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A Dance Set: Modern Familiar Essays

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Marlene Koenig

October, 1991

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of Graduate College, University of Nebraska,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts,
University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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ABSTRACT

The modern familiar essay is writing that balances skillfully on the fence rails between information and entertainment, scanning the view in both directions. Somewhat as in a business partnership, one member provides the originality that comes from experience and observation while the other contributes the authority that comes from facts and research. If balanced and integrated, the twin components of information and entertainment make the modern familiar essay as successfully unique in literature as the solid entrepreneurship is in business.

Michel de Montaigne, originator of the familiar essay, said that in it, ultimately, it is the "self" that one reveals. Because ballroom dancing, like writing, is of consuming interest to me, I have combined the two, using dance as the unifying metaphor for the theme of these essays. Selecting specific types of essays from the rich repertoire of categories of the modern familiar essay has been like choosing from the categories of dance sets throughout an evening's program. I have selected these: a philosophical essay, two how-to essays, a place essay, and a profile essay. Each has its rhetorical characteristics as well as its particular allure, thereby requiring of the writer a diversity of skills.

The philosophical essay is a liberally interpretive form of people-watching. Having danced with clingers and comedians, with the shy and the shyster, with impostors and innovators, with the driven and the dead, I give numerous examples of how people, by their dance movements, reveal their personalities. As individually expressive as a signature, dancing is a form of autobiography.

With their can-do approach and persuasive power, how-to essays appeal to

the believer in each of us. My how-to essays are works of deliberate dreams-come-true salesmanship. In the first, I show the reader how to dance. I promise that to be a dancer just two things are essential: you have to have a feeling for music, and you have to be able to move to what you feel. In the second essay, I give the reader the inside scoop on how to do and/or how to watch exhibition ballroom dancing. Different from either competitive or social ballroom dancing, exhibition is showoff, "Look, Ma, no hands!" dancing.

In a place essay, the writer uses a specific place to make a comment on society and, thus, a comment on the self. My essay on ballrooms is about dancing places that are necessary to imaginative, ritualistic, spirited people. The right chemistry with places, as with people, can be as complicated or as simple as we want to make it.

In a profile essay, the writer brings to life someone who is or is not characteristic of mankind in general. Touched on in most of the other essays, my extraordinarily creative dancing partner is the subject of the profile essay. His belief, that there is no going on to square two if square one is not perfected, guides us .

The five essays are framed by an introduction and brief closing. In the former, for those who wonder how this project evolved, I explain that for those of us who choose to navigate our lives along the swamps, islands, refuges, and marshes of society and life rather than through the main channels, essays are an ideal medium for expression. In the latter, I give the simplest explanation I know --in words borrowed from Montaigne--for the personal appeal of dance: ". . . because it is dance; because it is me."

To Dr. John McKenna
Teacher, Buffalo-Hunter, Fan
Who in all ways demonstrated encouragement, wisdom, and confidence

and

To McCoy
Mentor, Four-star Admiral, Buddy
Who has accompanied me through war to peace of mind

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Introduction

Ten words pointed me in the direction of writing modern familiar essays for my master's thesis: "Decides to submit collection of short stories as master's thesis." The words were about Flannery O'Connor.

There was never any question about whether or not I would write a thesis. I started life waving paper and pencils in the air instead of baby rattles. Finding an engaging research topic in literary criticism was the trick. Flannery O'Connor seemed a possible choice for a couple of reasons. The impression she left when I first read her work as an undergraduate was as powerful as my first scent of a real Southern magnolia, if a lot less delicate. What a writer! I loved her style, her voice, her humor, her dialogue.

Years later in Savannah, Georgia, I found myself living less than a five-minute walk from the house in which O'Connor was born. I walked past her home, thinking about her and her writing, often. After living in the South for eighteen years, I returned to the Midwest. Rereading O'Connor then brought *deja vu*. I felt I had heard those conversations before; I had known some of those people.

Finally, I settled on O'Connor and the revisions of some of her short stories as my thesis topic. I was as satisfied as I could get, but it wasn't what I really wanted to do. No aspect of literature meant as much to me as any

aspect of writing. Then I came across Sally Fitzgerald's ten-word line on O'Connor. It was like discovering the light switch behind the bookcases when I had been feeling up and down the wall for it. I wanted to do what O'Connor had done--original writing!

In the fall of 1989, happy to find a writing course in the curricula, I enrolled in Dr. John McKenna's Modern Familiar Essay class. It was the turning point for carrying out my plan.

The class's first assignment was to write five short paragraphs on topics of our choice. I turned in what I thought were well-written, clever little numbers. What I got back were comments like "Worthwhile?" "Somewhat general," and "Strange" written on the pages. This guy meant business! I never worked so hard nor loved a class so much in my entire life. It's a record I expect will stand.

From Joseph Epstein and one of his great opening lines, "'At fifty,' wrote Orwell, 'everyone has the face he deserves,'" to Annie Dillard, Dave Barry, Robert M. Pirsig, Joan Dideon--on and on, the writers were like a welcoming committee along the last seven-mile drive toward my Iowa hometown. A special rapport is in the air as I drive up and over the hills until, suddenly, from the top of one hill, still two miles away, I see home--the little town of 200 people, my mother's house, my childhood home on the far southeast corner. In this class, I was home. This was the kind of writing I

wanted to do!

At the end of the writing course, I discussed the possibility of writing modern familiar essays for my thesis with Dr. McKenna. He not only was open to the idea; he encouraged it. I'm talking about getting-his-hands-dirty, sticking-his-neck-out kind of personal encouragement. He took the idea to the graduate English department and won their approval.

The song raises the question, "What is this thing called 'love'?" I, being completely unfamiliar with it, had had to learn what is this thing called "the modern familiar essay". Michel de Montaigne, who is credited with being the creator of the personal essay, hit the resonating key when he wrote of it, "I desire therein to be delineated in mine own genuine, simple and ordinary fashion, without contention, art or study, FOR IT IS MY SELFE I POURTRAY" (emphasis added).

The writer's authority on the subject is, of course, essential. For good measure, he/she backs up her experience and authority with references, facts, allusions, quotes, etc., much like the leader who fronts the band surrounds himself with good sidemen. Ultimately, it is the writer who is the subject of the essay, cleverly sidling up to the reader alongside the specific topic being explored.

In his inimitable manner, Dr. Samuel Johnson described the familiar essay as "a loose sally of the mind; an irregular, undigested piece; not a

regular and orderly performance." Two hundred years later, the intellectual, personal rambling Johnson wrote of is still one of the appealing elements of the essay to both writer and reader. Tangents are characteristic of the genre.

Harking back to Montaigne, critic and essayist Edmund Gosse saw the essay as "a composition of moderate length, usually in prose, which deals in an easy, cursory way with the external conditions of a subject, and, in strictness, with that subject as it affects the writer." Perhaps more than in any other genre, the writer of the essay is intimately intertwined within his/her work. Whether through experience, tone, values, style, or point of view, there is at least a slice of autobiography in every essay. Sometimes the writer cuts a generous slice.

Directly emphasizing the relationship between writer and essay, David Daiches, author and editor, defined the essay as "a reasonably short prose discussion in which the personality of the author in some degree shapes the style and tone of the argument, and in which the writer's skill in the handling of prose exposition is impressive in its own right and pleasing for the reader to watch in operation."

Just as a dozen bands might play Henry Busse's "Hot Lips," yet each rendition will sound uniquely different according to the arrangement, and the style, personality, and interpretation of the band leader, so it is with essayists and their subjects. In time, the essayist becomes recognized by

his/her signature literary style and personality.

Most loquacious and most thorough on the subject of the familiar essay is the team of William M. and D. Barrett Tanner. Again, like Montaigne before them, these men emphasize the personality of the writer. Unlike some others, however, they also emphasize the importance of entertaining the reader. According to them:

. . . an essay is a relatively short piece of meditative writing, expository in nature and usually prose in form. It is a tentative and personal treatment of a subject. It is not an exhaustive treatise elaborately composed in accord with the principles of strict logic, but is rather the personal expression of the author's thoughts, moods, fancies, and opinions concerning his subject.

The familiar essay has for its immediate purpose the entertainment of the reader, though it may, as it often does, contribute indirectly to his information. It is addressed to the senses, the memory, the emotions, and the imagination, as well as to the intellect. The personality of the familiar essayist, the mood he creates, the conversational intimacy of his style, and the individuality of his diction are of much greater importance than are subject matter, theme, and structure.

The familiar essay is essentially personal writing. The point of view is usually that of the first person. The subject, the theme, the material, and the mood are all personally chosen. Individuality of thought and originality of expression, together with the revelation of pleasing literary personality, are the chief characteristics of the familiar essay.

The appeal of this particular genre of nonfiction lies in its multiplicity of pleasures--for both writer and reader. I think of the modern familiar essay as a fascinating, closely-danced tango between the well-matched partners of Information and Entertainment. While sharing knowledge, the essayist is also pleased to draw a smile, perhaps an intellectual grin, from the reader.

Samuel F. Pickering, the essayist and teacher who was the inspiration

for Dead Poets Society, thinks that "as life is fragile, so is truth, and the essayist writes essays in part because the form, like happiness itself, is fragile." I disagree. To me, essays are scrappers, the Little Rascals of literature. From without, they have withstood periodic neglect, attempts at dilution or absorption, and general deprecation. From within, they willingly take on all subjects. Good essays stand up to anything.

To those of us who choose to navigate our lives along the swamps, islands, refuges, and marshes of society and life rather than through the main channels, essays are an ideal medium for expression. All topics, all experiences, all interests are fair game. On one hand, essays welcome unlimited knowledge, detail, and research. On the other hand, the personal angle gives them their edge, their spunk.

O'Connor's "collection of short stories," for me, evolved into modern familiar essays. From the wide variety of essay categories including travel, sports, reviews, journals, and interviews, I selected five: a place essay, two "how-to" essays, a philosophical essay, and a profile essay.

Tying the five together with a theme seemed logical; tying them together with the theme of dance was inevitable. Apart from writing, dancing is what I do with greatest love. The two are wonderfully compatible. The sociability of dancing balances the solitude of writing and vice versa. The activity of dancing counterbalances the sedentariness of writing.

Both dance and writing are born in the bones, work their way to and through the heart, then outward to self-expression. I don't think we choose our passions; I think they, like Yahweh with his prophets, pick us. Dancing and writing are the lines and whorls of my identity.

In this thesis, the first essay is on place. Generally, a place essay takes one beyond what is known, where one has been. In a labyrinthian sort of way, writing about place becomes writing about one's perceptions of a place, which becomes writing about oneself. A typical essay route.

This essay, on ballrooms, is an invitation into a unique world of make-believe, romance, beauty, and enjoyment. The most researched, I have kept this the least personal of the essays. Rather than focusing at length on a particular ballroom, I have taken a more encompassing view of the naming, architecture, adaptations, clientele, and ambience of all ballrooms. In this essay I suggest that the strong personal appeal of ballrooms extends beyond me to many other people. To those readers to whom ballrooms are unexplored territory, the essay is a warm invitation.

In the first of the "how-to" essays, I offer the reader an upbeat, if slightly unconventional, method of learning to dance. Based on my experience, the method is a combination of how I wish I had initially learned to dance with how I have recently learned. I have written directly to the reader in this essay.

The appeal of "how-to" essays is that they appear to make a dream come true--hence the sale's pitch opening. There is no deception in this. "How-to" essays can fulfill a wish when they are followed from start to finish. The immediate pleasure of reading this type of essay, however, is in subconsciously believing that by reading about how to do whatever is presented, one has as good as already accomplished it. So even if one does not actually follow through, there was always that "one brief shining moment" of simultaneously reading and believing.

The second "how-to" essay is a private viewing, an insider's feel for the unique world of exhibition ballroom dancing. It can be considered a sequel to the previous essay, and is addressed to either the spectator or the practitioner. The experience and examples come from the work my dancing partner and I are doing. Woven into the framework of appearance, ability, and attitude, the underlying message is Joseph Campbell's "Follow your bliss," do your thing with all your heart for the pleasure it gives you.

The fourth piece is a philosophical essay. Having danced with many people, having watched countless people dance, I interpret what I see on the dance floor. My premise is that dancing is body language for the whole person. It is symbolic of the type of person we are. The examples given, while of specific people, are meant to demonstrate a general idea. Ideally, the essay will lead the reader to observe and consider people from a new

perspective.

The set concludes with a profile or biographical essay on a dancing personality. This essay was my favorite to write. Such an abundance of material from which to choose was available that the main task lay in deciding what to use, what to leave for another time. While the person is unique in the strictest sense of the word, his personality will have universal appeal to readers who know someone they love to hate. In their book, Harry H. Crosby and Duncan A. Carter write that "a profile succeeds if the reader says, 'I feel I really know that person.'" I think the reader of this essay will have that feeling. Much like the place essay, the profile essay takes a path leading the essayist and the reader back to a look at self.

The purpose of writing this thesis has been to answer questions. Could I replace the mantra, "I want to write" with an actual product? Would the modern familiar essay appeal as much to me as a writer as it had to me as a reader? Was it possible to combine dancing and writing? The answer to all three questions is the same: writing this thesis has been a ball!

A warm thank-you to the following professors at the University of Nebraska at Omaha for helping me learn more about writing in each of their classes: to Dr. Thomas Walsh, whose remarks on totems made a permanent impression; to Dr. Marvin Peterson, who gave me a solid foundation in research work, and who graciously allowed me to forsake Flannery; and to Dr.

Glen Newkirk, who brought England and Scotland to me as no one else could. A special thank-you to Dr. Phil Smith and Dr. Jim Wood whose careful reading and provocative comments stimulated more ideas than I could incorporate into this first effort. A heartfelt thank-you to Dr. John McKenna who, from beginning to end, has been an exciting role model in this writing experience.

Place My Heart Near My Feet

Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.
Exodus 3:5

Favorite places aren't chosen. Rather, as with baseball and love, all we do is respond. Think of love from the center fielder's point of view, as a high, slow flyball. The player doesn't have much to say about the ball coming to him; it's what he does with it that counts. The shifting, judging, waiting-- finally holding the ball--it's a good spot to be in.

Of the high flies that have come my way, I associate some of the best hit, not with persons, but with places.

I like ballrooms; I could willingly spend my life in them. Ballrooms are to me what friends are to many people: one or two have permanently captured my heart; some have personalities I find irresistible; combined, they are all the heaven I desire.

No two ballrooms are any more alike than are any two of the world's many Smiths. If you see someone walk into a ballroom, look around, and leave, you know there is an instinctive personality clash. On the other hand, if you see someone walk into a ballroom, smile, and come in further, you know the personalities click.

Scarcely anyone lucky enough to have lived during the best of the Big Band years, that short period between the mid 1930s and the mid 1940s, can fail to recognize the names of the great ballrooms: the Roseland, the Trianon and Aragon, the Cocoanut Grove, the Savoy, the Glen Island Casino. For this coterie, the names of these famous and beloved ballrooms are among the most evocative words in our language. Name one of these places and men and women will shake their heads, smile, start to hum a sweet tune or a swing tune, and then sigh wistfully. Ballroom nostalgia is as rooted in the heart as is a good first love.

Ballrooms, like all worthy places, have a long history, but I prefer, as I do with my friends, to consider only their recent history. Ballrooms' patron saint, Louis J. Brecker, opened his place in New York City in 1919. John Lucchese describes Brecker as a man who "absolutely loved dancing and he loved everything about the dancing business." That combination may explain why his ballroom is still in operation and has become world famous. Brecker found the designation "dance hall" far too common for his establishment so his Roseland became a "ballroom." It is, to many, synonymous with ballrooms, its name recognized even by people who don't dance.

No one who has labored to match the perfect name to the anticipated perfect offspring will think there is anything slight about the naming of a

ballroom. Unless it is named by people who love to dance, the place is likely to receive a name that wouldn't draw cows to a barn. Humpty Dumpty's acidic remark to Alice, "With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost," is appropriate for ballrooms given names like the Century, the Terrace, the Boulevard, the Park Central, and the Turnpike. They deserve better.

Some ballroom names, on the other hand, leave nothing to the imagination. The Siouland Ballroom in South Sioux City, Nebraska, for example, was renamed Mr. Tune's Party Room. Would one dare show up bassett-eyed at this ballroom? The Pla Mor Ballrooms in Lincoln, Nebraska, Kansas City, Missouri, and Rochester, Minnesota need no further advertising. Even before entering these ballrooms, the dancers must feel with Shakespeare's Troilus, "I am giddy, expectation whirls me round. The imaginary relish is so sweet that it enchants my sense." And certainly Lon A. Gault, in his compilation Ballroom Echoes, was right in giving space to Frank Frogge, the terpsichorean who had the self-deprecating good nature to call his namesake ballroom in St. Joseph, Missouri, the Frog Hop.

The best-named ballrooms are masterpieces of connotation. I like Oscar Wilde's assertion that "the advantage of the emotions is that they lead us astray," as long as I stray into a ballroom. The right ballroom names feed our continuous appetite for romantic, dreams-come-true, happily-ever-after

fantasies.

Certain places--for me, coastal Georgia and the Carolinas--take us tenderly and tenaciously by the heart, never letting go. Examining the appeal, like analyzing one's favorite color, is pointless. Ballrooms woo us in this same light-handed, full-blooded way. A place of fantasy set in the heart of day-to-day reality is, after all, what ballrooms are all about. Instead of unnecessarily reminding us that "humankind cannot bear very much reality," T. S. Eliot would have done well to take up dancing.

No other places are so purposefully named. Government buildings are named after popular politicians; libraries and museums, such as the J. Paul Getty Museum, after long-time benefactors. Some shopping centers, such as Oak View Mall, make feeble attempts at creative naming, and an occasional horse track, such as Churchill Downs, shows some flair.

But the Blue Moon, the Wonderland, the Crystal Palace, the Cinderella, the Melody Mill, and the Golden Slipper could only be names of ballrooms. In my imagination, even now, I can hear Louis Prima leading his band in a jazzy rendition of "Wonderland by Night" in the Wonderland Ballroom in Revere, Massachusetts. And I imagine that to the women who came glamorously-gowned to the Cinderella Ballroom in Appleton, Wisconsin, the cars they arrived in looked like coaches, and the men like princes.

The prize-winning state for beautiful ballroom names must be Ohio. Consider these former and current ballrooms: the Moonlight Gardens Ballroom in Canton; the Carousel Ballroom in Celina; the Crystal Slipper and Danceland Ballrooms in Cleveland; and the Crystal Room, the Canton Tea Garden, and the Ballarena Ballroom all in Dayton. Clearly Terpsichore and Euterpe reside among the Buckeyes.

Sometimes, however, one must altogether ignore the name of the ballroom and, against all common sense, enter it. So it was that my dancing partner and I first went to the ballroom in Carter Lake, Iowa, named, by some aesthetically-impaired entrepreneur, the Warehouse! The prosaic name, however, belies the beautiful interior. Here, the misguided soul who named the outside seems to have lost all power. The inside has a beautifully star-studded ceiling made up of soft chandelier lights, a red velvet-draped stage from which the bands play, and a spacious dance floor--all of which more than adequately certify it as a genuine ballroom.

Although they might burn or be torn down, well-named ballrooms never die. They rise, phoenix-like from the ashes, giving their names to other ballrooms. Even if Richard Philp, editor-in-chief of Dance magazine, didn't have ballrooms in mind when he said, "Dance is a passalong art, handed from one generation to the next," I'm sure he would have included them had he thought of it. Certain names have their own magnetism

because of the national popularity and musical memories associated with the original.

The Karzas brothers, Andrew and William, built and named two of dancing's eternal verities in Chicago. The Trianon, named for the French Trianons, was built on the south side in 1922, followed four years later by the Aragon, with its opulent Spanish architecture and decor, on the north side. Apparently outdoing the original Grand Trianon which was followed only by the Petit, the Chicago Trianon spawned namesakes in Buffalo, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Seattle, Toledo, and San Francisco among other places.

The Aragon, occasionally still hosting big band music today, has offspring in numerous locations including Cleveland, Detroit, and Santa Monica, California. Lawrence Welk supposedly complimented the Santa Monica Aragon patrons this way: "Those Aragon crowds were wonderful ["wunnerful"] people; beer drinking, shirt tail [sic] crowd, hard working, respectable folks who enjoyed an evening out and thought that dancing was a good way to have it."

If the mystique of ballrooms is partially in their names, it is also in their appearance. "They don't make them like that any more" is a cliché elevated to singular truth when it comes to ballrooms. The premier ballrooms, those magnificent works of art of the 20s, 30s, and 40s, were important socially and imaginative architecturally. Then, ballrooms were

lone eagles soaring high in popularity over other forms of entertainment. Now, though, ballrooms are one out of a flock of forms of entertainment. Sometimes, unfortunately, the bird is losing its plumage. The best ballrooms were designed and built as though the architects had at least a passion for architecture, if not, in fact, a passion for dancing.

Jose Abarrientos wrote this of the original Coconut Grove Ballroom in Santa Cruz, California:

The building itself was that type of architectural fantasy-pastiche that seems to have been peculiar to seaside resorts around the world: bulbous, onion-shaped domes surmounted by colorful pennants that fluttered like exotic birds eager to be freed of their elegant perches. There were arches, colonnades, balconies and verandahs, with hardly an inch left uncovered by elaborate carvings and sculptures. There were friezes; painted and stenciled decorations in abundance; endless miles of curiously repeating motifs; windows and doors flanked by mythological and heraldic figures. The effect was impossibly and deliberately exotic. And utterly beautiful.

Sigh.

Some ballrooms, like the Avalon Casino Ballroom on Santa Catalina Island, California, greet dancers with an open-arms display of personality. The exterior architecture has been described by some as "a Spanish Colonial Revival of Mediterranean style." If that sounds like an architectural smorgasbord, what a feast to the eyes it is! Talk about a personality with self-confidence! For my money the Avalon Casino has the most imaginative, most elegant, most picturesque exterior of any ballroom, ever. Others have more subdued exteriors and wait for the dancers to enter before dazzling

them.

Many ballrooms built in the 20s and 30s used decor to convince their dancers that they were, indeed, escaping from their mundane surroundings into a fantasy world. The heavy favorite in decor, perhaps because it ideally combined the exotic and the romantic, seems to have been Spanish-Moorish. Apparently that was far enough from reality for most Americans. Some ballrooms even mated their name with their decor. Several that charmed their dancers with palm trees, arches, mosaics, stuccoed walls, and balconies were the Aragon Ballroom in Chicago; the Indiana Roof Ballroom in Indianapolis; the Graystone Ballroom in Detroit; the Spanish Castle in Seattle; the Castle Farm in Cincinnati; the Trocadero Ballroom in Denver; the Madrid Ballroom in Louisville; and the Palais Royale Ballroom in South Bend, Indiana.

Just as bands frequently use identifying slogans, some ballrooms do, too. The Cotillion in Wichita, Kansas, for example, is the ballroom that has "Music in the Round with the Big Band Sound." The Indiana Roof Ballroom in Indianapolis makes the heady claim of being the "Most Beautiful Ballroom in the World." A ballroom where one can actually dance under the stars is the Centennial Terrace in Sylvania, Ohio, which has the distinction of being "The Country's Largest and Most Beautiful Outdoor Ballroom." And Springvale Ballroom in North Olmsted, Ohio, is the place "Where Old

Memories Are Exchanged for New Friends."

Any state that does not have its Starsomething Ballroom--Stardust, Starlight, Starline--is a state to avoid. If dancers cannot literally dance under the stars, they want to pretend they can, so enlightened owners know that they can never use too many of the right kinds of lights. Edison's gift was never shown to better advantage. In a perfect ballroom, the partners provide romance, the band provides music, and the lighting provides atmosphere.

I've seen the best and the worst. The worst was a ballroom that had four contentious styles of commercial lights, presumably from a gym locker, hog barn, or parts warehouse hanging from the ceiling. Looking up put one in the mood for overhauling the transmission.

My favorite ballroom, the Royal Terrace at Peony Park in Omaha, Nebraska, has exquisite lighting. Twenty-two electric wall sconces encircle the ballroom. The entire ceiling is framed in one large oval, with the inside painted black to suggest the night sky. Then the stars appear. One large ring of small lights outlines the entire oval. The inner part of the oval is filled with three enormous, breathtakingly beautiful chandeliers. Each of the three has twenty-four smaller chandeliers in two circles around the large central section. When all these lights are turned on and dimmed, the effect is unforgettable. It must be what Paradise looked like at night.

What has happened to ballrooms? What happens to friends? Some

die, some change, some go on.

A local downtown landmark, the Grand Ballroom of the Paxton Hotel in Omaha, Nebraska, hosted the big band sounds of the Paul Moorhead Orchestra for over twenty years. The ballroom, with its beautiful navy and cream color scheme; its leaded lilies set in long, opaque windows; its elevated, draped stage; and its two elegant crystal chandeliers, lives up to its grand name. Dances are still held on Tuesdays for residents of the now-converted manor and their guests. Basking in the ambience of the room on a recent visit, I found incongruously painted on the ballroom floor a pair of shuffleboard courts! It was somewhat like finding a long-time, stylish friend now wearing orthopedic shoes with her designer dresses. One understands the practical and prudent reasons for the accommodation but is still rattled at the sight.

Beginning noticeably in the 1950s, countless ballrooms began battling for survival. What Lord Thomas Robert Dewar had to say about pedestrians, "There are two kinds . . . the quick and the dead," seems to have applied with like-minded Darwinian selectivity to ballrooms. Although they thrived during World War II, ironically, many ballrooms could not fight and win the battle against television and rock-and-roll. Other enemies on the battlefield were high taxes, changing neighborhoods, high operating costs, home air-conditioning, and easy access to multiple recreational activities.

Many of the ballrooms that didn't survive seem to have died in one of two ways: by demolition or by fire. The whole sad matter brings to mind Robert Frost's lines which I would amend to read: "Some say ballrooms will end in fire/ Some say in ice. From what I've tasted of desire/ I hold with those who favor fire." One is tempted to think the number of ballrooms that have been destroyed by fire close to miraculous if not mysterious.

Most ballrooms have had to do some fancy footwork to stay in operation. Like dancing in a prolonged marathon, the price has been high even for the winners. Some changed their decor to psychedelic during the years when their best-attended bands were rock and their dancers were teenagers. Some went from being open five or six nights a week to being open only on weekends. Some, like the Starlite Ballroom in Wahoo, Nebraska, sat out a few years' dances and reopened. Some closed permanently.

To some people the pertinent question is: Are ballrooms passe' or are they going to endure? My temptation to bellow about the indisputable permanence of ballrooms is tempered by having seen two of the most elegant local ballrooms close since beginning this paper. That fact notwithstanding, I still like to think that with their long, if changing, histories, ballrooms, just like children's favorite hiding places, are necessary to imaginative, ritualistic, spirited people.

A ballroom today typically schedules dancing one to three nights a week. Some have kept in step with the music, as it were, by being open five nights but with a different type of music each evening. The Roam Inn, in Omaha, Nebraska, for example, has big band music on Wednesdays and Saturdays, country western on Thursdays, and polkas on Fridays and Sundays. As Max Beerbohm so lucidly summed up the situation, "For those who like this sort of thing, this is the sort of thing they like."

Overall, the most noticeable and most lamentable accommodation ballrooms have had to make is that they no longer look like ballrooms. They don't look like much of anything, a look that has been carefully crafted. It is, all too often, successful. The all-purpose box replaces beautiful and unique architecture, and Spanish-Moorish has become Generic. If one robin does not make a spring, neither does one mirror ball make a ballroom.

At the root of this dismantling of beauty is, of course, money. With keen insight, Kin Hubbard divulged, "When a fellow says, 'It ain't the money but the principle of the thing,' it's the money." What has happened is this: the place that is the ballroom one night of the week has boxing matches, bingo, banquets, and business meetings on succeeding nights. In addition there are trade shows, roller skating, political rallies, and reunions. All kinds of money-changers defiling the temple.

The majority of ballroom dancers today are fiftyish and older. These

people know how to appreciate ballrooms because many of them grew up dancing in true ballrooms. The hard maple floors easily receive their by-now smooth and polished dancing. Gliding around the dance floor is not a figurative expression; these people do it.

A ballroom's inherent elegance is honored by people old enough to know that "dressing up" means more than a clean pair of jeans, a new T-shirt, and fingernail polish. It means The Works: from suits and tuxedos to dresses and gowns, with all the razzle-dazzle wished for. Over the past few years, somewhat like a jockey who has her favorite silks, I have come to narrow my dancing colors to black and white. To me no other colors do justice to a ballroom the way these two do. Or, if I may be allowed to change his choice, I would agree with Eugene Field that "any color, so long as it's black or white is the color that suits me best"--at least in a ballroom.

Ballrooms have unique practices just as friends have their habits and mannerisms. One custom is that single people and married couples often sit in different sections of the ballroom. This is convenient in some ways and avoids misunderstandings, but newcomers and others with their own reasons may overlook the arrangement. I, as a matter of fact, was introduced to my dancing partner on the right side of the room where he was hiding behind a pillar among the couples, listening to the music. It didn't save him, though.

The Paul Jones Mixer, or simply the Mixer, is a popular interlude in the evening in some ballrooms. Men line up on one side of the bandstand, the women on the other side. When the music starts, one person from each side pairs up with whomever is next in line on the opposite side and dances with that person just long enough to get to the back of the floor, where they separate and each gets into his/her respective line again.

The Mixer is social gambling. It is fraught with potential and risk. Couples who mutually like who they get never go back into the mixer lines. An individual who doesn't like the looks or known dancing ability of the person with whom he/she is about to be paired sometimes develops professional avoidance techniques. I've seen people have sudden coughing attacks, go back to their tables for a drink, greet friends across the room, or suddenly allow other dancers to go ahead of them.

In some ballrooms, the band leader posts a dance program on the stage, listing the dance sets in the order in which they will be played. This is a convenience to dancers, allowing them in advance to line up favorite partners for specific dances. In many ballrooms, popular "Ladies' Choice" dance sets are interspersed throughout the evening.

One cannot know if his/her own personality will be compatible with another's from a hearsay description of that person. Neither can one generalize about ballrooms. Like friends, each has its unique appeal. When

you've seen one ballroom, you haven't seen them all!

In words that are almost worth a thousand pictures, Abarrientos captures the essential mood of all ballrooms:

You ascend a broad staircase, thickly carpeted in tones of red and rose. You emerge into the past, into a spacious and elegant foyer. Crystal tear-drop chandeliers, flocked, velvet-like wallcoverings, gilt and tufting, oversized settees and loveseats, all high Victoriana decorate the room for which, naturally, you prepare your entrance. Suddenly you are treading upon very nearly seven thousand square feet of beautifully polished wood. The effect is astonishing. The giant, oval-shaped floor seems to stretch forever in front of you. Looking up, there is an enormous brass railing enclosing a balcony that traces the entire girth of the ballroom. Above this, thousands of tiny, winking white lights caparison the vastness of the ceiling, like stars. And whether or not there is a band playing, you cannot help but hear music.

To some people, the thought of getting all the right things together for a perfect ballroom is overwhelming: the right location, the right building, the right floor, the right music, the right people, the right dress, the right lighting, the right evening, etc., etc., etc. Looked at this way, a successful ballroom is a miracle.

To other people, the equation is much simpler: find a spacious floor, bring in a good band, and people who love to dance will come. Everything else will take care of itself. The right chemistry with places, as with people, can be as complicated or as simple as we want to make it.

I can't imagine walking into a ballroom that is playing big band music and not feeling happy. If "liking the way I feel when I'm around you" is one expression of love, I love ballrooms.

How to Dance

If A equals success, then the formula is
A equals X plus Y plus Z. X is work, Y is
play, and Z is keep your mouth shut.

Albert Einstein

The sure-fire way for a dream to come true is with your ears open, your mouth closed, and with effort that is actually fun.

Have I got a dream for you!

Want something you can do alone or with others, at home or away; something that offers humor, coordination, health, gracefulness, variety, fun? Knowing how to dance is a dream-come-true!

Before you hurry out onto the dance floor, give me a moment to sweep aside a little gravel of misunderstanding that tends to get mixed in with the dance wax of learning.

Dance studios, curiously enough, sell the dream of learning to dance, backwards. I mean the method. Instead of making steps--the waltz, foxtrot, polka, rhumba, etc.--the very end, the very last, and certainly not the most important thing about learning how to dance, steps are everything. Not only are they the first thing that is taught, they are the only thing. This is, I repeat, backwards.

The formula for learning how to dance appears simple: to dance, learn steps; the more steps you know, the better dancer you are. Hogwash! If this were the case, ballrooms would be packed with dancing Lippizanners. You can learn to execute all the technical steps known to the dancing world but still not know how to dance.

Would a master builder, immediately after framing a house, show an apprentice how to hang the exterior doors, letting the apprentice think he then knew how to build a house? Would hanging those doors convince the apprentice that he was now ready to go out and build a house? Sure, doors are important but not in the beginning. Why, then, build a dancer in a way that we would never build a house?

The answer is willingness. Many people come with unrealistic expectations, asking to learn how to dance, willing, even, to work doggedly at what, for some, may be futile. "Can't dance? I'll take lessons. Anybody can learn steps, right?" When we want something badly, human nature sniffs out shortcuts.

Anyone who has watched people dance has seen good dancers who never had a lesson. How do they do it? Anyone who has watched people dance can also spot those who shout "Dance Lessons" by the performance of their steps, yet who look terrible on the floor. Why don't they have it? They don't because walking into a studio and taking a certain number of lessons

does not guarantee becoming a dancer.

Leaving that dust to settle for now, let's get back to your dream.

To be a dancer, to know how to dance, just two things are essential: you have to have a feeling for music, and you have to be able to move to what you feel. I repeat: **YOU HAVE TO HAVE A FEELING FOR MUSIC. YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO MOVE TO WHAT YOU FEEL.** Anything else, everything else is secondary. Or tertiary. At best.

The first point is an open-and-shut issue. Either you have a feeling for music or you don't. For some, a modest paraphrase of Gertrude Stein describes how they respond to music: "There ain't no response. There ain't going to be any response. There never has been a response. That's the response." Well then, that seems to settle the issue for those respondents, doesn't it!

Chances are you already know if music moves you, but, if not, a few simple questions will tell you. Question 1: Does the music of Tex Ritter, Leonard Bernstein, Spike Jones, the Electric Sixtraps, and Guy Lombardo all sound pretty much the same to you? Question 2: When you are home alone, does even the thought of listening to music grate on your nerves? Question 3: If you go to a dance, do your thoughts repeatedly and naturally flow to things like whether or not you'll be getting a refund on your income tax next year? Question 4: Does operating the remote control on the television satisfy

your urge for movement? If the answer to any of these questions is even close to yes, forget dancing.

Face it. Dancing isn't for everyone, no matter what the motivation or determination. People who don't have a feeling for words can't write; people who don't have a feeling for music can't dance.

Most likely you'll have to make this decision for yourself. Can you imagine a dance teacher saying to you, "Please don't come back. You're impossible as a dancer. If you stick around here, even I'll forget how to dance. Here, I'll pay you to stay away!" Nor can too many dancing partners be counted on to have the good-natured tact of the woman who encouraged her husband, "Waltz a little faster, darling, this is a cha cha."

Okay. You're not one of the above. You're a toe-tapping, finger-snapping, music-loving person who wants to dance. You know what it means to feel music. You know that feeling where music gets inside you and takes over, where everything else is shut out, where you don't even realize you're smiling and swaying, where you and the music are completely together, where nothing in this world touches you, transports you, moves you like music.

All you have to do to start dancing is move to that feeling. Just move to the feeling. You can learn to do this in two steps; three, if you want spit and shine.

Step One: move freely. Read this: move FREELY. If you think this happens by itself and can be taken for granted, you're right. In children. Not in adults. Men and women are notoriously inhibited in their movements, on and off the dance floor. We worry that we might reveal something by our movement. Of course we will--our "self". I, for example, wiggled, slid, and tapped my way past a background of strict, Germanic, convent training until I finally came back to a long-forgotten but familiar, toothy tomboy--myself.

Check yourself. Think of the last time you really "let it all hang out"--arms flailing, hips swaying, shoulders circling, head bobbing, knees bending, feet flying--all by yourself just for the fun of it! Ray Bolger, the Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz, knew how to do it. Next, when is the last time, being conscious and without being bribed, you moved like this in front of an audience!

Lost a few of you, did we?

I'm not suggesting this is how you should dance the next waltz in a ballroom. I'm talking about an attitude that you bring to learning to dance, one expressed in Thomas Edison's purposefully free-spirited, "There ain't no rules around here! We're trying to accomplish something."

While music inwardly moves many people, few, by comparison, express that feeling in their dancing. Which means there is a lot of pent-up musical feeling on the dance floor, which doesn't make much sense. Think

of it this way: it's much easier to cool down a live wire than it is to raise the dead.

You can practice moving freely at home. No costs, lots of laughs. You don't even need music. Just move in every imaginable way: wide steps, high steps, long flowing steps, short skippy hops, forward, backward, to the left, to the right, feet together, feet apart, feet crossed, quickly, slowly. The rest of your body will get the idea. Along about here you'll figure out why Mary Pettibone Poole's notion that "he who laughs, lasts," fits dancers so well!

Instead of getting stuck in movement patterns, create variety. Forget about what you've seen or what you're used to doing. Try to ignore all the "should" and "should nots," the "can" and "cannots." You can use the lines from two great songs, "Let yourself go" and "Anything goes," to guide you.

If at first you feel awkward and embarrassed, all right, but wean yourself from those overrated feelings. They'll keep you from being the best dancer you can be. What's the worst thing that can happen on the dance floor? Don't pride yourself into thinking that you'll look worse than everybody else out there. Indira Gandhi's admonition, "You're not that great," is worth remembering. What's the best thing that can happen? Half of the people on the floor will wish they were dancing with you, while the other half will wish they were you. Either way, you're in the winner's circle!

Learning to move freely takes time. Three boogies around your living

room floor won't do. We're talking weeks, months. Be an opportunist; practice every day. You can dance in front of a mirror, for your long-suffering pets, on your way to the mailbox. I have been dancing to an imaginary audience I see in my living room mirror ever since I was in elementary school. I still dance for this audience. Vary your music from classical to polka to latin to folk to marches--anything that'll get you moving.

Learning to move freely, like learning to eat properly, is habit-forming. Health-conscious people know that using diets in a succession of sporadic, on-demand, quick-fixes doesn't work. Dancing, like healthy eating, involves permanent practice, a committed attitude, a lifestyle. The goal is learning new ways to move until free movement is part of your mind and body.

If you practice the next step as wholeheartedly as you practice moving freely, you will be ready for the dance floor. Until then, you will be only a half-baked dancer, hot on the edges but raw inside.

Step Two: listen to the man. This means move to the beat of the music. In a word: timing. The "man" is the band as a whole or an individual instrument or musician. Even the loosest goose in the world isn't going to be a dancer unless he/she is in time with the music. Ballerina Natalia Makarova's words are right on target for ballroom dancers, "Even the ears must dance." Dancing to the beat of the music is like singing in tune. If there is some foundation, timing, like pitch, can be cultivated. Even people with

the most offbeat lives can feel the rhythm to dance.

The first two suggestions for listening to the man can be practiced with or without a partner. The third suggestion is for those times when you will be with a partner.

While all music might be equal, some is more equal than others because it has a stronger, more pronounced, easier-to-follow beat. For some people, the three-count rhythm of the waltz, with its strong initial beat, works well for practice. Even better, for my money, is the polka. Although the waltz and the polka have similar rhythms, they ring in the ears like chimes and gongs respectively. A friend of mine says that a person who can't feel the polka beat is probably dead and just hasn't been informed yet by his next of kin.

Another way of practicing timing also has to do with listening. Whether you pick the band as a whole or an individual musician or instrument, listen for what helps you the most to hear the beat. For many dancers, it is listening to the drummer; for others, it is the bass. Some people hear the pianist most clearly, while others hear the overall rhythm of the entire band. Try each and find what works best for you. The result will be similar to that of the person described by William Wordsworth whose "very soul listened intently; and his countenance soon brightened with joy; for from within were heard murmurings. . ."

Listening to the man is so important, according to one dance critic, that it alone never yields to other considerations. Be out of step with your partner, forego style for the moment, interrupt your flow on the dance floor, but keep listening to the man!

Back in the early 20s, no less a dancing authority than Arthur Murray paid timing this sweeping accolade, "You cannot develop your sense of rhythm without developing your brain and your powers of culture and refinement. With a developed sense of rhythm comes a more beautiful appreciation of music and the finer things of life." That's quite a sale's pitch!

One final, blunt suggestion for developing timing: shut up. When you and a partner are on the dance floor, both of you, shut up! You cannot concentrate on the music, you cannot let it move you, you cannot listen to the rhythm if, at the same time, you are discussing grandchildren, foreign imports, eating out, or game scores.

When people get involved in a movie, do they talk during it? When people are caught up in any type of performance, do they visit casually during it? Why, then, do dancers talk when they are dancing? I know, I know! A lot of people dance to socialize. As far as I'm concerned, that's what the tables and chairs around the dance floor are for. I like dancing with a singer because at least I know he's aware of the music, but I hate to dance with a chattering magpie.

In our years of dancing together, my partner and I have never spoken on the dance floor unless it related directly to the music or our dancing. Our smiling and laughing come from enjoyment of the music, not from asinine conversations. We save those for when we're back at the table.

Here then is a dancer: a person moved by music who has learned, while moving freely, to listen to the man. What about steps? The particular steps you use to move to the music are far less important than that you move in time to the music.

A partner who is moving in time will be able to dance with you, even though the two of you may be doing somewhat different steps. If you are both in time with the music, you will almost subconsciously fall into sync with each other's particular movements. This is where leading and following come into play, too. In short, you will be compatible as dancers because you are both in time. This is why many men and women who have never had a dance lesson dance well.

For four years my partner and I have practiced little more than timing. People find it hard to believe that we know probably no more than a dozen dance steps. With timing and some daring, we turn those few steps into endless combinations of fancy-pants dancing. The magic, or what Cecil Day-Lewis called "the certainty of power," is in our timing.

If you must have steps, the cherry on the banana split, here is where

you might consider going to the dance studio for lessons. Much like finishing off a home's interior with accessories, steps come, as I told you in the beginning, at the very end of the dancing process. Giving them their due, they are a convenience, a social convention. Besides offering confidence to some dancers, steps add finesse to movement. They are also a way for the serious dancer, the one for whom dancing is more than a pastime, to further his/her ability.

The band is playing a hot rhumba. Would you rather worry about how to do the side step, the quarter turn, the break, the crossover--or worry about the dream-come-true evening ending all too soon? It isn't prescribed steps that are essential for successful dancing. A feeling for music is, moving freely is, timing is!

How to Exhibit

When we want to sing, we sing
When we want to dance, we dance,
Do your betting, we are getting
Some fun out of life!

Jack Lemmon

This is not an X-rated essay. My mother has read it and approved. This is about dancing. The name "ballroom dancing" is too general because almost everyone has his own idea of what the term means. To some, it is waltzes, Vienna, Strauss, gowns and tails. To others, it is what fogeys over forty, including parents and grandparents, do. To a few, it is the best part of their lives, the essence of what keeps them alive and young.

Actually, there are three distinct types of ballroom dancing: social, competitive, and exhibition. Social ballroom dancing is what couples do on a Saturday night when they say to one another, "Hon, get dressed and let's go out dancing tonight." Learning to dance socially can be done on one's own or with anyone who's willing to teach. Some social dancers go through life winging it on the dance floor, where socializing is often on equal footing with the dancing. Many people are crazy about this kind of dancing.

Thanks to television, competitive ballroom dancing is becoming familiar to people who, a few years ago, were more acquainted with garden shows and tractor pulls. Competitive dancers are fanatical about executing

dance steps strictly according to the book, with perfect form, and more accurately than anyone else on the floor. Winning is the goal. My dancing partner once remarked to a competitive dancer, "I have the highest admiration for you people for going through all that work to get the steps and everything just right. That's why my partner and I are interested in exhibition dancing; we can get by with murder there." The woman's stiff-lipped reply was, "That's true." Only a few people are crazy about putting the necessary time and hard work into this kind of dancing.

For people who like to pull out all the stops, nothing beats exhibition ballroom dancing. It's showoff dancing; it's "Hey, look, Ma, no hands!" dancing. Exhibition uses some of the social aspects of ballroom dancing because having an audience is part of the fun. It also requires the dedication and discipline of competitive ballroom dancing. Anyone who wants to can learn to do exhibition dancing, but, to their credit, very few people are crazy enough to want to get involved in it.

I got involved in exhibition ballroom dancing a couple of years ago. I was your typical mouse living under a rock when a redhead in dancing shoes came along and kicked the rock aside. The next thing I knew I was practicing exhibition dancing.

Whether you decide to be sensible and watch exhibition dancing, or go out in the deep and do it yourself, the key ingredients are appearance, ability,

and attitude.

Because exhibition dancing is a total look, dress and style are important. You might get by dancing up a storm in work clothes, and you might get by dressing to the teeth and shuffling around, but probably not. Dress enhances dancing. Since the point of exhibition is to entertain creatively, appearance is what first catches the audience's eye.

Our dance teachers, Lloyd and Helen, always wear matching colors when they dance, colors that cover the entire spectrum. My dancing partner, McCoy, and I find that wearing any combination of black and white draws attention.

Each exhibiting couple develops its own style. Charlotte Hess, in The Joy of Dancing, talks about the source of style: ". . . it is the personal expression of rhythm that gives style to the individual dancer. The rhythm of the music should stimulate the movement of the body and encourage this expression." It is crucial that the style fits the couple; if it doesn't, the audience will sense an intangible incongruity. Our style, which appears to work, is one of playful elegance. Usually, looking across a ballroom floor, no one couple catches a viewer's eye for more than a moment, if at all. That's because most people don't want to exhibit their dancing. But we most certainly do!

Instead of dancing straight and parallel to each other, we signal

exhibition by our posture. I lean slightly backwards with my head turned to the left until I am looking just past my partner's ear. In addition to beauty and flair, this position has an "Oh, this is so easy and so much fun" look about it. Exhibition, when necessary, is also the fine art of make believe.

Our aim is to present each other in the dance. McCoy does his part by looking at me with such charm and fascination that every woman in the room envies me. I, for my part, accept this attention in such a way that every man in the room envies him. We are both, by the way, marvelous actors. If you saw us, you would think he was completely smitten by the combination of the music and me. Don't let that look on his face fool you! He knows exactly what he's doing; he's directing every move; and he knows exactly what impression we are making.

When everything is clicking, we draw the audience right into our aura. We know that people are dancing with us, as it were, when we see them at their tables leaning toward us, watching, and smiling. Our audience reflects back the same soft look we are presenting in our dancing. Style showcases the chemistry that makes a dancing team look attractive and entertaining to people who have the pleasure of watching them.

A subtle part of our styling has to do with pretending one thing while achieving something else. Simply put, we pretend to be totally oblivious to our audience. Strangely enough, this has the paradoxical effect of making the

audience watch us. We dance in such a way that we appear to be children in a sandbox who are playing, fantasizing, talking to each other, unaware the whole time that their mother is watching at the window and enjoying the pleasure of her children.

Sometimes people are disillusioned to learn that dancers see a lot more that's going on around them than it looks like they do. Exhibition dancers are experts at this. While McCoy, for example, cannot find his coat on the rack when it's time to leave, even though there are only three coats hanging there, he can, nevertheless, spot someone watching us two rows back on the opposite side of the room while we are in the middle of a spin. It's important for exhibition dancers to be able to find their particular audience in the crowd.

We learned something about how to exhibit from watching two pairs of popular dancers, or, more exactly in one case, from watching what not to do. True, Bobby and Sissy from the Lawrence Welk show are exhibition dancers. The problem? They act like it. They constantly dance with their faces turned toward the audience and the cameras, grinning like a pair of very visible Cheshire cats. They might as well shout, "Hey, everybody, look at us. Aren't we great!" The audience is so busy mentally hissing at their apparent arrogance that they can't appreciate the fine dancing in front of them.

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, on the other hand, do it right. They rarely ever look at their audience. They're good sandpile players. Having

watched eight of the ten movies they made together, time after time, we see them repeatedly looking at the floor or their immediate surroundings or at each other. People love to watch them dancing together because they draw the viewer into their circle by concentrating on each other.

We have been scolded hundreds of times by our instructor, "Quit looking at each other. You shouldn't be looking into each other's face like that!" We keep doing it, though, because we know what it's like for the Astaire-Rogers magic to come through to its audience.

When we dance engrossed in one another and the music, we feel the same kind of closeness with our audience that Astaire and Rogers did. Men and women stop us to say, "I wish I could dance like you do." In a way, for the moment they are watching us, they can.

If appearance is the advertising, ability makes the sale in exhibition dancing. McCoy says we should think of ourselves as oatmeal. The product, he says, sells itself for Quaker Oats. (There are times when I'd like to sell him to Quaker Oats.) Being good at exhibition dancing is partly loving to dance and partly finding two people who hear music in the same way. Mostly, though, it's wanting to have fun being creative on the dance floor.

We reject the notion that certain steps must be done to certain dances: waltz steps to waltzes, cha cha steps to cha chas, polka steps to polkas. We think of steps as an infinite pool from which to choose. Any steps can be

used in any imaginable combination to music. While I love Latin music, McCoy doesn't know many so-called Latin steps. Actually I think he goes out of his way to NOT learn them. That hasn't stopped us from dancing every Latin tune that's played. We have never done the rumba the same way twice, nor the samba, nor the cha cha. After dancing the polka to the cha cha, however, we have more than once been asked if we're dance instructors. Good bluffers make anything look convincing, and we are very convincing!

Creativity means not getting locked into anything: not steps, not styles, not moves. It means reacting to music in a free and personal way. It also means being willing to make a fool of yourself. Theodore Edward Hook who said, "The greater the fool, the better the dancer," wasn't kidding!

Speaking of fools, every morning at 5:15 I get out of bed, get down on my hands and knees, and crawl from the bedroom out into the living room, over to the sofa, and then over the sofa, around the sides, over the cushions, across the back, over the other side. The whole time I am making faces and noises like a monkey.

I practice this monkey business because, first of all, I am dancing with McCoy, a not very well disguised monkey. Secondly, I want to do this without being embarrassed even at the thought of somebody seeing me do it. I'm told that nothing we are ever likely to do on the dance floor will be this extreme; in fact, by comparison, anything we do will seem tame. I know

enough about exhibition, not to mention McCoy, to take that with a grain of salt!

In dance, creativity is essential; it has no substitute. The dance floor is where I spotlight all the prisms of my personality: the dramatic, the playful, the alluring, the daring, the foolish, the tender, the tough. I suspect even Nietzsche appreciated the importance of creativity in dance when he said, "I would believe only in a God that knows how to dance." Same here!

I have the dubious advantage of dancing with a creative screwball who will do anything for a laugh or attention. We practice in public as well as in the studio, and nothing is left unrehearsed. Nothing. I try not to think about what people are thinking when they watch us practice making an entrance from the table to the dance floor, back to our table, back onto the dance floor-- five or six times before we actually begin dancing.

There is the matter of making a stylish entrance, the matter of stepping out with the right foot to go smoothly from walking into dancing, the matter of smiling, the matter of picking up the beat immediately, and, yes, eventually, the matter of doing it just for the comic effect. The harder I try, the more he exaggerates the look of infinite patience on his face, tossing in a stage whispered, "She hasn't made a mistake yet, but she will," to a laughing audience.

Practicing or not, the first dance of the evening always has two

entrances because McCoy always forgets to unload his keys. I know that a lot of people wear their keys on a key ring, but his is more like an anchor. There are probably 75 keys on it since McCoy never throws away anything. I bet he has the key to his high school gym locker, the key to his Navy foot locker, and the keys to every car he has ever driven on that chain. The key de resistance, though, is the scalloped soup spoon. The handle, he explains, works great at unlocking something or other.

It's bad enough that he clangs and bangs his way onto the dance floor with this collection of keys attached to his waist and then can't leave port because he's so weighted down. But he also forgets to take off the rain rubbers he wears over his dancing shoes. So by the time he goes through these maneuvers, we've usually missed the first set of numbers. By then, though, you can bet we've got an audience for the evening.

Because there is a dark side to the dancing moon, attitude is everything. I don't mean loving to dance or wanting to entertain. A dancer who doesn't have those has already swum out way too far and left his life jacket on shore. Sometime, sooner or later, inevitably, exhibition dancers will face rejection. McCoy and I haven't yet because we haven't done any solo exhibiting. We've only danced in with the crowd or during intermissions so far. We often talk about that time when we will have to deal with rejection. It might be the wrong routine, the wrong audience, the

wrong band, a convention of monkey-haters, or nothing we can blame.

In his autobiography, Fred Astaire, the greatest of all exhibition dancers, reacts this way to rejection, "Life is not pleasant when you're in a flop. You are hesitant to go anyplace. . . Flops are bad enough when they are not too prominent, but this one [a Broadway stage show with his sister, Adele] stood away out. . . We were, of course, upset by this failure." This happened after they had been dancing together for more than a dozen years!

The final and most important word on exhibition dancing is this: do it for yourself, do it because you love it. With this attitude, the rejections can eventually be put into perspective with, "So what! I still had fun doing it and I'm going to do it some more." Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers sang about this in Swing Time: "Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again!"

While it's true that every facet of exhibition ballroom dancing is planned and rehearsed--every routine, every gesture, every expression--at the same time the impossible is made to look effortless, that does not mean that what is seen is not real. Whatever the specific mood, the romance or the clowning or the elegance is genuinely felt at the time because a passion for doing it all is inside one. The make-believe is real while the music is playing. I like to think the audience feels the same way.

Now you know what exhibition ballroom dancing is all about: finding

an equally crazy partner, dressing the part, creating your own style, winning the audience by acting unaware of them, reacting personally and creatively to the music, facing rejection, and doing it all for your own pleasure.

Now you know what to watch for. Now you know what to do. If you have any questions, give "The Carrot and The Blond" a call. We'd love to show off for you!

Dance Me a Little Something about Yourself

Nothing is more revealing than movement.
Martha Graham

When I want to know what a person is like, I watch him/her dance. Although my observations may not add up to scientific proof, to me they are foolproof, i.e., proof enough for this fool. I learn about a person's attitude toward life by the way he dances.

Dancing, more than any other activity in which I've engaged, reveals the basic person. Watching people is inexpensive entertainment; doing it in the context of dancing is, to me, irresistible. The car, the job, the talk, the clothing, the house, the appearance--all these might fool people, but not the way a person dances.

I've danced with clingers and comedians, with the shy and the shyster, with impostors and innovators, with the driven and the dead. I've watched dancers who were regal, dancers who did their best to blend into the ballroom wax, dancers who heard music that no one else did. George Bernard Shaw's claim that "dancing is a very crude attempt to get into the rhythm of life" is demonstrated, evening after evening, on dance floors.

Francis loved to waltz. He did it only in a circle. One, two, three, one,

two, three, circle, two, three, circle, two, three. Relentlessly. Nothing but circles. After the first set of waltzes, trying hard to focus, he predicted dismally, "I'll bet the next set's going to be even faster." It was. We, of course, did the gamely thing; we did our three-count circles even faster. It was quite a challenge. Onetwothreeonetwothreecircletwothreecircletwothree.

Somewhere in the middle of that set he confided, "I know there's a way to get out of these circles and go in a straight line. I just don't know what it is." I had picked up on that. The third set of waltzes was Viennese, the fastest waltz of all. Ontwthreeontwthreecircletwothreecircletwothree. We were holding each other up and together by sheer momentum. The centrifugal pull was so strong that, if either of us had relaxed our grip or slowed the pace, one or both of us would have flown across the floor and hit a wall of the ballroom.

By the time the music stopped, we had no idea whether we were facing the bandstand or the exit, whether we were standing reasonably upright or not, or where the table was. Francis said he loved waltzing with me, and would I save him another set.

Life is a constant attempt at balance; nowhere is this more evident than in dancing. In contrast to Francis, the Whirling Dervish, Dick, a writer, didn't move. At all. While the other dancers circled us and the ballroom several times, we moved less than six inches. For some reason he preferred hovering

over his partner with undue solicitude rather than moving with the line of dance. I shouldn't have expected a lot of action, though. Dick's loosely-hinged hand almost fell into my lap when I first shook it. This man was not material for the shakers-and-movers club.

Not long ago, I danced with a former high school classmate. The last time we had danced together was decades ago. He was still dancing the exact same two steps that he had then: a fun, fancy-footed swing for the fast numbers, and two steps to the side and one back for the slow numbers. He was again squeezing my waist as we walked to the dance floor, again looking soulfully at me during the slow numbers. It was clear he hoped nothing had changed. He was not reliving the past; he was living in the past.

I might have last danced with him days ago rather than decades ago, it was all so familiar. Since the band that played was formed during our high school years, they played music from those sock-hop days: "Only the Lonely," "At the Hop," "Wake Up Little Susie," "Save the Last Dance for Me." Glorious, rampant nostalgia. The difference was that for some the evening was reminiscent of a wonderful time in the past, while to my classmate it was a time from which he was reluctant to move.

What holds Francis in his circles, Dick to his spot, and my classmate in his time warp? I don't know. The point is, their dancing tells something about them as people. Dancers who are locked into certain movements are

people who are locked into a way of thinking, or acting, or dressing, or feeling, or believing, or reacting, or judging. They have let themselves get stuck somewhere in life just as they get stuck in circles or spots or steps on the dance floor.

Robert, the photographer, on the other hand, invented his own step called "Robert's Reversal." When everybody else goes forward in the line of dance, he suddenly switches and does a snazzy backward move for a couple of steps, and always when his partner least expects it. Robert's not likely to get stuck because he feels free to do his own thing while dancing.

He's also the humorist who sent me a postcard showing a mouse pulling a cake and luring a cat around a corner where three chop-licking dogs waited under a sign saying "Big Juicy Cats \$5." On the postcard he wrote, "It's safe to come dancing at Peony Park on Friday." I went, of course!

The most elegant dancers I know are Lloyd and Helen, who have been dancing together for fifty years. Lloyd was my first dancing teacher. Helen, his wife, teaches my dancing partner, McCoy, and me. Everytime they dance in the ballroom at Peony Park, it is worth the price of admission just to watch them. They always dress in beautiful matching outfits, which Helen makes--red one week, black the next, then gold, etc. They skim across the floor, elevating dance to the art of levitation.

Lloyd often tells stories of people who see them do a dance, such as the

shadow waltz, and immediately attempt to imitate them, only to discover the secret of dancing: good dancers make something requiring a great deal of practice look easily accessible to everybody. In this, dancers are like all accomplished athletes. The Jordans, Nicklauses, and Beckers of the world make the difficult look not only easy but inevitable. I can't ever remember a time when I went to a lesson that Lloyd wasn't in the studio practicing by himself in front of the mirrors as I arrived.

Dance instructor Charlotte Hess reveals the secret behind this beautiful deception, "Movement must never look like hard work; it should be produced from within, so that no effort is apparent. Mind and body work together." This is the magic that raises movement of any kind, but especially dancing, into the realm of art.

To Lloyd and Helen, dance should always be aesthetic looking. If the music does not inspire aesthetic movement, they prefer to sit out that number. Helen not only knows every gesture of elegance--every hand movement, every head turn, every facial expression--she also practices everything she knows, making it look for all the world as if she were born that graceful. Maybe she was.

This couple would no more act foolishly on the dance floor than Queen Elizabeth II would at a state function. With rare exceptions, they don't approve of others' monkeyshines in a ballroom, either. This makes McCoy

and me a nut and bolt in the jewelled crown when we get out on the dance floor and disregard their rules about how to dance.

One night we got beautifully dressed and did everything from scuttling sideways down the dance floor, to running backwards, to making faces. We got a lot of positive reaction from other dancers, had a ball, and came away feeling like happy clowns. When we got to the studio for our next lesson though, we were greeted with, "Don't ever do that again. The two of you looked terrible. That was just awful. You should have been ashamed to act like that." We weren't, but we put on our best contrite-clown faces and paid attention.

Although we certainly didn't intend for our lively dancing to embarrass our instructors, it did. They felt that when we rubbed eggs all over our faces, some of them splashed onto their faces. Not at all. Whereas McCoy takes full credit for our tomfoolery, we give our instructors full credit for teaching us everything they know. They cannot teach us how to play on the ballroom floor, though, because they don't do it and don't like it.

Many people feel the same way. Personally, I like Edwin Darby's idea that "there is a bit of insanity in dancing that does everybody a great deal of good." A dance floor is as good a place as any I know on which to let out a little insanity.

McCoy often tells me, "Teachers and mentors can take you only as far

as they themselves have been. Or as far as they want to take you. Or as far as they want you to go. Or as far as they think you should go. They won't take you where their beliefs won't allow them to go. If they are free and open-minded, they might point you in new, unexplored areas but don't count on it. In the end, where you go and what you do is up to you." This, like so much else, applies to how people live as well as to how they dance.

I've seen the sense of restriction carried a step further. A couple I know is accomplished in many, many dance steps. They always look striking in tux and cocktail dress. They dance well together. But they are as stiff and as boring to watch as mannequins must be to ventriloquists' dummies. Because they would not dream of deliberately making fools of themselves on the dance floor, they go out of their way to be sure it doesn't happen accidentally, either.

Believing that it is their refinement and reserve that has brought them kudos, they staunchly refuse to budge from that image, or to do anything that they feel might jeopardize it. That, for them, eliminates the possibility of dancing the polka. Or adding hand movements that go along with the music and the dancing. Or doing any but the carefully learned from-the-book steps. Dancing with them is a session in steps, "Do you know this step?" "No." "I'll show you." "Do you know this step. . ." It gets to be like some zealot pointing out each individual leaf on a tree. After a while one yearns simply to enjoy

the tree as a whole.

In one of his movies, Fred Astaire's character says ingratiatingly to the receptionist of a dance studio, "To know how to dance is to know how to control oneself." Some people mistakenly think this means squeezing all the life and personality out of dancing and the dancer. Calling it "propriety," they equate control with a crushing inhibition and restraint. If we held this attitude up to the light, bent on finding out with Artemus Ward, "Why is this thus? What is the reason of this thusness?" my guess is that we would find some misunderstanding afoot.

Look at Astaire. If ever a human being's dancing had the look of all-out abandon, his did. Yet it was precisely that--a look. He knew exactly what he was doing. He was not abandoning control; he was dancing with controlled abandon. The difference is crucial.

What happens that so many adults no longer consider music a playmate? Give children music and watch them. Do they care how they look when they move? Do they care if anybody is looking at them? They aren't calculating the steps: box, diagonal, left turn, right turn. If we watch the faces and bodies of children, we see the music is inside them. It is moving the children. A child isn't selective about what he dances to; any music can move him to dance. Without realizing it, a child feels free to move freely.

Only adults say, "John Philip Sousa is for listening to, not dancing to."

A child jumps up and marches to Sousa without being shown how to march. Adults are quick to say, "I can't dance to that; I don't know the steps." Not knowing so-called steps never stops children from dancing. They're still doing "what comes naturally." Perhaps the "I can't; I don't know how" attitude overflows so easily into dancing because it continually runs so near the banks in the rest of living.

Lounge lizards are a special breed of dancers. They seek out small, crowded, smokey, low-lighted, low-ceilinged places in which to dance. Because they prefer talking, drinking, or watching, these people only dabble at dancing. They enjoy the music primarily as background to their socializing. An evening out, a change of routine, some ready-made entertainment is what they are after. The lounges, with their pseudo-intimacy, are ideal resting places for these passive spectators of dancing and living.

A serious dancer in a lounge is probably a serious socializer as well. People who like to dance more than anything else have to have room to move. Serious dancers would no more go to a lounge to dance than serious golfers would go to a putt-putt course to practice.

Henry David Thoreau's famous lines, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away," are sometimes quoted without scrutiny. Having seen a quite literal

demonstration of these lines on the dance floor raised questions in my mind about whether Thoreau really knew what he was suggesting.

The couple I was watching had obviously had many hours of lessons. Their every movement tattled, "Dance Lessons!" When I talked to them later in the evening about dancing, I didn't understand a word they were saying; their conversation was so abstrusely and uninspiringly technical. I wondered how many years they had taken lessons to get into such technical terms and ideas. Even more, I wondered why they had twisted dancing into such sterile science. They dressed handsomely. They moved all over the floor and they moved together. But not once in the entire evening did they come even remotely close to moving with the music.

Watching them made me wonder if I was really seeing what I thought I was. This happens to me in drive-through car washes. The minute the brushes start coming toward and around the car, I am convinced the car has started moving. I can't believe it's the brushes, not the car and myself, that are moving. I double and triple-check to be sure the gear is in park, I stomp down on the brake every couple of seconds, I try to look through the water for a reliable object on which to fix my eye. No matter what, I still feel as if the car, instead of the brushes, is moving.

I had a similar sensation watching this couple. Was it possible that they were, in fact, moving out of sync to every other couple and, more

importantly, out of sync to the music, or was I imagining it? After watching them dance several different times in different ballrooms, it became clear that they did, indeed, hear their own drummer.

So did Arizona. He was undoubtedly the wildest dancer I was ever with on a dance floor. The man was a human hurricane. He began the evening dancing with his wife. When she couldn't go any more, slumped in her chair, panting, disheveled, frazzled, and waving him away, he'd ask me to dance. He'd get a glint in his eye, a grin on his face, and take off, plowing ecstatically through the crowd. He loved any fast music, but especially polkas. I don't remember us ever mowing anybody down; maybe it happened too fast. Then, too, it doesn't take people long to clear a path when a whirlwind is loose on the dance floor. Arizona wasn't somebody you could dance with too long, but, while you were on your feet, woowweeeeeee, what an experience!

Some people cannot escape their cages even on the dance floor. Other people cannot pull themselves into any kind of form even on the dance floor. Dancer/choreographer Ted Shawn says dance is "the only art of which we ourselves are the stuff of which it is made." We dance the way we are.

Extremes of neither inhibition nor unruliness hold much promise for becoming a great dancer or a well-adjusted human being. If one is going to lean in one direction, however, I would, in both instances, encourage leaning

toward unruliness. Behind the audacity of Stewart's Law of Retroaction, "It is easier to get forgiveness than permission," lies a necessary freedom. Dancers who show an ability to stay lighthearted, to keep a sense of abandon, to continue playing are in an enviable Catch 22: they are happy because they are dancing while at the same time they are dancing because they are happy.

If observation alone does not prove my theory that dancing reveals the person, experience does. My partner's dancing has been flatteringly described as "unconventional," a bull's-eye description of the man himself. Fred Astaire's closing words in his autobiography could be my partner's own:

I wanted to do all my dancing my own way, in a sort of outlaw style. I always resented being told that I couldn't point my toe in, or some other such rule. I felt at the beginning that there should be no restrictions. . . I felt that I was going to become a musical-comedy performer or bust and this meant that there should be no limitations.

Although he has had years of dancing lessons, McCoy is a self-taught dancer. He listens to and watches what every teacher has to offer, then picks and rejects according to what he is after. He compares this process to the cattle buying business. The buyer knows what he's looking for. With a glance, he takes or rejects the livestock before him. No school of dance can claim McCoy; no teacher can claim him. (Not that they would want to.) He is his own--person and dancer.

Working out a dance, move by move, is simple compared to the labor of becoming a dancer. In my experience, it doesn't happen little by little.

Instead, I work at some facet of dancing over and over and over and seem to get nowhere. The limits of trust, perseverance, and discipline are strained, and then, suddenly, there it is. Soon, the cycle starts all over again. A lot like life, I think.

The best part of dancing is whatever I am doing at the moment. It's the part that's happening right now. Some dancers live for the competitions or the shows. All their work is anticipatory. They lose the pleasure of the process. If their brief moment in the spotlight fizzles, then everything is considered in vain. Not so. The journey is neither separate from nor less important than the destination.

I get just as much pleasure from working, sweating, swearing, repeating, and thinking in the studio as I do out of displaying the results of that effort on a ballroom floor. What I do long-range with my dancing isn't particularly important. The best part is what's happening right now. I feel the same way about life.

With good reason, airports, parks, and stadiums are favorite hangouts for people-watchers. At the top of that list of places, however, I would put dance floors because "getting to know you, getting to know all about you" isn't always as easy as singing about it. The most reliable way is to have that moving experience, to watch a person dance. Not all autobiographies are written. The best ones are danced.

Ooo La La Loo

The way [he] believes in himself is very refreshing in these atheistic days when so many believe in no God at all.

Israel Zangwill

Certain people are incapable of solid objectivity. Either they think of themselves as Christlike saints, which they seldom are, or they avoid any hint of normalcy, which they never have anyway. My dancing partner is of the latter ilk. Thus, naturally, it falls to me to present a detached and impersonal tribute to him, one that will, I trust, do him justice.

Lloyd, my ballroom dancing instructor, walked me down the long rows of tables at Peony Park Ballroom. Explaining that the man I was about to meet was, like me, looking for a dancing partner, Lloyd was careful in describing him. "This man has been dancing for years and years. He's looking for a partner who will dance his way. Of course he has his ways, but don't worry, you'll get used to him." Right there I should have seen the red flag blowing and gone home, but the warning was wasted on me.

There, hiding behind a column so no one would ask him to dance, was the man who would become my mentor, another Professor Henry Higgins. Red-haired, smiling, mild-mannered, the picture of placidity. Outwardly. Inside, this man was Mt. Vesuvius, the atom bomb. His creativity as a dancer

was dynamite set to explode and I was going to be the igniting spark! When he looked at me, he must have seen an innocent, unsuspecting protegee. When I looked at him, I should have remembered with Hamlet that "the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape."

It was a cataclysmic meeting of improbables. I was a dumpy, middle-aged, boring broad with bad breath, who couldn't dance, he later explained in his delicate way; and he, to my insightful eye, was an arrogant, hard-boiled, loudmouthed know-it-all, who just happened to trip artistically over his size thirteen feet. How the relationship ever survived the first meeting, I'll never know. Clearly, we both liked a challenge!

A week after meeting, we started dancing lessons together. Basic training would be closer to the truth. This man operates on the peculiar notion that becoming a dancer is a military experience and should be conducted that way. So he addresses me by my last name when he's trying to be polite, and by something more pungent the rest of the time. "Once we open the door into the studio," he reminds me regularly, "you and I are strangers. You are a lowly private; I am your drill sergeant. Understand?"

If I'm dying for a drink of water, he says I am wasting valuable time, but hurry up if I have to have some. If I'm panting, he complains that I am out of shape and need to build up more stamina. If I admit to being tired, I am a weakling; if I deny being tired, I am a liar. When I do rest for a

moment, he spends the time conspicuously barnstorming around the dance floor. During this exhibition he calls out, "I'm ready whenever you are!"

He unveils the working arrangement: only he knows what is right or wrong about our dancing, only he makes the decisions, only he chooses the music, and only I get the flak. A typical lesson begins, "Well, Dummy, do you think you can do anything right tonight?"

We arrive at least fifteen minutes before the lessons begin for, what I call, testing of the systems. While we wait for the couple ahead of us to finish their lesson, Cannon-Mouth starts firing : "I don't know what we're going to do about you. You've just got to come to life. We're never going to get anywhere if you keep on like this. I can't see any kind of progress. You come in here dead and dance like you're just waiting for somebody to get around to burying you! At this rate, we'll be here doing these same things ten years from now. I want to see some energy, some life! Build up some strength! You wear out halfway through the lesson; the second half is just a waste. Did you get a nap today? Did you eat energy food today? For once, let me see you put some effort into this!" He prides himself on this boot camp motivation.

The lessons aren't about "steps." The lessons are about what it takes to become a dancer. He drills me hour after hour after hour on keeping a firm upper body, but with flexible arms; on dancing with soft knees; on turning from the hips instead of from the shoulders; on making the length of the side

steps equal the length of the forward and backward steps; on reaching out with the legs; on using insteps and ankles and knees to roll the steps over; on listening to the beat of the music, or, as he puts it, "listening to the man."

He is ruthless. I am trained not to depend on him in any way. If I lose my balance, I must fall on the floor rather than grab him. If he lets go in the middle of a spin and I fall away from him, we start over because it shows I am not balanced on my own. I hate his guts. He makes sure that I know he doesn't give a damn.

The dancer/choreographer Agnes de Mille's experience with her equally diffident partner, Warren Leonard, makes one wonder about an errant gene in these men. In her book, she says of him:

This was an old-time vaudevillian speaking--one did one's tricks right or one got fired.

"I'm tired," I whimpered.

"What's that got to do with it? You're scared too. Why are you always so scared? Afraid I'm going to drop you? Here, I will drop you. It's not so bad." He dropped me. Deliberately. I hit on my chest.

"It's not bad, is it?"

"It's not good," I said quietly.

"Well, now you see? Now get up and do it again and do it right." I toughened up. He was tireless. He also despised food during rehearsal hours. Rehearsal hours were four hours at a stretch. No food, no rest, no conversation. Lots of argument. "Oh, honey," he said one day after a long workout, taking my face between his hands and gazing tenderly at me, "oh, honey, you're so lousy!"

We spend days on something as apparently simple as stepping forward on the right or left foot. This, like all our movements, must be done in unison, with perfect synchronization. Or we go up and down the ballroom

floor, backwards and forwards: slow, slow, quick-quick. Slow, slow, quick-quick. Slow, slow, quick-quick. The two quick steps must be just as smoothly done as the two slow ones. He will completely ignore the 563 times in a row that we do it perfectly, but, when on time 564 we are a little uneven, he throws up his arms, howling, "What's the matter with you anyway, why can't you get this! We're never going to get anyplace; we might as well quit if you can't learn this!" And stop having all this fun? Never!

His most basic rule is: "There is no going on to square two if square one is not perfected." If he steps forward eighteen inches, my foot must go backward exactly eighteen inches, and we don't go on until that is perfected. If it takes two hours, that is what we practice for two hours. Only then do we move on to something else.

I soon learn that in his vocabulary there is no such phrase as "Good enough." There is only "Right" or "Wrong". Both of us, fortunately, tolerate hours of repetition. He explains to me, "I have no trouble with repetition. The secret is to enjoy it. I've seen the disaster of going on to square two before square one was perfected. If we do, nothing will ever be quite right. And we're going to do it right. Which means you'll do it my way. Not until you suspect I'm wrong, not until you hope I'm wrong, but until you can prove I'm wrong. And so far I haven't been wrong. So quit arguing or there's the door." If that last mouthful is meant to get my attention, it does. I get the

point and I get quiet.

In Sun Tzu's brief manual on war, he calls giving orders an "art." He goes on to make the euphoric claim that "if a general . . . always insists on his orders being obeyed, the gain will be mutual." Mutual what?

This man, who does indeed "have his ways," also has a way with words. While he seldom says what he means, he most vociferously means what he says: "As long as you're not always doing something right, I'm going to tell you that you're NEVER doing it right. And if you do something wrong just once, I'm going to tell you that you ALWAYS do it wrong. Either what I'm looking for is there or it's not."

When I suggest that he be more accurate with his words, he calmly responds, "I don't intend to change the way I talk. You're just going to have to get used to it. You peabrains always have to have things explained to you." Oh silly us!

No one could be more loathe to part with a compliment than this ornery cuss. He insists that I find satisfaction within myself, rather than from any "puppy biscuits," as he calls them, from him. He almost slipped once, getting as far as, "You know, you just might be living proof that a silk purse can be made from a sow's ear." Luckily he caught himself before he became any more lyrical.

In the middle of a lesson he will tell me, "Step back," and then a

moment later, "Don't step back so far." I begin to protest, telling him I am stepping back but not too far. He then states one of the Ultimate Truths: "The farther along we go, as you begin to learn a little, the more you're going to think you know what's right. Believe me, you don't. You will begin to think you're doing something right. You'll swear you are. And the farther along you get, the more convinced of it you'll be. But if I tell you you're not doing something, you're not doing it." I notice how nicely this truth leans toward his shrine.

Exemplary teacher that he is, he demonstrates this principle of trust with a clever little Mister Wizard experiment. I am told to fill one can with water as hot as my hand can tolerate, and a second can with water as cold as I can tolerate. He instructs me to stick one hand in hot water and the other hand in cold water for a moment. Then I quickly switch the cold hand to the hot water, and the hot hand to the cold water. The hand in the can of cold water feels hot, and the hand in hot water feels cold.

The bottom line is that I cannot trust even what my own body tells me when I'm dancing, at least not for now. I can trust only what he tells me. Hard as this is to believe, I know he's right. His principles of dancing work; I've seen and felt the results. When, on occasion, I've wondered out loud whether I'm learning in spite of, rather than because of, his highhanded methods, he merely shrugs and replies, "You can't argue with success."

As long as I live, which may not be as long as I had anticipated prior to these lessons, I will remember the first season we spent learning to do the traveling spin. Even by his admission, that move was a devil to learn. That was the season I kept Dramamine in the studio desk drawer to control the nausea I got from spinning up and down the studio floor hour after hour, night after night. That was the season I came to dance lessons with ace bandages on my wrists and knees; replaced my low-heeled dancing shoes with flat shoes to get maximum movement from insteps, ankles, and knees; spent my non-dancing time soaking in the tub, applying a heating pad, or refilling ice packs; and, on one particularly rough night, wore a zipper across my mouth to remind myself to keep my mouth shut no matter what the boss had to say, which was plenty.

Having a freshman's attitude was another area in which he instructed me. "Freshman," he explained, "have a learning attitude. They're willing to listen and learn. Sophomores, on the other hand, think they know it all. What you want to do is still have a freshman's attitude when you graduate a senior."

It was a good learning season. The routine we were working on ended with twenty-five traveling spins. We had learned, from watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies, that the traveling spin is essential in exhibition dancing, which is the kind of dancing we are interested in doing,

and we had to master it. His plan: "If we are going to make twenty-five spins look easy, then we have to be able to do at least fifty." Of course, at least.

There came the night, with no warning, when we did sixty spins. And within a month, there came a second night, again without warning, when we did 200 traveling spins! "Rougher than a cob," as he said, but we did them! I have come to trust his methods as well as his experience, so I try to keep my mouth shut and pay attention to what he is teaching me. He keeps saying that this basic training, as he thinks of it, is the worst part of all. That's easy to believe. Still, I actually enjoy what we do, and I believe he knows that and feels the same way.

The work during the lesson is only the first chiseling of the winter field. His churning mind never runs out of things for me to do at home to improve my stamina, strength, endurance, and patience. He thinks I need all of those for dancing; I think I need all of them for him. He has given me weights to use on my wrists and ankles when I practice; a rod to put across the door below my shoulder height so I have to bend my knees to dance under it; videos of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to study; a metronome to practice timing; instructions on how to climb around and over my sofa for flexibility.

In my spare time he also has me swimming, doing calisthenics, tap-dancing, and walking backwards. When I climb stairs, I climb backwards and on the balls of my feet. When I am sitting, I practice dancing from the waist

down, which is how all dancing should be done, and I shouldn't need to be standing to do it.

I wouldn't wish this man anything bad, of course, but neither would I weep if he were to get laryngitis now and then. Phil Rizzuto said that Yogi Berra was "not one to communicate the way the rest of us do. He makes noise." I know the type. We have yet to hold a "discussion" on anything regarding dancing. I tried, once. After a lesson I said to him, "You need to pay attention to some of the things I try to tell you during a lesson because sometimes I know what I'm talking about." He stopped, looked me straight in the eye, and said in that too-perfectly reasonable tone of voice, "When you know something, I'll be the first to tell you." I'd give almost anything if this smart aleck would choke on the foot in his mouth just once, but he hasn't so far. Damn!

I'm certain I didn't ask him to, but he ranked my dancing progress for me: "Last year your dancing was absolutely atrocious. This year it's only abominable. Next year, if you keep working hard, it'll be up to terrible. And the following year, it'll be just bad. Then the year after that . . ." So nicely put. So upbeat. So motivating.

The more involved he gets in what he's doing, the louder he gets. I remember the lesson when both he and the music were too loud for me to think. I finally asked to have the music turned down. That was easier than

trying to quiet him. I no longer am surprised that he demands 110% from me every minute of the lesson; it's what he gives of himself. Still, there are times when I'm torn between wanting strength and wanting a good weapon.

When I step on his foot, he says, "You're taking steps too big. Match mine." When he steps on my foot, he says, "Move your foot. It's in my way." It is, so I do. He then graciously acknowledges my mistake, "If I seem perfect and I don't make mistakes, it's because I don't conjecture. Everything I tell you, I've been through before. I know what I'm talking about." I wait for him to throw in George Bernard Shaw's two-cents worth, "The longer I live the more I see that I am never wrong about anything, and that all the pains I have so humbly taken to verify my notions have only wasted my time." Boy, would he agree with that!

At the end of a lesson, which runs from one to three hours, he says to the next students coming in while he changes shoes, "Yeh, you'd sweat, too, if you had to drag this 140-pound broad around the whole time." Never mind the forty pound exaggeration; never mind the blatant lie. They think he's hilarious. And, although I hate to admit it, the way he says it, it is funny. He then turns to me with what, I finally have learned, is his absolutely supreme compliment, "Not bad, Koenig. Not good, but not bad!"

The man is an incorrigible and consummate showman. Other couples dance as a pleasant way to spend an evening. While we dance for that same

reason, we also dance to entertain, to exhibit, to be noticed. Genetics gave him a tall, lean frame, and middle-age has enhanced the impact of his red mane and bright blue eyes. His rubber face is a one-man drama department, with expressions molding from villainous to romantic to comic under the brilliant direction of his spontaneously creative mind.

We go to a dance dressed to the nines, as though we were on our way to Vienna to dance to Strauss. When the other men wear dress suits, he wears a black tux. When the other men wear black tuxes, he wears something such as a winter-white tux trimmed with blue, just to be different. He always stands out, which is no accident; he always intends to stand out. Generously he promises, "When you're with me, Kid, people will notice you, too, even though you've got so little to work with."

People see us dressed the way we are and think we come only to be visual decorations at the dance; then we dazzle them with our dancing. Or, we take on the attitude of two monkeys, jumping and bouncing around, an attitude that does not match our elegant clothes, but that interests people more because of the contrast between how we look and how we act.

One night he told me, "It gives me satisfaction to know that I'm not one of the sheep. Conformity brings dependency and people begin to accept other people's rules and regulations. I'm not here watching someone else enjoy himself being different. I am. Dancing is an outlet for creativity for

me."

When the band plays a samba, we do the polka and it looks like we've invented a great new samba step. When the band plays a swing and everyone is jitterbugging, we are fox-trotting lickety-split down the floor, having a ball. When everyone else is sedately fox-trotting, we are improvising tap-dancing steps to the music. Specific dancing steps are just catalysts for his creativity. Knowing a lot of different steps isn't what makes dancers interesting to watch, he says; knowing how to improvise and create around a few steps is.

When he makes a mistake on the floor, he exaggerates it, making fun of himself, and the audience loves it. If he stumbles, he will trip and stumble halfway down the dance floor on purpose. If he turns me and I don't follow the turn, he will continue to make the turning motion even though I'm standing there laughing. Barnum and Bailey would make a killing with him. Rarely do we leave a dance without people telling us how much they enjoy watching us dance, which, of course, makes us happy. Yet, nobody could possibly enjoy watching us half as much as we are enjoying ourselves when we dance.

Even at the end of a lesson in the studio we perform, just for the fun of it. One grand finale, properly done, has me in a backward lunge, with my head and upper body curving back toward the floor, while he holds and presents me in this position until the music ends. It's difficult; it's painful;

it's beautiful. But why do it right, when, with one or two changes, it can be turned to comedy!

The goof has two variations. In one, instead of holding and presenting me in the lunge, he appears to lose interest, drops his arms and lets go, while I crumble on the floor around his feet. Our poor teacher, Helen, who is the epitome of grace and beauty in the dance, just rolls her eyes and shakes her head. She has already told us numerous times, "The two of you have made a different person of me." We know better than to ask how.

In the second variation, he gets into position, then deliberately starts a long discussion with our teacher, rambling on and on and on as he does so well. Meanwhile my back is breaking, I start gesturing frantically to him to get me back into standing position and he, of course, feigns oblivion to my presence. Only when we burst out laughing is the ruse up.

If people could hear our conversations while we are dancing, they would swear they were hearing wrong, but to me they add zing to an already spicy slumgullion. As we begin a dance, where most partners would have an opener like, "Hi, great band tonight, huh?" this charmer will ask, "Now, do you think you can dance this right, Stupid? Oh, by the way, 'Stupid' doesn't mean anything, it just means you're stupid." Enough to be listening to you, crosses my mind.

An essential part of our dancing is our style. I look, not at him (the

glare would be too much), but directly over his ear, and I smile. He, in turn, looks into my face admiringly (he should get an Oscar for that performance!), and this is how he "presents" me. This presentation is also called "the romance of the dance." Yeh. Sure. What people around us don't know is that usually, while looking sweetly into my face, he is saying something like, "Show some life, will you, come ON!" or "Get your chin up, smile, now move!" (Another Oscar for ventriloquism.)

Then there are the times when the band is playing something sentimental, and everyone else on the floor is caught up in the mood of the music. He, too, is smiling and appears to be singing with the band. But those listening closely as we dance past will hear, instead of the lyrics to the lovely "I Don't Know Why I Love You Like I Do," something like this: "Ooo la la loo bow wow wow wa wa woo." And I'm supposed to keep a straight face!

Behind the outrageous antics, behind the bullying and the discipline, behind the know-it-all attitude is an intense and passionate love for music and dance. I remind him that other people, too, love music and dancing. What makes his way right?

He explains, "I go by feel. I know what feels right. I know when you and I have got the feeling I'm looking for. I know what I want, and you and I will practice it until it feels right, no matter what it looks like. That's where other people make their mistake. They go by how it looks, not by how it feels.

We're either going to be nothing or we're going to be great. There's no gray area. I'm striving for a particular feeling, not a particular look. For me, it's the feel of moving to the music. The music is first, the innate love of it. Just listening isn't enough. I have to move to it. For me, that's dancing."

This meeting of improbables is flourishing, and, while the dancing partnership is unconventional, it's also lasting. Perhaps we will look back on this as the most fascinating venture either of us has ever undertaken. Perhaps we're both certifiably nuts. At any rate, when I learn to become a dancer, we could be quite a dance team. We both know that most people would not dream of undertaking the gruesome task of teaching me. We also both know that most people would not put up with his methods and his big mouth.

If one is very lucky, the perfect dancing partner comes along once in a lifetime. Mine happens to be a man who is not only greater than the sum of his parts, but also, fortunately, greater than some of his parts.

To carry my objectivity through to the end, I must admit that de Mille's tribute to Carmalita Maracci closely matches what I would say of him:

It is no ordinary experience to discover that an intimate, a known, well-loved daily companion has something close to genius and stands outside of the standards we set for ourselves. The person speaks with the usual voice, laughs with the ordinary expression and then, without transition or warning, becomes a figure of magic.

Not bad, McCoy. Not good, but not bad!

Save the Next Set for Me

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on . . .
 John Keats

Beginnings are thick with potential. Bands' opening theme songs, no matter how far-fetched, comical, or sentimental--"Got a Date with an Angel," "The Dipsy Doodle," "The Waltz You Saved for Me," "Day Dreams Come True at Night," "Sugar Blues," "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You"--call me like siren songs. Nothing the rest of the evening thrills me quite like the moment when the bandleader hits the downbeat on the opening theme.

Bands' closing themes--"Au Revoir, Pleasant Dreams," "When Day Is Done," "So Long for Now," "Goodnight, Sweetheart"--at the end of a wonderful evening are too poignant--I want to go out the door of a ballroom the way I want to go out of life: bouncing, not bawling.

When the music stops I actually feel some energy, some life go out of me. The abrupt transition back to reality, no matter how good, is too much. It's like a blackout right after a Grucci fireworks display.

Although we are often the first people to arrive at a dance, McCoy and I aren't the last to leave. We sometimes use the excuse that I have to get up early for work; or that I've "run out of gas" which is sometimes true; or he goes into his "I promised her mother I'd have her home early" routine, which some people believe, but the truth is I want to leave while the music is

still playing.

Just as we've practiced several floor entrances, so our exit, which began as unplanned and spontaneous, has now become a much-loved little closing ceremony.

First we gather back all the encumbrances of daily life we had laid aside before the dance: McCoy picks up his keys, he gets our coats, I pick up my purse. Then we make a half-hearted gesture of leaving: he by covering his dancing shoes with the rain rubbers; I by changing from my gold dancing shoes to street shoes. Finally, wearing our coats, and with purse, keys, and shoe bag in hand, we stand. But we don't walk out. We walk onto the dance floor.

Then, to whatever music the band happens to be playing, we dance once more until we come to the door. We dance out taking the music with us. On the drive home, as I get ready for bed, and while I fall asleep, the music is in me, still playing. I know I'll wake up finding myself dancing again.

Instead of speaking about his close friend, Etienne de la Boetie, this is what Michel de Montaigne would have said had he been me: "If I am pressed to say why I love dance, I feel it can only be explained by replying: 'Because it is dance; because it is me'."