

# 'Community building' with English dances

By ARTHUR DUDNEY

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Jane Austen was not known for her dancing, but she knew bad dancing when she saw it. In "Pride and Prejudice," she writes, "Mr. Collins, awkward and solemn, apologising instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give." I was all too aware of my own wrong movements when I first attempted English country dancing. "Don't worry. It'll come", my partner said, and meanwhile I was thinking, "Right foot, then left. Right shoulder turn thing. No. [Expletive.]" At times it even became a contact sport and I had trouble imagining the genteel atmosphere of the English country ball with all my stomping and swaying.

Yet people can do this, and they enjoy it. The instructors of the workshop, Judi Rivkin and Sue Dupré, both have over 25 years of experience with traditional English dance and speak rapturously of friendships made in the dance community. Both work for the University but profess English country dancing as their true passion. Ms. Rivkin tells me she has "dancing in [her] blood" because her

father was a professional ballroom dance teacher in New York. Ms. Dupré, on the other hand, discovered dance and the dancing community when she first came to Princeton, confused and lonely, 26 years ago.

The dancing lends itself to the kind of community building that the "dance mistresses," as they jokingly refer to themselves, emphasize. In one figure, four dancers stand together in a square and take each other's hands in sequence. I think some of my fellow men in the class had their masculinity threatened by all this hand holding, but whether threatened or not, it's amazing how well one can get to know complete strangers by moving in step with them. Conversation around the refreshments table was animated, and the successful partnerships on the dance floor were mirrored in who was talking to whom later. Since it's a line dance, each dancer comes face to face with every other dancer as though in some absurdly choreographed meet and greet.

It was still unclear to me what exactly counted as "English country dance," and I asked. Hesitation from the dance mistresses. "Well, it's a long story. I think we'll tell you more than you want in your article," Ms. Rivkin said. I heard about the

difference between the stuffy court dance and the vibrant dance of the rural elite, whose form had its roots in peasant culture. This so-called "country dance" became popular in the late 17th century, and its following has waxed and waned since then. The form is still alive, they proudly announced, because newly composed steps are often exhibited at the same time as 300-year-old patterns. As though bent on world domination, there are hundreds of associated English country dance societies in America and Britain.

The music likewise has an ancient tradition and is largely improvisational. Two fiddlers, a lute player and a pianist played for our class and changed the music slightly each time. Like the dancers themselves, the musicians must communicate with one another by subtle signals embedded in their music. For everyone involved, dancers and musicians, there is an obsession with "doing things nicely" (Ms. Rivkin's term), which means acting with poise instead of necessarily getting it all right. Though this aesthetic has fallen out of style, in general, it comfortably exists in this workshop.

Jane Austen, in the end, is somewhat of a red herring. The class has no more to do with Jane Austen than

going to the gym has to do with Arnold Schwarzenegger. In fact, it's a semantic issue: "No one knows what 'English country dance' is," Ms. Dupré said, but "everyone has seen 'Pride and Prejudice.'" The advertisement for the class proclaims, "You, too, can dance like Mr. Darcy and Lizzy Bennet!" The idea for the class was born when the organizers read a review of the Colin Firth adaptation of "Pride and Prejudice" in this newspaper.

The class will continue to meet in the Fields Center for seven more Monday evenings (until Nov. 22). The eventual goal is to become proficient in a very difficult step called "Mr. Beveridge's Maggot," which, I am assured, has neither to do with drinks nor worms. Maggot means "fancy" or "whim" but Mr. Beveridge's identity is lost to the



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**Participants move through choreographed line dances inspired by Jane Austen's novels.**

sands of time. A gala dance recital, somewhat shamelessly titled "The Austen-tatious Assembly," will conclude the series on Monday, Nov. 29. The next class is free for students, who are urged to make the crossover from ballroom dance or hip-hop to English country dance. The remaining six classes will cost \$20 and the public gala \$5. Contact Ms. Rivkin for more information at [jrivkin@princeton.edu](mailto:jrivkin@princeton.edu).