
HOW TO SHOOT GOOD DANCE VIDEOS

By Don Bell

Many people now have small video cameras and smartphones that can shoot high quality video and are inspired to shoot videos of English Country and contra dances. Online video-sharing platforms (such as YouTube) give us more opportunities than ever before to share and learn dances. But just having a good camera doesn't guarantee a good dance video. In this article I'll discuss some basic techniques that will help amateur videographers create good dance videos.

It's important, even for amateur videographers, to first have a clear idea about the video's objective. Some dance videos are intended to be mini-documentaries, recording and promoting a special dance event. Others are more educational, aiming to present a single dance done well so that viewers can easily learn it. Some try to accomplish both. However, I think the results are better when the video focuses on only one of these objectives. The goal of my videos is simply to help dancers learn a particular dance. Here are my suggestions for creating an educational dance video focusing on teaching just one dance.

VIDEO FORMAT

1. At the start of the video, present all the essential information on one or two screens. This makes it easy for a viewer to quickly determine what the video is about.
2. Next, show the complete dance done well a few times through to give viewers a chance to learn the figures, patterns, and style of the dance.
3. Try to capture the walk-throughs, demos, or learning tips from the caller. This is especially helpful to dance leaders who want to teach the dance.
4. If available, reference dance instructions, music and recordings.
5. In the closing credits, show all the essential information again (see #1), plus any additional credits. If the video is uploaded to YouTube, it's good to also include this information in the video description.



VIDEO TECHNIQUES

- Shoot from a height slightly higher than the dancers (8-10 feet). This makes it easy to see the dance patterns, figures, and style. Shooting from a stage or small, sturdy but light-weight step stool is helpful.
- Shoot from the top of the hall looking directly down a line of dancers or slightly to one side. This gives a good view of the dance and captures magical moments when a whole line of dancers is moving beautifully in sync.
- Keep the camera in a fixed position, mounted on a tripod or monopod (if you have a dedicated camera person). This keeps the image stable.
- Shoot entire rounds of the dance. This enables the viewer to take in the whole sequence of the dance.
- Focus on just one set of dancers. This makes it easy to identify the dancers in the set and allows for closer, more compelling views of the dancers.

THE ADVANTAGES OF HAVING A DEDICATED CAMERAPERSON

Often the person shooting a dance video is a dance leader or a dancer who would much rather dance than be a dedicated cameraperson (which is understandable!). But an unattended camera doesn't always capture the best dancing or picture composition.

You probably don't need a dedicated cameraperson if you are shooting a staged (scripted) video of a select group of good dancers. You can simply set the camera on a wide shot to capture all the dancers and just start recording. They will probably stay within the camera's viewing frame for the duration of the dance. However, if you are shooting video of a public dance event with many long lines of dancers, you probably need a dedicated cameraperson, as lines of dancers sometimes drift away from the center of the camera frame or even outside the frame entirely.

Here are some advantages to having a dedicated, active camera person. They can:

- compensate for dance line drift by panning, tilting, or zooming the camera to keep a well-composed image of one set of dancers;
- compose a closer, more compelling shot of one set of dancers. (This closeup view of dancers' movements and facial expressions provides the viewer with a much more immersive experience, a feeling of being more connected to the dancers.);
- spot the best and most enthusiastic dancers on which to focus;
- scoot quickly out onto the dance floor to capture a walkthrough or a caller's demo if you are using a monopod;
- get shots of the band and caller which can add interest, context, and variety to your video. (If you're in a position to have a good shot of both the dancers and the band, you can pan to the band when there's a couple standing out at the top and then pan back to the dancers when there's a new couple at the top. You have to know where the dance starts and ends to do this well. Try to make the pan as smooth as possible.).

OPPOSITE TOP TO BOTTOM: *Photo of band and caller included in dance video. Photo of cameraperson using a step stool and monopod to focus on one set of dancers.*

GETTING BETTER SOUND

A good dance video is not just about the dancing. The caller's calls and the beautiful sound of the music need to come through, too. If you are dancing to a music recording (as opposed to a live band), getting an acceptable recording of the dance music is easy, as long as the camera is not too far from the speaker and there are no distracting room noises. If you want to get even better sound, you can use a video editing program to replace the camera sound track with a digital copy of the original music recording. Of course, if you do this, you have to make sure the music soundtrack stays in sync with the dancers' movements. Some video editing programs can help you do this.

If you are shooting a video with live music, getting good sound is more difficult. You can improve your sound recording quality by getting a small external microphone to attach to your camera or smartphone.

The ideal is to get a good balance of sound from the caller, the band, and the dance floor. The caller's calls need to come through loud and clear for at least the first round of the dance. If your only audio source is the camera's microphone, which is pointed at the dancers, you may not get the best sound balance. To mitigate this problem, it's advisable to position your camera in a place where you have a good view of the dancers but can also record good audio of the caller and the band. Standing next to or behind the caller and the band is usually better than a more remote location. But don't stand behind an upright piano as its loud volume will drown out the caller and musicians.

To get the best sound, record sound from the hall's sound system. Because this is a more professional level recording, you first need to get the approval of the caller and musicians. Explain that you will ask for their approval again before making your video public. Then approach the sound person about giving you a direct feed from the sound system to your camera or another audio recording device. I like to use a separate recording device to record sound from the hall sound system. This allows me to mix sound from the hall's system with just enough ambient sound from the camera's audio (pointed at the dance floor) to provide atmosphere from the hall.



I hope these suggestions will result in an expanded collection of good quality English country and contra dance videos and will help to sustain the dance culture for many years to come.