

UC Irvine

Dance Major Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/90w9t8m2>

Journal

Dance Major Journal, 6(1)

Author

Schreifels, Madeleine

Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/D561041001

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Old dance forms, new bodies, and new friends

Not everyone comes to love dance in a studio or theatre—meet one enthusiast who started doing Irish Céili dancing with her family, then forged connections through swing dancing abroad and at home

by Madeleine Schreifels

For many families across America, a typical weekend family and friend get-together looks like barbecuing, card games, or playing outdoors — not for Teresa Marchand. I met Teresa at our workplace, the University of California, Irvine Costume Shop. She's a twenty-something, cheery woman who shares similar interests with me, such as learning languages and dishing up healthy recipes. One day, she mentioned that from time to time she likes to go swing dancing at local ballroom venues. I wanted to hear more about how she got into swing dancing, so we grabbed coffee after work one day and I stumbled upon her unique family traditions and childhood memories.

Teresa's earliest years are vivid with memories of practicing various forms of folk partner dancing with family and friends. Her parents and siblings have done folk dancing for as long as she can remember, frequenting Americana folk festivals and weekend dancing sessions with close family friends. At least once a month, there was a family dance night where they would do Irish Céili dancing, and several other folk forms originating mostly from the Appalachian area of the United States. Compared to my own childhood family traditions and the traditions of some of my closest friends, her experience with folk dancing as a part of her upbringing is remarkable. I couldn't think of anyone I knew who had dance introduced into their life in such a way. I wanted to know how these forms of social dance have followed her to where she is now, talking to a dance major about her more recent pursuit of swing dance.

Teresa described Irish Céili dancing as “an Irish form of country square dancing, just with more particular steps and of course the Irish music.” It's done with boys and girls paired up as partners, everyone dancing together as a large group. While her family doesn't have an ethnic Irish background, this was the main folk form that she practiced, especially when she was young. Around the age of 16, as the families and their children at those monthly dance nights began to grow up and move apart, the get-togethers began happening less often. She notices that now they only really do those folk dances from her youth when there are weddings or other special occasions that allow everyone to be together in one place.

So, I wondered, where did swing dancing get in the picture then? Teresa quickly fills in the gap when she reflects that around the time the family friends stopped hosting monthly dance nights, the childhood friends she grew up dancing with started going to ballrooms to try out swing dancing. She admitted at first it felt like a strange transition; she wasn't used to the new moves and looser aesthetic that swing dancing invites. However, her love for swing dance blossomed just as fast as her legs could carry her onto the dance floor. So much so, that she even began going to swing dance joints alone when her friends weren't available to go with her. I was surprised by this, as I imagined myself going to a dance hall alone and wondering, who would dance with me?

When I asked her what it was like to go alone she chirped, “Oh it's not like that at all! Most places are really good about getting everyone to dance with each other, you almost never sit out a dance!” The idea of everyone dancing with one another, purely because everyone is there to practice swing dancing and to have a great time, is heartening. The power of dance to bring individuals together for pure enjoyment became very clear to me from Teresa's experience at the swing dance halls.

Teresa's social dance experience has figured in her travels too, especially when she

studied abroad in Austria. At the international school she was attending, she got together with a group of students and taught them some swing dance and some of the other folk social dance forms that she knows. Someone she met pointed her in the direction of an Austrian folk dance weekend event happening in a small mountain town near Salzburg. Hardly anyone in these more remote regions spoke English, which was a potential challenge for being accepted into their dancing traditions. To her surprise, all the locals there were thrilled Americans had arrived to partake in their dance weekend, despite their inability to speak each other's language. It was then that Teresa realized the amazing way dance can be a kind of physical language:

And then there's something, especially with swing dancing, there's something so cool about being able to communicate with someone without words. Just with little slight gestures of hands, signals from the other person, you can tell what they are going to do. At a certain point you can stop thinking critically, and it becomes an instinctual thing. It's just about what the music is telling you, and what your partner is telling you. Which is something you can't really do elsewhere—everything else in life seems so analytical.

The ability to connect with someone without verbal language, using only physical touch or cues is a simple yet indispensable aspect of dance that is often forgotten. In classes, dancers and teachers feel they must describe what they are doing in order to teach or communicate what they are doing, which is undoubtedly helpful, but not always necessary. We can learn most of what we need by just watching, sensing, and feeling.

Teresa's was able to put into words what many professional dancers often overlook or take for granted. It illuminated a re-appreciation in myself for all the potential that dance harnesses to create connection and disconnection. As someone who dances every day, it just seems normal that muscle memory and music take over. As for partnering work, it seems second nature that the weight of another person is felt instinctually. However, Teresa's observation sheds light on a fine balance between thoughtful engagement in the activity and simultaneously allowing the brain to disengage and let the body take over. It truly is a gift to experience the balance of connection and disconnection that Teresa describes.

When reflecting upon the connections she'd made with other people who share her passion for folk dancing and swing dancing during her time abroad, Teresa was able to pinpoint why she is drawn to dance:

In a big city, sometimes you can feel a little like just one person, amongst so many. Social dancing is very unifying, and so you get a sense of community from that. Which is really neat.

Teresa's idea of dance being unifying, whether practicing social dance or another genre, is extremely gratifying. When dancing, there are moments when people inhabit the same space, physically, mentally, and emotionally. To hear all these concepts and ideas from someone who grew up doing folk dancing and now does swing dancing for enjoyment is a form of validation of why dance is so important in the world. It inspires those who dance often to never underestimate or overlook the connections dance offers.

Madeleine Schreifels graduated from UC Irvine in 2018 with a B.A. in Dance and a B.A. in French Language & Literature. She now resides in Ventura, California, teaching and choreographing dance at Ventura High School and at Santa Barbara Dance Arts. She hopes to earn her teaching credentials to teach French in public school.