

DEBONAIR

MAGAZINE

a whole new lifestyle.™

Debonair Magazine
<http://www.debonairmag.com>
Monday, November 06, 2006
By Matt Lynch

NIGHTLIFE

[Home](#) > [Nightlife](#)

Don't Get Served: Put Your Best Foot Forward

Posted: Monday, November 06, 2006

By: Matt Lynch

On Halloween night, while the rest of the city was busy throwing together last minute costumes and elbowing their way to the bar or through the Village parade, the mood was a bit less chaotic - if not as energetic - at Dance Chelsea, a studio on 25th St. between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. A young man in a Dead Kennedys T-shirt and beat-up Chuck Taylors waltzed around the room with a girl sporting a wig that complimented her partner's electric blue Mohawk.

The couple's attire might have looked a little out of place, but they did not. Their gracefulness was proof of ballroom dancing's cultural reemergence amongst a generation more comfortable with the mosh pit, club free-for-all or simple cross-armed indifference. Formal dancing's return to the limelight has been helped by a string of recent movies and reality TV shows, but the fact remains: women always dig a guy who can cut a rug.

"For a straight male, it's a great way to meet women," says Drew Brown, 27, an instructor and student at Dance Chelsea. "I went to an engineering school where there was something like a four-to-one guys to girls ratio. So I took a ballroom dancing class and it was four-to-one girls to guys, and I was like, wait a minute."

For single men, knowing the right steps can pay off. There still aren't a whole lot of guys comfortable busting out complex gyrations on the dance floor, let alone with the sort of typically refined dancing that often gets equated with their grandparents' evening activities.

"We teach them to walk and then we teach them to dance," Dance Chelsea owner Stanley McCalla says of his new pupils. "Dancing transforms the students. It gives them confidence, their posture is different."

Beyond the prospect of meeting women and improving confidence, dancing has less goal-oriented benefits. Some men find learning to dance to be, well, fun.

"It's a high, in a way," says Michael Bacarella, 30, a software engineer who was on a break in between lessons. "Especially swing, it's like riding a roller coaster." Bacarella had taken

classes with an ex-girlfriend a few years ago, and is now several months deep into his second tour of duty on the studio hardwood. He couldn't name a motivation in taking lessons other than it just being something he always wanted to do. "It helps me to stay fit. I do go to the gym, but I don't have to do any cardio." McCalla estimates that an hour of dancing can burn up to 200 calories, and says that he makes sure to work his clients that hard if desired.

This reporter couldn't resist trying the workout. So the next day, I decided to dive deeper into the mental aspect of dancing by attending



instructor Samantha von Sperling's studio in a Financial District apartment. I listened as she explained the benefits of dance lessons for her male clients, most of who, she says, are between 25 and 40 years old, and the type of man with an eye for self improvement.

"Dance does two things," she advised, with the authority of someone who has frequently seen it do those two things. "One: it hones a man's body language skills. Two: it develops his presence and his sense of command, command of his body, command of his space, command over somebody else."

"What can I tell you?" she laughed. "Ballroom dancing is a sexist sport. There are rules. That's the way it is, and if a man can't lead, he will fail."

Advocating dance as a complement to building a man's image; von Sperling also runs a social image consulting business, as she defines it, "a one-stop self-improvement boutique." Many of her clients are younger corporate types

who have reached the rung in the career ladder where they are expected to attend fundraisers and other events - where they are assured to find that dance floor taunting them to show their moves. She also does a fair amount of business with engaged couples preparing for their dreaded (more often by the men) first dance.

But the art of dance isn't only an outlet for weddings and business functions. In New York City, knowing how to dance can open the doors to some welcome alternatives to the bar and club scene. Both McCalla and von Sperling were able to rattle off a handful of places where more traditional dancing can be sought out around the city. From old standbys like Lincoln Center's Midsummer Night Swing and the Rainbow Room, to any number of Salsa and Latin-themed clubs there's room to dance for those seeking it out.

"Any excuse to get dressed and have drink served to me rather than thrown at me is a delightful experience," says von Sperling. "Don't get me wrong, going to a club to bounce up and down for a few hours can be fun too, but its different, you can hear yourself think. It's a great advantage to the man."

To illustrate her point, she wouldn't let me leave without taking an impromptu accelerated lesson in swing. While I was trying desperately to catch my rock steps on the right count and keep my shoulders at a posture that harkened back to getting my height measured every year on my birthday, I realized I wasn't nearly as lost as I'd projected I would be.

Sure, every time I attempted a complicated maneuver that involved her spinning and me guiding her back to position, I was hopeless, but I wasn't too bad with my feet and I was having a good time. I might have eventually "gotten" it.

This awkwardness reflects the experience of Michael Bacarella, the student from Dance Chelsea a night earlier. Although he'd been taking lessons for a few months, he hadn't yet been outside of the studio for what he called "social dancing." Bacarella will some be ready to put on his boogie shoes, and try out that thrill ride with an attractive new acquaintance. "I was nervous at first, but amazingly, you can come pretty far in three months."