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STRICTLY BALLROOM

What You Need to Know When You Go To Your First Ballroom Dance Party

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Congratulations on taking the first step and attending a ballroom dance party. The tips that I give below are my opinions but they are also pretty universal and therefore should apply to any venue.

1. Prior to Getting To The Dance

Personal Hygiene and Cosmetics

Grooming: Take a shower before going to the dance. Brush your teeth and freshen your breath.

Perfume and Cologne: This day in age, many of us have sensitivities to scents. Please refrain from using scented products if you can.

Hair:

- Gents: I have really short hair now but when I had longer hair I use to put my hair up with product. I would recommend a product that's not water soluble (will be affected by water). There's nothing like the stinging of the eyes during a Latin dance or an active quickstep when you're sweating and carrying the product down from the hair to the eyes.
- Ladies: If you can, tie your hair up or tie it back. During Latin dances, I have always found it annoying to get a face of hair every time the lady turns.

Bronzers: Personally I really hate it when ladies wear bronzers and then they leave a handprint of bronzer on the sleeve of my pristine white shirt.

Suggestions on What to Wear



Gents: I would suggest a minimum of dress pants, dress shirt and tie (business casual). A step up would be a dressy vest or a suit jacket. At times, you may be going to a black tie affair, in which case, bring out the tux!

Please don't wear cuffed pants – the lady could get her heel caught in the cuff!

Remember that you'll be dancing in whatever you wear so hopefully you don't dress in too many thick layers since it will get warm.

I would suggest an undershirt to absorb the sweat. You may decide to bring a change of undershirts/clothes, especially in the winter because stepping out into the cold with damp clothing could lead to unnecessary chilling of the body.



The shoes: If you don't have dance shoes, please bring a pair of indoor dress shoes. Especially in the winter when there's salt, sand and grit outdoors, you wouldn't want to track that onto the dance floor. Rubber soles are difficult to turn on and therefore I recommend a leather bottom. If you have to bring a pair of rubber soled shoes, make sure they don't mark since this is the demise of all dance studio owners. I have found that dress shoes have a fairly hard sole; my feet hurt after an hour or two of cutting the rug with them. I would recommend inserting a supportive shoe insert to add comfort.



Ladies:

Ladies typically go to dances in a variety of ball gowns, evening/cocktail dresses and long skirts. I don't think I have seen a lady in pants at a ballroom dance event. A lady dancer has provided the following suggestions to the ladies: whatever you wear on the bottom, make sure there's an inner lining side slit and that it's open high enough so that you can stretch those legs during a waltz or alternatively if there is no inner lining, wear a short under slip with a side slit. As well, short skirts or body fitted skirts are not recommended because it impedes movement.

Opinions from a Lead:

- It's really annoying to step forward with the right foot and be hindered by the dress's inner lining. Therefore, please make sure there's some freedom in movement.
- Ladies please wear a top to cover up the arms and armpits (avoid straps or sleeveless tops if you can). I suppose leads find it gross to have their right cuff be soaked with a lady's sweat after an active dance. A lady friend has informed me that it is difficult to find a stylish cocktail dress with sleeves – therefore use a non-staining anti-perspirant?
- Ladies who have a lot of glitter in their dress tend to also share that glitter with their immediate surroundings. We like to leave the dance floor with only a positive feeling from the dance, and not a pile of glitter on our suit and slacks as well.

What to Take to the Dance

Gents:

- Wallet: I usually trim my wallet down to the essentials (driver's license, cash, one credit card, bank card) and just use a money/paper clip instead of a wallet.
- Keys: I reduce my keys down to the essential ones. Normally when I dance I keep my keys in my left pocket so that the follow doesn't get a thigh of keys when she comes into closed position.
- Hanky: The venue is bound to get hot from all the physical activity. I usually bring a couple of cotton hankies with me. Paper towel and tissue could work although I find with repetitive wiping, the towel leaves bits of remnants all over my face.

2. At The Dance

Remember that a ballroom dance party is a social event. Sure there will be socializing going on but there should also be dancing – otherwise you could have just gone out to the restaurant or café and socialize there! It's normal for couples to dance together but it's also normal to switch up the partnerships – remember it is a social event after all.

Asking Someone to Dance

- It's 2015 and therefore it's common for leads to ask follows and vice versa to dance. Typically, I would approach someone of interest and ask:
 - o "Would you like to dance?" (or substitute dance with the dance that's playing)
 - o "May I have this dance?"

There's quite a few ways to do this, but in essence, you're just asking someone if they would be interested in dancing with you.

The Rejection

- There are times when we're not comfortable dancing with someone. How do we decline their offer to dance?
 - o Say you don't know the dance
 - o Say you need to take a rest
 - o Say you promised to dance the dance with someone else
- If you use any of the responses above, there usually is a compromise and you would return with an offer to dance later.
- If you used one of the first two excuses, it is quite rude to reject one person and then promptly dance with another.

On the Floor – Dance Floor Etiquette

- As your instructor may have told you, there is something called the "line of dance". That is, people dance around the room in the same direction even though there is no physical sign. If you're looking at the dance floor from the ceiling, the line of dance goes in a counter-clockwise direction.
- There are generally two lanes to the line of dance – the slow lane and the fast (express) lane. People who like to do fast, fancy or more "aggressive" steps should stay to the outer (express) lane while those who want to take their time and keep to more basic steps should stay closer to the centre (slow lane). Some dance floors may not be big enough to have both lanes and therefore both groups may be merged into one – so keep an eye out for those around you.
- Obviously you dance on the dance floor and talk in the seating areas. Please do not be a road block and talk (or argue) on the dance floor.
- Please do not eat or drink on the dance floor and also walk around the perimeter when transporting food and beverage. Once the dance floor becomes wet, it's very difficult to dance on it until it's completely dry! As well, once the dance shoe sole become wet, we can't dance in those either (and they take a long time to dry!)
- The dance floor is a communal space so please be respectful of those sharing the space.
- Collisions are inevitable on a crowded floor – if it happens:
 - o Be Canadian, apologize!
 - o Make sure everyone's okay
 - o Move on otherwise others will crash into you
- I have never been a fan of following a choreographed routine on a social floor. There are too many variables to keep track of! As the lead, I would recommend exercising floor craft (gauging other dancer's speed and distance meanwhile leading your partner to figures which won't interfere with the other dancers)
- The lead and follow never look at each other when they're dancing standard/smooth dances. Instead they should be looking into their respective spaces and warning each other if a collision is about to happen (leads can lead the follow out of the way; whilst the follow can squeeze the lead's right shoulder to let him know someone's getting close).

Tips to the Lead

- Once you get onto the dance floor with your partner, start the dance by going into position and shifting your weight from side to side so that the follow knows which foot you're starting on.
- Dance to the level of your partner and not beyond! The party is not an instruction class and therefore you should not be showing the partner new steps. If you don't know how much your partner knows, start basic and then work up.
- Protect your partner if a collision is about to happen.
- At the end of the dance, make sure to thank your partner and then escort your partner off the floor.

Food at the Party?



Here are my all-time-pet-peeves when it comes to venues where food is served:

- Some of us spend a lot of money to dress up for the occasion since it's respectful to the studio owners and to those in attendance. If you invite others to dance or others invite you to dance, make sure you have clean hands! On a number of occasions I have ended up bringing some chocolate dessert back home on my suit jacket sleeve because a lady forgot to clean her hands.

So, that's it! Many of the things mentioned above are common sense and if followed it'll help to ensure that you and your partners have a great time at the event! Enjoy yourselves!

Happy dancing!

Horace