

The New York Times

May 18, 2008
Dance

When the Hokey-Pokey Isn't Enough

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO



Andrea Fischman Photography
Sara Juli, in white above,
created a dance to Britney
Spears's "Toxic" as a wedding
surprise for her husband, Chris
Ajemian, in 2006.

SHOULD you be in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park on June 28, you may witness a once-in-a-lifetime site-specific performance. People dressed in strange costumes, wielding various props and accompanied by musicians, will enter Queens Theater in the Park, forming a vibrant, carnival-like parade.

The event that follows — Alexx Shilling and Julio Montero's wedding reception — is, unfortunately, invitation-only. But if you are one of the guests, you will also be present for the premiere of a solo Ms. Shilling is choreographing and dancing as a gift for her fiancé.

It's wedding season, and with it will come countless awkward first dances, featuring sappy songs and nervous newlyweds gritting their teeth through boilerplate waltzes. But for contemporary choreographers and dancers like Ms. Shilling — as well as nondancers savvy enough to employ an atypical professional service — the traditional first dance is anything but.

"I've been a dancer my whole life," Sara Juli said, explaining her decision to choreograph for her wedding in 2006. "If this day was really going to be about us and the rest of our lives together, it was literally a crime to not have choreography at my wedding.

"I'm a solo performance artist. How can I not have this crazy, ham-it-up dance at my wedding?"

For choreographer couples like Lori Yuill and Brian Buck, who drew on a variety of movement techniques to create a duet for their wedding in March, partnering can serve as a rich metaphor for the push and pull of marriage. But not every solo performance artist's partner wants to take part in a crazy, ham-it-up dance in front of hundreds of friends and relatives. (In this day of digital recorders, the possibilities for blackmail are endless.)

Ms. Juli's husband, the writer and director Chris Ajemian, wanted nothing to do with her idea. She spent months cajoling before deciding, tradition be damned, she would do it

without him, as a surprise. Using one of Mr. Ajemian's favorite songs, [Britney Spears](#)'s "Toxic," she created a routine with her bridesmaids, all adept dancers.

Then, a month before the wedding, Mr. Ajemian had a change of heart. Ms. Juli, not about to abandon "Toxic," ended up with back-to-back choreographed pieces to start the reception. After she and her husband surprised their guests with a silly duet to [Stevie Wonder](#)'s "I Was Made to Love Her," she and her bridesmaids surprised him with a sexy, absurd mix of modern-dance moves, lip-synching, improvisation and, of course, suggestive gestures.

Choreographers, after all, "know how to work a crowd," as Ms. Juli put it. "We're taking the skills and talents we have as dancers and creating a magical experience for everyone."

The pomp and circumstance surrounding a wedding can allow choreographers to be less serious and self-scrutinizing about their craft than they normally would be. Civilians may not have the same skills. But in the wedding industry any service can be procured.

Enter the niche company MatriMony Mony. Created four years ago by two dance-theater artists, Gabriella Barnstone and Emily Greenhill, MatriMony Mony collaborates with clients to create first dances tailored to the couples' personalities and abilities. (A standard package costs \$1,500.)

"In my dances I do a lot of improvisation," Ms. Barnstone said, referring to her work with her own company, El Gato Teatro. "I have actors who are not trained. I'm interested in whatever an individual's personal movement style is."

This interest, she added, comes from a populist view of dance. For MatriMony Mony she explores clients' comfort levels with various movements and any special moves they might be dying to perform in public, from moonwalking to pirouettes. For couples looking to put their stamp on a first dance, working with choreographers steeped in the highly interpretive, eclectic sensibility of contemporary dance makes much more sense than turning to a codified language like ballroom.

"I have seen a lot of boring first dances, or poorly choreographed, where the couple tries to do it on their own," said Rachel Venokur, who hired MatriMony Mony to help her and her fiancé, Christopher Clark, create a dance to a Queen song for their wedding on June 1. "We took the choreography that they gave us and put our own personalities into it; it could be something as silly as jazz hands at one point, which is not in the choreography but is typical of our personalities."

On a recent Wednesday night Ms. Barnstone and the choreographer Corey Harrower, the company's first hire, were headed to Harlem to teach a new dance to Eric and Katherine. Like every MatriMony Mony creation, it left plenty of wiggle room for interpretation and playfulness.

“I wanted it to be fun and funny, but not too cheesy,” Katherine said of the disco-infused routine, which represents a brave leap for her. “I’m not comfortable dancing. I really wanted steps I could follow.”

Her fiancé, despite being more at ease on the dance floor, took some convincing. “I wasn’t crazy about it,” he said, speaking with stiffly folded arms as he and Katherine waited to see what they were in for. “I’m still not crazy about it. To me the wedding’s going to be stressful enough as it is.”

But Eric perked up once the rehearsal began. It was touching to see how quietly protective he was of Katherine, who became flustered while struggling with a maneuver that called for her to twirl into his arms. As he put his own spin on simple movements, it seemed he would do just fine improvising in front of a crowd.

“Unlike the right and wrong of ballet or ballroom,” Mr. Harrower said, “there is room for ‘Well, that’s not comfortable to do, but I can do this.’ ”

Eric and Katherine might be further heartened to know that even professionals struggle. Ms. Shilling acknowledged that she was not entirely sure she could pull off her solo.

“It’s turning out to be the hardest piece I’ve ever tried to choreograph,” she said. “This is a gift for Julio. It’s challenging to encompass all of my emotions into the work.”