

Let's Put on a Show

by Harold & Meredith Sears



An influential dance critic and *New York Times* dance editor once wrote:

Dancing falls naturally into two major categories: that which is done for the emotional release of the individual dancers, without regard to the possible interest of a spectator; and that, on the other hand, which is done for the enjoyment of the spectator either as an exhibition of skill, the telling of a story, the presentation of pleasurable designs, or the communication of emotional experience. (John Martin, 1963)

Let's make a list. When we dance, we might —

- only seek to feel a personal emotion, or we might
- try to communicate that emotional experience to others, or
- exhibit a skill,
- tell a story, or
- present an artistic design.

Dancing For Ourselves —

Sometimes, I do think that we dance for ourselves. We get out on the floor, absorb the music, and launch into complex movements that interact with the music and feed off those rhythms. There is both physical and emotional tension and release. We hear of joggers achieving a “runner’s high.” Surely there is a comparable and maybe even richer “dancer’s high.”

Beyond excitement or euphoria, we might dance to feel playfulness, surprise, or joy. Of course, we are dancing with a partner, so we might enjoy feelings of affection, tenderness, gentleness, and sympathy — ardor, lust, fervor — hope, gratitude — maybe jealousy. The negative emotions are sometimes fun. Why else would one read Stephen King, watch a horror movie, or ride a roller coaster? We might dance sometimes to feel loneliness, sorrow, fear, anxiety, envy, anger, despair, pride — what are those seven

deadly sins — anger, envy, gluttony, greed, lust, pride, sloth — hard to feel sloth on the dance floor, although it's one of my favorites at other times.

The social nature of dancing can probably intensify each one of these pleasures. You might take a dance home, to work on it in the kitchen or maybe on the driveway, but it won't feel the same as when you are with a crowd on the dance floor. Someone once pointed out that when a mile-long military parade, twenty soldiers abreast, starts off on its collective right foot, each soldier and even each onlooker feels that collective power. Well, at a DRDC weekend, when the cuer says, "lead foot free — forward waltz," and a ballroom full of couples begins together, isn't there the same collective thrill?



Dancing For Others —

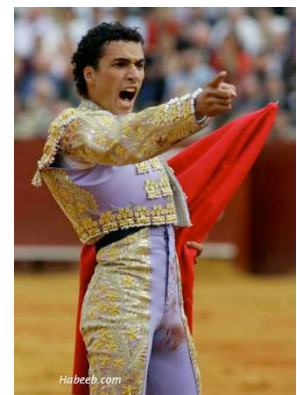
So, dancing for ourselves is good, but could it be even better if we were also to dance for an audience? Certainly, dancing is often done for others. Show dancers and ballet dancers know that they are dancing for the audience. Competition ballroom dancers play to the judges and the audience. Our teachers dance for us during showcases and demonstrations. During any given round-dance evening, there are usually at least a few dancers who are sitting out, and there might be some spectators. Do these onlookers make us self-conscious and detract from our dancing pleasure, or can we enrich our pleasure by dancing partly for them? Can we enjoy putting on a show?

It could be an art show — making images, creating and displaying pictures, with our bodies as the medium instead of paint. We could become more conscious of body line, shape, and color (of our costume). Or we could take those emotions that we were only feeling within ourselves and think about expressing and displaying them through facial expression, arm and hand gestures, and overall posture and line. Finally, we could invest our dancing with still more meaning by actually acting out some appropriate drama.

A couple dance is a natural opportunity to act out basic human interactions. There is action and rest, separation and reconciliation, flight and pursuit, attraction and repulsion. Could our lead and follow be turned into a representation of courtship and conquest? As we approach and then turn away, might we act out pursuit and parting (I happened to think of the Worlocks' *Tormento De Amor* right there). Could the Cucaracha be a little drama about the squashing of a cockroach? When we dance a Snake, might we think about and portray the reptile? Is that Paso Doble really a bullfight?

Dance Rhythms —

A while ago, some dancers were talking in a Web-based discussion group (<http://forums.dancescape.com/eve/forums>) about what sort of feeling each rhythm ought to evoke, what sort of story each rhythm ought to tell, and it seemed that **Paso Doble** maybe has its drama most clearly on the surface.

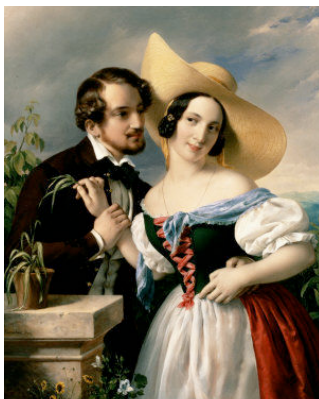


The man is a Spanish matador with proud, upright carriage, back arched, shoulders back, chest out, head up. He marches about the bullring with manly strength or prances with haughty pride — the crowd is cheering. The woman is traditionally the matador's cape, and in some figures she will dance back and forth in a flowing way. But she is not fluttery or in any way weak. She is a partner in this contest of wills. In other figures, she can find herself playing the role of a picador, a partner matador or an opposing matador, a flamenco dancer, or even the bull itself. She too is strong, sometimes haughty, other times flirtatious. The dance is about challenge. The man challenges the woman. The woman returns that challenge. Both challenge the audience — we dare you to doubt us!



Samba has been called a celebration of life and the most light-hearted of all the Latin rhythms. Think Carnival time in Rio and dancing in the streets. One dancer suggested that we think of monkeys and dancing in the tropical rain forest naked (well, maybe we shouldn't hold that thought too long). But we might abandon ourselves to some degree of lighthearted abandon, flamboyancy, ostentation, primeval forces or primal lust. There is rise and fall, always turning, sway to the right and left, and the back and forth Samba bounce and side to side Cuban hip. Can we show an audience that this has been an absolutely wonderful day?

I wonder if **Quickstep** is the most light-hearted of the Smooth rhythms, the adult equivalent of skipping down the sidewalk on a wonderful spring day for the sheer joy of it — literally jumping for joy.



Foxtrot has been described as a stroll down a charming country lane, or a stroll on a Sunday afternoon with someone you love. You've been to church, asked and received forgiveness for all your naughty sins, and now you're enjoying life renewed. On the dance floor, you are utterly confident with just a hint of sensuality — sassy, flirtatious and mischievous underneath. It's not haughty or stuck-up, just really sure of itself, very smooth. He is strutting along, picking up chicks, a sway in his walk, and a cocky smile on his lips. She is a nice girl with a naughty secret. “Hey, I'm gooooood!” Almost too cool to be dancing in the first place.

Tango is a dance of passion. Actually, many feel that the three styles of Tango show a progression. American Tango represents the cheesy beginning of the relationship. There is a little bit of flirtation, but you are on your best behavior. In Argentine Tango, there is the passion and even the lust of a full-fledged relationship. Originally it was done between men in the slums of Argentina so there was the feeling of two roosters circling, challenging, and preening. When that very rare commodity, a woman, appeared, the men were trying their best to show her how strong



and virile and desirable they were, yet covering up their desire/desperation with a haughty and arrogant air, while the woman knew that she had all the power with these men since she could pick and choose as she pleased. There are unusual head positions — downward gazing, meaningful glances, a playful smile. Now, in International Tango, we are much more serious. Chris & Terri Cantrell once wrote that this is a long-married couple that is staying together only for the sake of the kids. Another dancer suggested that at times there might be a nudge of passion. Or you might lust after each other but you absolutely mustn't admit it. Stay in character, focus, be serious. You mustn't smile or even look at your partner except maybe down your nose during a Right Lunge or at the end of a Spanish Drag. (At the end of the dance, you may loosen up and give her a hug.)



Finally, **Viennese Waltz** is young love, bubbly laughter, the giddiness of a great time, and appreciation for what makes life grand, and modern **Waltz** is maybe a little less exuberant and more floating, soaring, and tranquil. For some, there is even a little wistfulness or bittersweet pain. One dancer urged us to think of Juliet at the end in *Romeo and Juliet*: "Oh happy dagger, here is thy sheath, there rust and let me die!" and to lock that feeling in your heart and dance. Another quoted from the waltz, *Plaisir d'Amour* which says in part, "The joys of love are but a moment long, The pain of love endures the whole life long."

Richard Lamberty and Alise Halbert once wrote a waltz called *Trilogy*. In their choreography, instead of the usual parts A, B, and C, they wrote parts "Courtship," "Romance," and "Love." The dance begins in Open Position with no hands joined, and Courtship contains mostly open and solo dancing. In Romance, we shift to a square dancer's Promenade Position, side-by-side with right hands joined over left. We use Tandem and Skater's Positions. There are coy shoulder taps and playful looks. Finally, in Love, we dance in Closed, Banjo, Sidecar, and Wrapped Positions. We are close.

Dancing is not a form of locomotion. We are not simply walking to the rhythm of the music in order to get from here to there. It is not just "people running around." It is artfully arranged, organized — it sparkles — and it can be expressive and even meaningful. Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics* that a dancer, "by the rhythms of his attitudes, may represent men's characters, as well as what they do and suffer."

