

Learning to Dance - Making the Impossible Possible

The Invitation

“Would you like to dance?” This is a moment of surprise, hopeful anticipation, uncertainty, and sometimes downright fear. These emotions are experienced by both the extender and the invitee. *“I didn’t expect to be asked.” “Please say yes.” “I hope this works out.” “What if s/he says no, or worse, what if I screw up and we look stupid?” “What if I say yes and I disappoint him/her.”* All these thoughts flash by in a moment of decision. Even the most experienced social dancers go through this trying ritual before each dance. It’s a wonder that anyone would subject themselves to it . . . yet we persist. Why? Because when it all works out, a successful social dance can be glorious!

Unfortunately, in many situations the invitation is declined or worse, never extended. Often because of a lack of confidence and/or competence in the mechanics of social dancing.

We would like to share with you how this may be remedied.

Why, because we experience the joy of dance. We want to share that joy with those that have experienced frustration in attempting to dance. It can be done, but it takes a new way of looking at how people dance and how you can learn to dance.

The Role of Social Dance

Social dancing is an activity that is integrated into most of our celebrations - weddings, graduations, inaugurations, new years parties . . . etc., and for good reason. Dancing can bring joy and promote happiness. It is a universal means of expression. Many find dancing natural and beautiful; some even find it essential in their lives. As long as humans have lived in social groups, there has been dancing.

The Other Side -- I Can’t Dance, Don’t Ask Me

Unfortunately, in our ‘high-tech’, yet ‘low-touch’ world, many people don’t learn to dance to their satisfaction. The reasons why are many, varied, and personal. Despite these reasons, under the right influence many people can learn dancing to a measure of competence.

Learning to dance is no more difficult than learning to walk upright. Walking is a complex combination of balance and movement. Yet, all people, except for those with disabilities, master the art of walking with confidence. And so they can with dance.

If Not, Why Not?

Learning anything requires motivation, encouragement, some instruction and a belief that it can happen.

It is helpful to contrast learning to walk with the traditional ways we are taught to dance. Learning to walk in infancy begins with seeing others walk. Seeing everybody walk is ample encouragement and motivation for a child to attempt walking and to convince her/him that it is possible. Not so for dance.

In our modern world, dance is not a daily occurrence witnessed by everyone from birth. Learning to dance is delayed until adolescence or adulthood and is often attempted by taking lessons that are structured and somewhat formal. Also, there is no compelling reason to learn to dance for most. In some circles, dancing is undesirable, unseemly or even outright banned. Yet, dancing is beautiful and can be learned without pressure.

The Structured Approach to Dance

In conventional ways of teaching dance, verbal instructions are the norm. Often these instructions are first explained and repeated while the dancers attempt to follow them.

Interestingly, there are no instructions given in the process of learning to walk. Perhaps because of the failure of language. Even if walking instructions could be accurately verbalized (it can't), the child's language skills could not interpret instructions adequately. Dancing can not truly be learned from primarily verbal instructions either. Each move, step, nuance must be experienced, over and over again.

Continuing with the analogy, the benefits of walking are immediately obvious to a child. Making mistakes like falling down are all part of the process. Criticism and self doubt never enter into the picture. But the benefits of dance (joy, happiness, a sense of freedom as well as consecutiveness) are not forthcoming until well after the students are proficient at dancing, if they ever get there. Most drop out, which reinforces their belief that they "can't dance." Joy and fun must be experienced right from the beginning with listening to and enjoying the music, its rhythms and the beat if the learning is to be sustained.

Inspiration From Another Arena -- Gives Rise to a New Approach

Introducing **Method Dancing** as a way for those who have trouble mastering the process of social partner dancing. It takes inspiration from method acting, pioneered by Konstantin Stanislavski. In method acting, the ideal of a "true or real" moment or impulse is valued most highly. It is the application of "natural" rules and laws. In his words "Create your own method . . . Make up something that will work for you! But keep breaking traditions . . ." Method Dancing is "breaking traditions" on how to dance and how to learn to dance. It is based on the "natural" way people learn to move.

Method Dancing – idea of James Pitts and Natalia Goncharova based on Method Acting of Konstantin Stanislavski

Ten Steps to Enjoying the Dance

1. Method Dancing is a way to learn partner social dancing while having fun. It is a natural approach to learning to dance, not a structured formal approach that is often taught by and learned from others. It is built on the premise that learning to dance can and must be experienced and must be fun if one is to succeed. To have fun, immediate and tangible results must flow from the “experiential” learning process.
2. Any physical endeavor, whether it be driving a golf ball, or bowling a ball into the pocket, or walking, are all learned movements, mastered after repetitions and trials. And so is Method Dancing.
3. Dancing is personal. Facilitation in Method Dancing is tailoring the dance movements to the individual as opposed to conforming the individual to a dance sequence. There are no mistakes in Method Dancing. Fun actually can be in making “mistakes” while experimenting and discovering together with your partner.
4. Method Dancing is not performance dance for the entertainment of others. The perception that one must “look good” to enjoy dancing is debunked. Students must be freed of intimidation often felt by the inexperienced. Many want to dance, but are afraid to look awkward, to be laughed at, and alike. Some think they do not have the right body; there is no such thing as the right body. In Method Dancing it is about connecting with yourself and your partner, not about impressing anyone else. Students that are shy or self conscience inhibit their experimentation, learning, and enjoyment. Therefore, shy students are encouraged to learn in places where they are comfortable, free of distractions, perhaps not in groups in a public setting. This requires motivation on your part if it applies to you. Dance when no one is insisting and telling you what to do.
5. Hearing and responding to the beat and the rhythm of the music is fundamental to dance. The first experience must be learning to hear the beat. “Beginners” should perfect their ability to hear and then move to the rhythms and beat of the music. Difficulties encountered by the student should be addressed by repeated hand clapping, toe tapping, and body swaying to music. Hearing and responding to the beat should be learned off the dance floor in a car, a kitchen, walking down the street ala John Travolta in the movie Saturday Night Fever . . . everywhere! Dancing alone, experimenting, and polishing moves without a partner can be a useful exercise. Watching oneself in the mirror executing basic steps can also help to see oneself move to the beat. Dancing in front of a mirror in groups may be counter-productive for those who are intimidated by “how they look” to others. However, overcoming the dependency on the opinion of others is a way to enjoying dancing. Being in front of others more often than not is one way of gaining confidence. Individuals differ in their preferences in music. There are a variety of dances, music, and beats to learn. Method Dancing encourages beginners to first select music and dances that inspire them. Once confident in one’s chosen dance and music different venues can be later explored more easily.

6. Dance is learned, not taught. In Method Dancing, facilitators/instructors take a "back seat" to the students as they learn to dance.

(A common problem with traditional dance instruction for beginners comes when teachers call out instructions to dancers as the dancers try to learn. In this traditional approach, dancers end up listening to the teachers rather than to the beat of the music. Worse, followers dance to the instructions of the teachers and not to the feel of their leader/partners. Therefore, leader/partners don't get to practice leading, which is their primary responsibility. The most important contribution a facilitator does is giving individual recommendations to each dancer and dancing with the student. Learning to dance in groups has limitations because of the lack of individual attention.)

7. Learning to dance is not just learning steps except for the basic step of the dance. Once the basic step is mastered, it is up to the student to dance, dance, dance. Or as the traditionalist say, practice, practice, practice. We prefer dance to practice because practice can infer work over play which is often not fun.
8. Method Dancing is not necessarily trying to replicate what beautiful dancers do. It is doing what each dancer/couple do best as the result of experimentation and lots of dancing. Different couples do different things well, but so what. More power to them. Whatever inspires the student/couple to try new steps and moves is encouraged in Method Dancing.
9. As it is with traditional instruction, in Method Dancing the roles of leaders and followers are emphasized as an initial construct. Afterward, all bets are off. It is the dancer's call. Back leading and or co-leading, or traditional leader/follower dancing are encouraged if it contributes to the fun and joy of the participants.
10. Method Dancing is built on the foundation of communication between the partners and it is this communication that is the primary benefit of partner/social dancing. The eye contact, the holding of hands, the embrace, and the synchronous body movements all culminate in a joyful experience. *People coming together to move to the rhythms of the music is a kind of metaphor for moving to the rhythms of life.* Dance is fantasy, joy, love, sensuality and reality all rolled into one. Method Dancing is the place you are free to explore all those modalities without fear of consequences.

Natalia & James Productions - Just Be Happy