

THE  TIMES

weekend

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Nobody cares if you can't dance well. Just get up and dance. Great dancers are not great because of their technique, they are great because of their passion. — Martha Graham

WHO really doesn't like dancing? Can even the most curmudgeonly dance-floor-swerver last an entire lifetime without a shameless drunken shimmy at a wedding, a triumphant jig after the birth of a child (or a particularly good goal), or a secret bedroom shuffle? Whether it takes the form of a spontaneous release of energy and emotion, or a skilful display of practised artistry, alone or in company, to dance is as fundamental to humans as breathing.

Martha Graham wasn't overstating it when she said: "Dance is the hidden language of the soul, of the body."

The first human art form, dancing is an instinctive celebration of physical existence, a language that can be spoken by anyone and understood by everyone. Beyond speech, learnt behaviour, or even conscious thought, we do it when we feel good, and we feel good when we do it.

It's a little sad, then, that as a nation, our tailfeather-shaking reputation has historically earned us *nul points*. Always ever-so-slightly embarrassed by fun, Britain has failed to give dancing the status and support it deserves.

But times, and dancefloors, are changing. More and more British travellers are returning home with glowing memories of cultures in which dance is a vital part of life, and musical cross-pollination has familiarised our ears to exotic dance rhythms from all over the world.

Cinema, too, has celebrated traditional artistry in films such as *Strictly Ballroom*, *Evita*, *The Tango Lesson* and *Tango* — expect the profile of the smouldering Argentine style to skyrocket after Robert Duvall's *Assassination Tango*, due later this year.

For many years, the pop music played in nightclubs consigned ballroom, Latin and rock 'n' roll to the laughably bourgeois scrapheap. And while the faithful kept old-fashioned floorcraft alive in schools and competitions, within 20 years social dancing was broadly perceived as a slightly freakish cultural quirk practised by very orange people in very spangly outfits.

LYNDON WAINWRIGHT, of the British Dance Council, lays the decline of social dancing squarely at the fast feet of John Travolta, who as disco dancer Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* struck an iconic, swaggering solitary figure in the mirrorball. "But it started with Chubby Checker in 1960, with *The Twist*. That was the first solo dance in the ballrooms."

But now Dancing — big D, in all its different styles — has made a revival. Behind its rebirth lies a confluence of factors: the global village and a growing awareness of different cultures and music; a kitsch delight in

the accessories — frosted hair and maribou-trimmed frocks; and ennui with the loud unfriendliness of modern dance clubs. Clubs offering instruction in lambada, line-dancing, swing and ceroc, all light years away from rigid British fare, have sprung up all over.

On an average week in London, the entertainment guide *Time Out* usually lists around 50 Latin dance nights, many of them offering lessons. Meanwhile, traditional dance schools too have started to report significant attendance rises.

“Just across traditional ballroom and

Latin styles, we know that 240,000 amateur tests were taken last year,” Wainwright says. “The schools tell me business is booming, with salsa and Argentine tango especially on the rise.”

For those unconvinced, he points to the health benefits. “An evening’s dancing is as good for you as a three-

hour hike. It pumps blood up your legs, so it’s good for your heart, and it helps posture and breathing, too. And you don’t get that kind of fun on an exercise bike.”

A brisk merengue, he claims, will burn off around 400 calories an hour and a spirited lindy hop up to 700. It

keeps your brain tuned too, busting stress, promoting relaxation and, with the mastery of a new skill, bringing self-confidence and a sense of achievement. "There is nothing more notable in Socrates than that he found time, when he was an old man, to learn music and dancing, and thought it time well spent," the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne once mused.

PROFESSOR Cary Cooper, of the Department of Psychology at UMist, says: "Dancing allows people to have physical contact in a safe, sanctioned environment. It literally puts people in touch. And quite apart from the sexual dimension, all humans need tactile contact. The touch of another person affirms that we are real, that we are alive." The writer Henry Fielding was in no doubt where this led: "Dancing begets warmth, which is the parent of wantonness."

Whether you're in it purely for the social contact, or incline more towards Noël Coward's interpretation of dancing as "a vertical expression of a horizontal desire", there's no denying that social dancing offers unparalleled opportunities to get up close and personal with a range of partners, in a forum where ability and enthusiasm transcend age, gender and class.

"We live extremely insecure, isolated lives," Cooper says. "More and more of us leave our native communities, work long hours, sacrifice our relationships, neglect our social lives. Clubbing, with its deafening music, solo dancing and heavy competitiveness, provides less and less social contact, and becomes an avoidance activity. Now people are embracing the old forms again. Social dancing is a ritualistic reaching out. People want to reconnect with others."

Naturally the internet makes it a cinch to find tuition and social events, stock up on music and dance-related services (dancepants for men, incidentally, may be snapped up at www.dancepants.com).

More and more amateur dancers are making a pilgrimage to the home of their favoured dance. Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, Spain and Senegal are hot destinations, and many tour operators now offer dance packages.

However, one step forward, another back: not all are happy with recent developments. One venue in Suffolk has banned line-dancing at its Country and Western nights. The DJ Vic Stemp, 77, fumed: "I'm not against line-dancing, but I do not like them gatecrashing and taking up all the dance floor. There is nothing worse than dancing round the floor and into people doing a line dance. It stops your rhythm and is very irritating."

Oh dear. Perhaps he should follow the advice offered by the Indian sage Krishnamurti: "You must understand the whole of life, not just one little part of it. That is why you must . . . sing, and dance . . . for all that is life."

Or as Henry Havelock Ellis put it: "Dancing is the loftiest, the most moving, the most beautiful of the arts, because it is no mere translation or abstraction from life; it is life itself."

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BALLROOM AND LATIN

Emily, my dancing partner for the evening, and I approached this drop-in class with trepidation, but were pleasantly surprised. The teachers were patient, affable and supportive as they taught us some basics of cha-cha-cha and foxtrot. Students were of varying age, ability and background — some partnered, some not, and everybody changed partners every few minutes. A relaxed hour of social dancing. “My God, I can cha-cha-cha!” said Emily as we left. And she could.

Rowan McIntyre

● Kensington Dance Studio, London SW7 (07774 443627);

www.naturaldirection.com/KDS.html;

£7 (£6 members)

The Royal Festival Hall has free dance events in August. 020-7970

4242; www.rfh.org.uk

Websites:

www.danceweb.co.uk

www.dance-news.co.uk

RICHARD MILLS



Getting to grips with the steps during Tango Al Fresco in Regent's Park, London. The last session of the year takes place tomorrow



It takes two to tango: Rupert Mellor and Kele Baker learn to do it the Argentine way

Let's Dance