

The World of Ballroom Dancing

Breathe. Stretch. Relax. *Dance.*

The first time I entered into the dance hall, I was caught up with the beat of the music and the sight of a dozen couples spinning around the dance floor. I paused for a moment, taking it all in. People were smiling as they danced, the movement of their bodies in sync with each other and with the music. I inched my way around the floor to a chair and took out my notebook, prepared to observe and begin to discover the world of ballroom dancing. Within a minute of settling down though, a man came up to me, a smile on his face and his hand outstretched.

“Would you like to dance?” he asked.

“Um...I’m just here to observe,” I said nervously, gesturing to my notebook and pen.

“You’ll never learn how to dance by observing,” he grinned, and then took my hand and swept me out onto the dance floor.

And after that first step, I was hooked.

Ballroom dancing was one of those activities that I had always known about, but never participated in, like curling or horseback riding. I had done a two-week module in high school where I learned the basics of the waltz and a few other dances, but that was the extent of my exposure to ballroom dancing. My grandparents, who are avid ballroom dancers, tried teaching me some steps whenever I visited them, but with lack of interest and no time to really become involved in it, ballroom dancing shuffled to the bottom of my things-to-do list.

In the past few years, dancing seems to be gaining some more popularity, as

evidenced by the television shows such as So You Think You Can Dance? and Dancing With The Stars. Millions of people tune in to watch the shows and there is no doubt that people who can dance are admired for their talent and abilities. People enjoy watching the smooth, flowing motions of the waltz, and the fun, carefree movements of the swing, but when trying to convince people to take a dance class, the refusal is quick, followed by “I just don’t know how to dance!” It seems that because people do not know how to dance, they are afraid to even try it. There is the fear of looking silly in front of other people, and dancing can be awkward unless you knew what you were doing.

But like with any other skill, ballroom dancing can be learned, maybe even more easily than other skills, and the benefits from participating in this type of activity are worth the anxiety that one may have initially. One woman said, “You just have to get past your inhibitions and give yourself a fair chance. There is a way for everyone to learn and enjoy how to dance.” Of course, practice and further instruction is required for someone to get better, but even just attaining the basic step patterns to some dances lets people realize that they can actually dance. And, as one woman said, “Who’s not happy when you’re dancing?”

However, I have discovered that ballroom dancing is more than just learning a few steps and moving your body to the music. Along with learning a new skill, the world of ballroom dancing introduces you to a community of amazing people, a different style of expressing yourself, and a way of relating to the rest of the world in a manner different than anything else.

Why dance?

“Dance is your pulse, your heartbeat, your breathing. It’s the rhythm of your life. It’s the expression in time and movement, in happiness, joy, sadness and envy.”

~ Jacques D’Ambroise

In the past, there have been negative opinions regarding social dancing, often coming from religious institutions. The view is that dancing should be forbidden because of the sexual connotations. However, one woman told me, “Sure, dance can be sensual, but it’s not all like that. It is what you choose to do with it, not the act itself.” While it is true that there are some dancers who treat dance in that manner, most of the people who get involved in ballroom dancing are there for the social aspect, to practice all the dance steps that they have learned and above all, to have fun dancing with others.

Using your brain...

Ballroom dancing has a benefit of being a mental activity. Learning all the steps to the different dances requires concentration, practice, and awareness of your body as you move. Matching steps to the beat of the music is more difficult than one might imagine, especially once you get to the higher levels that involve more complicated steps.

One woman said that “you’re always learning a new step in dance....it has a lifelong learning curve.” Dance is a constantly changing activity, and you can always be striving to learn that next move. Even the combination of simple moves will be different with each partner that you have, which keeps the mind active. The silent communication that happens between dancers also sharpens the reflexes and responses to those subtle cues.

Keeping active...

Ballroom dancing also keeps the body active. It is important to be active and stay healthy, and ballroom dancing is a fun way to do so. It provides good exercise with dances like the quick step and the samba. These fast moving dances require the dancers to be in continual motion, twirling around the dance floor several times. You not only get your heart pumping as you dance, but you also have fun doing it. It is different than participating in sports because on the social level, it isn't competitive (though there is competitive ballroom dancing, which is a whole other world). There is no pressure to win or lose in dance, and so all people can participate and enjoy it.

Making friends...

There is also a major social aspect of ballroom dancing that sets it apart from other activities. Other types of dance, like ballet or jazz, provide a similar level of mental and physical exercise, but ballroom dancing has that added element of being a relational activity. People can chat while they dance together or on the side of the dance floor as they watch other dancers, bonding over the difficulties of some steps and admiring the more experienced dancers twirling around the floor.

It is a safe place where people can relate to others who have a shared interest. There were conversations I had where I did not even know the other person's name, but we would laugh together over missed steps, and with that common ground between us, our friendship began to develop. Even though we did not meet up outside of the dance party, for that short time, in the community of fellow dancers, we shared our lives with one another.

Learning roles...

“Everybody should dance, because then world peace would reign! No, I’m serious. Dance teaches you about partner relationships, etiquette, and being responsible for your role. If everyone would learn how to dance, then the world would be a better place.”

~ Anonymous

In today’s society, there is high value placed on being able to work well with others and to be responsible for the roles that we are given. Dance draws on those values as well. During a dance, not only do the steps have to be correct, but they need to be on time with the music and matched to your partner. Good dancers need to learn how to dance to their partner’s level in order to have an enjoyable time.

Both men and women need to be aware of and responsible for their roles on the dance floor. Men need to be constantly aware of how they are handling the women, not to be too strong-armed or forceful when leading the women into turns. One man told me that it is slightly easier being in the woman’s role: “Just keep your feet moving. You can fake it pretty good if you just follow, you don’t have to lead”. This does not excuse women from learning how to dance. Almost as important as knowing how to lead, women need to learn to follow and respond to the cues that they are given. Some may view it as being a harder role to follow, because women should not take over, even if the man they are paired with is not as experienced as she is.

There is a saying in ballroom dancing: The first time you get asked to dance is because you look good, the second time you get asked to dance is because you feel good. Dancers not only need to know the steps and dance well, but they need to make it comfortable and fun for their partners as well.

Learning etiquette...

Ballroom dancing also brings back some of those old-fashioned manners that seem to be lost in today's society. One man said that dancing taught him "how to treat a lady properly". There is a sense of respect expected when interacting with other people. The traditional way to ask someone for a dance is to say, "May I have this dance?" In the same way when accepting or refusing the dance, it is expected that people would be kind and considerate. Traditionally, it has been that the men ask the women to dance, but in recent times, that does not matter as much. But the attitude of knowing how to treat a lady and respond to a gentleman is encouraged. During the dance, the woman is the one to set the distance between herself and the man. There needs to be consideration towards other people and an understanding of the appropriate attitudes in dance. Another person commented that "jerks don't last long here".

Express yourself...

"The truest expression of a people is in its dance and in its music. Bodies never lie."

~ Agnes de Mille

Dancing is also a way to make physical expression through music and movement. Matching the steps with the rhythm and melodies of the music is seen as a way to interact and experience the outward expression of human emotions. One woman said that dancing was "like relationships...the emotions of the dance make it more real and I can relate to it better". Each dance has its own 'feel', its own individual personality, from the elegant rise and fall of the waltz, to the strong rhythmic movements of the samba, and the fun swirling nature of the swing.

It can also be a way to relieve the stress and pressures of everyday life, a way to balance out the grind of the daily job. After a long hard day at work, dancing is almost an escape where you have a chance to be physically active and have fun with friends. The music itself is another part of dance that adds to the experience. When a song is familiar, you are able to connect with the music more, which adds to the feel and enjoyment of the dance overall.

“We dance for laughter, we dance for tears, we dance for madness, we dance for fears, we dance for hopes, we dance for screams, we are the dancers, we create the dreams.”

~ Anonymous

The perfect moment...

Dance also provides an element of romance in our lives. One woman told a story of when she was a student, going home late at night after a dance party. It was raining and her partner took her into his arms and they began to dance the Argentine Tango. There was no music, but they were dancing in their own little world, just the two of them. Dance was the perfect way to share that special moment together.

How to get started

At first, I thought that learning to dance meant just finding a dance school to learn the steps of each dance. However, I realized that there was more to it than that. Entering into the world of ballroom dancing involves learning not only the steps, but also the etiquette and rules of dance. Understanding these things will allow you to have fun and enjoy the art of dancing.

One of the first worries I had was that I did not have a partner to go with me, and ballroom dancing is difficult to do solo. Fortunately, the dance school that I discovered has a philosophy of dancing with different partners. This helps people learn how to adapt to different levels of dancing and is a great way to build up the community among the members of the dance school. When asked why she enjoyed coming to this particular dance school, one woman said, “A lot of people come by themselves and have a lot of fun. This is a good place because everyone asks everyone else to dance.” One man told me about a different dance school that he had attended: “It’s a totally different environment. There is a lot more drama there; people fighting over who they want to dance with and only dancing with their selected partners. I didn’t like it.”

There are many different dances that are considered to be ballroom dancing. The term ‘ballroom’ indicates that it is a partner dance, somewhat formalized in that there are specific steps to each dance. These dances can be categorized by the origins of the dance, such as the Latin origins of the Salsa and Samba, and those that are mainly seen in competitive ballroom dancing, like the Waltz and the Tango. Depending on what is offered at the dance school, learning the basic steps to a variety of dances will get you started into the world of ballroom dancing.

Once you have found a good dance school, the next step to take is to sign up for lessons, whether they are group classes or private lessons. As that man told me on the first day of dancing, you cannot learn how to dance just by observing. You could watch dancers for years and not be able to pick up the subtle nonverbal communications between dance partners. Experienced dancers can move quickly around the dance floor, from corner to corner, without even looking at one another, just by responding to the

physical cues of the other person.

Learning how to lead and how to follow is an important concept to learn in ballroom dancing. Men have a difficult job in thinking about the moves they want to dance next, as they have to prepare to give the signal to the women. At the same time, a women need to be alert to respond and follow the men's lead. This is one of those things that cannot be observed. The classic ballroom dance hold is with the man's right palm flat on the woman's left shoulder blade, and his left hand stretched out, clasping the woman's right hand. The woman's left palm is placed on the man's inside shoulder in order to feel where he wants to lead and keep the frame of the dance.

During a dance, there should be 50-50 pressure against one another. When the man wants to move forwards, he will raise the pressure up to 51%. The woman remains at 50% pressure because if she falls back too much, the connection between the two is lost. When the man wants to go backwards, he goes down to 49% and then the woman gets the power and moves forward until the man pushes back. These subtle cues are what dancers need to be aware of in order to maneuver around the dance floor.

Another important thing to remember is the transfer of weight from one foot to the other in a dance step. If there is no transfer of weight, it is just tapping your feet. The weight transfer is necessary to make sure that you are ready for the next step of the dance. Also, the position of your feet is important as well, in order to avoid being stepped on. For example, in the tango, the woman stands slightly to the left of the man so that their legs do not get tangled during the dance.

Beyond the dance floor

There are things that the world of ballroom dancing can transfer to the rest of your world. Music and movement is something I learned to appreciate through ballroom dancing. There is something beautiful and graceful when you see two people moving together to the melody of a song, trying to portray the emotions of the music through dance. It is an activity that can simply be enjoyed without having to analyze or critique it.

An important attribute that dance develops is to be confident and strong. Often, an instructor will advise someone to “walk strongly...it’s easy to walk strongly if you’re standing tall, not so easy if you’re staring at your feet”. When you are first learning to dance, there is bound to be awkward moments and times where you have no idea what you are doing. However, with practice, the movements begin to feel more natural and you realize that you are able to actually dance. Having that confidence in knowing what you are doing can transfer to how you feel when you are doing other things.

My experience with ballroom dancing has left me feeling as if I have only scratched the surface. There are many things that I still do not know, other types of dances that I have not yet learned, and many people in the community I have not yet met. The world of ballroom dancing is a small one, but it is a place where people can have fun, have community with others, and enjoy life.