
Dance as if No One Were Watching



By Richard Parker, Delray Beach

“Now we do the thirty magic steps. You start with the prep step, then a heel turn to a feather, followed by a reverse turn, another feather, then a 3-step...” And off she went in a fluid gliding motion with little respect for gravity.

This was Amy Block at the ABC Ballroom in New York, demonstrating to me in 1988 what was an otherwise incomprehensible pattern of footwork. Around us, the ballroom was filled with talented dancers such as Pat Taverna, Debbie Avalos, Bill Davies, and others. The coaches on the ballroom floor were demonstrating the latest English groupings, fresh from Blackpool, on their annual sojourn from London to New York, to Chicago, to Los Angeles, and then on to Houston and Miami before returning to London. Like circuit riding preachers, they spread their gospel of technique and balance to the great-unwashed terpsichorean masses – myself included.

But I was unaware of the details of the industry – after all, I saw Amy over at Stepping Out Studio on upper Broadway during an Argentine Tango lesson, and I just liked the way she moved. Movement – the *sine quo non* of dance, is exquisitely expressed in the International Style; never mind that a credible foxtrot may take 15 years to perfect.

Now, blessed by ignorance and fortified with the notion that “I could do it”, we continued the lesson, mindful of the wall poster, “*Dance as if No One Were Watching.*”

Now, why does a moderately boring engineer – or anyone else for that matter, suddenly take to ballroom dance? This is a question asked through history, but perhaps expressed best by Ruth St. Denis, who believed “*Dance begins in consciousness, not in the body.*” Perhaps it is something born within us, and we are unable to process it, just to do it.

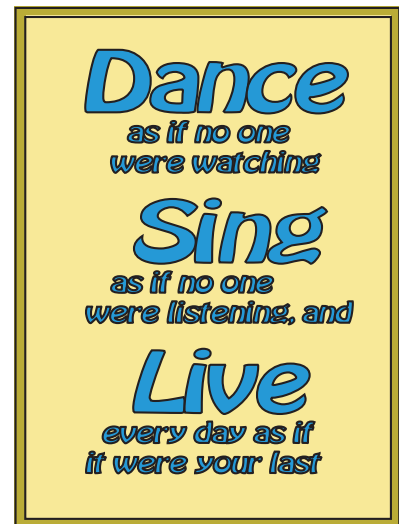


Watergate Hotel in Winter

“Now the reverse turn is executed with a contra-body movement so the lady (always the lady, pronounced “Laay-Dee”) may proceed with you along your left. Then you continue into the feather step...” So she continued, and I, new and fascinated by the process and wondering what this was all about, finished the lesson and New York appointments then caught the shuttle to Washington out of La Guardia.

But that January evening, walking out on the open parking lot of the Washington Watergate Hotel, my practice time was to begin.

No dance floor here – but the Southeast corner of the lot was somewhat empty and smoothly spread with a glistening texture of white snow, reflecting little sparkly points of lights from the overhanging mercury vapor bulbs. The Walkman tape player was enveloped deep



Studio Poster

in the left pocket of my tapered Italian ISSOMO overcoat – the ear bud phones securely in place, and the only competition to this picture was the actions of the party on the fifth floor behind. I was told this was a high-powered party with members of Congress and the Senate, but I had no invitation at the time.

So the measure of the movement of the thirty magic steps began (*Dance as if No One Were Watching*), tracing out shoe outlines in the white coating, trailing runners for the execution of the “dragging two.” The choreography traced out a ragged rectangle, bounded only by the wheel markers, and the dancer moved with little skill but abundant persuasion, being particular to the heel turns and the backward-moving waves.

That is, until I looked up.

There, on the fifth floor, outside the party apartment, and lined along the rail, was perhaps fifty partygoers, quietly surveying my performance.

With an astonished halt to the routine, I suddenly stopped in the midst of yet another reverse turn.

There it was – my first public performance, in front of a high-powered audience of Washington political personages – and a solo performance at that.

After making a slow and elegant bow, I purposefully strode across the lot to the Hotel entrance accompanied by the sudden burst of applause.