

DANCER'S HEART

I fumble through my dance bag. I know it's here somewhere, past the gum and mints, the Catalina swing-camp brochure, and miscellaneous dance steps scribbled on every type of scratch paper imaginable. An open safety pin, OUCH!!—I gotta get a real tie clip. Eureka, I found it! A chocolate Power Bar, the swing dancer's best friend. Just two bites and it's gone—hopefully to my feet.

My friends and I have been dancing non-stop for a couple of hours now and the outside world has all but disappeared. The sound of the horns, drum and piano blend with the dancers movements.

Girls in vintage outfits, some with flowers adorning their hair, make for a colorful soup. We are all totally high: on the music, on the movement, on each other's smiles. It's a wonderful feeling. It's the "cookie" that keeps us all coming back night after night, dance after dance, class after class.

But It wasn't always this way. How does it go in Genesis? In the beginning... .. there was a great clumsiness across the land and the swing dancer was without style or technique. His feet would not obey the dance instructor's commands no matter how hard he stared at them. And he was harshly ridiculed for wearing clip suspenders.

Those beginning months can be brutal on the ego. If you can't laugh at yourself, you will probably hang up the two-tones permanently and have some good material for your therapist. There is no doubt about it—it takes a special kind of courage to learn to dance. And a special kind of heart.

If one does have the desire to really dance—not just, as they say in acting classes with such contempt, "indicate" (mechanically going through the steps)—but to let go and dance from the heart, the rewards are tremendous.

But how does a dancer get into that zone? We all have a secret inner life. Hidden under our jobs, our education, and the expectations that have been put on us from others and society. This hidden side we usually only reveal to the people we trust; our close friends, our relatives, our lovers. Its expressions are often silly, playful, daring or sexy. It's these expressions that we are challenged to reveal on the dance floor. "Will I look stupid?" "I can't do that... I'm just not that type of girl," "If I move my body like that, I'll look feminine," etc. So many ways the mind has of shutting down our creativity and convincing us the safest thing to do is nothing.

Watch people when they dance, the ones who really inspire and take your breath away. They take chances and abandon themselves to the music, ego be damned. It's this mix of controlled

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craft and impassioned release that creates the thrill, the juice, of enjoyable dancing. This is true for both the dancers and the audience. This is the magic that keeps 'em coming back to Broadway and the ballet season after season. Dancers express passionately what is laying latent inside the viewer's soul. That which they yearn to awaken, the audience experiences vicariously through watching. They can touch it, but they can't have it. We can have it—you, me and the others—as we participate in this wonderful play called dance.

So next time you're on the hardwood, take some chances. Find friends you can dance with that will let you experiment and mess up without giving you a funny look. Turn off the metronome in your head for a dance, don't count the steps, and just let the music and energy move you. Buy a full-length mirror. Set it up in your house, spin a swing CD, and practice dance movement in front of it. Play with some boogie backs, fish walk, Shorty George, Susie Q, kick-ball-change, etc. Be silly, be creative: no one is watching but the cat. This kind of practice can greatly help your improvisation and footwork next time you hit the hardwood.

As you challenge yourself with new movements and stylings, you will feel awkward. A good rule to remember is the bigger you screw-up the larger you smile. Slowly from the well of your own unique creativity, the dancer's heart will emerge. I love this quote from Theodore Roosevelt (rumored to dance a mean Charleston himself):

Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.

Keep Rock Steppin' ...

- by Noel Plumb