

***Dansez!* Acadian Percussive Dance on Prince Edward Island, Past and Present**

Meghan C. Forsyth, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Modernization and the rise of new technologies across Prince Edward Island (PEI) resulted in major changes to social life and entertainment by the late 1950s. By the 1970s, an improvised “shuffle” or “kitchen” style of step-dancing that had once been prominent in PEI’s Acadian communities had been largely supplanted by a choreographed style of step-dancing that incorporated standardized steps from formal teaching, the emergence of local dance troupes, and popular dance forms. Mirroring scenarios in other regions of Canada, by the late 20th century there was also a marked decrease in social “set” dancing and, to some extent, its accompanying instrumental traditions (Forsyth 2011; Quigley 1985, 1991, 2010; Harris Walsh 2008). While modern, more heterogeneous forms of percussive dance have gained significant popularity across the island, older styles of step and set dancing are not widely practiced today, and the oral histories of these traditions are relatively unknown. Nevertheless, in recent years, earlier forms of traditional Acadian dance have been highlighted in several events and projects in the community, including demonstrations at festivals and an upcoming collaborative exhibit. In this article, I will introduce three interrelated forms of Acadian percussive dance on PEI – step-dancing, *podorhythmie*, and *danse assise* – and the *Dansez!* exhibit, which will be launched in June 2016.



Figure 1: Albénie Arsenault (1881– 1979) of Saint-Gilbert, PEI, step dances at the *Exposition agricole de Baie-Egmont et Mont-Carmel*, ca. 1965. Courtesy of le Musée acadien de l’Île-du-Prince-Édouard.

The “Shuffle” in Acadian Step-Dancing

In the Evangeline region of Prince County, in western PEI, step-dancing, like the practice of *podorhythmie* (seated, percussive foot-tapping), is considered an important part of the region’s musical tradition, adding a layered, percussive dimension to the performance. In fact, many step dancers perform steps that replicate the rhythmic line of the fiddle tune and at the same time complement the rhythm of the seated foot-tapping (Ouellette 2005: 25). The term “shuffle” (in French, *un frotté*) refers to a dance movement that produces a specific sound when the ball of the foot is pushed in a forward-to-backward motion, low to the floor, which Acadian dancer and pianist Mylène Ouellette describes as a “brushing movement of the feet” (Ouellette 2005: 16). This shuffle is generally followed by a tap movement with the same foot, and then the shuffle-and-step pattern is repeated, starting on the opposite foot. This shuffle-and-step pattern is the starting point for most dance steps and varied rhythmic patterns (watch Héléne Bergeron dance here: <https://youtu.be/dlEpid94RCo>).

In the course of my research on PEI, older dancers and musicians frequently reminisce about dance traditions practiced before the revival of traditional dance in the 1970s, when this shuffle step formed the basis of a spontaneous, improvised style of step-dancing that would have been performed between square dance “sets” at informal house parties or other local events. This older style is usually described with phrases like “from the heart” and “free”, in contrast to what dancer Colette Aucoin calls a formal, more choreographed “*gigue de spectacle*” (interview with author, 17 August 2008, Mont-Carmel PEI). Older tradition-bearers note that there are few dancers today who have retained this “old style”. Héléne Bergeron (née Arsenault), a member of the popular Acadian group Barachois (1995–2003) and daughter of PEI’s late “Grandfather of Fiddling”, Eddy Arsenault (1921–2014), describes the older style as being similar to Appalachian clogging, in that it is performed with the feet kept close to the floor and with a similarly strong rhythmic drive. Born in the 1950s, Héléne is one of only a few younger dancers to have learned and retained the old dance style of her parents’ generation, and she describes the challenge of learning the older “moves”:

[My first instrument was] my feet! Well, my dad [Eddy] is a fiddler and he used to play at home every day ... not as a form of entertainment, he'd just get lost in a world of playing. And so I probably saw my first dancers at family get-togethers, my [paternal] grandparents lived across the road. And my grandfather was a great step dancer, and my aunts, and [my uncle] Amand. My dad, too, was a pretty wicked step dancer. Dad and Amand have some unique steps that I wish I could learn. I don't think it was like specific steps – it was just movements, they just have movements ... moves ... it's now all steps, like 16-beat steps and then you change steps. I love the old style and I wish there were more people who danced that old style. Dad's steps are even different than Amand's. They're really neat but you'd have to watch them a long time to be able to understand what he's doing. There's no "method" there. You have to soak it in for a long time. (Hélène Bergeron, interview with author, July 14, 2008, Charlottetown PE)

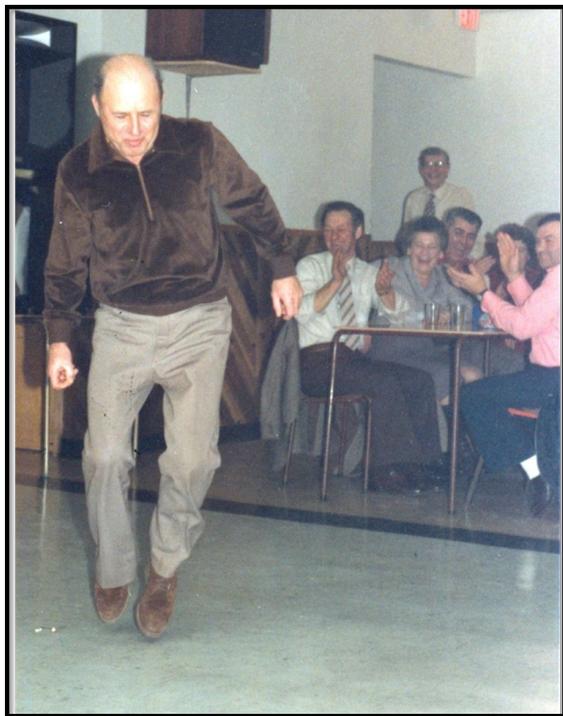


Figure 2: Eddy Arsenault (Coll. Hélène Arsenault).

As Hélène explains, contemporary Acadian step dance routines, as in most step-dancing traditions across Canada, are generally organized in a series of steps (alternating between starting on the right or left foot), each lasting between eight and sixteen beats of

music, before a new step is introduced. As in many dance styles, Island Acadian dancers have adopted metal "taps" on their shoes for performances, and dancers often have a common vocabulary of steps, with routines choreographed to their favourite tunes. Reels (tunes in 4/4) are the most common tunes for dancing, although there are an increasing number of jigs played in the local repertoire, which seems to have encouraged dancers to learn jig steps. Few Acadian dancers "step" to strathspeys, although strathspeys are commonly danced in communities with Scottish ancestry.



Figure 3: Hélène (Arsenault) Bergeron dances during a family gathering in Abram-Village in 1962. (Coll. Elva Arsenault)

While these modern styles of step-dancing are alive and well in French- and English-speaking communities across PEI – a common sight at almost all formal or informal gatherings or performances where one might hear traditional music – there is no doubt that older forms of both step and set dance are in real danger of disappearing, as many of the remaining practitioners of older dance styles are quite elderly. Returning to step-dancing lessons as an adult, Yvonne Tuplin (née Arsenault) describes the differences she and her sister, Claudette, have experienced between the contemporary style that is taught and performed today and what they recall from their youth:

Some of the steps are similar but most are different than we are use [sic] to ... The difference is two or three steps are combined into one; much more complicated than when I was young and I

don't have the memory to always remember what comes next. (Tuplin 1998, n.p.)

In her self-published memoir of growing up in an Acadian community on PEI, Tuplin describes her experience of dance in the early 1960s:

We often heard fiddling on the radio or on television. *Don Messer's Jubilee* was a family favourite. We also watched a variety show called *Shur-Gain*. From time to time, there would be a concert at the parish hall. Mostly everyone in the community attended. I started step-dancing when I was around seven. My father would do a few steps from time to time but mostly I learned from girls at school or watching dancers on *Don Messer*. Throughout the year, fiddling and step-dancing contests were held all over the Island. I would go with Mom and Dad and enter numerous contests. I began to really enjoy it when I started winning. I would spend hours practicing and learning new steps. They had different age categories at the step-dancing contests. Mom even entered from time to time when there were only one or no contestants in the adult category. She was sure to win. Amand à Arcade would enter too and they would come home with either five or ten dollars. (1998:

n.p.

By the late 1960s, several dance troupes had emerged in the region, emphasizing costumed and choreographed performances that incorporated both step and set dancing. While these performances featured modern dance steps and group step-dancing (à la Riverdance), the choreography also incorporated older set dance formations. The popularity of these groups had a lasting impact on the region's dance scene and local traditions, and are recalled with pride by musicians and dancers in the region. The most prominent of these groups was Les Danseurs Évangéline (The Evangeline Dancers), a large troupe that performed regularly across the island and abroad from the late 1960s to early 1980s, dressed in 19th-century Acadian costumes. Highlights from Les Danseurs Évangéline's impressive list of performances, including invited performances at Expo 1967 in Montreal and a European tour, are often referenced in my conversations with musicians, dancers, and their families. Les Danseurs Évangéline inspired numerous other local troupes of young dancers in the decades that followed and are recognized as having been a prominent symbol of Acadian culture throughout the Maritimes.



Figure 4: Les Danseurs Évangéline, 1977. Courtesy of le Musée acadien de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard.

Podorhythmie and Danse Assise

The seated foot-tapping performed by Acadian instrumentalists (predominantly fiddlers) provides the rhythmic foundation of the dance music. Unlike the single-footed “heel-toe, heel-toe” pattern performed by many Anglophone fiddlers on PEI, Acadian musicians and often listeners tend to recreate the basic shuffle rhythm from a seated position, similar to foot-tapping practices in some parts of Québec and French Newfoundland, performed with a “toe-toe-heel” (or “toe-step-heel”) tapping pattern with both feet. As Albert Arsenault explains, the use of the feet as percussion instruments is central to the overall musical aesthetic:

We were in a room last night practicing and we didn't want to bang our feet too much [because of] the plaster ceilings. And there were rugs. Banging [our] feet softly on the rugs we couldn't hear anything – we weren't really gelling and we knew it was because the feet weren't there. (interview with Fiona Richie, *The Island Fiddler* 4, no. 3, 2006)

Oral history in the region suggests that *podorhythmie* emerged in response to restrictions imposed on music-making and dance by the Catholic Church (Forsyth 2011: 80-83; Ouellette 2005: 33); however, there is little historical evidence to suggest this. It is more likely that the practice came about due to a lack of accompaniment instruments, such as the pump organ, piano, or guitar. Nevertheless, stories about the prohibition of dance abound. One older musician recalled a story he had been told about a priest who would walk past houses and peek in the windows to ensure that the imposed decorum was being upheld, and a tradition of seated foot-tapping accompaniment developed as a way of masking percussive accompaniment to singing and mouth music (Amand Arsenault, interview with author, 15 July 2009, St-Chrysostome PE). Similarly, a young musician told an account of her great-grandfather, whose instruments were confiscated in New Brunswick: “My grandfather had his instruments taken away, in New Brunswick. But he used to tap his feet and, the story goes, they would tap their feet so nobody could see them – that's why they were sitting down.” (Pastelle LeBlanc, interview with author, 22 July 2008, Mont-Carmel PE) For many years, square dancing was looked down upon by clergy, and some parish priests prohibited dancing that involved bodily contact. Step-dancing was tolerated because it was solo dancing, even on Sundays when square dancing was forbidden (Arsenault 1998).

Today, elaborate variations on the basic shuffle pattern, combined with modified steps borrowed from step-dancing, have been incorporated into the performance repertoire of numerous dance troupes and bands. This is known as *danse assise*, or seated step-dancing. Seated in a line of armless chairs (so that dancers can support themselves by holding onto the edges of the chair bases), five or six dancers perform the shuffle step in combination with a variety of other patterns, such as “cross-steps”, “walking-steps”, and heel taps, to name a few, both in unison and by “passing” steps between dancers to create a kind of rhythmic conversation.

The origins of *danse assise* are not known, but local accounts suggest that the practice may have emerged as entertainment at house parties in the mid-20th century. The groups Barachois, and later Vishtën, brought this form of seated dance back into popular practice, and it has been picked up by younger groups such as Les Tapageuses, who have combined these traditional Acadian forms of percussive dance with international influences, such as South African gumboot (*Isicathulo*) dancing. Pastelle and Emmanuelle LeBlanc of Vishtën cite their experiences as members of a local traditional dance troupe, *Les Pas d'folies*, directed by H  l  ne Bergeron, as the influence behind their incorporation of *danses assises* into Vishtën's performances; they explain that H  l  ne choreographed several virtuosic *danse assise* routines for the troupe, which were always popular with audiences, adding rhythmic and visual variation, and they frequently combine elements of those routines into their own *danse assise* performances.



Figure 5: Les Pas d'folies, *danse assise*. (Centre de recherche acadien de l'  le-du-Prince-  douard)

Dancez! The Exhibits

While conducting my doctoral research in PEI's Acadian communities between 2006 and 2011, I was often told stories about traditional Acadian dance,

and many people with whom I spoke had questions about the older traditions and were curious to hear other people's stories. Although percussive and social dancing were not the main focus of my research, which focused rather on contemporary instrumental traditions, it quickly became clear through my conversations with these tradition-bearers that there were interesting stories to tell about dance in this island community that were not being widely circulated, and I began actively documenting dance performances – including a demonstration of the “old style” of Acadian step-dancing at the 2009 *Jamboree atlantique des violoneux* and spontaneous performances by older dancers at a variety of other events. I was intrigued by the stories told by dancers and musicians of the older generations about dancing and the wild parties in “them days”, the interrelationship of dance steps and instrumental music (including *turlutter* – mouth music – or “diddling”), the prominence of male dancers (who are a rare sight today), and the way groups such as Barchois and Vishtèn (and, subsequently, younger groups) have been inspired by these older

forms and have both adopted aspects of the older tradition and created their own variations.

In 2013, I initiated a three-part project that mobilizes the data collected in the course of my doctoral research, a wealth of local knowledge, fantastic stories, and archived audiovisual materials, and makes them accessible to a broader public through an interactive, multimedia museum exhibition, an accompanying web-based exhibit, and a public programme comprising lecture-demonstrations and performances. The curatorial project, entitled *Dansez! Acadian Dance Traditions on Prince Edward Island, Past and Present*, is hosted by le Musée acadien de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard, the Acadian Museum located in Miscouche, PEI, and has been created in collaboration with local Acadianists, dance specialists, tradition-bearers, designers, museum and technical staff, student researchers, la Fédération culturelle de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard and the Centre d'études acadiennes. The project focuses on both percussive dance forms and social (set) dancing.



Figure 6: Exhibit logo.

Supported by a SSHRC Connection Grant and the Helen Creighton Folklore Society, the bilingual museum exhibit will open in June 2016 along with its accompanying website (www.danseacadienne.ca). The curatorial team is developing an interactive museum exhibit that incorporates numerous multimedia elements, including an oral history booth in which patrons can record their own memories and stories; screening of videos from public and private collections (including two films produced by the National

Film Board in 1954 and 1976 which showcase Acadian music and dance, which are no longer in circulation); a dance corner where patrons can learn new steps (directed by mini instructional videos created in collaboration with local tradition-bearers) and share their own steps; listening stations through which visitors can listen to tradition-bearers tell their own stories; archival photographs and artefacts; and wall panels describing diverse styles of Acadian traditional dance from different periods and in different

and changing contexts, the relationship between music and dance traditions, and local people and practices. In addition to featuring archival and new videos, audio clips, and photographs, the accompanying website aims to make the stories and information available to a broader public, and will include more general introductions to francophone and anglophone Acadian culture and local traditions on PEI and more elaborate essays on a variety of topics. Contributions by a variety of scholars and culture-bearers focus on the changing contexts of vernacular dance, including new styles, steps, and choreography; the dichotomy of music for dancing versus music for listening; music and embodiment; a discussion of the *quadrille* dance from the 1960s that was recorded by folklorist Simone Voyer; samples of transcribed set dances; excerpts of oral histories and interviews with practitioners about step and set dancing. Our aims are to document these expressive forms, to make widely available and add to existing – but largely inaccessible – archives, to facilitate community building through the sharing of stories and resources, and to ensure that knowledge about these older traditions and their relationship to contemporary traditions is preserved for future generations.

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My three recommended resources:

1. Voyer, Simonne. *La Gigue: Danse de pas*. Sainte-Foy, QC: Les Éditions GID, 2003. This book (in French) by Simonne Voyer, ethnologist and specialist in traditional dance, is an excellent entry resource for those interested in percussive dance in Eastern Canada. The first part outlines a history of step-dancing and modes of transmission from its European roots to its contemporary forms in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec. The second part is an analytical study of steps used in Quebec, with illustrations and explanations of 30 step patterns.
2. Johnson, Sherry, ed. *Bellows & Bows: Historic Recordings of Traditional Fiddle and Accordion Music from Across Canada*. MMaP Archive Series no. 4. B. Diamond and K. Szego, series co-producers. St. John’s: Memorial University of Newfoundland. (also available in French: *Soufflets et archets: Enregistrements historiques de musique traditionnelle pour violon et accordéon du Canada*). This double CD and book, showcasing fiddle and accordion traditions from across Canada, will appeal to dancers and musicians. Produced by Dr. Sherry Johnson and compiled by a team of regional experts, the 64 tracks feature tunes from diverse Canadian styles, highlighting rare and out-of-print tracks from every region and province of Canada. It includes an extensive introduction to traditional music and dance practices in Canada, and the relationships between the two art forms. This is a useful resource for teachers, scholars, and anyone interested in learning more about the diversity of traditional music and dance in Canada.
3. *Bowing Down Home* (website). A digital resource devoted to Prince Edward Island’s fiddling traditions, hosted by UPEI’s Robertson Library and based on recordings collected by Ken Perlman for the Canadian Museum of History. This is a useful site for anyone interested in fiddle-based dance music in the Maritime region and its accompanying dance forms. URL: www.bowngdownhome.ca.