

Shall We Dance?

Quick, quick, slow: students rediscover the lost art of ballroom dancing.

by Kate Hamilton

Lindsey Van Wyk is one of about 40 students gathered at the Field House on a chilly January evening. The film production junior from Marshalltown is not there to play basketball, use the extensive gym and aerobic facilities, or swim laps in the pool. Instead, she looks forward to learning the basic steps to the waltz and the fox-trot.

Such a demure intention may seem more in keeping with the Big Band era of the 1940s, when students regularly donned gowns and suits to sashay around the Iowa Memorial Union Ballroom. Dances provided prime opportunities for men and women to meet socially then, and students flocked to numerous events, including the University Prom, the Barrister's Ball, the Interfraternity Dance, the Currier Sweetheart Dance, and the Spinster's Spree.

Decades later, television, computers, cellphones, and bars may present a dizzying array of fast paced social outlets and distractions, but another generation is discovering the pleasures and rewards of tripping the light fantastic.

In the fourth floor aerobic studio at the Field House, this class of predominantly young women watches as instructor Paul Davis, 68MA, glides around the glossy wooden floor. Images of the dapper dancer and his partner, niece Heather Lewis, reflect in the mirrors lining one wall as the couple whirls and twirls in time to the music emanating from a boom box in the corner.

Students follow the couple with their eyes as they try to memorize the intricate triple-step pattern of the cha-cha and the precise alignment of the dancers' bodies. Then, they gingerly try to duplicate the rhythmic movements and combination of turns. Where Davis and Lewis move with graceful ease, many students spend much of the time looking to see where their feet are going. Nonetheless, they seem to be enjoying themselves. As Davis

describes it, "They're having a ball!"

According to the United States Amateur Ballroom Dancers Association (USABDA), more than 300 colleges across the country offer ballroom dancing programs, and many students compete in leagues or hold collegiate dance competitions. "Social ballroom dancing now is the 'in thing' with college students," states the association's website. "They give it an ultimate rating of 'cool' and 'neat.'"

A few years ago, an estimated 30 million people in the U.S.—many of them under the age of 35—were indulging in the gentle art of ballroom dancing. The swing dance craze of the '90s is credited with helping usher in the younger generation's revived interest in social activities practiced by their parents and grandparents.

Other social commentators say the revival can be traced to a societal desire for connectedness. After earlier generations rebelled against authority and explored free love—represented on the dance floor by cutting loose in a solitary fashion—today's young people are rediscovering old-fashioned, take-your-time courtship rituals. "With disco dancing, you can bounce around the dance floor on your own," Davis explains, "but with this, you need a partner."

Whatever the reason, ballroom dancing has shed its stuffy image.

After three years without such a class, the UI reintroduced ballroom dancing in the spring 2004 term with a one-semester-hour "Lifetime Leisure Skills" elective under the guidance of Davis. Even with two sessions each accommodating 40 students, Davis still had to turn people away. While some of the participants may indeed find the subject matter "cool" and others are simply fulfilling a physical education requirement, Davis sees himself as providing a repertoire for a lifetime. He wants to arm students with the confidence to shed their wallflower ten-

dencies at social events. "I want them to be comfortable on the dance floor and enjoy themselves," he says.

As well as traditional ballroom dances, the eight-week course also includes such exotica as the tango, salsa, mambo, the Irish jig, the Jewish hora, swing dances (minus the death-defying aerial moves), and line dances with evocative names such as "The Electric Slide" and "The Stroll." Davis loves to teach that last one, a toe-tapping line dance from New Orleans. "Any time you hear that Dixieland music, you just gotta get moving!" he says. "It's great for helping people lose their inhibitions."

"Ballroom Dancing" attracts students with varying degrees of skill—members of the UI dance team, people who know how to navigate a basic waltz, and complete novices. In the first few weeks, many in the class suffer from inhibitions. They're overwhelmed by the prospect of dancing with a partner to unfamiliar music—in fact, just dancing.

They're in good hands, though. Davis has taught dance for many years and to many people, including grade schoolers during his tenure as principal of Iowa City's Grant Wood Elementary. Now retired, he teaches classes at the recreational centers in Coralville and in North Liberty, in addition to his two classes at the UI. Davis's mother taught him to waltz at the tender age of ten, and he has danced ever since. He met his wife on the dance floor at Iowa Wesleyan College 45 years ago. "We used to dance every night because it was the only thing you could afford to do," he says.

For this class, one of the biggest problems Davis faces is finding appropriate music—tunes that provide the necessary beats and rhythms yet still appeal to his students. "It's my music versus theirs," he laughs. "A lot of their music is for listening to, not dancing."

His criteria for the first few lessons are simple: "Anything with a four-count beat that they can move to." So, he mixes rap and disco numbers but does incorporate music that the students have heard before—songs from Elvis Presley and popular TV sitcoms such as *Ally McBeal*.

Another hurdle is getting his male students to loosen up. Whereas women tend to move with rhythm and grace and follow the music easily, many men are awkward—more Fred Flintstone than Fred Astaire. "From the age of about four, boys tend to

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Instructor Paul Davis recommends these movies for good examples of ballroom dancing:

Scent of a Woman
for the tango

The King & I
for the waltz

The Student Prince

Saturday Night Fever



With locked eyes and attitudes at the ready, these students discover what happens when the dance takes over.

lock their knees and walk more stiffly,” Davis notes. “I’ve got to get them to unlock and bend more.”

Students appreciate Davis’s warm personality and the relaxed environment in class. They are graded on attendance and a short, 30-question test at the end of the session, although the syllabus also includes reading material surveying the history of dance and detailing various movements and hand holds.

Jessica Bickford already envisions herself making practical use of her new ability on the dance floor. “It will definitely be put to use at formal occasions such as weddings,” says the music education and communication studies sophomore from Bettendorf. “I’ll be able to participate instead of sitting on the sidelines and watching others have fun dancing.”

Students have plenty of other outlets for their new skills. The Iowa City/Cedar Rapids chapter of the USABDA lists almost 20 local ballrooms on its website,

and several of Davis’s students make plans one week to attend an upcoming dance at the Ponderosa Ballroom in Walford.

Although it’s unfamiliar territory for many of them, especially the women who have to dance with each other because of a shortage of male partners, the students impress Davis with how quickly they pick up the steps and moves. Within a few weeks, couples who started off awkwardly are giddily improvising, their exaggerated struts, dramatic dips, and elaborate turns accompanied by animated laughter. “My favorite moment would have to be when my partner and I were dancing the tango,” says Van Wyk. “We had one of those moments where you lock eyes and attitude takes over. Then it’s no longer just a dance.”

Surprisingly, many students seem to favor the waltz. “They just love that dance,” Davis says, “maybe because it’s so romantic.” He remembers a time not long ago when, at a party attended by some 200 people, only two couples (including Davis and his wife) stayed on the floor when the band played a waltz. “And then everybody clapped when we finished,” he says.

Thanks to his efforts, these students will be able to step out confidently when the first strains of a waltz fill the air. The last question on the course’s final exam asks: “How can you tell a good dancer?” After eight weeks of two-stepping and lindy-hopping, Davis’s students know the answer: “A good dancer gets on the dance floor and doesn’t have to get off. He or she can dance to anything.”

To prove the point, Davis plays a random array of songs, from Benny Goodman’s “Sing, Sing, Sing” to the famous 1917 Argentinean tango “La Cumparsita.” Within a few beats, his students are on the floor—dancing.

Dana Fromm, a psychology junior from Saint Louis, shares the secret: “It isn’t just knowing the steps, but being able to hear the music and move with it.” **www**

Kate Hamilton of Cedar Rapids was a journalism senior at the UI when she wrote this article.