

# *Behind the Scenes – Secrets of Our Success*

**By Ruth Ostrower**

When Stefania Miller asked me for some thoughts on my tenure with the *Ontario FolkDancer* it initiated a bit of a walk down memory lane. It's hard to believe that offering to help with the syllabus at Ontario Folk Dance Camp in 1973 would lead to an over-20-year association with the OFDA publication. I decided that since I had helped with the camp paper, a logical progression was to work on the newsletter, especially since Heidi Fiebig was the editor in charge of both publications at that time.

It would be November 1973 when I got my first "credit" for production, along with Sally Sturgeon. Heidi, as noted above, was the Newsletter Editor, Dorothy Sloan was the Folklore Editor and Hans Sanders was the publisher. The newsletter was published 10 times a year and was typically about 16 pages per issue. We had just celebrated 25 years of dancing in Toronto, and you could dance in two or three different locations every night of the week.

It's hard to believe that we used to type the individual articles (yes, on typewriters). Initially we worked with whatever came our way, which sometimes meant two or three different fonts in a single issue. However, over the next two years, Heidi would gradually clean this up, with everyone using the same font and margins, so that you could no longer tell if one or several typists were at work.

Over the years we moved from typewriters to word processors (oh goody, I can fix that typo without retyping the article or drowning it in whiteout), to computers and into the world of desktop publishing. Pictures that were once screened to create an image that an ink press could print from have now (post my time) turned into scanned images, and the newsletter is produced on high-speed photocopiers; the miracle of modern technology. While my main focus was on the production side, I was persuaded to write regular reviews of camps, workshops and other events.

Until 1983, I mainly worked with Heidi and Walter Bye, associate editor. Producing the newsletter was a definite commitment. We ensured that nothing (work, family, illness or vacations) could interfere with our schedule. While we originally produced 10 issues a year, this would be reduced to eight effective January 1982 and later further reduced to seven. However,

while we were cutting back on the number of issues, the fact that the newsletter grew from typically 20 pages to often 36 pages (typically 32) meant that each individual issue did require many hours of work.

It was September 1983 when Heidi kicked Walter Bye upstairs, as it were, into the Editor's Chair and I became the Production Manager. This led to many late-night sessions at my office, with Walter writing and me typing. We actually had a Mac in my office, which was wonderful for the newsletter since its desktop programming software was much more sophisticated than the ones available on the PC. Walter was the source of many of the ideas for the columns that appeared and did a huge amount of research to keep them going. All aspects of folklore interested him, and this was reflected in articles on not just dance itself but the food (very important), costumes and culture that went into giving the dances a context and bringing them alive. "Hiers ek Wiers" (literally Here and There) was another Walter innovation, keeping the folk dance community aware of what everyone was up to. It could be births and deaths, but it was also a good place to describe an event that needed a little more space than was available in the Coming Events column but wasn't large enough to warrant a full article.

Stefania asked what it was like working with Walter for issue after issue. For the most part, it worked very well. I had a strict policy that only one of us could have a crabby day at a time. This meant that if he was out of sorts, I had to make it work. If I was in a bad mood, he had to behave himself. For the most part, this was pretty irrelevant. We each had our own skill set, and between the two of us we produced each issue and typically had a lot of fun in the process.

It's interesting to check out the back page of the newsletter to see who were our long-time advertisers. As a not-for-profit organization, our main source of income came from membership fees and these ads, as most events paid for themselves but didn't typically generate a lot of profit. Therefore, advertising was critical to helping us balance the budget.

Thanks to Gwen Peacher's influence, her husband, Doug, persuaded Sears to advertise for many years in our newsletter. Can-Ed Media (originally

Canadian Folk Dance Service) was another early supporter: a company started by Ernie Krehm and run by Jack Geddes for many years, where you could go and buy variable-speed record players (does anyone still know what a 78, 45 or LP is?). Those old Bogans were great machines because the teacher could literally slow down the machine while we were learning complicated footwork and then bring it up to speed once our feet had gotten the patterns sorted out. Can-Ed was also the source for music – again, records were the order of the day at that time.

In October 1985 we had the first ad from Yonge Distributors. They supplied individual cassette tapes so a teacher could put one dance on one side and another one on the reverse; no more hunting through a cassette with 20 dances on it to find the one you wanted. And the tapes were much lighter than all those records. Of course, in this day and age, when you can have an entire catalogue of music on a laptop, it makes us pause as we think of all of those years when teachers schlepped so many cases of records and then tapes to classes and camps. What a difference a decade or two can make to literally lighten our load.

Continuing on the ad theme: Along with full-page ads for many camps, workshops and cruises, we see the ad for Shan Shoes as a staple of the magazine since 1986. It should be noted that Margaret Whelan played a crucial role, for many years, in sourcing many of our ads.

In January 1985 we introduced a new layout inside the publication, with much thanks to Hy Diamond, who was able to take our ideas and rework the existing artwork to give the newsletter a much cleaner look.

During Walter's years, we would also share in the correspondence between "Gradina" and "Baba," not to mention letters to "Natasha." While the intent was that people would write to Natasha and get answers, we didn't always get enough questions, so, as we said when we shut down this column, what we often got was Natasha's view on life through dance-focused lenses.

It was September 1989 when Walter made his first pitch for someone to come on board and replace him as Newsletter Editor. He would continue as Editor for over another year, since for some reason no one seemed to want the job. His last issue as Editor was the June 1991 issue, although I had material come my way from him for the first fall issue that year. Sadly, in

the next issue I would write the saddest article I have ever had a hand in, which was to talk about Walter after he died. It is always tough to find a partner who truly shares the workload on a project. He was definitely missed.

There are still some people out there who have questions from our time, such as, "Who is Gradina?" and "Who is Natasha?" However, part of the mystery of these two columnists was that other than Walter and me (and them, of course), no one knew who they were. And I think I will leave it like that – unless they decide to "out" themselves.

This was one of Walter's many skills: that he managed to find all kinds of people and persuade them to provide material for the newsletter – definitely the toughest job of the editor, to fill those pages without having to do all of the writing yourself. This is why it is always so great to open current copies of the newsletter and see multiple authors. What brings it to life is having different perspectives, sometimes on the same topic. In a way, in this modern era of 140-character tweets, it's our old-fashioned message board where people can and should comment on what they're reading and share their ideas and trips and events with the wider folk dance community.

It was an amazing experience, and I'm proud to have been a part of the chain that produced this publication for so many years.



*Walter Bye and Ruth Ostrower at the appreciation night held to honour them for their contributions to the Ontario FolkDancer, March 2, 1991, at the Cecil Street Community Centre, Toronto.*