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## OF DANCE ETIQUETTE

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### INTRODUCTION

Dance etiquette is a set of guidelines that help us navigate the social dimensions of dancing.

Why do we care about dance etiquette? Because it is nice to know how to go about in the dancing circles. It makes the difference between having a happy or unhappy dancing experience, the difference between people wanting, or not wanting to dance with you.

### WHAT TO WEAR?

#### Protocol:

Dancing has its own culture. If you want to join a group of dancers and enjoy their company, it is a good idea to follow the accepted costumes of their dance group. One of the ways you get accepted into a group is by the way you're dressed.

How formally should we dress at a dance? The general rule is this: the more formal the dance, the more formal the outfit. For example, if you are invited to a formal charity ball, anything less than a tuxedo for men or ball gown for women would be inappropriate. On the other hand, at a dance lesson at your local studio, there is usually no need to dress formally.

A little common sense goes a long way. Also, if in doubt, follow the crowd! See what others do and follow suit. If all else fails, you can always ask the dance organizers about the dress code.

Below I give a guideline and explanation for dress code, which you may see on invitations and announcements, as well as a general idea of what to wear at different dance venues.

- **White tie:** White tie is the most formal category of dressing. For the gentleman, it means a black tailcoat with matching trousers trimmed by ribbon of braid or satin on the outside of each trouser leg, a white pique' tie, white pique' single or double-breasted vest, and a wing-collar shirt with a stiff pique' front. White gloves are nice optional accessories for gentlemen. The lady appears in a ball gown, which is an evening dress with a full skirt, possibly with open back and low neck line. Elbow-length gloves are a nice addition for the lady.
- **Black tie:** Gentlemen in black tuxedo coat, trousers trimmed with satin ribbon along the outside of the legs, cummerband and bow tie. The phrase "black tie" does not refer to the color of the tie. In fact colorful ties (with matching cummerbands) are very popular. Ladies appear in ball gowns.
- **Black tie optional:** Same as above, except gentlemen have the option of wearing a regular suit with a tie (bow tie preferred), and ladies wear a cocktail gown or dinner dress. Long to full-length skirts are preferred; short skirts are not recommended.
- **Formal:** Gentlemen in suit and tie (nowadays a sport coat is often an acceptable replacement for a full suit), ladies in cocktail gown or evening dress.
- **Semi-formal:** Gentlemen in dress slacks with dress shirt and tie, jacket is optional. Other options include a vest or a sweater that shows the tie. At the lower end of formality, these events can be attended without a tie, e.g. with a turtleneck and jacket. Ladies in evening dress or dinner dress, but other chic outfits are also acceptable (like flowing pants, etc.)
- **Dressy Casual:** Applies to most practice dances, workshops, and dance lessons. Gentlemen can wear cotton slacks with solid color T-shirt, turtleneck, mock turtleneck, or polo shirt. Ladies have a

much wider set of clothing options. Use your imagination and sense of fashion. In general this is a conservative and toned-down appearance that has grown increasingly popular on the dance floors. Don't forget your dance shoes!

- **Country/Western:** Country western attire has variations across the country, but generally it is acceptable to go in blue or black jeans (not stone-washed) and cowboy boots. Make sure that the boots will not mark the dance floor. If you wear a hat, it may be a good idea to take it off when going on the floor. Note that country western folks can be very sensitive about their hats. It is improper to touch or otherwise handle someone's hat, even if it sits on a table. For a lady to pick up and put on a gentleman's hat is considered very flirtatious.
- **Milongas:** (Argentine Tango) For both ladies and gentlemen, black or dark themes are preferred.
- **Latin:** This refers to venues that specialize in Salsa, Merengue, Cumbia, etc. For gentlemen, any button-up shirt, solid T-shirt or mock turtleneck, dress slacks, and dance shoes. Jackets are nice, but a vest can be even more stylish. Unlike most other dance venues, bright and colorful outfits for gentlemen are acceptable, although dark themes are more common. Ladies can (and often do) wear sexy outfits: both short skirts and longer slit skirts are popular. Low necklines and exposed midriffs are not uncommon.
- **Swing:** There are no strict rules for swing outfits. Both the Gentleman and the Lady wear outfits that are reasonably neat and chic, although often not very formal. Many types of swing are fast-paced and athletic, so wearing suitable clothing is essential. For example, the Lady would be well advised to stay away from short, tight skirts. See also the next section on Comfort and Safety. A cute trend, especially in Lindy Hop circles, is to wear vintage outfits from the 1930's and 40's. But this is not done everywhere and is not at all a requirement.

### **Comfort and safety:**

Wear clothing that makes it easy and enjoyable to dance, both for yourself and your partner.

- Regardless of how informal the dance is, always wear dance shoes. Do not wear sneakers or other shoes with rubber or spongy soles. They can stick to the floor during turns and spins and cause ankle and knee injuries.
- Avoid sleeveless shirts and strapped dresses, especially for active dancing: It is not pleasant to have to touch the damp skin of a partner.
- Sleeves that are baggy or cut low in the armpit are not a good idea, especially in Latin and swing dancing, because dancers need access to partner's back, and hands may get caught in baggy sleeves.
- Accessories like big rings, watches, brooches, loose/long necklaces, and big belt buckles can be dangerous. They can catch in partner's clothing, scratch and bruise.
- Gentlemen: if you have no place to leave your keys and loose change, carry them in the \*left\* pocket of your trousers. This makes it less likely to bruise your partner.
- Long hair should be put up or tied in a pony tail. It is difficult to get into closed dance position when the lady has long flowing hair (hair gets caught in gentleman's right hand). It is also not fun to be hit in the face with flying hair during turns and spins.

## **PERSONAL GROOMING**

Dancing is an activity where two people come in close contact. Before a dance:

- Shower and use a deodorant,

- Brush teeth and use mouthwash or breath mint,
- Abstain from foods that produce strong odors, like those heavy in garlic
- The odor of cigarettes on one's breath or clothing can be very unattractive.

During a dance:

- Check your grooming periodically
- During active dance sessions, freshen up and towel off periodically in the bathroom
- Gentlemen, you can carry an extra shirt with you to the dance, in case you need a change.

## **ASKING FOR A DANCE**

When asking for a dance, it is easiest to stay with traditional phrases:

- ``May I have this dance?"
- ``May I have this Waltz/Rumba/Foxtrot/etc."
- ``Would you like to dance?"
- ``Care to dance?"
- ``Shall we dance?"

In the past it has been the tradition that men asked women to dance. But this custom has gradually changed. Today, women should feel equally comfortable asking a partner for a dance, even in a formal setting.

If your desired partner is with a group, be unambiguous and make eye contact when asking for a dance. If you vaguely approach a group, two individuals may think you are asking for a dance. You can imagine that the one not getting the dance is going to be miffed. Let's avoid such awkward moments by a decisive approach and solid eye contact.

What if you want to ask someone to dance, who is engaged at the moment in a conversation? Is it acceptable to interrupt a conversation to ask someone to dance? Some would say that one's presence in a dancing establishment indicates a desire for dancing and everyone is fair game. Others say that interrupting a conversation is rude.

In my opinion, ask someone to dance if you think he/she is ready to dance and will enjoy dancing with you at that moment. This requires you to be a good judge of the moment. Also, if you know someone well enough to know they don't mind being interrupted, then go ahead and ask them.

Perhaps one way to handle this is to walk gently to the edge of your intended partner's "personal space", which is about 3-4 feet (one meter). It will give you an opportunity to ask them to dance. If your presence is not acknowledged, then it may be a good idea to find someone else for that dance.

Exercising common sense and social skills is always a good idea. If someone is sitting closely with their significant other, whispering sweet nothings to each other, then it is probably not a good time to ask either of them for a dance. Now a different scenario: your intended partner is cornered by a bore and being lectured on weather patterns in lower Namibia. You can advance and stand close. Once your intended partner makes eye contact with you, smile and say: ``Dance?" Usually, that is enough to do the job. If not, it is better to leave him/her to learn about weather patterns in lower Namibia.

Sometimes two individuals simultaneously ask someone for a dance. In that situation, dance etiquette

recommends that the object of attention should accept one of the dances, while offering a later dance to the other one.

## **WHOM TO ASK**

If each person dances with only one or two others, the social dynamics of dancing will be compromised. For that reason, dance etiquette strongly encourages everyone to dance with many different partners. This is to ensure a diversity of partnerships on the floor, and to give everyone a chance to dance. Specifically, dance etiquette rules against asking the same partner for more than two consecutive dances.

One of the common violations of this rule occurs when someone dances most of the night with their escort. The ruling of etiquette in this case is much the same as for the traditional (formal) dinner parties: one never sits down to dinner next to one's spouse. It is assumed that if spouses were interested primarily in talking with one another, they could have stayed home together. By the same token, going to a social dance demonstrates a desire to dance socially. This means dancing with a host of partners, and not just with one or a select few. I have heard a version of this rule that reserves the first and last dance of the evening to be done with one's escort, and other dances with others.

People generally tend to dance with others at their own level, but you should try to dance socially with partners of all levels. Dance etiquette frowns disapprovingly on those who only dance with the best dancers on the floor. Although this is not a terrible offense, it is still bad form. Better dancers are especially advised to ask beginners to dance. Not only does this help the social dynamics of a dance, it also helps the better dancer (although it is outside the scope of this discussion to explain why or how).

Unfortunately, there are some social dancers who consider themselves too good to dance with beginners, who cannot "keep up" with their level of dancing. It is often the case that these dancers are not as good as they think. They need good partners because only good partners can compensate for their mistakes, bad technique, or other inadequacies. The truly good dancers often seek the challenge of dancing with those at lower levels, and enjoy it. Good dancers make their partners look good.

## **DECLINING A DANCE**

Being declined is always unpleasant. For beginners and shy individuals it is even harder to take, and may discourage them from social dancing. Dance etiquette requires that one should avoid declining a dance under most circumstances. For example, there is no correct way of refusing an invitation on the basis of preferring to dance with someone else. According to tradition, the only graceful way of declining a dance is either (a) you do not know the dance, (b) you need to take a rest, or (c) you have promised the dance to someone else.

The last excuse should be used only sparingly. When declining a dance, it is good form to offer another dance instead: "No, thank you, I'm taking a break. Would you like to do another dance later?" Also, declining a dance means sitting out the whole song. It is inconsiderate and outright rude to dance a song with anyone after you have declined to dance it with someone else. If you are asked to dance a song before you can ask (or get asked by) your desired partner, that's the luck of the draw. The choices are to dance it with whomever asked first, or to sit out the dance.

Does dance etiquette allow declining a dance outside of the cases mentioned above? The answer is yes, if someone is trying to monopolize you on the dance floor, make inappropriate advances, is unsafe (e.g. collides with others on the floor), or is in other ways unsavory, you are within the bounds of etiquette to

politely but firmly decline any more dances. Perhaps the simplest, best way is to say "No, thank you," without further explanation or argument. Dancers are encouraged to use discretion and restraint when exercising this option.

## **BEING DECLINED**

The first thing to do when one is turned down for a dance is to take the excuse at face value. Typical social dance sessions can be as long as three to four hours, and there are few dancers who have the stamina of dancing non-stop. Everyone has to take a break once in a while, and that means possibly turning down one or two people each time one takes a break. The advice to shy dancers and especially beginners is not to get discouraged if they are turned down once or twice.

However, since social dancers are generally nice and polite, being repeatedly declined can be a signal. In that case, it is a good idea to examine one's dancing and social interactions to see if anything is wrong.

## **ON THE DANCE FLOOR**

### **Line of Dance:**

The dancing on a floor is done along a counter clockwise direction, known as the Line Of Dance. This applies to traveling dances including Waltz, Foxtrot, Tango, Quickstep, and Viennese Waltz, as well as Polka and two-step in the country western repertoire. Latin and Swing dances are more or less stationary and have no line of dance. Sometimes it is possible to dance more than one type of dance to the same song. For example, some Foxtrots can also be swings, and many Lindy Hop songs are just great for Quickstep. In that case, swing dancers take the middle of the floor, and the moving dancers move along the periphery in the direction of the line of dance.

### **Getting on the floor:**

Some caution should be exercised when getting on the dance floor, especially if the song has already started and couples are dancing on the floor. It is the responsibility of incoming couples to make sure that they stay out of the way of the couples already dancing. Specifically, before getting into dance position, one should always look opposite the line of dance to avoid blocking someone's way, or even worse, causing a collision.

### **At the end of the dance:**

After the dance is finished and before parting, thank your partner. This reminds me of a social partner who, upon being thanked at the end of the dance, would answer: "You're welcome!" This always gave me a funny feeling. The proper answer to "Thank you!" on the dance floor is: "Thank you!" The point is that the thanks is not due to a favor, but to politeness.

If you enjoyed the dance, let your partner know. Compliment your partner on her/his dancing. Be generous, even if he/she is not the greatest of dancers. Be specific about it if you can: "I really enjoyed that double reverse spin. You led/followed that beautifully!" If you enjoyed it so much that you would like to have another dance with him/her again, this is a good time to mention it: "This Waltz went really great! I'd like to try a Cha-Cha with you later." Although remember that dancing too many dances with the same partner and booking many dances ahead are both violations of social dance rules.

### **Leaving the floor:**

When a song comes to an end, leave the floor as quickly as it is gracefully possible. Tradition requires that the gentleman give his arm to the lady and take her back to her seat at the end of the dance. While this custom is linked to the outdated tradition requiring the gentlemen to ask ladies for dances, it is still a nice touch, although it may be impractical on the more crowded dance floors. In any case, remember that your partner may want to get the next dance. Don't keep them talking after the dance is over, if they seem ready to break away to look for their next partner.

### **Leaving entrances free:**

Some dance floors, especially in country western dance establishments, have limited access space (most of the periphery is railed). Dancers and onlookers should avoid blocking these entrances. In particular, avoid stopping to chat immediately after exiting the dance floor. Another issue in Country Western dancing regards line dancers, who sometimes share the floor with other dancers. They should avoid blocking entrances from the inside while dancing.

### **Sharing the floor:**

Responsible usage of the floor requires that one stays out of the way of others. Some figures require a momentary movement against line of dance. These figures should be executed with great caution on a social dance floor, and only when there is no danger of collision. Avoid getting too close to other couples, especially less experienced ones. Be prepared to change the directions of your patterns to avoid congested areas. This requires thinking ahead and matching your patterns to the free areas on the floor (floorcraft). While this may sound complicated to the novice dancer, it gradually becomes second nature.

Sharing the floor sometimes means leaving the floor! For example, if there are too many dancers to fit on the floor, then a considerate dancer would withdraw every few dances to let everyone dance. The same idea applies if there aren't the same number of men and women. Then there is a mismatch and for each song some people will be left without a partner. If there aren't enough partners, it would be nice to voluntarily withdraw every few dances so that everyone gets a chance to dance.

Another aspect of sharing the floor is to match one's speed to that of others. In a recent social dance, a particularly tall and handsome couple caught my eye. They were moving with great speed and skill across the floor, and I began to enjoy watching them dance. But then I noticed they were coming dangerously close to other dancers on the crowded dance floor, and many times other couples came to a stop and moved out of their way. It was easy to see they were unhappy about this couple ``taking over" the floor.

### **Aerials and choreography:**

The only thing to be said about aerials on the social dance floor is: don't do them. While they may look ``cool," the execution of aerials requires training by a qualified instructor. Don't do them by yourself unless you are trained, and certainly don't do them on the social dance floor. Dancers have been badly hurt by either participating in aerials, or unluckily being in the proximity of those who did. In fact, in 1996, a swing dancer died during the execution of an aerial. Aerials can be extremely dangerous, please take this issue seriously.

The same principle applies to other lifts and drops, as well as choreographed patterns that require a large

amount of floor space.

## **No-Fault Dancing**

Never blame a partner for missed execution of figures. Once in a social dance I accidentally overheard a novice couple, where the lady said: "I can do this step with everyone but you!" The fact that she was wrong (I had seen her other attempts) is irrelevant. The point is that she was unkind and out of line. Even if the gentleman were at fault, she was not to say something like that (more about this in the section: "dancing to the level of partner.")

Regardless of who is at fault when a dancing mishap occurs, both parties are supposed to smile and go on. This applies to the better dancer in particular, who bears a greater responsibility. Accepting the blame is especially a nice touch for the gentleman. But at the same time, do not apologize profusely. There is no time for it, and it makes your partner uncomfortable.

My personal preference is the following: whenever something untoward happens, I first see if my partner noticed. Sometimes the partner may not be aware, for example, that a figure was slightly off-time or that a fine point in technique was missed, in which case it is better to let it go. If she has noticed, I just smile and whisper "sorry..." and go on, regardless of whose fault it was.

## **Did Your Partner Enjoy the Dance?**

### **Dancing to the level of partner:**

It often happens that the two partners dancing socially are not at the same level. It is important that the more experienced partner dances at the level of the less experienced partner. This is mostly a comment for leaders: when dancing with a new partner, start with simple figures, and gradually work your way up to more complicated patterns. You will discover a comfort level, file it away in memory for the next time you dance with the same partner.

The same principle applies to Latin and Swing followers, although to a lesser degree. Doing extra syncopations, footwork, free spins etc. can be distracting and even intimidating for a less experienced leader. Although I must say that the show-off follower is rather rare; most of the violations of this sort are by leaders who lead inexperienced partners into complicated figures.

### **Being sensitive to partner's preferences:**

Social dancers strive to make their partners comfortable and help them enjoy the dance. This requires sensitivity to the likes and dislikes of the partner. These preferences can take a variety of forms. For example, I remember that one of my West Coast Swing social partners found neck wraps uncomfortable. In the same manner, some dancers don't like spins (or many spins in a row), while others really enjoy them. Some like extended syncopations and others don't. There are many more examples in various dance venues. Be sensitive to your partners. It is not too hard to detect their likes and dislikes, and if in doubt, ask.

### **Demeanor:**

Be personable, smile, and make eye contact with your partner. Try to project a warm and positive image on the dance floor, even if that is not your personal style. Many of us lead hectic lives that include a

difficult balance between study, work, family, and other obligations. Having a difficult and tiring day, however, is not an acceptable excuse for a depressing or otherwise unpleasant demeanor on the dance floor. Because of the setting of a social dance, we do not always dance with our favorite partners. This is also not grounds for a cold treatment of the partner. Once one asks or accepts a dance, it is important to be outwardly positive, even if not feeling exactly enthusiastic.

The social dancer is also well advised to be watchful of an unchecked ego. While a healthy sense of self is helpful in all social interactions, it is more attractive when mixed with an equal dose of modesty. Don't let perceived dancing abilities or physical attractiveness go to your head. It is helpful to remember that overestimating one's dance prowess or attractiveness is quite common.

## Teaching on the Floor

There are two aspects to this point of etiquette:

### Unsolicited teaching:

This is unfortunately one of the more common breaches of dance etiquette. This often happens when a dancer stops in the middle of a song to correct his or her partner, or tell them how to execute a dance figure. Ironically, this error is often committed by individuals who are not fit to teach! Experienced social dancers dance at the level of their partners. Even for experienced dancers, the social dance floor is not the place to teach or to correct your partner. It is better to concentrate on patterns that both partners can do and enjoy. Unsolicited teaching can be humiliating and takes the fun out of dancing.

### Soliciting teaching on the floor:

This is not necessarily a flagrant violation. For many, it is flattering to be consulted about a point of dancing. However, a little care and caution is always a good idea. Consider this hypothetical scenario: A polite dancer is excited when his favorite song comes on, and he asks the closest stranger for the dance. He really wants to dance this song, but she replies: "I have never done this dance before. Can you please teach me?"

It is debatable how much one can learn, from scratch, in the 2-3 minutes a typical song plays, but that is beside the point. This is a song he really wants to dance to. For this or any other reason, he may not wish to spend time at that moment teaching someone, but she has left him no polite way of getting out. In this situation: (a) She doesn't know him (so cannot justify the imposition based on friendship), (b) she solicits teaching at the time he is asking her to dance, which puts him at a disadvantage, and (c) she does not know anything about the dance, so he cannot say: "let's just do basic steps."

Of course it's not always that bad. Dancers can learn quite a bit from each other in social dancing; observing a few simple points will make things enjoyable for all:

- Don't say "teach me" the moment someone asks you to dance. If they are shy, they will feel trapped, will spend the next few minutes with you, and then for the rest of the night will avoid you like the plague. If they are not so shy, they will *not* teach you, *and* for the rest of the night will avoid you like the plague.
- A good approach is the following: when asked to dance, one can say "I would like to, but I don't know the dance." This shows that help would be appreciated, but without any pressure.
- The asker in this situation can either offer to take the partner on the floor and do some basic steps, or if s/he is not so inclined, take it as a decline of dance: "Oh, it would have been fun, perhaps we

can do a different dance later?"

- It is better to request help from friends, or at least someone you have had a dance or two with already, rather than someone you just met. If anything, this is a great motivation to make friends in the dance community.
- If you want to get pointers from someone, wait until s/he sits out a dance. Then go talk to her/him. This way they are not missing out on a dance by helping you.

## Summary

- Etiquette is here to ensure everyone has a good time in a social dance setting, so pay attention to it.
- Your outfit and accessories should be comfortable, safe, and also reflect the culture and level of formality of the dance group. Most importantly, do not forget your dance shoes.
- Ask everyone to dance. Do not monopolize one partner for the whole night.
- Today's beginners will be the good dancers of tomorrow, so be nice to them and dance with them.
- Do not decline a dance unless you absolutely have to. Having declined a dance, you cannot dance the same song with someone else.
- Be considerate of other couples on the floor. Exercise good floorcraft. Do not cut other couples off. No aerials or choreographed steps on the social dance floor!
- Stationary dancers (e.g. Swing dancers) stay in the middle, traveling dancers move on the boundary along the line of dance.
- Avoid patterns that your partner cannot do: dance to the level of your partner.
- Never blame your partner for missteps.
- No unsolicited teaching on the floor!
- Smile, be warm, be personable, be nice.

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