

THE DANCE DETECTIVES

Photograph © UH Mayer

Alison Gallagher-Hughes hears from Brigitt Mayer-Karakis about the World Dance Council's attempts to put history at our fingertips

A group of "dance detectives" is piecing together ballroom's past to safeguard its future by establishing an online archive that will promote dancesport and provide a one-stop educational resource.

The Dance Archives website (www.dancearchives.net) has amassed more than 10,000 followers since it was established by the World Dance Council's (WDC) historical committee earlier this year – drawing documents and

multi-media excerpts from a range of different sources.

The archives aim to chart the evolution of ballroom dance from its "socially unacceptable" beginnings to the competitive art form we know today and has structured content to include

Brigitt Mayer-Karakis with photographer Ron Self, looking at the latter's archives. Inset, Monsieur Pierre writes about the rumba in *Ballroom Dancing Times*

sections on people, music, places, results and history as well as the dances themselves.

The site was kick-started by resources held by the WDC's educational department – the "parent" of the historical committee – but the search is now on to

identify people or organisations that are willing to share unique documents or film footage that will piece together the jigsaw.

Historical committee chief Brigitt Mayer-Karakis found that recollections of the great dance pioneers were gradually being lost, along with assets that recorded the part they played in creating dance history.

It was a view reinforced while the former Latin dancer was undertaking seven years of research for her book, *Ballroom Icons*. "With the passing of time, we are losing many of the great names who witnessed those pioneers and they themselves helped evolve dancing to the competitive level that we know today.

"Ballroom is still a relatively young activity, spanning just 100 years, so we are now at that crucial time where we can capture our past and continue to learn from it," she reflects.

Many valuable artefacts have been "lost" by descendants who didn't realise their value or importance believes Brigitt. "When Doris Lavelle passed away, she had only one nephew and he moved to the States. Doris was so influential in the development of Latin American dancing in England and had a wealth of material including film footage from Cuba when she was there with Pierre [Zurcher Margolie] in the 1950s, which was shot by Jimmy Arnell, but no one appears to know what happened to it."

Having devoted so much of her time creating a definitive publication, Brigitt is well aware that she is starting out on another mammoth journey that could take a lifetime.

It was Professor Dr Ruud Vermeij, the chief of the WDC's educational department, who initiated the project. Knowing the vital part history plays in dance education, he co-opted the like-minded Brigitt into developing a new history committee and a resource that would provide a cornerstone to their work.

"It is impossible to embark on this adventure alone," she admits. "The WDC history committee must now grow and reach out to establish a network of representatives around the world, particularly in those countries that have been prolific in the development of ballroom. We will need those people to gather key documents and chronicle the active role their countries have played in this process."

Brigitt also hopes that the concept of the archive will overcome any political divides between various organisations representing ballroom dancing. "This isn't about who owns the rights to material, it's about putting it out there as a valuable resource which will, in turn, present ballroom dancing to a wider artistic and cultural community and heighten its profile and status.

"The goal is to produce a comprehensive information source on ballroom dancing that can not only be used by 'our own people', but can serve as a research database for scholars and for the media." ➤



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Briggitt Mayer-Karakis (right) talks to Alison Gallagher-Hughes

With such a wide variety of dance organisations, publications and key people in the UK alone, how do Briggitt and her team decide on what to publish and where to look for further information streams?

“It would be great to approach all these organisations and ‘can’ a few things that could prove key for the archive but realistically, as volunteers, there is a limited amount of time that can be devoted to this type of activity.

“However, as awareness of the archive is increasing we are seeing a growing number of submissions being offered. We need individual organisations to be stoic, put their differences aside and focus on what we are trying to create as greater than

the sum of the individual parts.”

There are also a number of key individuals within the dance world who are keen archivists in their own right and it is hoped that they too will see the value of the resource and be willing to share some of their treasure trove.

“**W**e don't need to ‘own’ the originals,” stressed Briggitt, “just access their content. We can copy the materials and then hand them back. We are eager that precious artefacts are not kept in isolation only to be lost long-term. All we can do is act on ‘information received’, use our network of contacts and persuade those that have documents, photos and film to share them with us,” she says.

The conversation again draws a parallel to detective work. “Could you imagine the television series?” jokes Briggitt, “The Dance Archives’, a forensic examination of ballroom dancing.

“We can be rightly proud of our achievements within the ballroom world,” she concludes. “What we need to do is extend that sense of pride and show the outside world what we have achieved, learn from the past and the people who established the competitive environment that we love.” ●

Anyone with artefacts that they would be willing to share with Dance Archives should contact the team through the “Contact Us” section of www.dancearchives.net