

Simon's guide to *Swing*

Simon Selmon considers the different approaches to teaching the Lindy hop

When you're a beginner and you want to learn to dance, it's normal to crave the moves you've seen others do – and that is what many teachers show you. A tried-and-tested age-old method is to teach “vocabulary” first before getting into the “grammar” of the dance. As students become more experienced, moving into intermediate classes and beyond, they often still believe they need to learn as many moves as possible in order to have more satisfying dances. A number of beginner and intermediate dancers are afraid of running out of moves and teachers constantly come up with new variations to satisfy that demand.

By and large, most beginner dancers seek out more and more moves, shapes and patterns and create a demand for teachers who will supply them. This can also apply to those who have learned to dance by watching old clips of the original dancers of the 1920s to the 1950s, but they have no first-hand experience of the lead and follow, and of the connection involved in a move.

I have to say, it works – to a degree; but there is another school of thought that is followed by those who believe in teaching principles, concepts and technique before – or alongside – moves. They believe that learning moves on their own can result in



Simon and Anna Selmon teaching *Swing Out* at the *Underbelly Festival*.

hollow, shell-like patterns with no real substance, and that you need to understand the dance rather than copy it. They, too, have a point, although many students who just want to dance will find this method too slow and too much like hard work.

Moves get the students on the dance floor quickly – principles, concepts and techniques keep them there longer, and to a higher level. In reality, of course, there's actually more of a spectrum of views that lies somewhere between these two extremes. One approach gives students an instant Polaroid picture; the other requires more time and effort – studying composition, structure, lighting and post-production – before they can see a result.

Where do I stand, you ask? It is the lead and follow, and all the other techniques that lie beneath the casual first glance at what's going on in a move that I believe are really important. Both ends of the spectrum, however, have their place. For example, if you are teaching a one-off taster class and you want to get everybody on the dance floor in the shortest

amount of time, showing a few simple moves might be your best option. Yet if you really want to teach someone to dance, it's not the move that is important but what's going on behind it that really counts. This is what makes any partner dance special.

Yet, wait! Some of you avid readers of this page will remember me ranting about how too much focus on technical issues alone can kill the spirit of the dance. I still hold this to

be true: dance is made up of many components – the music, which must come first, its history, which gives dance its soul, and the principles, concepts and, finally, technique which finish our product. However, moves are the result of these components rather than the starting point.

So, if you really want to learn how to Lindy hop, I would suggest finding a teacher who will instil in you the essence of the dance, and the principles that go beyond just movement and serve as the foundation. Some teachers, like me, may even sneakily hide the principles, concepts and technique within moves. For many dancers, particularly beginners and intermediates, the rule that “you don't know what you don't know” will generally apply and you may not be able to recognise what you are or aren't being taught at first, but, as you become more experienced, so you will begin to understand that moves alone will only get you so far and that your journey has only just begun. ■

Principles, concepts and technique

PRINCIPLE: Respect. You should respect your dance partner. Why? If you respect someone, you'll want to hear what they have to say. Sometimes we listen to people because they are in a position of authority, but that doesn't always mean we hear what they're saying. If, however, we truly respect someone, we will listen to them much more intently and, as this dance is based on call-and-response, we need to listen to our partner.

CONCEPT: Lead and follow. It's the principle behind the skill of improvising with a partner, of creating a choreography in the moment, where two individuals dance as one. It requires subtle and constant communication between both partners.

TECHNIQUE: Frame. The frame allows us to apply our concept of lead and follow. For example, it includes exactly how much tone to place in our arms and hands, so we can clearly communicate our intentions to our partner (typically, for the leader), or understand what our partner is inviting us to do (typically, for the follower).