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Buffalo Big Dance 2008 *by Mary Collins*

It was sunny and abnormally warm for April in Buffalo. Each of the three previous Buffalo Big Dances (BBD) was met with cool, cold, rainy or snowy weather, so this warm front was either exceptionally helpful or mournfully detrimental to our event. Since our attendance was a bit low for the event one would say that the weather played a part; but the caliber and “home-base” of those attending would belie that assumption. Most of the dancers in attendance were seasoned dancers and well versed in festivals, some were new to contra dancing, tango and bourré,* the offerings of the day. Some were local to Buffalo, but others came to us from Cleveland, Toronto, Hamilton, Ithaca, Rochester and points farther away.

In addition, as we had hoped, the name Buffalo Big Dance has become one of the “places to go” for great contra dancing. Since the event, I have been approached by several organizers from nearby communities asking when next year’s BBD would take place, as they do not want to schedule conflicting events. I take this as confirmation that we have begun what can be a long running and successful dance weekend.

Financially speaking we did not do as well this year as in prior years; however, we did enter into the event knowing that a loss was a much greater possibility than in previous years. Some of the contributing factors to this are believed to be: a) a more expensive, better known band; b) better known callers; c) less volunteerism and higher over all expenses.

I will address each of these issues:

a) The committee agreed to hire a well known band with a following at a much higher rate than in previous years in hopes of drawing strong dancers from farther way. Buffalo’s home dance, while fun, is not populated with many strong dancers. It is our hope that by

bringing strong dancers to our bigger events, the local dancers will appreciate their ability, have more fun and thus put more effort into making the regular Buffalo dance better.

b) The reasoning for a stronger, well known caller is as above. The better the caller the more likely we are to attract outside dancers, and it is better to help the new and struggling dancers to integrate with the others.

c) We agreed this year to pay more of our professionals, specifically our sound person and all of our bands and callers. In the past, some have graciously volunteered their time and energy to help make this event a success. Since this year’s dance started earlier and used more space our rental expense increased, more money spent on incidentals and as mentioned before, less volunteerism, more pay-for-services and higher fees for bands and callers.

As before, we offered a different event or focus as an alternative to our attendees. This year we offered a bourré workshop led by one of our members who is extremely well versed in several forms of traditional dance. Everyone who attended expressed enthusiasm for it. We also offered tango instruction and held a milonga** opposite our main contra dance in the evening. While the instructional portion was sparsely attended, the participants all agreed that it was fun, interesting and they were glad they did it. However, they did not attend the milonga, choosing contra instead. This may have been because of poor communication about publicity. Some of the tango regulars said that had it been more widely publicized there could

have been upwards of seventy people in attendance. This would have not only helped us break even but would have made us profitable. The lesson learned here is to really take on all aspects of publicity and to help and nurture the newer organizers and guide them in getting the best response possible.

One other thing that is important for all event planners is participant feedback. A questionnaire addressing dancer and performer's concerns and interest, is, for the organizers, a most useful tool and was instrumental in helping with decision making for the last two dances. This year, our questionnaire was more comprehensive, printed and forgotten. A major faux pas that should and will not be repeated. I have, however, learned from this that the questionnaire should be as generic as possible, to be used repeatedly; this way, those forgotten questionnaires could be used for the next event.

Our sound was the most significant improvement over previous years. We worked with our sound person over several months discussing ways to improve the sound quality in our venue. The result was due to a great response from our community in providing quilts and blankets to sound proof not only the adjoining dance room from our main event, but to help with the acoustics in the main hall. This resulted in the best sound we have ever experienced in this particular venue. Several of the quilts used were donated, by request, to a local shelter after the dance.

Preplanning and booking is another area in which we saw improvement. By being attentive to this area we were able to book really talented bands and callers, thus ensuring one of the best possible experiences for our dancers. This year our publicity was again a weak area; we seem to be floundering with this. A conversation was held with a marketing person, and while ideas were helpful for the longterm, for this event were not really applicable or cost effective for our budget. We need to address this more with each subsequent dance. Other things that affected our budget adversely were the potluck dinner and snacks. Buffalo contra dances are well known for our snacks and living up to this reputation seems to have become costly. We budget for this portion but each year we seem to overspend. This is something else we need to address as organizers.

In spite of all the negative aspects and disappointment in the financial areas, and due

to the exceptional sound and dancing, we have agreed to forge ahead and are currently in the planning stages for the next Buffalo Big Dance. We have high hopes that it too will be a successful dance event.

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* Bourrée—a dance of French origin common in the seventeenth century; it is danced in quick double time, somewhat resembling the gavotte.

** Milonga—an evening of dance; in this case, an evening of tango.

The author is vice president of Queen City Contra Dancers. QCCD dance on first and third Saturdays (October-June) and third Saturdays only (July-August), from 8-11 pm, usually at Unitarian-Universalist Church, at Elmwood and West Ferry in Buffalo, New York. They recently began a quarterly family dance which precedes the first Saturday dance; the next one will be in the spring. The next Buffalo Big Dance will be in the fall of 2009. For more information, see their website, www.qccd.org.



Photo courtesy Mary Collins