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Dancers raise the roof for a sun-filled summer

-dawn rose garden folk dance is a potent May Day tradition

BY JENNIFER WILLIS
The Portland Tribune, Apr 29, 2008 (2 Reader comments)

Every May 1, rain or shine, a growing band of dedicated Portlanders gather at the International Rose Test Garden to welcome the May Day dawn.

Wearing anything from kilts to blue jeans, these brave souls huddle under cloaks and blankets, sip hot chocolate and join in the communal predawn maypole dance to celebrate the traditional start of summer. They await the morning's main action: the morris dancers.

Portland's morris teams — the Bridgetown Morris Men, Renegade Rose Morris, Iron Mountain Sword and Wild Rose Garland — arrive at the Rose Garden each year to dance up the May Day sun. Tradition holds that the English folk dancing promotes good weather and ensures a bountiful harvest.

"All morris teams, everywhere in the world, dance on May Day," says Hugo Glanville, foreman for



KATIE HARTLEY / TRIBUNE PHOTO
Maia Clemons watches the Bridgetown Morris Men dance at the Pagan Faire at Portland State University in March. The morris troupe will join others from around the city at the Washington Park Rose Garden early on May 1 to dance up the sun.

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the Bridgetown Morris Men. “The summer wouldn’t be sunny and wonderful unless you had morris dancing on May Day.”

Portland teams have been dancing on May Day — also called Beltane on the pagan calendar — since the 1980s, and have been performing in the Rose Garden since 2000.

Morris dancing is derived from ritual dances of England and Wales. In the spring, dances from the Cotswold region are performed, with dancers sporting flowered hats and colorful ribbons and accompanied by musicians on mandolin, penny whistle, button accordion, concertina and melodium.

It’s a manly tradition

You might not think a bunch of guys leaping about wearing knee pants and bells and waving hankies in the air would look particularly manly, but the Bridgetown Morris Men pull it off.

“People in England look on morris dancing as a loathsome pastime carried on by potbellied men of dubious sexual persuasion,” Glanville says. “Over here, you ask women what they think of men morris dancing, and they go, ‘Men who can dance! Men who have rhythm!’ ”

Morris dancing has traditionally been men-only — like the Bridgetown Morris Men — but other teams, including Renegade Rose, are coed.

As they sing and skip through their figures, the dancers’ cheerful and boisterous mood is infectious — and with their vigorous, high-stepping moves, they have no trouble keeping warm.

“Those guys have calves of steel,” says Heidi Shewchuk, a Clackamas blacksmith who has been a die-hard May Day spectator in the garden for about eight years.

Shewchuk says she’s seen as many as 50 people at the garden.

“Traditional dancing is becoming more popular,” she says. “It’s an opportunity for people of northern European and English descent to share our folk traditions. The whole ritual is so exciting, seeing all these other crazy people in the dark.”

For many performers and spectators, celebrating May Day traditions is very much in keeping with a growing focus on sustainable living and local roots.

“The celebration harkens back to a time when people were connected to the earth and were more aware of the seasons and seasonal changes,” says Linda Golaszewski, assistant foreman for the Renegade Rose Morris team. “With the rise of green ideology and sustainability, we’re yearning culturally to have those kinds of connections to the seasons, to each other, to Mother Earth and to a sense of community that gets lost in city living.”

Top of the props

The dances are definitely athletic. Many were originally intended to encourage fertility, in both plants and people.

“I have to say, it does work,” says Shewchuk, who grows her own fruit. “The higher the dancers jump, the higher the crops grow. Every year, I get a good crop.”

Dancing around the maypole is another tradition associated with the return of the earth’s fertility.

“I had a vasectomy, and my girlfriend couldn’t have children,” Glanville says. “But now we have a 2-year-old. If morris dancing doesn’t work, I don’t know

what does.”

Based on pre-Christian traditions, the May Day celebration has pagan overtones but isn't overtly religious. The festivities mark the first day of summer, while midsummer — or summer solstice — celebrations honor the sun at its height in the sky.

“It's not like we're praying to the sun or anything,” Golaszewski says. “It's more about our connection to the earth and the spirit of the earth. I don't think you need a religion for that.”

The Green Man — a man draped in foliage and very much resembling a shrub — also usually makes an appearance. In the past, he's entertained the crowd by decorating the faces of spectators with green sparkle paint.

The celebration begins with the Abbots Bromley horn dance, a ritual dance with antlers that dates back several hundred years. If you're up before the sun on May 1, you can also see the teams perform with sticks, bells, handkerchiefs, flower garlands and rapper swords.

“Some say the tradition is that the stick dancing is to drive the spirits — that would come up from the underworld and spoil your crops — back down into the underworld for the growing season,” Glanville says. “The handkerchiefs ... I don't know what that's about.”

Dress warmly, bring joy

Following the sunrise celebration, many of the dancers and spectators head off to a communal breakfast before the morris teams continue their May Day performances at area schools.

May Day may be the traditional first day of summer, but it's still awfully chilly so early in the morning. If you're headed for the Rose Garden, May Day veterans recommend dressing warmly.

“It really depends on the weather,” says Golaszewski, who remembers bundling up her kids in blankets for May Day when they were younger. “It's nice for bystanders to bring a warm drink with them.”

Shewchuk encourages newcomers to bring their families to the Rose Garden to join the early morning fun.

“It's a good way to celebrate the beginning of summer,” she says. “Everybody's very friendly.”

She adds, “You don't have to be a tree-hugging dirt-worshipper” to enjoy the festivities. “Just come with a sense of joy in your heart.”



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