

# Morris and Calusari Dancers Meet in Vancouver, Canada: "Cut From The Same Cloth?"

by  
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**1935.** The English Folk Dance and Song Society organize a festival of International Dance to be presented on the stage of the Albert Hall. Representing England's flagship, Morris Dancing, is Jingy Wells and his "young-uns". But all eyes are eagerly turned to another dance tradition that promises to be the equal of morris, and they are right. The Calusari Dancers of Romania, led by Grigore Stan (1899-1974), sweep the Society's members off their feet with their costume, choreography and intensity. During the follow-up seminars and informal discussions much is made of the similarities between morris and Calusari, especially the white shirts and pants, the ribbons and flowers on the hats, the noise-makers on the legs (tambourine jingles on the shoes vis a vis jingle bells on the shins), the men-only prerogative, the extempore visits to the market places, and the specificity of time - Whitsuntide for the morris, Rusalii for the Calusari - each of the them 50 days (i.e. Pentecost) after Easter, an obvious Christian accretion to an ancient imperative.

However, one aspect was particularly intriguing. Whereas the Morris community was feeling its way through a morass of conflicting opinion about the origins of Morris, ranging from archaic Fertility Cult to Labour movement, the Calusari had no doubts whatsoever. Theirs was a pre-Christian fertility ritual, a mandate to bring luck, health and happiness to the villages they visited. Those "brought into the dance" (jucat in calus) were contrasted with "those taken out" (luat din Calus) because of broken prohibitions - for example, working during the visit of the men.

The Calusari are also self-appointed warriors doing battle against the capricious and malevolent "Iele", fairies or sprites of the water who were particularly potent at that time of year, threatening to create havoc in the village wells and streams. The mystical powers of the Calusari continue to fascinate Westerners, as was seen in the television series "X-Files", in an episode aired on April 14th, 1995. Called "The Calusari", a Romanian woman living in the United States called upon a dark and mysterious cabal called Calusari who attempted to do disarm her ailing child's dead twin brother, bent on pulling him past the veil into his own nether world. Needless to say, their dance aspect was completely over-looked.



### **Sunset Morris Men in action, demonstrating their excellent Woodley-style Bampton**

These unflinching attitudes of Grigores Calusari men gave strength to the members of the Morris community who also saw their dance as a vestige of an ancient Fertility cult, encrusted and tainted with 1000 years of extraneous history, especially at the hands of the working classes in the last 200 years.

**1996, January.** Norman Stanfield, a member of the Vancouver Morris Men, is on a business trip in Regina, Saskatchewan (Canada). A chance conversation with an airport taxi driver reveals the existence of a living Calusari dance tradition right there in the city. A meeting is arranged and the leader (Vitaf), Jason Rotelick, meets him in an empty meeting room of his hotel. Jason had heard about morris, but only as a rumour originating from the famous 1935 collaboration. Dance steps, attitudes, costuming were compared, excitement mounted, and the idea quickly grew that the Vancouver Morris Men and the Regina Calusari Men would have to meet.

**1997, May 17-19 - Whitsuntide and Rusalii.** After months of preparation and planning, the Regina Calusari arrive in Vancouver for a week-end of mutual dance and discovery. They are joined by a group of morris dancers from Los Angeles, Sunset Morris, who had heard about the venture and pleaded to be part of it. No problem. Aside from their reputation as superlative dancers and party animals, they would bring an important component to the week-ends spectacle. The Vancouver Morris Men are currently presenting Clog Morris dancing from the Northwest, so Sunset would provide the very best in morris from the Cotswold area in the south. This was a fortuitous turn of events because the "morris" that is usually compared with Calusari is in fact from the Cotswold tradition. They even prepared a number of Bampton

dances in order to emulate the historic 1935 meeting.

The Regina Calusari dancers were excited yet puzzled by a number of challenges I presented them with (through the incredible and instant medium of email communication). First, I informed them that we would be performing on the "street". The Vancouver Morris Men have dedicated themselves to presenting their morris dance in settings that best mirror their inherited traditions, namely public spaces that resemble village markets and greens. That requirement also translates into the complete absence of PAs (electronic sound enhancement). Live musicians, and not audio cassette tapes emanating from "boom boxes", would be the order of the day. The Calusari men, like practically all "ethnic dance ensembles" only perform in the rarefied atmosphere of stages - cultural "hot houses" enhanced with electronic amplification, lighting, comfortable seating, etc. Even their choreographies are designed to accommodate the stages two dimensional "window" that looks out at the audience. And, as is typical of modest national dance companies, their choreographies follow the vagaries of their resident cassette taped music.

This challenge included re-constructing their dances in the form it existed in the village squares. This resulted in a presentation that was mainly "in the round". Their second challenge was to dance with live musicians, and to this end I was able to locate some local Romanian musicians, men who performed "Gypsy" music on violins, guitar, etc., in local expensive restaurants. It was necessary for me to notate the music from the audio tapes used by the Calusari, and rehearse with the musicians before the actual week-end of the "dance-out" . It even became necessary for me to play my fife along with them although this was not too much of a concern because I am a professional flutist. However, I also found myself leading the group through tortuous repeat schemes, all the while playing at a blistering 200 beats per minute. (The average morris dance proceeds at 70 b/m.)



### **Vancouver Morris Men "doing their thing" - a NorthWest dance from Preston**

The third challenge I issued was for them to re-introduce the traditional Fool, called Mut, into their dance, making their presentation a theatrical, as well as dance, spectacle. By having the Fool, and all his attendant actions, the Calusari dance became more than dance - it became an event lifted from the golden age of its past where the happenstance audience in the village squares did not simply witness the dance, but were willingly drawn into the "magic" of the occasion with prompts and jibes from the Mut. He acted as a comic foil to the terribly serious business of the dance and its urgent need to be perfect, in order to maximize its magic.

On the Friday afternoon before the week-end of the dance-out, we had our first practice with the Calusari dancers and Romanian musicians. After the first play-through, I had to peel all of them off the ceiling. None of them had ever experienced the thrill of live musicians or Calusari dancers.

On Saturday morning, our guests awoke to brilliant blue skies and a fresh breeze blowing off Vancouver's "English Bay". The Calusari men "kitted up" after an early breakfast and we all strolled out to the middle of a huge verdant playing field right outside the Youth Hostel near army barracks where the Regina and Los Angeles men were staying. (I had arranged for them to have their own dormitory in the building.) Again, due to my urging, they re-created the traditional "oath of effort and allegiance" that all Calusari men invoke before their Rusalii tours. They gathered around their hand-held "flagpole" which is very reminiscent of the "tutti-poles" and other English hand-held Maypoles (including the Bampton Mens flower-decked Sword) and shouted their heart-felt oaths, followed by the ritual "bastinado" - the

striking of the dancers soles and thighs to "beat out the devil". We had already purchased the three ritual plants - wormwood, basil, and garlic - to place on their pole. The fool was ready with his phallic Sausage, also purchased the day before.

We climbed into a yellow mini school bus I had rented, thanks to an operating grant provided by Vancouver City Savings Credit Union. This local bank supported the venture because it fit their mandate to encourage and promote multiculturalism in our city. On this day, and the next, we drove to outdoor locations, some hardly busy, others packed with shoppers, and took turns presenting our dances in half hour sets. At one location, a Multicultural Festival that was happily programmed on exactly the same week-end as our exchange, a television crew hired by Teleromania had appeared, ready to show the folks back home what the locals were doing here in Canada. During the entire week-end, I'm not sure who got the greater benefit - the dancers who could watch their counterparts, or the audiences who stumbled into a feast of colours, music, and movement. Although the act of repeating the dance sets, each time in new surroundings with new challenges of space restrictions and audience involvement, all the while steadily improving with each public effort, was second-nature to us morris dancers, but it left our Romanian friends breathless with discovery and revelation.



### **The amazing Calusari dancers - Is this Morris from Rumania?**

From the above descriptions you may be under the mistaken impression that the Regina men were shy and retiring, foreign souls swept along by us gregarious (not to mention quintessentially North American) men. Quite the opposite was true. They turned out to be the equal, trading jokes and jibes, exchanging endless sources of hockey information. Every one of our dance-outs was near a pub, which turned out to be a necessity. I have no idea who drank

more, but I do know that the Calusari and Morris men were equally hard to pry out of the pubs and back on to the bus. Just as several of us Vancouver Morris Men are second and third generation English, so too were the Calusari in their relationship to their Romanian families and past. And like us, they see their dance as a prime opportunity to reach into their past to discover their heritage while remaining rooted in their North American cultures.

At the half way point, Saturday night, I had arranged for a Feast in a local community hall that is situated above, what else, a pub (actually a Legion, named the Billy Bishop). Thanks to the spouses and friends of the Vancouver Morris Men, not to mention the many excellent cooks among our ranks, we had a heaping pot-luck followed by an evening of dancing and carousing. But with one fascinating difference. We took turns exchanging social traditions - for example, the morris men sang a rousing drinking song, and then the Regina men would sing one of their traditional Romanian drinking songs. One of the highest moments of these trades was the English and Romanian "country" dances, all called "on the spot". We even had a gaggle of young children in attendance, thanks to the legal "gray zone" of the upper hall vis a vis the downstairs pub, so there was a distinctly community flare to the evening. They would do their helicopter dances whenever an English or Romanian dance would break out, while their parents chose to sit at the tables lining the wall, drinking and chatting. Our guests included members of the Romanian communities as well as our friends, many of whom have emigrated directly from England, so each was newly exposed to the others ultra-familiar traditions. The Vancouver Morris Men even pulled out their Christmas Mummers play, which took on new meaning as Turkish Knight blustered his way through the challenges and battle. The Romanians still have fresh memories of the Turkish occupation of their country.

On the way home, spent and weary from entirely too much fun, one of the Romanians shot me through with a casual remark that went right to my soul. He said that the evening was the equal of any (East European) wedding reception he had attended, and I knew exactly the level of his high compliment, having been to several fabulous Ukrainian affairs in my reckless youth.

But that is not my personal favorite anecdote from the two days. I think the very best moment was when the Calusari Mut spontaneously "Fooled" in the set of a Cotswold stick dance being done by the Los Angeles men. Can you imagine the tremendous meeting of time, space, and cultures in that seemingly simple moment? For many of us, it was a moment of magic never to be equaled.



**Team photo - Note the "two bald men" at the front: a tribute to Sunset's previous musician, Edie.**

So, after having seen the Calusari first hand, is it possible to re-evaluate the dispute about the origins of mens ceremonial dance in a pre-historic Fertility ritual, mentioned at the beginning of this essay? Im afraid not, although I suspect that the Calusari dancers may be in for some serious introspection and sobering re-evaluations of their own as they encounter the skepticism and subsequent discoveries of the morris world. But what is possible is a deeper appreciation of the role of mens ceremonial dance in any community, any time, any where. I suspect that each of the traditions retains a basic outline, with one genre emphasizing one aspect while another exploits a different element. Seeing them all together allows one to get a rare glimpse of the over-all picture. Our "close encounter" with the Calusari definitely went towards our own discovery of that potent universal understanding.

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