

“Les Belles Vilaines” French dancing and beyond

*by Catherine Pattison, photos by Ordine Grace
from DANZ Quarterly magazine, Autumn 2010,
reprinted with permission
www.danz.org.nz*



After 10 years teaching West African dance with live drumming in Dunedin (Songbong), Kate Grace's 50-year-old body and her creative energy decided it was time to cast back to the style of French dancing so popular in her home country.

Kate and kiwi partner David have lived in New Zealand for 15 years, but a three-year stint living back in France from 2005 allowed Kate to change roles from being the tutor to being the student.

Based about 90 minutes from Paris, near Chablis in Burgundy, she attended button accordion and traditional dance workshops on a weekly basis. Kate also enjoyed going to many festivals and participating in some week-long camps.

These workshops were quite common and traditional dance was well developed in the particular region she was living in. “The people I met there were dedicated to passing on tradition. They focused on collecting music and dance from various sources and handing it on to whoever showed an interest.”

“It was not about making money at all. And I suppose that is what tradition is about, you want it to carry on, you cannot afford to take the risk of losing the opportunity because of money. So I decided to carry on in NZ on these grounds.”

Kate began her traditional (or French) dancing classes back in Dunedin last year and asked the 15 or so dancers for koha only. “I don't really care, I want it to happen. I want people to explore the dances and the music and find what I myself found in it. That would be such a gift if I can achieve that. Maybe because that is where I am from, or maybe out of respect for the wonderful dancers and musicians I have met in France. If people are ready to open their hearts and minds, it feels like it cannot be done for purely commercial ends.”

Before she advertised the first class, Kate had trouble finding a name for what she wanted to teach.

“I was looking for a title that could tell people what it was, but not scare them away at the same time. Above all, I did not want to call it folk dance.”

She had found that the word ‘folk’ has negative connotations, especially for people forced to learn folk dancing at school. Some associated it with older people, while for others it conjured up visions of the 1970s’ “tree huggers and dope smokers”.

“When I went back [to France] in 2005, I realised that there was a big revival of traditional forms of music and dance. Still involving lots of people who were 20 years old in 1968, but also, and that surprised me, lots of young people.”

“Traditional instruments are transformed, but above all, the music and the dances are evolving at a fast pace. That is maybe why so many young people are part of the new wave. In France, ‘folk’ does not have exactly the same connotation as here, but nevertheless, it does not sound like something very exciting to do. So they came up with the word ‘trad’ which is now becoming ‘tradactuel’ (which translates to current or neo-traditional).”

However, Dunedin people reacted to the word ‘trad’ as if it was something very strict from Scotland so Kate went for “Les Belles Vilaines” – French dancing and beyond – because it allows her to teach European dances as well.

Weekly classes began again in early February – one in Dunedin and one in a nearby community, Waitati – and Kate is optimistic they will blossom. “I just started small but I'm confident it will happen. The French thing is attractive for people here.”

Last year she started to teach a variety of dances in the class – her goal is to give everything she can to the dancers. “I would like them to start feeling what I am talking about. Basically I teach dances which are danced in ‘bals folk’ or ‘festnoz’ (a place where people dance to live music) in France.”

Kate teaches dances from France, especially Brittany, and central France, but also some dances from the South and others regions of France. She also teaches dances from the French ‘neighbourhood’, including Germany, Portugal and Scandinavia. In Kate’s repertoire are fast waltzes “not only with 3 beats, but also 5, 8, and 11”; the mazurka that is evolving and becoming a hit in Europe; some Scottish dances; medieval dances and a few dances from the Balkans.

She likes to use a CD player as little as possible, preferring instead to use live instruments played by herself and her musician friends. “For me, dance and music have always been the same thing. One does not exist without the other. Twenty years of dancing to drums teaches you that. The body is the media for music. To play it, I need to feel the dance.”

Kate enjoys playing the flute and, together with other musicians, is working on a repertoire of French tunes. Ultimately, she would like to spend



less time leading the dance, and more time playing the music for the dancers.

“There is no right or wrong way to do it. I am not so concerned with technical precision, but rather with how much emotion the dancers are putting into their dancing. Not just going through the motions, but breathing life into the dance.”

If you are interested in Kate Grace's West African dance with live drumming visit this website www.songbong.co.nz

For her Les Belles Vilaines classes www.frenchdancing.co.nz