



Behind the Steps
History & Culture

A Project of
American Ballroom Theater



www.dancingclassrooms.com

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Dancing Classrooms

Mission Statement:

Our mission is to build social awareness, confidence, and self-esteem in children. By working with a partner in a dance hold, students are required to exhibit care, consideration and team work, transferable skills necessary for adult life.

Launched in 1994 as a project of the American Ballroom Theater Company, Inc., directed by Pierre Dulaine and Yvonne Marceau, ***Dancing Classrooms*** is an Arts-in-Education program integrated into the upper elementary curricula.

To achieve the goal of social awareness, and to build self-esteem, ABRT uses a curriculum-based approach with a 10-week series of 45 to 50 minute classes held twice each week. The classes serve a diverse population of children and languages; there are no pre-requisites and experience is never required; all children participate and all classes are conducted in English. Also, the public school teachers are encouraged to join in.

This booklet offers a look at the geographical origins of the dances as well as an introduction to their history and musical development.

We hope this information will be useful in uniting the experiences of social dancing to the students' academic coursework and in expanding their understanding of the world and its many cultures.

October, 2006

Introduction



American Ballroom Theater's ***Dancing Classrooms*** provides instruction in American style ballroom dance. Training in some of the classic styles of ballroom dance helps students experience the joy of moving with a partner and the accomplishment of building a skill. Students learn steps, rhythm, body posture and style for the dances as well as the history and background.

Understanding the basics and performing them in a correct form while working co-operatively with a partner becomes the ingredients through which ballroom dance can be judged. These skills lead directly into recreational dancing, for sheer pleasure or for competition, where couples can exhibit their accomplishment before judges. Students learn to appreciate a vital and active contemporary folk form, while exploring its various cultural, geographical and artistic influences.

The featured dances are: Latin, with Merengue and Rumba, and Ballroom which includes Foxtrot, Waltz, and Tango, plus Swing, and the fun "Line" dances. Each class in the series introduces new steps, reinforcing what has been previously learned through practice and repetition.

The course culminates in social activities geared toward family members such as an evening dance for students with their parents, an assembly performance complete with literacy components, sometimes a Ballroom Breakfast. After all exhibitions are completed, a team of 12 students are chosen by audition at each school to dance at the "Colors of the Rainbow" Team Match.

About the Dances – Cultural and Dance History

The histories of our current ballroom dances are intricately connected to the development of various musical elements in different countries. In the Caribbean and South America, for example, laws were not as restrictive as they were in North America regarding use of original African instruments, so rhythms continued to be played on what is commonly known as Conga drums. These drums, along with stringed instruments similar to the banjo and percussion instruments such as the Marimba, have blended and evolved into contemporary Latin music.



In North American repressive laws against enslaved people practicing their own cultural traditions were rigidly enforced. The African musical and dance rhythm and sensibilities, however, were not repressed. Unable to play drums in the traditional ways, new instruments and styles of movement and music were invented. Syncopation, or the accent coming on the after beat (a highly specific characteristic of African music), became the basis of what we think of as American musical styles, from Ragtime to Jazz to Swing to Rock.

New Orleans, the cradle of American Jazz, maintains a unique position in the history of American music. The French colonial power did not restrict the music and dance as rigidly as most of the other areas of North America. In fact on Sundays, enslaved people gathered in an area known as Congo Square to share music and dance.

This continual and frequent through line of musical and dance styles directly influenced what we now think of as American music. The musicians, though predominately originally African, would not have been a homogenous group either, presumably having roots in many tribal and cultural traditions. As these diverse elements blended through time, new forms resulted. It is interesting to know, for instance, that Rap has direct links to this period and connections past this period to both Africa and Spain. What is important to understand, is that, while it is impossible to connect exactly the direct path a given art form takes, it is exciting to understand the cross cultural traditions evident in the movements and music of ballroom dancing.

Merengue



Location: **Dominican Republic**

Capital: **Santo Domingo**

Island in the Caribbean, borders with Haiti

Official Language: Spanish

Surrounded by Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea

The Merengue, originally a folk dance of the Dominican Republic, is a stationary or spot dance with a vigorous feel. A dance in 2/4, it is certainly a combination of African and Spanish culture. It has been linked both to the word *merenguearse*, which means to dance with real abandon, and also to an African dance in duple time called the *Meringha*.

After reaching a stature as a dance of the salon in the Dominican Republic, it made its formal entry into the dance scene in this country in 1955. Along with other Latin dances such as the Mambo, Cha-cha, and Bossa Nova, the Merengue possessed the requisite elements for a lasting social dance – and now seems to be a permanent part of our dance repertory.

Dance lore suggests a Prime Minister, upon returning from a successful war was presented with this style of dance to honor his wooden leg incurred from the battle.

Description: Marching dance on the beat, moving the hips.

Count: side together, side together.

Time signature: 4/4.

Speed: 56 measures per minute.



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Foxtrot



Before 1910 and the startling emergence of Ragtime music, ballroom dancing existed mostly in the hot-house atmosphere of private balls and parties. Dancing was based on a modified ballet technique.

The Schottische, the Polka, the Two-Step and the Waltz were the fashion. Feet were daintily turned out, partners held each other at arm's length, and dance steps followed set sequences. Cuts, slides and points were the dancer's equipment. Then suddenly, the patterned elegance of pre-modern ballroom dancing disappeared with amazing finality.

The intoxicating Ragtime music touched off a dance craze that circled the globe. Newly opened public dance spots were crowded with couples who lurched around the floor, holding each other closely, just happy to keep time to the wonderful, pulsing music. But – as it inevitably had to be – a measure of order began to develop from the chaos of the Turkey Trot, Bunny Hug and Grizzly Bear. By 1914, the rage for fast tempo Ragtime dances had died down. A sweet, lilting kind of music began to pour out of Tin Pan Alley. The old Two-Step and the new One-Step, producer of Ragtime, were blended, and the Foxtrot in common four-four time, danced to this smooth, sweet music, became an international favorite.

Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines Foxtrot as "1. A slow, mixed gait of a horse in which it trots with the forelegs and paces with the hind legs; hence, 2. A dance in 4/4 time with a variety of steps, both fast and slow." This manner of derivation is in line with the tendency prevalent from 1910-1914 to introduce dances characterized as "walks" "canters" "and "trots" and to give them animal names.

Dance lore suggests that a vaudeville performer name Harry Fox choreographed the original Fox Trot in 1912-1914. As danced by Fred Astaire in the 1930's the Foxtrot is a joyful, creative dance, emphasizing improvisation within the overall tempo of the music. In the past, over 75% of all popular songs were written in Foxtrot tempo.



Description: Two walking steps and a side-together.
Count: slow, slow, quick, quick. Time signature: 4/4.
Speed: 34 measures per minute.

Rumba



Location: CUBA
Capital: Havana
Island in the Caribbean
Official language is Spanish



The Rumba's origins date back more than 400 years to the cultures African slaves brought with them to Cuba. In its most basic form, it was an expressive pantomime danced by the Africans to hypnotic rhythms. A variation on this ritual pantomime is still performed today in Cuba's countryside.

A stationary or spot dance internationalized in the 1930's, the Rumba combines undulating African isolations of the hip and rib-cage, the syncopated rhythms of many of the African musical traditions and the embrace position first seen in the Waltz. It was an instant success, for American were completely beguiled by the exciting Cuban Music – a fusion of Spanish melody and African rhythm, and by the movement style of this importation from the Caribbean. The body rhythm was an expression new to the American ballroom. The upper body remained quiet, while the shift of weight was manifested through the hips.

But the dance we've come to call the Rumba is to a certain extent an American fabrication. Since the diamond-shaped step of the Cuban "Son" (the most popular Cuban social dance) was alien to us, and since the upper body shift on count "one" – instead of our customary stepping on count "one" was alien also – we made the Rumba basic into a form of the box, and also interpreted the music by making a foot placement on count one.

Despite these changes from the original, the Rumba's popularity rivaled that of the Foxtrot for many years. Then the dance called the Mambo took its place in popularity in some sections of the country. However, in many other sections and in many segments of society, the American style Rumba continues with its popularity unabated.

Description: Box step starting to the side
Count: quick, quick, slow. Quick, quick, slow.
Time signature: 4/4.
Speed: 32 measures per minutes.

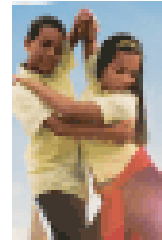


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Tango



Argentina, South America
Capitol: Buenos Aires
Official language: Spanish



The Argentine Tango, which came to being in Buenos Aires, refers not only to the dance steps, but also the music, song and poetry. Like other dances influenced by African traditions, its rhythms are punctuated and complicated. Unlike many other forms, there are none of the common percussion instruments in a Tango orchestra. Rather, accordion and guitar are used to provide the percussion.

The Tango has no clearly defined origin: it may have roots in Argentine, Brazil, Spain and Mexico. Descended from an early Spanish folk dance, the Milonga, and bearing traces of Morrish and Arabic ancestry, the Tango acquired its name in the early 20th century in Argentina, although it was being danced under various other names throughout South America. As the Tango developed, it is believed that many Argentine immigrants of Italian descent mixed dance and musical styles with the Spanish and African populations of Argentine. Many male workers, finding themselves without their families frequented Tango halls where they dance to songs of longing, despair and bad luck. With its intriguing, asymmetrical style, the image of the Tango is one of dancers who thrust their legs between one another with quick, sharp moves, then pause and unexpectedly change direction.

The Argentine Tango was introduced in Paris and on the Riviera by the Argentines early in the 1900's. This version was widely accepted almost immediately, and in many countries became equally popular with the Foxtrot and Waltz. In order to simplify the rhythm and leading, a form of the Tango evolved in the United States in the late 1920's, which employed four beats or two measures for the basic figures. This style came to be known as the American Style Tango and is a practical way to enjoy the Argentine rhythm. It does not, however, have the maneuverability of the true Argentine Tango and therefore requires more room for its execution.

Description: Three walks, side- close, no weight
Count: T-A-N-G-O
Time signature: 4/4.
Speed: 56 measures per minute.



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Swing



Swing at the present time, is a name given to an American jazz dance typified by subtle movements and syncopated timing. Related to such memorable dances as the Black Bottom and Shag, it traces its origins to the Lindy Hop of 1927 and American jazz rhythms. Early twentieth century Rag dances and the Charleston in the 1920's led directly into Lindy Hop, which is said to have been named after Charles A. Lindbergh and his epochal flight across the Atlantic. In its original form, the Lindy Hop was noted for its spectacular muscular contortions and the acrobatic feats of both partners.

In the 1930's, young people in Harlem danced a complicated air born version at the Savoy Ballroom, often performing in ad hoc competitions and creating impressive aerial movements. Initially, the Lindy was performed as a modified box step (a basic took 8 counts) with a distinct shuffling movement. This shuffle is what makes the faster tempo of the Lindy into a single time Lindy. The more popular Triple Lindy is dance to slower tempi.

In order to survive, all dances must have a firmly established basic pattern from which to improvise. The Swing has this attribute (a 6 count rhythm) and furthermore, can be dance expertly in a relatively small area. American G.I.'s can be seen in many Hollywood moveies dancing to the sounds of big bands such as Benny Goodman, Count Basie and Duke Ellington.

Single time Swing: Side, side, back rock

Count: Slow, slow, quick, quick.

Time signature: 4/4.

Speed: 42 measures per minute



Waltz



Austria, Europe
Capitol: Vienna
Official language: German



With the sweeping differences in tempo among Slow Waltz, Medium Waltz and Viennese Waltz, there is an inevitable wide variation in movement style for each speed. Originally a turning, traveling dance for couples in $\frac{3}{4}$ time popularized in Vienna in the mid-nineteenth century, the Waltz remains as “Queen of the Ballroom.” People were shocked when the Waltz was first introduced. A man dancing with his hand upon a lady’s waist in public? No proper lady would permit it and society matrons declared it wicked and compromising. Yet in the United States, where there was no blue-blood caste, it proved an immediate success, and was danced by the citizenry as early as 1840. Young people, when requesting a dance once shouted ‘a waltz and a waltz again.’

In the early days of Waltz history Strauss, Waldteufel and Chopin wrote their exquisite melodies to be played at the exciting tempo of fifty-eight to sixty-six bars per minute. Then in the closing decades of the 19th century American composers began to write waltzes to be played at a tempo ranging from forty-four to forty-eight bars per minute. These were compositions like “After the Ball” and “A Bird in a Gilded Cage.” At that time the dance form was modified to accord with this music. Later, after the Ragtime Revolution of 1910, an even slower tempo waltz, typified by “My Wonderful One” claimed the talents of American composers, and again the waltz form was modified to fit the new music.

The Waltz proved its mettle by being the only classical dance to survive the Ragtime Revolution, albeit with diminished popularity. With the introduction of ragtime in 1910, the Waltz slipped into second place in the public’s fancy, being supplanted by the many walking, strutting dances of the era. People who had mastered the techniques and whirling patterns of the Waltz quickly learned the simple walking patterns, paving the way for the great ragtime rage and the birth of the Foxtrot.

American Waltz: Box Step.

Count: 1 2 3 4 5 6. Six steps to six beats.

Time signature: $\frac{3}{4}$. Speed: 31-36 measures per minute.

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Folk and Line Dances

Heel-Toe Polka

The Heel Toe Polka, derives from a *chasse-saute en tournant*, a step common in many folk dances and loosely translates into a chasing step that turns. Popularized in the mid-nineteenth century, the polka has a triple beat with an outside 2/4 meter. Hops and turns combine to give the dancers the intimacy of the Waltz with the vivacity of the Irish Jig. A contemporary German dance historian traveled from Odessa to Vienna to study the Polka and found the steps to be nothing more than the well-known Scottish (Schottische) Waltz. Certainly Eastern European immigrants in the United States brought the dance with them. It is originally thought to be based on either Scandinavian or Bohemian folk dances.



Line Dances

Line dances exist in many cultures and have many different degrees of intricacy. They are a choreographed sequence of steps, performed by individuals and allowing for some improvisation, as long as the performer keeps within the general movement of the line. **Dancing Classrooms** program uses some classic late twentieth century line dances such as The Macarena, The Stomp and The Electric Slide.

Curriculum Integration Ideas

Language Arts

- Keep a Ballroom Dance Journal / Portfolio, include art work, personal reflections, poetry, photographs, dance history details, impressions of the music, dance related articles, critiques and self presentation or public performance.
- Create an acrostic from the letters of one of the ballroom dances or the letters of the American Ballroom Theater Company or the letters of Dancing Classrooms.
- Using several different forms of poetry, write a poem for each dance learned. Examples: A rhymed couplet about the Waltz, a haiku about the Foxtrot, etc.
- Interview your parents about the kind of social dancing they did when they were young.
- Create a spelling list from the vocabulary words in the dance history booklet, *Behind the Steps*.

Social Studies

- Research ballroom dance costumes. Design your own costumes and present your sketches to the class.
- Interview your grandparents about the dances in the countries of your own ancestral origin.
- Interview your parents about the kind of social dancing they did when they were young.
- Locate and learn about the countries or regions where each of the dances originated.
- Create a vocabulary list from words in the dance history booklet, *Behind the Steps*.

Math

- Calculate the number of steps taken per minute based upon the time signature in each dance (*Behind the Steps*).
- Have students create some word problems from the dances.
- List the geometric patterns of the dances.

Science

- Discuss sound frequencies and percussion rhythms.
- Discuss basic laws of physics and apply them to different parts of dancing/moving.
- Show how a ballroom dance step is executed using the biomechanical levers/joints of the body.
- Chart all the processes used in the body to dance (mind, ears, nervous system, muscles, bones, etc)

Physical Education

- Monitor heart rates during each different dance and compare
- Track steps with a pedometer during each dance and compare
- Teach your parents one of the basic dance steps. Write down the process step by step. Read your paper to your class and give a demonstration.

Art

- Design a ballroom costume using one of the art forms learned so far in class.
- Design an invitation for the culminating event.

Music

- Learn about the instruments used in one of the dance styles.

5th Grade Teachers: we would love to hear about your curriculum integration ideas. Please send your stories to our office:

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Is a project of the American Ballroom Theater
Providing arts programs of quality to public schools

*"Dancing is about connections – to our families, friends and neighbors. It's one of the most expressive ways we celebrate and communicate about our cultures and communities. With **Dancing Classrooms**, we're able to reach children in existing classroom settings and address fundamental issues of mutual respect and self esteem – issues that social dance puts into practice."* - Pierre Dulaine & Yvonne Marceau, Artistic Directors, American Ballroom Theater

Dancing Classrooms was developed in 1994 to help meet the ongoing need to provide hard-pressed public schools with quality arts programs. It is a holistic approach to build confidence and teamwork, stretch creative skills, and support academic excellence, using the rich a varied vocabularies of social dance to increase cooperation, to improve concentration and to explore areas of commonality, understanding and cultural awareness.



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