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The Artistry within Partnering

The importance of discovery and development beyond technique

In just about any style of partnered dance, whether ballet, ballroom, tango, ice dancing, or informal salsa, it is rarely the obvious (meaning, the steps themselves) that is ultimately responsible for entrancing spectators. Instead, a pair's approach to the tiniest of details *within* the actual partnering work will ultimately set one couple apart from the next and keep audiences on the edges of their seats longing for more. Such nuance is typically derived and developed through the artful intelligence, tailored partnering style, and dramatic instincts of the individual dancers. Many feel that a dancer's innate talent and temperament will have a significant influence on his or her partnering style. We have found this to be true in certain instances, but we also believe that technical distinctions and stylistic individualities can be consciously learned, practiced, and developed—just like any other aspect of dance. These refinements truly have the potential to enhance one's partnering abilities and may help transform a promising bouquet of technical skills into a maturely developed and unified art.

The vast array of actions and emotions within a *pas de deux* can prove incredibly intense and extraordinarily delicate simultaneously.

Whether it is the slightest of smiles, a stolen glance, or even something as seemingly trivial as the placement of fingers, it is often a dancer's attention to minute details that has the power to make or break a *pas de deux*. As a couple, we have always invested significant time and energy concentrating on exactly these elements. Our rehearsals are never solely focused on perfecting the choreography we must execute; rather, they tend to be about what we wish to achieve *overall* and what our plan of action should be. We first discuss in detail our general intent: exactly what we would like the audience to feel, to comprehend, and to take away from our performance. We then try to settle on a harmonious "game plan" that will lead us most efficiently in that direction. Having our aspirations and objectives clarified right from the start allows us to use our time economically and leads to productive rehearsals.

Anton Dolin, famed British dancer of the early nineteenth century, is known for his extraordinary partnering expertise. He states in his book *Pas de Deux: The Art of Partnering*, "Great Ballet, like great theater depends upon the collaboration of its artists; I think that it is in partnering that this collaboration, because of the complexity of the minutest detail, attains its most complete fulfillment."¹

When partners strive to develop artistic distinction on physical, musical, and dramatic levels, they should expect that intentions and tactics will vary with one pairing to the next. This is true at even the simplest of levels. For example, one pair may take a basic approach to a *promenade* (the gentleman walking steadily around the lady, rotating her as she balances on one leg) by simply going around in as balanced (or off balance) a way as they can as they prioritize speed in the interest of the produced visual and musical effects. Another couple may have the desire to advance this basic approach one step further in terms of *physical detail*. They may decide that their ultimate objective is for the lady to look as poised, delicate, and as lightly maneuverable as possible. Here is where we will find a significant

1 Anton Dolin, *Pas de Deux: The Art of Partnering* (Wilmington: Dover, 1969), 59.

difference in approach to the same step. The first couple will probably execute their *promenade* with a conventional hand-to-hand grip. While this grip is a secure and satisfactory choice, both traditionally and technically, the latter couple may choose to experiment. The gentleman may try using only his thumb and middle finger to hold the lady's wrists instead of her hands. This grip will allow them *both* the freedom to display their fingers, a technique often seen in the Balanchine style. Though more delicate (and to some, more beautiful), this grip may initially feel insecure, requiring more time and practice to perfect. If executed properly, the ballerina will appear to be floating ethereally as she is lightly and almost imperceptibly maneuvered by her partner. Eventually both couples will successfully accomplish their *promenade*: the former with security and distinct musicality, the latter with enhanced physical finesse.

Much of the artistry in partnering lies in the intrinsic conversation between the two dancers. Often ladies will “interrupt” their partner’s “sentence,” robbing him of the chance to initiate and continuously guide a sequence of movements. This is particularly common in ballet. Unlike social and ballroom dancers who regularly practice spontaneity and improvisation, ballet dancers are generally expected to memorize and execute specifically detailed choreography over and over again. Knowing exactly what is to come, step after step and beat after beat, often results in a natural urge to anticipate. Constantly rehearsing and performing the same passages with the same familiar partner to the same predictable music can easily cause a dancer to go on “auto-pilot,” albeit inadvertently. By doing so, she will unintentionally disregard both the spontaneity of feeling and the depth of purpose within a *pas de deux*. Take the following example. A ballerina motions in acceptance of the gentleman’s hand *before* he actually offers it and continues on to take an initial step in the direction she *knows* they will be going *before* her partner has shown his intent to lead the way. Dramatically speaking, she has just diminished both her own regality and his role as “the cavalier.” In a second, more physical example, if a lady begins leaning off balance at her own whim instead

of waiting for her partner to ease her outward, she will have, in her hurriedness, stolen away her partner's chance to guide her smoothly off of her leg with seemingly effortless control. Caught off guard, he may have significant difficulty steadying and maneuvering her.

While neither of these two instances may seem enormously consequential, they are nonetheless useful illustrations of a female dancer's preceding her partner's initiatives, typically causing him to lag a split second behind her. Being thrown out of the driver's seat, he will be forced to play catch-up, sometimes fumbling in order to regain control. He may also have to take quick problem-solving actions should things begin to go awry in a domino effect.

These are also perfect examples of how easily two dancers can suddenly find themselves in the middle of a paradox: "partnering" separately, dancing a *pas de deux* as two individuals instead of as a single team. Though they share the stage and execute steps together, the emotional connection and overall chemistry between the partners will be lacking, regardless of their technical expertise.

Several of the elements that define the artistry in partnering may be instinctual, for both men and women. Certain dancers will find that they are remarkable artists in their own right, yet somehow lack the natural intuition necessary to being a great partner. However, many of these alleged instincts are actually learned skills instilled in some fortunate dancers from a young age. In several countries, such as Cuba and Russia, dancers begin *pas de deux* classes very early in their training. Sometimes *pas de deux* classes are mandatory even before the dancers have built enough strength to handle many of the physical demands (such as lifting) associated with the work. As a former ballet dancer herself, physical therapist Elizabeth Maples, DPT, notes, "Many of the injuries I treat are the results of accidents both directly and indirectly related to partnering. Students always seem so anxious to start *pas de deux* classes, but really, from a dance medicine standpoint it makes little sense to begin lessons prematurely. How can one be expected to dance correctly, safely, and efficiently with a partner when they are still in the academic stages of learning basic

technique, and still in the process of discovering how to hold themselves up on their own?”²

Early partnering training is undoubtedly a controversial subject. Despite the physical risks associated with it, however, if classes are properly managed, *some* young dancers’ experiences may well prove valuable later on. With early exposure to intelligently structured, moderate *pas de deux* work, young dancers will generally acquire comfort and ease with it. By regularly working with a variety of partners differing in weight, height, and body type, they are apt to develop versatility and adaptability. Boys can become sensitive and attuned to each particular girl’s physical axis, her center of gravity, and her shifts in balance, discovering for themselves the quickest, most efficient ways to accommodate these differences. Likewise, girls can find various techniques to help boys of varying heights and strengths support them, learning how to hold their bodies when paired with partners of limited physical strength and technical ability. Girls can also become considerably more comfortable with the idea of being manipulated by a partner and attuned to deciphering the numerous signals and physical cues each new partner will bring to the floor. Early intuitive development has reportedly contributed to the traditional renown Cuban male dancers enjoy as exceptionally strong, smooth, and knowledgeable partners. It has also led female Cuban dancers to be lauded for their fearlessness and unfaltering partnering strengths.

Much of the perceived mystery in the art of partnering lies in the unspoken bond formed between two dancers. Though not always adhered to as strictly as in formal social dance, the foundation of a strong “lead/follow” relationship is often considered the essence of a great dance partnership. Though “leading” and “following” are traditional, well understood terms in dance’s vocabulary, in actual practice, the gentleman makes a physical “suggestion” to his partner, a cue that the lady must interpret and respond to. Neither of their roles is entirely passive or aggressive. A dancer’s ability to successfully

2 Author interview with Elizabeth Maples, February 5, 2015, Miami Beach, Fla.

interpret his or her partner's signals will almost always depend on attentiveness, open-minded willingness, and mental flexibility. There is an intangible beauty and artistic sophistication to be gained when two dancers grow to understand each other intimately over time. A nurtured, slowly developed dance relationship has the power to generate a unique sense of confidence. This deep level of poised familiarity and trust typically allows dancers to enrich their partnering with unrehearsed and spontaneous personal flourishes. The gift of such unconditional assuredness between partners may prompt a pair to experiment with impulsiveness, introducing an element of fearless abandon into the restrictions of set choreography.

When two dancers work together to coordinate and to adapt to everything from their builds to their timing to their idiosyncrasies, they will find themselves on the road to developing a relationship. As they allow themselves to become symbiotic extensions of each other's movements, two individual dancers will organically morph into one. A successful dance partnership is, for better or worse, much like a marriage, calling for patience, understanding, cooperation, trust, loyalty, and, occasionally, submission. It is a relationship of equal opportunity. Both dancers must take ownership of their actions and acknowledge that the success of their *pas de deux* lies in a true team effort. Indulging egos will serve no purpose. The dancers must be willing to share the stage, the spotlight, and the workload. There is no master, no servant. Whether initiating or responding, both parties will share proportionate purpose and responsibility for the unfolding of the dance. There must be a commonly shared priority and a mutual shift in focus from each individual's personal triumph to the success of the couple as one. Development of trusting relationships between dancers will allow for bold experimentation and growth within partnerships and *pas de deux* work. This verity has informed differing dance styles and genres for centuries, and it continues to the present. It is the beating heart of partnering and what will keep distinguishing *pas de deux* work not only as a technique but as an art form in its own right.