



groove is in THE HEART

Is there a better, more joyful activity than losing oneself on the dancefloor? Christa D'Souza makes a case for strutting one's stuff

An airy room on the first floor of Pineapple Dance Studios. Two days before the opening of *Some Like It Hip Hop*, the "hip-hopsical" by Sadler's Wells street-dance company Zoo Nation. In one corner Taneisha, in sweats and kneepads, with an impressive eight-pack, is practising a move called "the resurrection", a sort of speeded-up version of the yoga pose "upward dog" that inexplicably, brilliantly, reminds of a tape being rewound. In another, Ross, a handsome bodybuilder type with a shaved head and full-sleeve tattoo, studies himself

delicately popping in the mirror. At the far end, Sarah, a teeny tiny thing who sometimes dances for Cheryl Cole and JLS, is mimicking Denny, a dead ringer for Justin Timberlake, as he shimmies this way and that. Hip-hop. It's such a mating ritual. This is exactly what George Bernard Shaw meant when he described dancing as "the vertical expression of a horizontal desire".

Right. Time to do it to the music. On goes the beatbox, the room shudders with a pounding hip-hop version of "It's a Man's World", and Zoo Nation struts its stuff. It's impossible not to get goosebumps;

impossible not to want to join in – yes, even me, with my "white girl" rhythm. How come dancing isn't taught in prisons and schools? Like Molière once sort of said, "all the ills of mankind, all the tragic misfortunes that fill the history books", might they have arisen merely from not enough of us having a dance? Might not the act of getting down and boogieing be the key to what is missing in our sedentary, disaffected lives?

"I love to dance," says Poppy Delevingne. "Anywhere. Any kind of surface and I'm pretty much always there. House parties are the best dancing locations because they are filled to the brim with props, whether it be a pillar in a hallway, a lazy susan or someone's half-drunk whisky on the rocks – to be used as a microphone, obviously..."

The joy, the pure unadulterated joy of a good dance. The feeling of sheer abandon, of being "in one's flow", at one with the

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Rihanna*

beat. Not the polite "top half" dancing you do in your seat at the Royal Albert Hall or the O2. I'm talking about the kind you have to check in your coat for, the kind you can do for hours and hours without realising the birds are tweeting outside, the kind that goes on at the Kave or DC10 in Ibiza, or Catch 22 in Shoreditch, the kind that feels – as a clubber friend of mine puts it – like a form of meditation. "I like to dance with a DJ in front of me," she adds. "I need an altar at which to worship."

And let's not forget the joy of watching other people dance. How much pleasure can be extracted from watching Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor and Debbie Reynolds step over those sofas in *Singin' in the Rain*? Or – and this from a committed non-balletomane – a piece of choreography by Wayne McGregor, the way his dancers writhe around and through one another like wormy pretzels?

How about the way toddlers will instinctively buckle their knees when you put any kind of music on? And how long >

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does it take before this impulse is embarrassed out of them? Gosh, my poor children. The merest hint of their mother having a dance, and they have to run to another borough. Thank goodness they weren't there to see me in my "flow" at a friend's wedding in Kent the other night, busting my classic "mum" dance move (my *only* dance move): soles of the feet glued to the floor for fear of falling over, elbows jammed to my sides, fingers snapping – not necessarily in time to the music – having to be gently escorted out as the staff stacked chairs. In my head, you see, when I've had a few jars, I can bogle better than Rihanna.

'Twas not always thus. The memory of the weekly Saturday night dance in the assembly hall of my all-girls boarding school still haunts. That sinking feeling which set in around Thursday afternoon and grew as Saturday loomed. The abject cold fear that I'd get picked by one of the older girls to initiate the dancing, and the hot-faced ignominy – shuffling around the floor to "Cum On Feel the Noize", or whatever it was, the giggling behind cupped hands from the sidelines – when I finally, inevitably did. The move *du jour* wasn't complicated: thumbs hooked into the belt loops of one's Brutus flares, elbows jutting out and down, as far as I can remember. But I could never get it quite right.

Perhaps this shame, the feeling of being judged, is the reason some of the best dances I ever had were on my own in my single-girl flat after coming back from a club – carpet rolled up, lights turned off, and the stereo (yes, they were stereos then) way turned up to *my* music. That's when the old chestnut about dancing like no one is watching – "the hooligan kind of dancing, where you throw yourself about like a mad thing," as Delevingne describes it – makes so much sense. One feels more vulnerable, somehow, than in any other medium. As the old Indian proverb goes: "To watch us dance is to hear our hearts speak."

"It is exposing," agrees Kate Prince, Zoo Nation's founder and artistic director, "but then, you ask any of these guys to stand up and recite or sing – they'd far rather dance!" Prince, who was educated at Bryanston and Edinburgh, remembers first getting bitten by the bug while taking jazz and tap

lessons as a five-year-old in her local village hall, before falling in love with hip-hop via MTV. Because it's her profession, she says, she hardly ever goes out clubbing, "but you should see me at a wedding or a birthday. I'm like a madwoman." Does she think she was born to dance? Or can anyone dance, with enough practice? "They can become a better dancer," she says rather doubtfully. "I think I'm just one of those people who can't think or

be creative without moving. Maybe it's a form of ADD."

"I feel a bit more intelligent when I dance," says Hofesh Shechter, one of the sharpest, most daring choreographers/composers working today, whose extraordinary piece *Political Mother* has toured

worldwide since 2010. "Thoughts appear out of nowhere – it's as though movement unlocks something for me. But, see, you are catching me at the office. I don't dance enough. It makes me feel guilty. I totally believe that for most of us, the impulse is there. It's just repressed or forgotten. After all, the first thing we hear in our mother's wombs is a heart rhythm."

"Look, we're all born in movement and we die in movement, and there's a collective rhythm we almost can't help but follow," says Akram Khan, the Bangladeshi choreographer and dancer whose company performed at the opening ceremony of the Olympics, and who has collaborated with, among others, Nitin Sawhney, Anish Kapoor and Juliette Binoche. "If you observe a group of people walking down a street in central London, their collective rhythm is different to that of a crowd walking down a street in Wimbledon, and you subconsciously shift your tempo to fit in. There are all sorts of collective rhythms we tap into. It's like a shoal of fish who have this collective awareness but there is no logic behind the pattern – which, for me, is why it's beautiful."

Maybe it's thinking too much about dancing that makes it so difficult. Maybe one has to be, as it were, more fish-like. Literally go with the flow. Perhaps, too, as with sex, the more you do it the more you want to do it?

"Everyone has an innate rhythm and I'm convinced that if we got rid of all the negative psychological bubblewrap, >

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VOGUE GOES POP

everyone would find it. Dance can change people's lives." So insists Dr Peter Lovatt, experimental psychologist and founder of the Dance Psychology Lab at the University of Hertfordshire. As well as helping people find cures for chorophobia, or fear of dancing (being blindfolded is one; learning ceroc, which pretty much involves just two steps, another), he conducts studies into the link between dance, hormones and neural processing. A familiar figure on TEDx with his black-rimmed specs and mad-professor hair, he has all sorts of theories. Take "dad" dancing. According to Lovatt, that excruciating grinding motion you see men *d'un certain age* proudly exhibiting on the dancefloor may be a subconscious Darwinian way of warning women of child-bearing age that they'd be better off looking elsewhere. "Like a green apple that's gone brown," he says helpfully.

Lovatt's belief that dancing has curative properties is backed by scientific research, conducted by watching people's brains as they dance. Giving sufferers of Parkinson's Disease dance therapy has been clinically proven to alleviate symptoms by increasing dopamine levels in the brain.

Dance as medicine. A study at the University of New England found that doing the tango significantly reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and that dancing with a partner in general eases depression; the need for mindful focus and constant connection is a fast route to switching off negative thought patterns. And let's not forget, aside from all those endorphins, what great exercise it is. Compare a Zumba body, with its pert buttocks, to a yoga body. Look at Gwyneth Paltrow's body after months on Tracy Anderson's dance-inspired workout programme. It is what inspired Jo Manoukian and Elizabeth Saltzman to start up a regular "chicks only" disco in a Hammersmith working men's club, "with all the lights down low, no fancy clothes, no mobiles, no cameras allowed. And no Springsteen either; proper Studio 54-style disco music. I don't work out," continues Saltzman, who describes herself as "the world's best worst dancer", "so this is it."

"Dancing is my exercise and my therapy," says make-up artist Charlotte Tilbury,

who is a veritable whirling dervish on the dancefloor, as anyone who even vaguely knows her will tell you. "I can be on cloud nine for a week after a good night dancing..."

As for the heels/flats dilemma, says Manolo Blahnik, "when you dance, the weight of the body rests on the ball of the foot, so when you are wearing high heels your feet are already in the dancing position. Rather than being an impairment," he explains, "elegant high-heeled shoes should aid you in moving gracefully on the dancefloor."

The journalist Deborah Orr loves dancing so much that she gave an dance party for her fiftieth birthday. The playlist consisted of at least one

iconic song from every year of her life, starting in 2012 and going back to 1962. "Plenty of disco after the Sex Pistols – for example, 'Come On Eileen' for when me and my friend Eileen Greer were students together – and 'Atomic' from when I used to go clubbing in the early Nineties, and so on."

Because doesn't it feel, sometimes – apart from the wedding or the significant birthday – that there aren't very many opportunities over the age of 25 to cut loose? Perhaps it is an age thing. In my late teens and early twenties, guaranteed, I'd be up there at concerts – not just in the front row but actually on stage, squirming away with the Boomtown Rats or my then-favourite-ever band, the Tubes. In my twenties, meanwhile, living in Eighties Manhattan, that's all we did of a Thursday night, go out to the Roxy or Danceteria specifically and uniquely to dance.

Now though? The dying out of the mosh pit; what feels like the gradual shrinking of the dancefloor (have you seen the postage-stamp-sized ones at the Scotch and 5 Hartford Street?); the music (all these "retro" Nineties nights! Why can't everybody just play Seventies Philly and be done with it?)... It all conspires to make the idea of going out

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THE WALTZ



for a dance not seem as easy as it used to be. And, of course, the less integrated into life dance is, the more preposterous it feels to do it. It is quite possible, for example – and I have witnessed this with my own eyes – to spend an entire weekend at Glastonbury and stand stock-still throughout. As AA Gill, an avowed non-dancer, triumphantly tells me when I ask him how he manages: "I listen!"

OK, enough of talking. Time to seize the day. And what do you know, I've just spied an opportunity. Tomorrow, a bunch of girlfriends are going out for dinner, a stone's throw away from the Scotch. I've been practising steps from Youtube and I've got my handbag ready for the flashing dancefloor. Jazz hands, everybody! "Gotta dance..." ■