

Leading a contra dance role-swapping workshop

by Erik Erhardt and Tina Fields

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Introduction

This article offers concrete “hows” of experiencing even more joys in contra dance. A workshop that encourages dancers to play in both dance roles is a fun opportunity that also helps evolve the skill of your dancers. While swapping roles initially seems like an advanced skill, it is often learned quickly and improves a person’s ability to dance well in either role.

We first provide swapping principles and a selection of swap points in three scenarios. We then offer a workshop outline that you can use, based on the “Gender Shenanigans” workshop we gave at Stellar Days and Nights dance camp held in the mountains of Colorado in February 2015.

While this type of workshop works well as part of a weekend dance camp with most dancers in “traditional” dance roles¹, small doses have proven to be popular at local dances, too.

Swapping principles

It can be very fun to cultivate the ability to be “ambidancetrous”; that is, to be able to dance either role and even to switch roles multiple times during a given dance.

When considering role swapping, the first thought that arises might be the simple puzzle of body mechanics in the various moves. But first and foremost in community dancing is actually the need for consideration—for good dance etiquette. Etiquette is the art of making someone else feel comfortable, and this includes not only obtaining consent from your partner, but also being aware of the expectations of the entire dance line.

Always dance with **respect for your neighbors**. It is our observation that the essence of truly excellent dancing isn’t making fancy moves, but matching the needs and energy of each person met. Just as the elderly or disabled may need shorter, gentler swings, attention and courtesy must be given to each person encountered when swapping. Be in the right place on time for the next move, and confidently project to approaching dancers, particularly beginners, which role you’re dancing. This can be done by making eye contact, clearly offering the appropriate hand, and additionally saying “I’m the gent/lady” if helpful. If you’re swapping, you shoulder extra responsibility for dance excellence. If we follow this “prime directive” of respecting the line, role swapping will continue to grow in acceptance and popularity, even among those with little desire to do it themselves.

Partners choose together (consent) when to swap or continue roles. Discussing briefly before the dance starts helps. In a same-gender or “ambidancetrous” pairing of any genders, decide who will dance each role and for how long. (Examples: “I dance both roles. Do you have a preference?”, “Want to swap roles throughout

¹ This article is purposefully sidestepping the unstraightening of contra through gender-free dancing, since so many people have written eloquently on this important revolution already (see CDSS workshops from puttinonthedance.org and cdss.org/swroc). For clarity, this article uses “gent” and “lady” to indicate the dance roles for partners ending a swing on the left and right, respectively, as well as “norm” or “traditional” to indicate the situation where a man dances the gent role and a woman the lady role. Gendered pronouns may also be used to simplify writing. “Gypsy” is also used since a widely accepted standard replacement has not yet been adopted.

the dance?”, “How about while dancing one role until we reach the end of the line, then swapping?”, “Okay.”) Don’t force your partner.

Vet the dance as it’s being taught, and decide if it’s a good choice for swapping or not. **Exert caution during unbalanced or complex dances**, such as those involving opposite or changing directions of travel for each role (e.g., gents face in, ladies face out for a Rory O’More long waves, then rolling in different directions on different sides of the set). These can involve too much thinking to really be fun when swapping and can lead to repeated mistakes, thereby alienating your neighbors. Best to wait for the next one.

If you decide to swap multiple times throughout a dance, it can be helpful to **dance your original role 2-3 times** through before swapping to be clear about which role does what. It can also be helpful for each partner to dance both roles early on, while the dance is still being called all the way through.

Line awareness is important. If you notice or know that your next neighbor prefers to dance with other “gender norm” neighbors, you can help them be more comfortable by being in your traditional role when you progress to them. Do the same with known beginners: the visual cues of a beard, say, on the one dancing the gents’ role in an opposite-gender pairing can help them go to the right place. When in doubt, dance the “traditional” role; **connection trumps novelty**. Avoid dropping hands to swap (for example, when circling) since you’re breaking the connection from people who need you. If someone gets lost and you’re in the remaining trio of dancers, make a friendly fuss and have the lost dancer find you. If the line is breaking down around you, stop swapping and dance “traditional” until order permeates. Assess the line’s health and needs during the recovery points during swings, long lines, heys, and whenever you’re waiting on the side while your partner interacts in the middle.

Start playing with swapping by choosing **simple and obvious swap points** (e.g., at the end of the line or during a long swing). This allows the new role to be established and claimed by both partners in time to do the next move correctly. Later, when both are more comfortable with swapping, find a swap point where you might **surprise your partner** but where you also take the next active move (for example, put yourself into the lady role for a chain). This will give awe without giving immediate responsibility. Finally, when both partners know both roles, swap as much as you want without deteriorating the dance experience for yourself or others around you; do so artfully without excess. Some dances work better with swapping every time. Note that if a pattern of swapping has been established, then *not* swapping is a new surprise.

For a shadow dance, **warn your shadows** (a dancer you see each time who is not your partner, a.k.a. trail buddy) that you and your partner may swap, and try to indicate who they are. Because a shadow is an “anchor” to whom you repeatedly return, an unannounced swap can really confuse a shadow. But if your shadow knows they’ll have two shadows, and can easily identify both you and your partner as such, swapping rarely poses a problem and often confers extra delight.

For callers, swapping as a dancer can enhance your skill. It’s imperative for a caller to understand how everyone moves and interacts on the floor, and there’s no better way to do that than actually dancing a figure from every dancer’s perspective. The experience will often give you insight about figures new dancers may experience as confusing or frustrating “trouble spots.” Swapping can, therefore, improve your teaching by helping you discover which words the dancers in each role need to hear, and when, in order to more quickly have success and enjoy dancing. As callers, we also want to encourage dancers to “dance with who’s coming at’cha.”

For all dancers, the increasing prevalence of role-swapping changes the game: encountering an unexpected person in a dance role doesn’t necessarily mean they’re in the “wrong” place. Instead of worrying or trying to correct the situation, assume they are where they belong and enjoy the dance, confident that any confusion will work itself out. It’s the dance position/role (not gender) that determines the interaction between dancers. All of us can be anything we want, when we want—what power!

Swappable moments

To swap, defy the definition² of a given dance call when interacting with another dancer to end in opposite dance role positions. A partner swap is the easiest and safest way to play because it only immediately affects your current neighbors, and it's easy to undo. A neighbor swap is as easy as a partner swap but has consequences. If you're not careful, you may unintentionally lose your partner and steal someone else's. While this can also be fun if intended, it is shocking, confusing, and even rude if not. Prearranging play buddies along the line is a great way to extend your swapping network.

Partners

The list of partner swaps below, roughly ordered in increasing complexity, is intended to inspire rather than be comprehensive.

Call or Moment: Modification to swap

End of the line, while waiting out: Don't cross over. Go back into the dance in the other dance role's position.

Swing: Switch with partner starting/during/ending swing; or start the swing with ambiguous barrel frame or ceilidh hold to create the dramatic tension of "who will be whom" at the end of the swing. Offering hands facing up or down before a swing can designate intention to dance the gents' or ladies' role, respectively, and helps both dancers remember who's dancing which role.

You could also add a gentle surprise rollaway at the end to nab that role. But make sure to do that sort of thing early enough to be on time for the next move with others.

Down the hall, Turn as a couple (with partner): Turn alone instead.

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Allemande: End in traded places with partner by adding or removing 1/2, especially if going into wavy lines.

Do-si-do: End in traded places by adding or removing 1/2.

Gypsy: End in traded places by adding or removing 1/2.

Courtesy turn (from Right and Left through, Ladies chain, or Promenade): Add a rollaway to end facing across (lady ends on left).

Ocean wave allemandes: Don't trade places with your partner when the dance calls for it. Instead of "balance the wave, allemande 1/2 with partner", just balance the wave and then either stay put or allemande 1X. (If it repeats, do this the last time only, or only the time with your partner.) Then you're set to go into the next move in their position and role.

Long lines, Forward and back (partner along the line with you): Forward, then partner roll away with a half sashay on way back.

Long lines, Forward and back (partner across from you): On beats 4-5, partner half gypsy. across to trade lines. (This move is less ideal, as it violates the taboo against dropping hands/losing connection with others to swap. Once in awhile, though, the novelty might outweigh the risk of breaking the line.)

Figure eight: Actives symmetric do-si-do, Inactives can swap once the actives have passed between.

California twirl: Turn alone with a gentle ricochet.

Petronella: Leading partner (partner on right around the ring) stays in place, trailing partner ricochets off or rolls past lead partner to progress two places to the opposite corner.

Hey for four (passing partner in the center): Partners ricochet in the center to switch.

Hey for four (passing partner on end): Partners ricochet on the end, but this is more tricky since the shoulder pattern changes for you both, especially for the person who would be entering from the end.

Star promenade (pick up partner): Add a roll away after the butterfly whirl.

Star: The leading partner in the star (usually the gent) ducks under trailing partner's arm, then pops up behind to switch and continue the star.

Experiment, apologize when things break, and share your successes!

Neighbors

Use caution. You can swap with a neighbor in your minor set by using any of the partner swaps above, easy-peasy—albeit with consequences. A neighbor swap gives you a different partner and reverses your direction of

² A corruption of the modern western square dance suggestion to "dance by definition" of calls.

progression. Both your original and new partners may be surprised that they also have new partners! Swap (1) only if you know whom you're affecting and you know for sure or strongly suspect they'll be on board with this type of play, (2) they're experienced enough dancers to not get discombobulated, and (3) the novelty of a (permanent) swap outweighs the partnering they were expecting. It can be a bummer for unsuspecting neighbors to suddenly lose a partner they really wanted to dance with. Remember the prime directive: respect your neighbors.

Prearranging shadow play

Prearrange a "play" line with willing (shadow) couples and line up so all your playmates are facing the same direction (either all 1s or all 2s), interleaved with other couples in the line. All of your playmates will be progressing with you along the line. Let the nonplaying couples know that there's a block of you who are swapping so they can decide to join a different line if it's not for them (prime directive). Help your beginner dancers by encouraging them to join another line.

The easiest place to swap is during an 8-beat call where all your playmates of a given dance role are **standing out at the same side of the line**. Seize the day: swap along the line! Watch for these moments during the walk-through, and make eye contact with your buddies with a knowing nod that indicates "oh yeah, this is the moment to swap". For example, when the gents are allemanding 1-1/2, the waiting ladies³ can swap places along the sides of the set and even get a brief swing in to do it.

Another great place to swap is when you're **on the side of the set with your partner** (for example, after a partner swing) in long lines. Go forward in long lines, but on the way back roll your buddy away to both swap partners and roles in one fell swoop.

You'll eventually find ways to stack multiple swaps in a row with your partner, and even with others. Swapping with your neighboring buddy is a good start, then swap back to your original partner. But as you all grow bolder, soon you'll be quickly swapping five buddies up the line as you shuffle each of them down one spot by tapping them on the shoulder as you pass them saying "slide down, slide down".

This kind of play obviously takes some coordination as well as a great deal of consent. Because any swap increases cognitive load and temporarily decreases connection, please find your sweet spot as you play. For most single dances, zero to three swapping points is plenty, erring towards fewer.

Such novelty can also bring feelings of exclusion to people who prefer not to swap but still want to dance with the "hot shots," so consider limiting swapping dances to once or twice in an evening. At a large dance (150+ dancers) you might ask the caller to announce a deliberate play line that everyone knows will be wild. This "play" structure has become preferred to the "chaos" line, a name which suggests and sometimes leads to too much permissiveness, confusion, and disconnection. Remember, the point is not to "break the dance," but to keep it going smoothly even as wild swapping occurs. That's skilled dancing!

Workshop ideas

We believe the focus of a workshop is to give the dancers an opportunity to learn, try, fail, (relearn,) succeed, and assimilate something they couldn't do before. Thus, each segment of a workshop can attempt to capture all of these experiences. The specifics of how you instruct can greatly vary and still be successful. If a workshop like this is followed by a dance evening, have the callers plan at least one dance that will encourage swapping. Callers should choose one that facilitates easy, clean swaps, then forewarn the dancers and indicate which line it will be in.

In a 1.5 hour workshop, consider having 15- to 20-minute segments where each includes a family of one-to-three related swaps. Start with a floor demo (a minor set of two couples in the middle of the floor will usually be enough, but three sets are better), then take hands four in short lines and lead selected couples (maybe 1s, then 2s) in practice. Finally, teach an easier dance that features multiple swapping moments, and throughout

³ Note that the terms "gents" and "ladies" imply whoever is dancing those roles at the given moment.

the dance occasionally remind the dancers of the swaps just before the swapping moments to encourage practice.

Begin the workshop by reminding dancers to always first gain permission from their partners to swap roles, either once or multiple times throughout the dance. “Are you down to swap?” Some people may want to participate in the workshop but not swap; pair up those as couples first.

Segment 1: Basics of dancing both roles

Dancing the other role is only challenging because some calls have dance-role differences embedded in the move (such as swing, chain, box the gnat, California twirl, and courtesy turn). But most calls are actually non-role specific (such as circle, allemande, and do-si-do).

It’s common to use palms up/down to designate gent/lady when taking hands. When teaching, use the expression “fake what you saw” or “try it out” to open a safe space for dancers to try dancing the other role, knowing it won’t be perfect and that’s part of the fun.

Choose a dance that has only two role-specific calls (such as swing and chain, as in Simplicity Swing by Becky Hill). Line up the dancers and teach those calls from “traditional” roles, then from “swapped” roles teaching again with more specific details. Use the word “freeze” in the middle of a call if you need time to explain to each dancer what happens next, then “go” to complete the call.

For example, for a ladies’ chain to partner, you might say: “Ladies start to pull by rights WHILE the gents slide to their right. FREEZE, you’re looking at your partner and the gents slid right to make space for their partner (ladies let go of hands). Take lefts with your partner, ladies right hand on your lower back, and, GO, gents scoop your partner around by the right hand on hers with a courtesy turn (gents backing up) to end facing across”.

For a swing, begin by specifically showing each role where the left hands should be placed on the partner’s body. This can be done by having the pair face each other and beginning with the usual role, repeatedly shift hand positions between the two roles. Swing. Teach the dancers to stop the swing, then open on the correct sides “with the pointy ends facing where you want to go.” Note that the addition of a twirl takes four beats, so plan ahead. Walk each call from swapped roles a few times, watching your dancers and giving them the details they need.

Consider having everyone line up in short “traditional” role lines, then have the 1s swap to dance the other role. Let the dancers know to swap roles at the top of the set. This way the 2s are anchors in the role they’re comfortable in, and everyone gets the experience of dancing in swapped roles and of dancing with swapped neighbors. Teach the walkthrough and add a couple of details when relevant: start simple, try twirls later; work on smooth transitions and good timing; recover with smiles.

For shorter workshops, this segment on dancing the other role may be enough.

Segment 2: Swap with partner

Choose an accessible dance that has several opportunities for swapping (such as Butter by Gene Hubert, with a forward and back, chain to partner, and partner swing; avoid shadows).

Teach swapping moments during the walkthrough, repeating the swapping call a few times in a row to practice. Remind the dancers of swapping principles during teaching: dancers who are swapping have extra responsibility to be on time and to be clear whom they’re dancing with next (care for your neighbors); aim for excellent timing with finesse, avoid “breaking the dance”; don’t force partner but decide together when to swap; default to the “traditional” role to reduce chaos.

Try out the dance, then try again. Point out different strategies for swapping: swap roles only at the end of the line (this helps you get into the flow of the dance, but the disadvantage is that you may not have any calling

for your new role after the swap); swap every time through (the plus is that both hear the calls in both positions, but the minus is that your swapping may lack flow); swap every few times through (a balance); or swap a few times each time through (possibly too hectic, but enjoyable as a rarity).

Encourage dancers to not swap the first two times through the dance. It's easier to do each role once it has been fully kinesthetically grokked.

Segment 3: Swap with shadows

Choose a dance that has a move where one partner interacts in the center while the other partner waits at the side and includes a new partner swap (such as Heartbeat Contra by Don Flaherty, with a ladies gypsy right 1-1/2, balance the ring and spin to the right x2, California twirl).

A dance like this will allow the waiting partner to swap up and down the set with play buddies (shadows) and to practice more partner swaps.

Have consecutive pairs of 1s become buddies, and same for 2s. Teach the dance without swapping, then reteach with a buddy swap (look at buddy up and down set, then swap). Then swap dance roles, and teach the buddy swap again. Start back in home positions, remind the dancers to care for each other, and dance, reminding them of swapping opportunities with their partner and buddies.

Conclusion

Besides the fun factor, it is hard to beat the learning that can be gained by dancing the other role. One quickly realizes what makes for good, enjoyable dancing (or not) by experiencing one's usual technique from the other side. For example, dancing the gent's role for the first time, Tina learned just how hard a swing can be on the right shoulder to bear the weight if the lady leans back too far in a misguided attempt to create momentum. This new awareness changed her dancing in the traditional ladies' role for the better from then on. And dancing the ladies' role, Erik discovered the welcome relief and connection of a standard courtesy turn following a whole line of gents twirling ladies at every possibility. Now he occasionally offers the simpler, sweeter basic move as a novel surprise.

We hope this article will encourage all dancers to be less intimidated when encountering neighbors in swapped roles in a contra line, for the curious to try dancing the other role with a willing partner, and if up for the mental challenge, for the courageous to then try swapping roles with that partner multiple times in a given dance. We also strongly advocate for attentive kindness in all forms of dancing, particularly when engaging in any sort of anomalous play.

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