

CHEEK TO CHEEK

Intimacy and the language of touch in the art of ballroom dancing

text **Herman Cheng** photos **Simon Chu & Lawrence Au**

"IT CAN BE SO SENSUAL, SO AGGRESSIVE, SO LOVING, SO EXCITING, AND THAT CAN ALL JUST BE FROM A HANDSHAKE. AND IF YOU CAN JUST IMAGINE IT WITH THEIR BODIES UP TO EACH OTHER IN DANCE HOLDS ... IT'S INCREDIBLE, ACTUALLY."

TWO YEARS AGO, Gillian Metcalf told me she would shut her eyes when we started again. For the fourth night in a row, Gillian and I were dancing in the party room of the Student Union Building at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in preparation for a dance event. She had heard somewhere that dancing the slow waltz, eyes shut, helped develop one's technique. I was skeptical.

"What if I were a stranger?"

"Then I wouldn't close them."

"What if I closed *my* eyes?"

"Then how will you know where we'd go?"

I would find a way, I told her. We started out deliberately, bobbing a discombobulated path through several waltz revolutions. Yet we "connected." It felt like one of those foggy and disconcerting dreams of falling, but the familiarity of holding onto Gillian made the experience much more pleasant. The physical connection we had fostered over the past month or so acted as a security blanket for me that night, and it continued to be something that would ameliorate any negative situation we encountered in our ballroom dance experimentation. Eventually, however, I stopped dancing. I had not reminisced on my night of dancing blind until I had to think about DanceSport, as it is now called, all over again for this article.

I had spent approximately three years immersed in the ballroom scene, watching, admiring and dancing. To this day, I am impressed by the precise and elaborate technique, grace, athleticism, and tenacity practiced by other dancers. Not because I possessed so little of it myself, but because they were all so good to look at. Now, I am grateful that many of these talented individuals were more than eager to speak with me about their passion, and to attempt to answer some of my most pressing questions. Why is the Asian Canadian community so enamoured with a dance form that is, to put it bluntly, so European? How does love, or



May Lam & Tony Fung

touch, play a part? And why did Gillian want to close her eyes?

"It helps you focus on what's going on inside, rather than what's going on outside," said Penny Bedaux, a ballroom dance teacher for 30 years and the UBC Dance Club's longest-standing, most-favoured instructor. Penny was beaming at me across a little round table at the Crystal Ballroom on Southwest Marine Drive. The floor speakers blared a continuous stream of recorded samba music, songs I had listened to many times before. "Of-

ten, we're too externally oriented. Our eyes tell all we can know about life. We look at the world from the outside, rather than looking at what we really should be feeling. And sometimes it's important to close our eyes and say, 'Okay, what exactly do I feel within my body? Am I carrying my right shoulder three inches high?' You can get a better internal vision that way."

Ironically, all I could notice was that Penny's posture now was as perfect as the first time I saw her teach. Her smile and features were animated, her gestures, while sparing, conveyed the subtlety of feeling that lent her fluid voice and words their emphasis. And she knew that giving off the right type of feeling or mood is the quintessence of ballroom. What differentiates ballroom is the need to convey that feeling to your partner, and finally to transmit those feelings to your audience. To have the correct feel for yourself and your partner is to communicate on the same wavelength. If you do not have this type of communication, both of your performances fall flat.

"I remember watching a wonderful dance couple many years ago who had just divorced. And I knew at the beginning of the show that there was something amiss. I had no idea they had already separated at that point, but when they danced, there was a perceptible difference in how they related to one another. It's a very subtle thing, but as human beings,



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we can pick up on things like that.”

Hiyasmin Matias, the bubbly and high-spirited president of the 1,800-member UBC Dance Club,¹ concurs. “You [and your partner] have to be able to share the same type of enjoyment and love for dancing and expression, to be able to actually have a character on the floor that describes and defines just you and your partner. It’s not just you and someone else, or just you dancing well [or] you expressing yourself while dancing with someone who has no expression at all.”

Proper communication is paramount in expressing a mutually-integrated character for each dance. Hiyasmin continues, “I think it’s more about the expression of the music, rather than what you feel towards the person, that you’re able to show when you dance. It’s the music that moves you through your partner’s touch, and that’s what you transmit through your dancing. But when you dance with someone that you’re romantically involved with, the dance is also heightened by emotions, and in that sense, it’s not just the music that affects your dance. It’s also affected by how you touch each other and how you look at each other.”

Ultimately, the leader and follower communicate exclusively through touch. Each dance step is executed by and through a combination of different hand pressures, gestures, pushes and pulls that give the follower a subtle clue as to what to prepare for next. The wealth of information interfaced through this act



Hiyasmin Matias & Shalleesh Sharan at the Grand Ballroom.

“THERE’S AN INFINITE SENSITIVITY BETWEEN THE LEAD AND THE FOLLOW,” JOEL SAYS. “IF YOU CAN DEVELOP THIS INFINITE SENSITIVITY IN TERMS OF THE LEADER BEING ABLE TO LEAD, AND THE FOLLOWER BEING ABLE TO FOLLOW, AND SOMETIMES THE FOLLOWER LEADING AND THE LEADER FOLLOWING IN SPECIAL CASES, THE SKY IS THE LIMIT. AND I THINK THAT’S HOW WE GET INTO THE ZONE, WHERE OUR TWO BODIES CAN BECOME ONE.”

of touch is startling. By visualizing a flow chart of these dance signals, a subtle language, which weaves an intricate tapestry of physical gesture, becomes apparent. For instance, the hand-to-hand connection, the clasp of a leader’s left hand with his follower’s right, acts as one tactile medium for this type of body language. Without such physical communication, the dance becomes impossible.

“[It’s] not actually a matter of pushing or pulling,” Penny elaborates. “It’s a matter of moving the central core of your

body so that your partner responds to it. In actuality, it’s not led with hands. Yes, in Latin dancing the connection is through the hands. But Latin dancing is led through the frame, which is connected to the hands. All dancing comes through the body.”

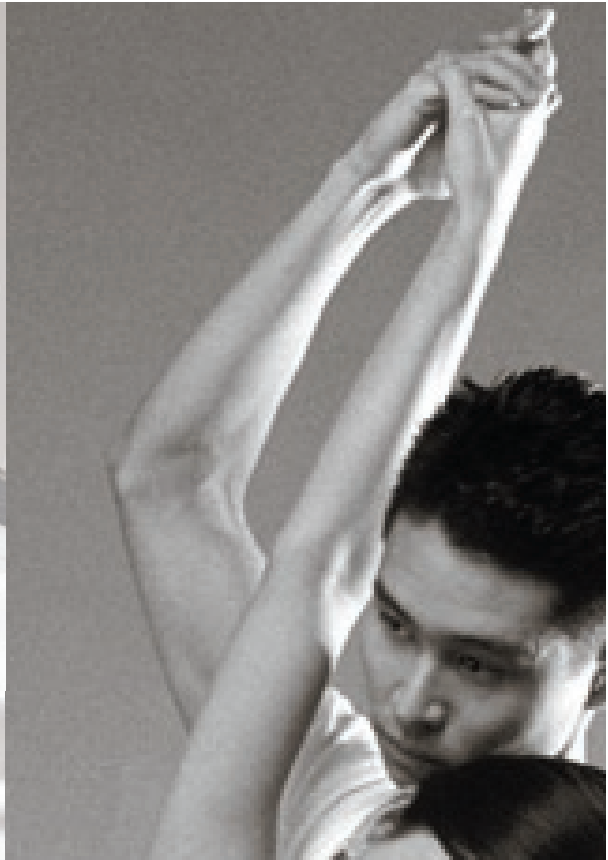
Joel Marasigan and Clara Shih, dance partners for about six years, are currently ranked first in Standard² dancing in B.C. and fourth in Canada. The pair feels that their own dancing has thrived on a fusion on movement, shape and musicality. Touch becomes both the physical interface for, and the ultimate barrier to, this fusion. “If our touch is too strong, or if there’s too much tension or pressure between us, too much hardness or stiffness, it just doesn’t work,” says Joel. “If there’s no touch, it doesn’t work either, because then there’s no communication between us, and we can’t blend, meld and become one body. One of our coaches always talked about the yin and yang, the two different energies, the positive and the negative, the male and female, and the roles therein. That theory has played an important role in the development of our connection as dance partners.”

Clara interjects, her enthusiasm growing. “What people have to realize with DanceSport is that there has to be a certain amount of touch, so that he can lead me and I can respond to him in the right way. If I don’t respond, the pressure will increase. So I have to respond with the same amount of pressure no matter what we’re doing: rotating, spinning, etc. The pressure has to remain the same the whole time, so I have

to react fast and he’s got to lead properly. That is all achieved through a sensitivity to touch.”

“There’s an infinite sensitivity between the lead and the follow,” Joel says. “If you can develop this infinite sensitivity in terms of the leader being able to lead, and the follower being able to follow, and sometimes the follower leading and the leader following in special cases, the sky is the limit. And I think that’s how we get into the zone, where our two bodies can become one.”

Clara adds, “If your partner is even a little bit off, the other

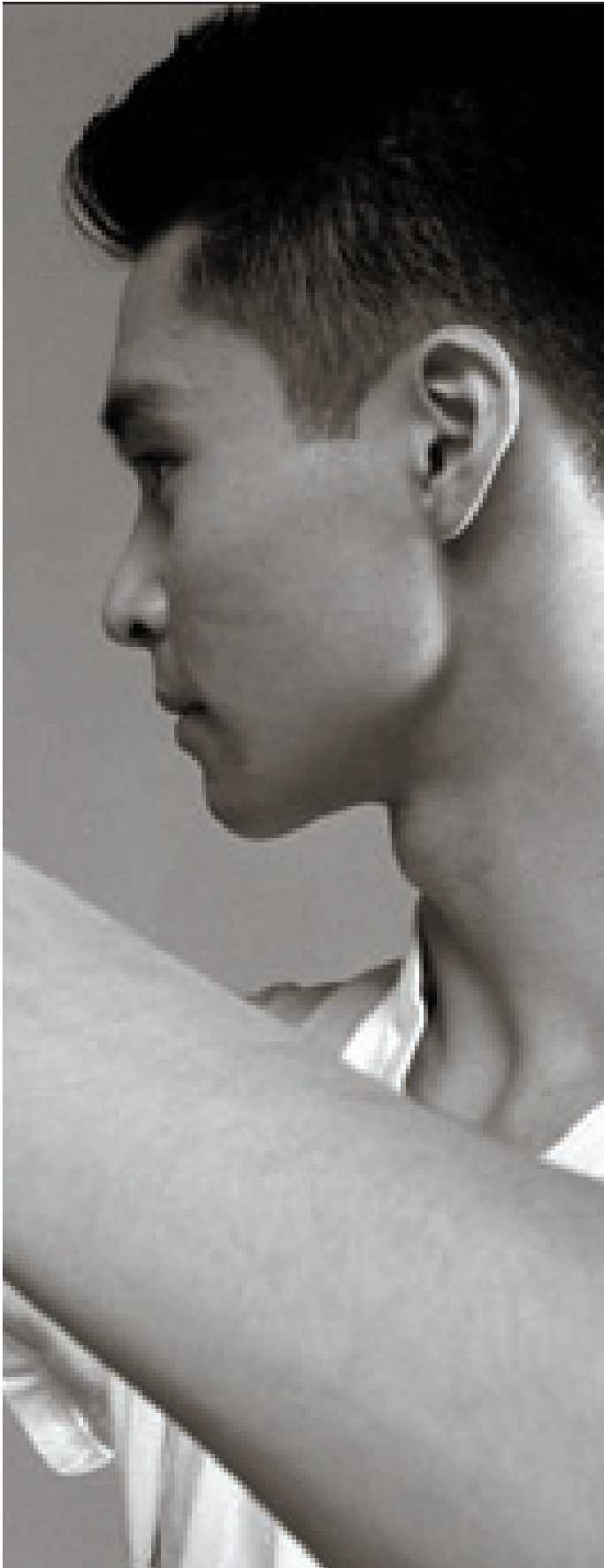


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person can feel it right away. So we both have to be extremely balanced, and respond to each other with infinite sensitivity. Otherwise, you're just not 'together.' When people start out, they'd go to the ballroom and learn their steps. And so as long as both people know the steps, they could both dance together. But we're at the level where just knowing the steps and being able to 'go together' just isn't enough. We actually have to be able to respond to the nth degree of a millimetre, and this becomes especially important in competition, where there are a lot of different couples on the floor and you need to weave in and out of traffic. You might have to change the steps that you originally intended to perform. And so, the more sensitive you are to each other, the better you can improvise."

"We've had great coaches," enthuses Joel. "The way that they can hold your hands is so very sensual, and communicative, and inviting. It's because they've developed this ability to modulate touch, to increase and decrease how much communication is transmitted through touch or the holding of a hand. And it can be so sensual, so aggressive, so loving, so exciting, and that can all just be from a handshake. And if you can just imagine it with their bodies up to each other in dance holds ... it's incredible, actually. One dancer can portray the waltz very lovingly, another can portray it aggressively. Another can be sensual, and it could be to the same music, but it's a different way of interpreting the dance."

SEVERAL DAYS LATER I was in my office when I heard the door open. Faye Hung, currently on the board of directors of DanceSport BC,³ stepped through. Faye had been president of the UBC Dance Club when I joined. I remembered that back then, at the annual UBC Gala Ball, the audience's focus had never left Faye and her partner, who won every award at their level. We were transfixed as we watched her. The same thought went through the minds of every other male there: *I want to be the guy dancing with Faye.* And that's how these wonderful, sordid love affairs with ballroom often begin.

"Can you say something to me about the aspect of touch in ballroom?" I ask.

"Touch. You have to be gentle, yet the direction has to be strong." Faye answers as though instructing an imaginary partner. "The lady has to know exactly which direction you want her to go in, yet it can't be forceful. She has to go there by herself, but you have to tell her where to go. What makes it so difficult is that you have to get to that median [where] she'll know where you want her to go based on the least amount of force that you give her."

"Different dances communicate different things," she continues. "The quickstep is definitely not romantic. The waltz and tango are

more passionate. With tango, you have the power and the passion, but the waltz is smooth. It needs the least amount of touch, yet the lady produces the largest amount of expression from the man. The tango requires an equal amount of expression from both partners."

Ballroom dance has its own physical languages, and each dance its own dialect. The language of each dance can convey, love, anger, hate or jealousy, depending on the couple's intent and interpretation of the music. But more specifically, it is the subtle modulation of touch that directly affects what is being communicated.

May Lam and Tony Fung started dancing eight years ago, when they first met, and have only recently turned professional after successfully reaching the finals of the Canadian Closed Ten Dance Championship in Calgary. The pair were among the first couples in Vancouver to train in England, and to hold private lessons for newcomers. "Social dancing is a common language that we can all communicate," May explains. The spryness of May's expressions and gestures as she speaks is remarkable. Occasionally I felt her enthusiasm pressing at me like heat from a furnace while she revealed her ideas. Perhaps if she and Tony chose to communicate their ideas through dance, I would have understood them just as well. "You can enjoy interacting socially with other people without having to worry about their cultural backgrounds and their language. Our body language is our common language." If social dancing is a language, competitive dancing is the attempt to render that language at its most poetic. To stretch this allegory further, dancers tell stories through their dance and in competition, this story needs to be told to the audience as eloquently as possible.

LIKE ALL LANGUAGES, communication through touch takes years to become comfortable with, and many more to fully understand and improvise upon. New partners need to become familiar with each other's physical wavelengths before any real chemistry and flow start to develop. It took a while for Gillian and I to attune ourselves to one another, but the physical sensitivity we eventually cultivated, although admittedly not as refined as that found in competitive dancers, allowed me to respond better to her touch and she to mine, until our bodies were assimilated into one dance entity. What the process truly gave us was the freedom to dance the same moves together just as well as

we could by ourselves. This touch or physical relationship that dance couples inherently establish is not as passionate as it is comfortably familiar. It is ultimately non-verbal: love through intimacy, fostered through touch.

"It takes time. Two separate entities. Everyone has their own personality, and it takes a whole lot of give and take," notes Penny. "I know that with my daughter [Tamara], it's taken time to find just the right partner, the right emotional connection. And it's true with every partner. You certainly can't have it all your own way. Life is

about compromise. Then again, there are certain people that you feel more comfortable with, just like in life, but even more so with dancing, because it's like a marriage when you compete. You certainly spend more of your waking hours with that person than with anyone else, and so you have your good and your bad. So you better enjoy them.

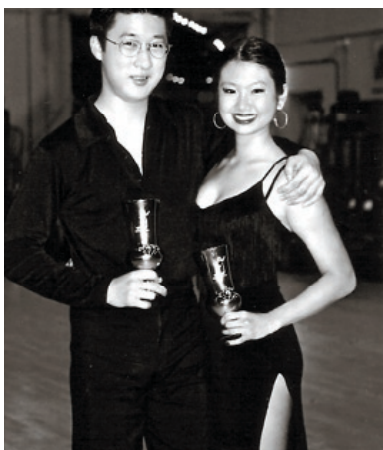
"I think that, as far as teaming up with another person goes, it's more important that you click on an emotional rather than even on a physical level.

Physical issues can be overcome. There

may be slight differences in height, [or] body type; you've seen it, and I've seen it. People can still do well even though they're not exactly the perfect height or the perfect body type. It's not entirely about the physical. It's more about finding the right space with your partner so you can work as part of a team, and having the respect to acknowledge that the other person may not always agree."

Emotionally, Faye's relationship with her partner Conant Liu also required understanding and time. "The more time you spend with each other, the more you get to know them, the more you know how they work, what pisses them off, what makes them happy, and I think that's what you have to do to make the partnership work. It gets to a point where you travel so much, you spend so much time together, that you have to know how to get along with each other, and I think we really got along well. We started taking a lot of lessons, and we talked about our goals and what we wanted to do and how far we wanted to go."

Clara agrees that her dance relationship with Joel functions through mutual respect, and adds, "For any partnership, it's a little bit of a gradual process because it's a different body, and so you have to readjust everything: height, width. Everything is different. We're pretty lucky because our body types are very similar, and so the height difference is perfect for Standard. They



Lawrence Au & Joy Stephanny Lau, second-place Gold Latin winner at the Grand Ballroom (Richmond, BC)

say DanceSport is a sport, but they're also saying that it's an art, so aesthetically it has to look pleasing, even though it is very athletic. So I think we're lucky that we're very well matched."

Tony also believes that about his dance relationship with May. "One of the reasons that our results have been so positive is because we've never switched partners. When you switch partners, you're basically starting over again."

"You're basically trying to be one person, as two people," echoes May. "So we need a good understanding of our centres, our partnership and how the movement flows. We need to feel each other. Even if two good dancers come together, it'll take time to get used to each other. You can't just dance for yourself. You have to dance for each other. With jazz and ballet you can work on it on your own, but with a partnership dance, you need to practice with your partner and be aware of him or her."

SHALL WE DANCE? Masayuki Suo's charismatic movie about ballroom dancing in Japan, opens with the following text, positing that Asian culture renounces ballroom dancing:

In Japan ballroom dancing is regarded with much suspicion. In a country where married couples don't go out arm in arm, much less say "I love you" out loud, intuitive understanding is everything.

In other words, the concept of two unmarried people holding each other in Japan was embarrassing, even scandalous. The film revolves around a salary man who struggles to lose his inhibitions through dance and to find a measure of liberty in a stifling environment. Though perhaps stifling in 1996 when the movie was made, by all accounts the dance community in Japan is now booming.

"I've heard that at the moment, ballroom is a very big phenomenon in Asia, particularly in parts of Japan, Taiwan and in the Philippines," says Hiyasmin. "But when I left about seven years ago, it wasn't at all like it is now. In fact, I didn't know anyone who did ballroom dancing in the Philippines. Then, I believe about three or four years ago, it became more of a fad, and old ladies started dancing with younger men as a pastime."

Whatever Hiyasmin might have meant, it's clearly possible that the idea of open touching in ballroom served as a barrier to its adoption in the Philippines. Mysteriously, however, Hiyasmin says these barriers have lifted.

"I don't even know why it really started. I had just heard that it started all of a sudden and it was such a boom. The three things that you would probably find in any Filipino party is [sic] food, sing-

ing and dancing. So in that sense, a lot of Filipinos are very musical and have a good sense of musicality, so they like to express that through ballroom dancing and music."

So how does ballroom fit in with the Asian Canadian community? Touch was a promising avenue to follow, since some have surmised that Asian culture relies on non-verbal communication such as silence, presence, feeling and touch to transmit feelings, anxieties and concerns. Once the Asian community circumvented its initial cultural disdain for open touching, ballroom dance, with its subtlety and elegance and with touch as the primary means of communication, might have become more appealing. Nor is touching in ballroom as overtly sexual as a touch or caress at a nightclub or dance party. Perhaps its ambiguity is what makes ballroom appealing, and a good fit for more shy and reserved personalities.

The wider Asian Canadian community has embraced ballroom as its dance form of choice, and in Vancouver this history is both rich and deep-seated. Determined, in any case, not to rely solely on my own conjecture, my research brought me to Richmond's Grand Ballroom, founded by Andy and Wendy Wong.

"What I think," said one observer, as we sat talking in the ballroom's leather armchairs, "is that a good majority of the recent influx of Asian immigrants interested in ballroom dancing arrived here within the last decade from Hong Kong, as the city prepared for the takeover in 1997. Ballroom dancing is huge in England, particularly a hundred years ago, when the British took over the island.

"Now, British diplomats and bureaucrats in the colonies loved holding large functions and society balls, which, obviously, were very upper crust, bourgeois. And while it may be true that Asian sensibilities a century ago, like that of Japan, may initially have disdained the concept of open touching in dance, it's inevitable that a part of that culture would eventually incorporate the idea that ballroom dancing was the preferred pastime for the sophisticated and elite, something that was done if you were rich and prestigious. The British had 99 years of colonialism to persuade the nouveau riche in Hong Kong to adopt many of the values of the British upper class. It's therefore not a coincidence that many Asian ballroom dance families here are fairly affluent." The families who emigrated here brought their love for ballroom with them, perhaps supplementing a community that was already predisposed towards it.

Joel agrees that ballroom dancing is a healthy, social pastime, but money is invariably required to obtain proficiency. "Lessons aren't cheap. Going to lessons, dances ... it's not an inexpensive sport where you can shoot hoops in a playground



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for free. You need a nice facility, a good floor, sound system, all that. And because of that, you need people with a fair bit of disposable income to support it, and to take lessons. I guess it might be a simplistic way of looking at it, but in a sense, that might have something to do with the prominence of the Asian community in ballroom.”

“I think our Asian community has always gone social dancing,” counters Faye, who was born and raised in Hong Kong. “So if you go to a place like Hong Kong, you will see a lot of ballroom dancing there. Maybe not international style, but a lot of social dancing, that’s for sure. If you look at Caucasian culture, they’re into hockey, they’re into football, they’re into active contact sport. Asian Canadians, on the other hand, are more reserved. We keep to ourselves. I think the dancing aspect attracts them because they can express themselves in a way that they would not perceive as indecent. Because Asians are very conservative and reserved people, and with dancing you can still express yourself and still stay in that norm of being conservative and reserved.”

Ultimately, it would be a futile oversimplification to attempt a single conclusion, as ballroom is popular among many diverse Asian cultures. Yet touch remains a highly ambiguous, sensual aspect of ballroom.

When I began this piece, Gillian, now in Ontario, tried to help by sharing her experience at a salsa club. “The instructor was a complete stranger, yet he touched me in such an intimate way that I would have been offended in any other circumstance. I didn’t think twice about it at the time, because I knew his intent was only to guide me through a step, and my trust went with him. And it was not [the] explicitly sexual [or] even lecherous type of touching that I might find in other places. I mean, otherwise, I would have slapped him.” □

1 The UBC Dance Club is considered one of the most important amateur dance organizations in B.C. It offers lessons at the internationally recognized newcomer, bronze, silver and gold levels.

2 The figures in modern ballroom dance are standardized and categorized into various levels for teaching, with internationally agreed vocabularies, techniques, rhythms and tempos. Ten types of dance are internationally approved for competition in ballroom. Of these, five are Latin (Samba, Cha Cha, Rhumba, Jive and Paso Doble) and five, Standard (Tango, Waltz, Viennese Waltz, Quickstep and the Foxtrot).

3 DanceSport BC is a British Columbia amateur ballroom dance organization. It annually publishes *Steppin’ Out*, a magazine devoted to ballroom dancing in Vancouver.