

This troupe celebrates the earthy allure of a strange English folk dance. And beer.

By **Maia Silber** August 4 at 9:00 AM

Mitch Diamond first saw a Morris dance 47 years ago, at a folk-dancing camp in Massachusetts. He locked eyes with one of the dancers as the man leapt into the air.

“You could just see this look,” Diamond said, waxing nostalgic after his own performance in Bethesda on Tuesday. “It was strong. It was earthy. It was primal.”

He paused for a moment, reminiscing. Then he remembered the urgent task at hand.

“Come on, guys!” he called. “We gotta get to the beer.”

His fellow dancers — including his son, Nathaniel Diamond-Jones — finished packing up their bells, handkerchiefs and batons, and headed to the nearby World of Beer tavern for a pint between stands (Morris-lingo for “performances”).

The American Travelling Morrice had just finished the ninth stand of its 42nd annual tour of the United States. (Don’t ask why it’s “Morrice” with a “ce.” “If anyone tells you why, they’re lying,” said member Lloyd Lachow.) The group embraces an English folk-dancing tradition that dates back to at least the 15th century but may have roots in earlier pagan celebrations. The name may be a corruption of the word “Moorish,” but the dance’s connection to the Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula remains unclear. “Its origins are lost in the mists of forgotten time,” according to American Travelling Morrice literature.

Morris dancing, which involves rhythmic stepping, jumping, handkerchief-swinging and stick-wielding, declined in popularity during the Industrial Revolution but survived in a few small villages in England. In 1899, the English composer Cecil Sharp began documenting those Morris traditions. Today, a number of groups in England and the United States perform Morris dances. Most are all-male, though there are now some female and mixed-gender groups.

John Dexter, a classically trained violist who performs with the Manhattan String Quartet, founded the American Travelling Morrice in 1976. Like Diamond, he encountered the tradition at a folk-dancing camp and felt immediately drawn to it. “It was

this sort of mythical thing,” Dexter said.

He joined a group in Binghamton, N.Y., and then teamed up with Boston Morris dancers to organize an annual week-long tour. Over time, dancers from New York, Washington and elsewhere joined the American Travelling Morrice. Now, a few dozen dancers usually join the group for each tour. Most also perform with local groups.

A year before each tour, a “squire” begins scouting out locations for a home base. Usually, the dancers set up camp in an empty field, under a canopy. This year, they’re staying on the grounds of a farm near Frederick, Md. “We have showers, so it seems luxurious,” member Jim Morrison said enthusiastically. Often, according to Dexter, facilities consist of just a hole in the ground and a hose.

Then the squire scouts out performance venues, and the group confirms its repertoire. Over the winter, the dancers meet to hash out the details and enjoy a feast. “A crown roast of pork with oyster stuffing,” Dexter reminisced about the most recent meal.

When summer comes, the tour begins. This August has the American Travelling Morrice performing throughout the DMV area, with stops in the District, Annapolis, Baltimore, Bethesda, Frederick and Leesburg, Va. Several times a day for six days, the troupe, wearing white breeches and white shirts and bells on their legs, arrive in a public space. And they dance.

In Bethesda on Tuesday, the group performed numbers from such quaint-sounding English villages as Bampton-on-the-Bush. The dancers wove and jumped, brandishing their handkerchiefs and sticks, accompanied by a fiddle and a melodeon (a type of accordion).

“There are moments that are almost spiritual,” member Jim Moskin sighed during a break. “Moments when you’re suspended in midair, perfectly in sync.”

A dozen or so Bethesda residents looked on with a combination of delight and confusion. (Thank God, Lachow noted later, they’re not like hardened New Yorkers, who often pass by without even a glance in the dancers’ direction.) “It’s a nice thing to come across on a Tuesday in Bethesda,” said Robert Robbins, there with his son, Eli. Neither father nor son had any idea what he was watching.

As the dancers moved into a particularly complicated bit of choreography from the Cotswolds village of Leafield, a man began to run in a circle around them. He wore a black suit covered in bottle caps, a cowboy-style kerchief, and what looked like a mop hanging over his face. As the dancers stepped and jumped, he swung at them with a round, flesh-colored object — a goat’s belly, he later revealed. This was the “fool,” a traditional Morris role. The fool carries a black bag whose contents include, in addition to the goat’s belly, a creepy doll, fake dog poop, a rat trap and an antique hand grenade. His job is to use these props to distract the dancers and amuse the audience.

“I’m the force of disorder,” said the fool, whose real name is Mike Gallagher. “If you did this stuff to people without the costume, they’d punch you in the face.”

Another Morris character is the “bagman,” who passes around a bag, encouraging the audience to drop in some change. Not that Morris dancing brings in much of a haul: Usually, it’s just enough to cover the post-performance beers.

Because, yes, beer is an important part of the Morris tradition. After the performance, the dancers took over the World of Beer, brandishing their pints and their fiddles. Dancer Steve Woodruff began singing an English music-hall song.

This is an important ritual, Diamond-Jones stressed. Once, on a New England tour, the dancers had planned to eat at a fancy lobster restaurant but canceled their 30-person reservation when they learned that mealtime singing would not be permitted. They ate pizza at a local dive bar with a friendlier music policy instead.

As the dancers sang, Lachow walked over to Dexter. “Want to just bag the next stand?” he asked. “There’s good crack here.”

That’s “craic,” Lachow quickly clarified. “It’s Gaelic. It means fun. When you’re singing and your eyes are twinkling, that’s craic.”

It’s often in the pub, Lachow said, that the real magic of the Morris happens. He recalled the time the group walked into a little bar in rural Pennsylvania in full costume. The patrons looked at the dancers skeptically. But when they started to play and sing, everyone joined in the fun. “We’re just a beautiful benevolent force,” Lachow mused.

Really, what’s not to like? “ We sing and we drink beer,” Lachow summarized. “And I think there are some deeper things about relationships with the earth and the seasons and fertility.”