

Policy on the practice of face makeup in folk dancing

At the English Folk Dance and Song Society our long-standing policy has been to denounce full-face black makeup, and not to engage dancers using this at any of our events.

The historical practice of dancers painting their faces in a skin tone associated with another ethnicity is irrevocably linked to discredited practices such as 'blackface' minstrelsy, which are now comprehensively rejected as being clearly racist and offensive.

Now, in 2024, we recognise the need to add detail to our policy:

- We will never work with any dancers, in any context, who paint their faces in a way which has the potential to be interpreted by a reasonable observer in any reasonable context as mimicking another person's skin tones.
- This includes makeup looks which could be misinterpreted through error or omission. For example, considering how appearances might be perceived in different contexts – including under varied or low lighting; at different times of day; from a distance; from all angles such as when seen in profile (showing only one side of the face); and when featured in a still monochrome photograph, or on video.
- The same exclusion applies to anyone who wishes to hire our building or to dance on our premises.
- In addition, we exclude such images from our website, social media profiles, and learning materials. Limited exceptions are made for historical archive photographs where these are accompanied by prominent contextual explanations and assurances that this practice has been stopped.

We urge all folk dancers to consider these issues.

See also:

- Our Autumn 2020 EDS article: [Time's up for 'blacking up'](#)
- A [letter by our Chief Executive and Artistic Director](#) published in The Guardian in August 2019
- Our Winter 2016 EDS article: [Facing up to a dancing debate](#)

In a letter to us dated 21 November 2019, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport wrote 'we believe that those participating should take into consideration the potential for this practice to cause offence' (Ministerial Support Team, ref. TO2019/11979/FBM).

3 April 2024