

## To Shape or Not To Shape (That is the Question!)



I am guest teacher for the Joffrey Ballet School, Ballet Hispanico and The Gelsey Kirkland Ballet Academy in New York City. The reason I mention this is I have noticed they all have an interesting thing in common. They have a teacher for everything. By that I mean they have a teacher for Core and Technique, one for Period Dance and History, a teacher for Partnering and Adagio and a teacher just for Characterization of the dances. That to me is an amazing package. These prestigious schools obviously feel that these categories are important enough that they make it a part of their daily curriculum

That made me think and ask this question:

Does today's competitive Ballroom or Latin dancer have that same kind of format for their craft? I can only speak for myself. When competing I did not. But what I did have were coaches and teachers who encouraged me to research on my own and guide me in the right direction for as much outside information as possible. Things like take a certain dance class see a certain show etc... For that I am forever grateful. I hope you can achieve a full package for all your dances each and every one. Here are a few suggestions for just one dance. The Paso Doble. The one dance that minimum must have character. Character perhaps based on shape.

First off lets clarify what the dance is about. It is about the Bull Fight. Specifically the "actions" of the Bull Fight. The lady is not the bull. And ladies don't sell yourself short if

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some one says you should be the bull or act like the bull smile and come back with this information.

The three characters of the Paso Doble are:

The Matador. (Both the man and lady may portray this.) The Cape and the Flamenco-Spanish Dancer. Hopefully the lady will play the last two roles through out the dance with a lot of help from the man's leading, shaping, partner skills and choreography. The man's role and character will be dominant through out. The lady may match him periodically with that strength but to be the Matador along side him for most of the dance in my opinion defeats the purpose.

Paso Doble is based on these characters and if the music were off the result is "Pantomime". Or mime for short. Definition: "To act out with gestures and body movement". Anyone watching this dance should be able to see feel and experience this story. The most impact one can have on the competitive floor is sharing the emotionally charged highs and lows of the Bull Fight with the audience, judges and most importantly each other. And what is in the dancers favor is that no matter what competition you go to most of the time you know what music will be played for this dance. The music alone tells the story. That is a gift.

Let us explore the actions of the Matador in the ring. He uses a cape, a piece of material to antagonize, distract or encourage the bull. Who as you know at this point in time is not too happy. He may use the stamp (Appel) as a vibration on the ground to get the bulls attention. After the bull has been aroused the Matador must shape his body in such a way that the bull will not make any direct contact with him. If he stands square on to the animal or stands in a neutral position he would direct the bull into his body. Not the idea. The Matador makes the diagonal shape in his body to deflect the animal to either the right or left side (La Passe) away from him. That said there should be no neutral position in this character. Not only does it possibly save his life but it helps to keep air in the cape as well. If the lady is choosing to be the Matador she may apply the same shapes.

As far as being the cape as previously stated, the lady should place herself according to the Matadors actions or better yet the man should place her there. Ladies you may find a whole different meaning to your actions, shapes, body lines and role in this dance if you think of yourself sometimes as a rich, flowing piece of material possibly floating behind or to the side of the man. The lady does not always have to match the matador's actions.

And lastly we have the Flamenco Dancer. Flamenco is done with the castanets (a musical instrument) and with the rhythms of the feet. So ladies work your hands, fingers and wrists that way. Imagine the texture of the rounded wood in your hands and feel the sound they are making. The same with the feet .We will feel it too! The ladies upper back is arched much higher in this style and the arms go farther back behind the body and head. So ladies apply accordingly. Not so for the classically trained male dancer. He tries to puff his chest with air to be proud and show courage and uses a

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stronger pelvic thrust applied in all the walking and strutting actions. Spanish dance is based on mating rituals, which is why some of these postures are used for the man and lady.

Paso is toward the end of the competition and especially after a few rounds we all get tired. Instead of trying to get more intense in the movement with the arms and legs, quickly and sharply change your core from shape to shape. You will have more stamina and the story line will prevail. I have seen so many wonderful couples dance three great dances and after the Rumba the Paso looks like a Samba or worse yet a traveling Cha-cha. Here is your chance to make a difference, honor your craft and of course “pull focus”. Remember its not the take off it's the landing.

Once again hats off to the brilliant Walter Laird. His book: The Laird Technique of Latin Dancing. Notice how he clarified the timing and musicality of this dance (and all the dances.) A quick example is “a musical accent occurs on the 1st beat of each bar.” Think about it and maybe make a change for the better in your Sur Place movement alone.

This article addresses a tiny portion of the many facets of Paso Doble. This information may be your entry into the next round or refresh your continuing interest in dance education.

Take a Flamenco or Spanish Dance Class. DVD's like Carmen and Blood Wedding by Antonio Gades. A wonderful book by Matteo Vittucci and Carola Goya: The Language of Spanish Dance.

So next time I see you on the dance floor I hope a few of you can mesmerize the crowd with your new found stories, shapes and last but not least characterizations of the dance. The Ballet world just might have the right format after all. To Shape or not to Shape that is the question! I leave that answer up to you.

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