

Dance Is The Poetry Of The Foot

An article by Judi Hatton

The above statement/headline was written by English poet John Dryden who lived from 1631-1700, and is as true today as it was centuries ago in Restoration England. Unfortunately many dancers today don't seem to have received the memo!

The most fundamental element in the construction of any dance is the use of the feet and legs, the footwork. Clearly, in order for a dancer to progress from journeyman to artist, it must be correct, so why do so many dancers ignore this most basic and important element?

As I go about my work of coaching and judging I am continually amazed at how little attention is paid to what is, without doubt, one of the fundamental building blocks for any dancer - the feet. They are, after all, the part of the anatomy that is in contact with terra firma, and as such should surely be the first line of attack. Yes, I know that there are those in the dance world who decry the need for good technique, or even technique at all; how often have we heard "Don't worry about the small stuff, just do it, just go!"?

Would any of us, living in a building, say to the bricklayer "Don't worry about the foundation, just make the walls look pretty."? Despite the fact that we know little or nothing about bricklaying, we are all too practical to believe that the pretty wall will remain standing when subjected to even the slightest stress.

The most fundamental element in the construction of any dance is the use of the feet and legs, the footwork. Clearly, in order for a dancer to progress from journeyman to artist, it must be correct, so why do so many dancers ignore this most basic and important element? Fundamental footwork is the easiest element to correct, the information is readily available in any one of several books and all the dancer needs to do is look it up! Although the information found in technique books may be overly simple, it is certainly a very good place to start. There are simply no excuses for incorrect footwork.

The consequences of poor and incorrect use of the feet can be devastating - loss of rhythm at best, off time at worst. Lack of speed, a breakdown in the partnership - the inability to stay together or connected, the loss of the topline/style in standard dancers and smooth dances, the loss of rhythm, leg and hip action in the 'rhythmical' style dances, all of these are common faults. The prescription that will help cure all of these symptoms is good use of feet and legs, why then are there so many dancers who are willing to believe the Philistines? Is it the promise of a quick fix? Are we so conditioned by our 'instant' society to expect instant success? Success never comes by accident; it is the product of intelligent thought and planning, lots of hard work and a generous pinch of luck.

When we look intelligently at what the feet and legs are used for, what they create and what they affect, it becomes astounding even to the neophyte that this facet of the dance, our very wheels, can be so flagrantly ignored. Consider the action of movement as it relates to DanceSport. We move in eight fundamental directions, and must be ready to go in any one of them in a split second. Add to this the production of speed, rotation, and swing not to mention sway and shape, all qualities required for dancers to produce a three dimensional picture while moving across the floor.

Imagine zipping down the Interstate when suddenly, without warning one of your wheels became square. I feel sure you will agree that, despite the fact that your three remaining wheels were in good shape, the fourth 'square' wheel would dramatically impede your progress and would make for a very bumpy ride. The driver would be forced to slow down and would suffer a severe loss of maneuverability.

If your footwork is incorrect you are in the same situation, and as a competitor, are giving the judge a clear and dramatic reason NOT to mark you.

Everything the dancer does, choreography, position, action, rise and fall, swing, sway, speed and slowness, all are attributed in some way to the use of the foot, not just the toes and heels, but to the use of specific parts. Like the skater's blade, the foot must be employed with knowledge and finesse, for it is only by using the feet specifically, inside edges, outside edges and 'corners', as well as ankles and knees, that the dancer can truly produce a bravura performance. Champions are not 'born', they are 'made', by application, perseverance, desire and vision, and a lot of luck. Change your luck today, make it your New Year's resolution to work to eliminate foot faults and footwork errors, you'll be surprised at how easy it is when you do it right and at the great results you will achieve!

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Portraying the Character of the Dance in Tango

An article by Maja Serve

Tango is probably the most dramatic dance of the five standard dances. Tango is the only dance of the five standard dances that was created South of the Alps. What does that mean being created South of the Alps? In Europe, it is said that the people living south of the Alps show more emotions and passion than their neighbors to the North. Tango is a dance that is often misunderstood in how its actions are produced. It is a very different dance from the other four standard dances and therefore needs a very different approach. My partner and I would always start our shows with Tango as it was the dance that required the least physical workout.

Many couples work so hard in their Tango and become exhausted by the time they finish the dance. We actually found that Tango was a gentle dance to warm up with and get the body going. Tango is actually a very soft dance as you should only use the energy in pulses and not on a constant basis.

Before continuing let me give you a little history of the Tango as it was told to me and from which research into the subject has shown. Tango was created in the Northern part of Spain by the Gypsies that lived there. The Gypsies often used dances to tell stories or teach children the insights of life.

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Tango was one of the dances that explained life, married life to be exact. The dance would illustrate all the moods and interactions between the husband and wife, from passion to anger, love to hate. Europe was hit by a famine that devastated most countries and of course the poorest people felt the famine first. Some Gypsies got the idea of taking the dances that they did to the exclusive nightclubs of the French Riviera. They were then able to make a living and feed their families with the money they made. The Gypsies that were not able to make a living in Europe found ways of getting themselves to South America, one of those countries being Argentina, developing the Argentine Tango. The rich Parisians soon fell in love with the expressions of the Tango and took the dance back to Paris and the Tango soon became a big hit in many nightclubs in Paris. The English that visited Paris brought the Tango back with them to England and "the rest is history", as they say.

Now that we know a little about the history, let me go over some of the characteristics of the Tango. As I said earlier, the Tango is the dance of marriage and is supposed to show all the temperaments that a married couple goes through. The couple should show love, passion, a sense of carefree, anger, and even hate. This is shown with the use of light and shade within the music. The music will at times be danced soft, and at other times very sharp. Most couples know how to dance the soft parts as that is what is needed in the other standard dances (Waltz, Foxtrot, Viennese Waltz and Quickstep). I will therefore concentrate on the basic actions and production of the sharp movement.

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To dance the Tango well, you need to first understand that Tango is a very compact dance. It is danced as a walking dance, not a gliding dance. **Each step is taken very deliberately and placed in its new position. A great image here is of making clear and clean foot prints in new fallen snow. Do not create tracks, but prints that show the whole foot. Lift the foot up above the snow (2-3 centimeters) making sure to leave a clean print behind. When a foot is lifted off the floor, it should be maintained as flat or parallel to the floor as possible.** There is a little roll of the foot (forward movement from the heel to the "platform" and backward from the "platform" to the toe). You should not release the toe (no foot rise) the same way as it is done in, for example, Foxtrot as that promotes a sliding of the heel and/or foot. The typical look and use of inside and outside edges of the feet are created by the keeping the thighs connected. One teacher of mine (Bill Irvine) gave two examples that would be helpful images here. The first one is to imagine or maybe even try to dance with a balloon between the knees. The other example is to imagine or again maybe even try to dance with an elastic band around the thighs. These two methods both promote the compactness of the dance, and make it easier to use the insides and the outsides of the feet.

Now let's move onto the body and hold. The hold is more compact than in any of the other dances. The man's left hand and arm come further around the lady's body and the lady's left hand and arm comes over the top of the man's left arm. There should be a strong connection between the elbows (man's right elbow and lady's left elbow) making them, appear as if they were one elbow. This connection makes it easy for the lady to respond to the turn and/or rotations that the man does in his ribcage. The man's left hand holds the lady's right hand, when dancing the Tango the palm of the man's left hand and the backside of the lady's right hand should be turned slightly to face the lady. This action lifts up the man's elbow slightly making the triangle between the man's lower arm and the lady's lower arm look like it is tilted to be standing on the lady's elbow.

As I said earlier I will go a little into the sharp movements of the Tango. The sharp movement should feel like a pulse of energy and once the movement is done, the energy is released again. These pulses of energy are most often used to create a turn or rotation, example when you are opening from closed position to promenade position or closing from promenade position back to closed position. To make this action of turn or rotation as fast as possible I used to think of there only being two positions in Tango, namely promenade position (pp) or closed position. You need to turn from one position to the other as fast as possible, making sure there is calmness before and after, to create that sharp look. The faster the turn more time you would have before and after the turn, making the turn look even sharper. You can actually change the timing to help you feel the sharpness even more clearly. Let's take two International steps, that I thing you all know, Progressive Link and Closed Promenade. The timing given by the book for the Progressive link is QQ, making the step and the turn

equal in length. Now try this, count the Progressive link as &S and feel/see what happens. The turn was faster making the step appear sharper. Now let's try the Closed Promenade. The book timing on this step is SQQS producing a fairly slow turn. Now try this timing and feel/see what happens ...SS&S. Again the turn was done faster making the outcome look sharper. If you count the beat value of what I just did, you will see that I didn't change the overall beat value. I just changed the beat value around a little and thereby created more light and shade. This is an easy way to create a sharper look without having to make big changes to the actions or the steps.

I have tried to explain the Tango in as simple a manner as possible without using fancy explanations or words in the hopes that whatever level you are dancing that you will benefit from the information given here. Tango is of course much more than what I am able to explain here, but it will give you a good start to grasp the essence of the dance. Use the light and shade to create the sharpness. You might want to have your teacher/coach help you get the timing clear.

I never follow.

I participate to the action you decide to do, and sometimes I have my own moves. I do things that you don't lead, because I want to express my own feelings through the step while I dance with you. Therefore, you feel that I am active without taking over.

Therefore, to you it feels that I am following very well, but in reality I don't.

- Bobbie Irvine