

The sheepish shuffle of the wedding dance is having a makeover. Canny couples are now wowing guests with carefully choreographed tangos and Travolta-like moves, says John Gibb.

Photograph by Dean Belcher.

Everything's gone well so far. Holy Trinity looked sublime, sunlight arching through the stained glass and catching the exuberant flowers hanging like jewels from the ends of the pews. The salmon en croûte and pommes dauphinoise went down well, as did the accompanying buckets of Cristal. And thankfully, there were no embarrassing moments during the speeches. But now it's party time and you're just about to walk onto the dance floor while the band prepares to launch into its version of *You Do Something To Me*.

You are on display, alone in front of a dowager duchess, a sprinkling of Guards, a coven of maiden aunts and a gaggle of cousins, nieces and nephews. The lights are on and everyone's staring. Remember the excruciating wedding dance in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*? "Well," you think, "that'll be nothing in comparison to the trauma of a Jimmy Choo slingback caught in the hem of a £10,000 wedding dress as the young bride and her groom stumble onto the dance floor."

Wedding dance jitters is a phenomenon I was unaware of until last autumn when I was prospecting for stout in the Silvermine mountains to the east of Limerick. I found myself in a bar in Tipperary where the landlord let it slip that there had been a bit of a hooley up at Kilshane House in Bansha. "It was a society weddin'," he told me. "Thet pretty young filly from the TV, y'know. She'll be after tellin' you the weather fortune." I discovered eventually, as the conversation slowly unwound, that the girl in question was Lisa Burke whom I, like millions of other men, had long been happy to watch convert even the foulest weather system into something to enjoy. She had come here to marry Adrian Wells, head of foreign news at Sky, and it had been a grand affair with the full nuptial mass at Holycross Abbey.

The story began to fragment when the publican told me that camels had been hired from Dublin Zoo and a ballerina booked to dance *The Dying Swan* at the reception. The bride and groom had, he added, performed a perfect foxtrot followed by an encore – everyone was talking about it. "There was two fillum crews there, a harp and a top-hole band," he enthused.

I liked the idea of a couple performing their wedding dance with style. Back in



Kele Baker trains Lisa Burke and Adrian Wells at the Kensington Dance Studio.

England, I went to see Lisa and Adrian at their home in west London. “We decided to learn to dance properly. Everything is planned in detail for the modern wedding,” said Adrian, “so why not make sure your first dance looks good? We chose Chet Baker for our music and booked 20 lessons at the Kensington Dance Studio.” “But there were still problems,” interjected

Lisa. “The band played the first number, *That Old Feeling*, in slow tempo, though we were able to adapt. We made sure they played *It Had To Be You* at the right speed. We were dancing alone for about eight minutes. It was a complete surprise for our guests and everyone loved it.”

I asked the couple about the camels and the ballerina. “Oh yes,” said Lisa. “Peter

Kelly, the wedding planner, fixed it. We thought they were grand.”

Exhibition Road in Kensington is one of the great London boulevards and halfway down at number 55 you’ll find the Polish Hearth Club – home, on the ground floor, to one of the finest bars in the capital. East European refugees used to gather here during the last world war to plot against



the Nazis. In the summer, when they set tables on the terrace overlooking the sweep of the gardens, it is one of the most beautiful corners of London.

On the first floor is a ballroom, used for lectures and plays staged by companies from the homeland. Hung with paintings of notable Poles such as General Sikorsky and the actress Rula Lenska, it is home four days a week to the Kensington Dance Studio. This opens for lessons at 10am, and in the evenings fills with ballroom dancers, champions and amateurs, here to practise or have tuition.

The room is long and softly lit with a polished floor and broad windows. Couples glide silently about with their teachers hovering like ghosts beside them, whispering instructions as they turn their students into confident dancers. When the music stops you can hear the birdsong in the gardens.

The Studio is where increasing numbers of couples are coming to have their wedding dance professionally choreographed. It was founded six years ago by Ralf Schiller and his dance partner, Kele Baker. Schiller used to work in a bank in his native Germany, but in his spare time he became a top-notch ballroom dancer, holding the title Amateur Champion of Ballroom and Latin in Hanover and Lower Saxony for several years. He came to Britain 10 years ago, turned professional teacher and later set up the Dance Studio.

Baker is a feisty red-headed New Yorker with a background in theatre and music. She first went ballroom dancing when she was 26 – and it was at that point, she says, that she discovered her mission in life. “I trained for three years in New York, became a teacher and moved to London where I met Ralf,” she tells me.

Coaching the wedding dance has become one of their specialities. “Couples want to look good when they step out onto the dance floor for the first time,” says

Schiller. “Parents also like to dance at their child’s wedding, so we’ve started coaching whole families. We choreograph the couple coming onto the floor, then perhaps the groom will dance with his mother or there’ll be a combination of parents and then they may swap around.”

“We also teach them how to cope with any problems on the day,” adds Baker. “The floor might be lumpy or they may find that they’ve got 10 extra guests so there are tables close to the edge and there’s not enough room to do what they planned. We help people to be adaptable – if they haven’t the space to do four basic dance steps along one wall, for example, they can do three. You never know with weddings so you have to be ready for the unexpected. Some brides change clothes before they dance, but if they don’t, will they be able to step backwards in their wedding dress? What happens if the train unhooks?”

“The most popular wedding dances tend to be the traditional foxtrot, box rumba or the Argentine tango,” she continues, “with lots of Frank Sinatra, Jamie Cullum, Westlife, Stevie Wonder’s *You Are The Sunshine Of My Life* – that sort of thing.”

A less conventional choice was made by Stephen and Joanne Kettely, who danced the John Travolta number *Staying Alive* from *Saturday Night Fever* at their wedding. “We’d had a few drinks when we were planning the reception. We sat down to watch the video one evening and just decided to do it,” Stephen told me.

It was a brave decision. John Travolta got into condition by dancing at least three hours every day, followed by a five-mile run. Stephen and Jo, both lawyers in the City, went to the Dance Studio for lessons with Latin American expert Melina Hamilton. “I spent hours studying the film,” she told me. “They were very ambitious, even doing Travolta’s lift of Karen Lynn Gorney. It took your breath away.”

Jo wore a classic wedding dress with spaghetti straps and a layered skirt which flared as she twirled. “I wore disco shoes,” she said. “The nightmare was that I might catch my heel in the dress, but Melina taught me how to deal with that. They prepare you for everything because you never know what might happen.

“I will always remember standing at the edge of the floor in this marquee on top of a hill in the Essex countryside, thinking to myself, ‘What have we done?’ There were 180 guests and we hadn’t told anyone about our dance. Afterwards, people said that they would never forget it. It’s lovely to think it gave our friends and family a special memory to take away with them.” ♦

Kensington Dance Studio, First Floor, 55 Exhibition Road, London SW7 (020-7823 9949; www.kensingtondancestudio.com). Seven hours’ dance instruction for bride and groom plus a 30-minute consultation on music choice and dance style, £254.