.

Cécile Laye is one France's top persons for English figure dances. With her company, Chestnut, she's helped to spread these dances in France and abroad. She is also doing important work reconstructing dances, publishing and recording dance music.

### Tell us about your involvement with historical dances

As a child I did a lot of dancing, both classical and rhythmic, and came to think of making it my profession. But as I was good at school my parents insisted I should go on studying and I started college, to take a degree in English.

I spent a year in England for my studies and that's when I took part in a medieval dance workshop with the **Dolmetsch** (now [The Historical Dance Society](#)).

Back in France I went on learning with Francine Lancelot and Andrea Francalanci, gave up college and went full-time into yoga and dancing (ballet-jazz dance-tap dancing-tango...)

During one of my trips to England I met the group **Nonsuch History and Dance**, led by **Peggy Dixon** and **Jack Edwards**. In the evening they would show us costumes, pictures etc. related to a given historical period. I found it an interesting way of getting a better feel for history. In this way I discovered the John Payford dances and fell in love with the repertoire, its harmony and humanity.

From that time on, I went back at regular intervals to work with [EFDSS](#) (*English Folk Dance and Song Society*)».

I was lucky enough to take part in workshops focusing on quality dancing. For instance, workshops led by Ethel Anderson always included a moment for dance technique. With her and with Marjorie Fennessy I also discovered **Pat Shaw's** dances.

I met many interesting, generous people, like researcher Tom Cook and now Andrew Shaw, always willing to help my research or to provide me with information. All this confirmed my decision to study in depth this repertoire.

### Tell us about Chestnut's beginning

Few people in France, at the time, worked on historical dance and music. I launched *Country Dances* workshops in rather a naive, unquestioning way – questions on whether I was legitimate in doing this only came later. I founded a first association, Amarillis, later replaced by **Chestnut**.

I soon started working with musicians and a singer. Together we built a show alternating music, singing and dances, designed to sustain the audience's interest.

I later kept the idea but added texts. Country Dances are formal, so it is important to choose texts and music that put them in context and appeal to the spectator's emotions.

It was a natural development, in fact. I later strengthened what I had done instinctively, for instance by studying acting at Cours Florent, in Paris.

### **What about the themes you research, your sources, your methodology?**

I wouldn't claim to be a researcher, strictly speaking, rather a teacher trying to find out more about what she teaches.

I study and teach the three repertoires of English figure dances (historical, traditional, modern) but my main subject is John Playford's dances because I think it is the repertoire most damaged by the rules set up by the English Revival movement.

When I started I simply repeated what I had been taught. When I found out EFDSS and other groups of historical dances said different things, I read Playford's text, comparing it with Sharp's, to see for myself. I noticed there were often important discrepancies between Cecil Sharp's systematic instructions and John Playford's text, and had to conclude the latter was sometimes more interesting.

Ever since, my work has been based on historical documents whenever possible.

I was impressed by Margareth Dean Smith's introduction to the first edition's facsimile. She thinks the dances in the first edition are « a mixed bag » and I agree. There are structural differences between those dances, something you fail to see if you rely only on Cecil Sharp's work, no matter what its quality.

I later obtained a grant from the french National Dance Centre and used it to classify all 105 dances in the first edition of the Dancing Master. I found five ways of sorting them, which shows what a complex collection it is.

Working on a repertoire spreading over four centuries and changing all the time implies your work must be based on many different sources. I try to get as much information as possible on every period but so far I haven't been able to do such an in-depth study as for the first edition.

My next research project will be on analogies between the Italian and English repertoires in the 17th century. I'd like to join forces with a colleague specialised in the Italian choreographers of that time.

I try to throw light on the English figure dances repertoire because it is not well known in France and not enough appreciated among specialists of historical dances.

### **Did your research change the way you dance and teach?**

Of course it did.

For a long time I was unsure of how to start figure dances: right foot? Left foot? However, as I was working at the same time on Playford dances, French and Italian Renaissance dances, I came to realise that the three repertoires were contemporary. From that point on, I couldn't bear to teach a pavane starting with the left foot but a set and turn starting with the right foot (set and turn is nothing but a pavane sequence). It felt like schizophrenia! So I opted for a coherent rule.

I switched to the new system the first time Chestnut took part in Bal de l'Europe. It felt like a leap into the void! I then had to fight for my way of seeing things, to explain my choices. Beyond the starting foot they cover the figures as well. The more closely I read Playford's texts, the more I noticed Sharp was sometimes inconsistent with the text. I came back to the original version whenever it felt right to do so. I still do, and the versions we record are often those I have reviewed in this way.

Research strengthened my dancing and teaching. It enabled me to stand for my ideas.

## **What difficulties did you meet when you started teaching?**

I knew few dances – good ones, but only a few. Over the years I have been widening my repertoire, with old dances but also traditional ones and modern choreographies. The dancers get a broader range and discover new things.

Teaching is a passion for me, so I prepare my classes with great care.

I've had good examples. In college, my professors for English and French were exceptionally good pedagogues. They prepared us to meet difficult tasks by gradually teaching us to overcome smaller obstacles.

The progression in my teaching starts from that early experience: a class must be carefully built up, each element leading to a more difficult one. In my classes many exercises are about one particular figure; dancers must understand the figure from different places in order to fully grasp it and be able to remember it easily and quickly during the ball. I then give them the whole dance and when they come to the figure I've shown them, they have no difficulty.

I mean people to have fun learning what they need for the dance and to enjoy dancing together. That's why I encourage advanced dancers to come and help beginners. Progression through imitation

## **What else is important for you in pedagogy?**

I work a lot on the relation between movement and music: understanding the beat, recognising the phrases in the melody. The repertoire is so large it is possible to choose contrasting but mutually supporting musics.

I always start with a warm up. Failing that, it wouldn't be possible to work on the style and the charm of the dance would vanish - we would be left with gymnastics. For me, Country Dances are choral dances. They have to be taught as moving choruses. The dancers, although an essential part of the whole, are secondary to the figure being built and the team work it involves.

It is also important to know when to stop. You may work on a dance, clean it up, but at some point it becomes counter-productive to go on, or the dancers would tire of it.

My pedagogy improved through watching people and answering their questions. My pupils taught me my profession, actually, by making me question myself, find out better ways of explaining and which exercises work best and of course, which are their favourite dances. It is endless!

## **In what way can historical dances be performed on stage for a present-day audience without betraying them?**

I don't think a show is against tradition – it is all a reconstruction, really. At the time of James 1st and his son Charles 1st, figures were part of the masks. There was no clear distinction between royal amusements and society dances.

A show is no betrayal. Quite the reverse: it makes a forgotten repertoire visible again.

I've been reading a lot on dance, music, history of the Jacobean and Carolin periods, which of course permeate all the shows I build up. A show is not a conference but it gives a good deal of information all the same.

As I said earlier, I pay a lot of attention to the rhythm, to balancing the elements of my shows. For someone who doesn't know them, all dances look alike, so unless something different comes up, his or her attention may snap. Hence the interest of texts, live music (or not), other sounds, stage directions etc. I try for the audience to feel different emotions, as they would in real life, and we all work hard at avoiding affectation, one of the main threats to historical dances. My only ambition is to carry the audience with me and make them want to know more. If my shows make them curious for more, I've reached my goal.

So, I don't think a show is a betrayal. Quite the reverse, it lends visibility to a repertoire that is little known or, worse, misunderstood in France. Displaying this repertoire in an interesting way is important to attract new dancers. Like many other associations in the field, we lack younger dancers, young men in particular.

## **Talking of visibility, what is the part played by films and TV series? For instance the 1995 « Pride and Prejudice » ?**

The 1995 film brought us a new membership, mostly young women who identified with Elizabeth Bennet and her love story with Darcy (Colin Firth). Even though none of the dances in the film, proposed by dance director Jane Gibson, could in fact have been danced by Jane Austen around 1793 because they belong to much earlier editions, they are well chosen and well interpreted.

Generally speaking, all these adaptations of novels cause more people to see this repertoire and that's a good thing, even if dance teachers later have to comment on the historical validity of the scenes thus seen and admired.

The film brought about lots of research and publications on the Regency repertoire in England – a very good thing.

## **For you, is a ball the synthesis of research, teaching and show, or pure entertainment?**

First it is an entertainment for everyone but of course it is a consequence of my research and reflects my own tastes.

A ball is, just as a class or workshop, a delicate work because a balance must be found between its different elements. It must include easy dances for newcomers, other dances that people used to dancing will be able to do and also a number of difficult dances, prepared all through the year, for advanced dancers passionate about the repertoire and, for some of them, willing to devote a lot of time to it.

I believe in working but work doesn't exclude pleasure.

If all the dances on the programme can be learned in two minutes (as in a mixer) there is no encouragement for dancers to come to a class or workshop and learn more complicated, more interesting dances. The frustration felt by people excluded from some of dances may sharpen their interest for them.

In the same way, I like to put in a few demonstrations. I think it is a good thing to show one or two difficult dances performed by a well-trained team. It is a good way to show the style and flow of a dance without having to make a speech about it.

As you see, I work a lot and I believe work by no means excludes pleasure

## Flash questions

**Someone who inspires you:** Pat Shaw, even though I never met him

**Something that gets on your nerves:** having historical dances disparaged as obsolete, dull, even linked to suspect ways of thinking. As if the persons who spread such prejudices had seen nothing, heard and read nothing over the past forty years...

**Your favourite dance:** *Nonsuch*... and many more! I am very fond of dances using music by Purcell and Haendel. To the extent of starting to write my own choreographies to such music a few years ago. On Telemann right now.

**A book:** *Rebellion, The history of England from James I<sup>st</sup> to the Glorious Revolution*, by Peter Ackroyd. It covers the historical context to the edition of John Playford's *Dancing Master*.

## Further information

Cécile Laye will speak on John Playford, his dances and how they were re-discovered by Cecil Sharp, in three parts

1. The historical context, a presentation of John Playford and the first edition of the *Dancing Master*
2. Structural analysis of the 1651 edition repertoire, with Measure as a starting point
3. Cecil Sharp and the English Revival

