

Clog Dancing at the Old Vic

By Pat Tracey

For six weeks in the spring this year, the boards at the Old Vic in London echoed to the sound of Lancashire clogs. Actors, representing colliers, in John Arden's play 'Serjeant Musgrave's Dance', were rattling off the clog-dance routine they had learnt in just four and a half weeks.

The play is set in the 1870's in a mining town in the north of England. A serjeant and three soldiers, all deserters, arrive in a mining town ostensibly on a recruitment drive. They find that the colliers are on strike and could be amenable to recruitment propaganda.

However, the first reaction of the colliers is one of hostility, as they assume that the soldiers have been sent to quell the strike. The serjeant persuades them that this is not the case, and asks them to go to the public house that evening and hear what he has to say.

So, at the beginning of Act II, we find the soldiers and colliers fraternizing in a convivial atmosphere. Sparky, the youngest of the soldiers, is singing 'Blow Your Morning Bugles' and everyone else is joining in the chorus. Soldiers and colliers are dancing and the soldiers are handing out cockades.

The scene threatens to turn ugly when the Pugnacious Collier asks what will become of his wife if he goes to the war, and the Slow Collier taunts him and says he will take her from him. To deflect the anger, the Slow Collier seizes the Pugnacious one and, as the stage instructions say: "they do a clog dance together".

This bare statement, together with the fact that the play is sprinkled with folk song, inspired Albert Finney, the Director, to use both the song and the dance to offset the tense and gloomy atmosphere which prevails.

The English Folk Dance and Song Society was approached for help with the clog-dancing, and the librarian passed on the request to Madeleine Hollis. Knowing that it would involve a heavy programme of teaching and choreographing, Madeleine spoke to me and we took on the job together. By coincidence, I had taught the dancing in an earlier production of the same play at the Royal Court Theatre. We suggested Sam Sherry for the part of the Dancing Collier, a character specially written into the play by Albert Finney. John Tams was recruited to supervise, research and, where necessary, compose the music. Tim Laycock was Leader of the Musicians. It was our job to teach and choreograph the dancing of the colliers and soldiers.

The cast of fifteen men and two women was headed by Albert Finney as Serjeant Musgrave, with Eileen Atkins, Max Wall, Graham Crowden, Alun Armstrong and Willoughby Goddard in leading roles. Albert Finney also directed the play and Richard Johnson was the producer.

Our first week was spent at the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith where the entire company put in an hour a day

learning steps from the Old Lancashire toe and heel routines — steps which would have been danced by colliers at the time the play was set. The second week, in the rehearsal room at the Old Vic, followed a similar pattern. The actors were enthusiastic and very professional in their approach. They were also great fun to teach.

In the third week, we got down to business more seriously, and spent at least one and a half hours a day with the actors who would be performing the dances on stage.

We choreographed three dance sequences. It was necessary to weave in the dancing with the singing and the dialogue, and give an air of spontaneity in keeping with the pub atmosphere.

As the Second Act opens, soldiers and colliers are in the pub together, and the atmosphere is already convivial. Private Sparky is singing 'Blow Your Morning Bugles', and the Slow Collier is clog-dancing cheekily towards Private Attercliffe who is pinning on cockades. They do a cheerful, linked-arms skipping in a circle which never seemed to go right until half-way through the chorus when they changed directions. We winced from the gallery.

There follows a mixture of talking and singing until Sparky reaches the verse beginning:

"But soon we were paraded
And marching to the war."

This reminds him and Private Attercliffe of dances seen on their travels, and they do some Mediterranean stepping together moving stiffly in unison as if they were drilling.

During the singing, the Pugnacious Collier begins to get quarrelsome so, to divert him, Private Attercliffe glides up to him, doing a 'Swanee' step¹ which, there being a little rivalry between colliers and soldiers, the collier scornfully shows he, too, can do, and edges the soldier away dancing the step with him. They change to a rant step, facing each other aggressively, crouching lower and lower as they dance, until they end by kicking each other's ankles.

The second sequence, the Miner's Clog Dance, is sparked off when the Musicians go into the tune 'Collier Lad'², again to divert trouble which the Pugnacious Collier is stirring. This tune is their cue for the clog routine they all know so well. The Slow Collier snatches the barmaid's apron and puts it over his head like a shawl, ready to sing the part of the collier's sweetheart. He calls out "Come on then, mucker", to the Pugnacious Collier, while other people pull out a small table for the Dancing Collier. Two of the collier musicians join in and the landlady does a bit of stepping on the side.

The sequence we worked out was roughly a repetition of a verse of quiet stepping while the Slow Collier sang a chorus of more vigorous stepping when everyone joined in the singing, and a solo, with instrumental accompaniment only, from Sam on the table. The table had its problems, and eventually the drawers had to be nailed down to stop them from opening eerily while Sam was dancing.

We just *had* to include a step known as 'The Miner's Step', and this became the party piece of the four colliers. This step, not an easy one for beginners, includes one kick forward with the right leg and two with the left. To be effective, the four colliers had to dance in unison. At rehearsals, the score was usually 3 : 1. However, it was "alright on the night" — or, at least, on the nights we were in the



One of the choreographers runs a workshop.

audience. We have to admit to being rather proud of them.

The colliers ended with a vigorous 'Jumping to Corners', before Sam finished off in a rattle of fast tapping.

None of the colliers, except Sam, had clog-danced before and we had only two rehearsals on-stage before the opening night.

Our final sequence came in the last Act when Serjeant Musgrave instructs his soldiers to hoist up from the box in which it had been concealed, the skeleton of a soldier who had come from that town, in a final attempt to bring home to the people the horrors of war. Beneath it he dances what The Times critic called "a creaking dance of carnage". John Tams composed a suitably chilling tune to the song:

"Up he goes and no one knows
How to bring him downwards",
and we devised a dance based on Morris steps, which became wilder and more insane, as Serjeant Musgrave's increasing madness becomes evident.

For both of us, it was a real pleasure to be a part of the production team. The actors were cheerful and friendly and there was a good company atmosphere throughout the run.

From time to time, Max Wall entertained us with his mimicry when we had lunch at

the Actors Pub down the road. Private Sparky's wife gave birth to a daughter during the run and brought her into the theatre. We missed Albert Finney's birthday party as it was at the end of the day, but had some cake saved for us. We shared the first-night euphoria at an on-stage celebration after the show, and the sadness after the final performance when an excellent company was disbanded.

1 L R L R
 step pivot step step
 on
 heel

Rhythm 1 — and — 2 — and
Repeated several times travelling to Right.

2 "Collier Lad"

The words of the chorus were altered especially to suit the play.

Collier lads get gold and silver,
Soldier boys get nowt but brass.
Who'd be bothered with a lousy
lobster*
When there are plenty of collier lads.

*A "lobster" was the slang word for a red-coat soldier.

The four verses, as sung, were:

My mother said I mustn't marry a collier
If I do he'll break my heart.
But I don't care what my mother tells me,
I'll have a collier for my sweetheart.

If you'll leave your collier sweetheart,
I'll buy thee a guinea gold ring,
I'll buy thee a silver cradle,
For to rock thy baby in.

I don't want your silks and satins,
Nor your guinea golden ring.
I don't want your silver cradle,
For to rock thy baby in.

My mother said that I could be a lady,
If from my collier lad I'd quickly part;
I'd sooner walk on the bottom of the ocean,
Than be parted from my collier sweetheart.

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