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Date

Dream of Once Upon the Dancesport

As I walk into the Common Classic Ballroom Dance Competition, my senses are flooded by an overwhelming aura. Glamorous intrigue is everywhere: intense music, gorgeous gowns, tailed tuxedos, shimmering rhinestones and enchanting movements. The reason for its appeal seems apparent: It is challenging, terrifying, thrilling and absolutely overwhelming. It seems to be a spectacular and delightful version of the piano students' recital. However, where there is magic there is also myth. Competitive amateur ballroom dancing, also known as dancesport, in the greater Portland area is a business, not a sport. After all the work, time, and money an amateur dancer invests into his or her dancing, it is neither skill nor presentation that determines placement and prize. Dance competitions are tools of business. Despite the monetary focus and adjudicative pretence, the dancers do not reap any of the profits. If amateur dancers can neither faithfully compare their success to their skill nor gain some financial profit, then why do they compete, why do they continue to compete, and why do they love it so? The answer is in the sensation. The competition world is a fantasy world, one in which the dancer can play with his or her narcissistic needs. In more familiar sports such as baseball or golf, business and legitimate scoring have equal pull. Thus, competitors can and do improve their standing through participation. In dancesport, the business consumes legitimacy; because of this, amateur dancers are a unique community of athletes that compete neither to win nor to make a profit, but rather to steep in fantasy.

The fantasy begins with the hour preceding the competition, the most enchanting hour of all. An electric current of anticipation lingers in the air like the static before a storm; the lights are dim; workers are moving quickly to get ready, and dancers are trying the floor. Couples in matching Dance Sport jackets and leg warmers over their costumes, dance to hushed silence, to the syncopated rhythm in their

minds. The women have their hair slicked back into tight elegant buns, and their faces are bewitchingly enhanced with all that glitters and sparkles. It is a striking sight. As the moment gets near, things begin to bustle. The lights remain dim but the music begins to play. Vendors set up shop, and more and more dancers flow into the ballroom. A flutter of preparation and last minute adjustments fill the remaining moments. Will you zip me up? Does this look okay? Let me fix your hair. Have you seen my camera? When do I dance? The excitement builds. Dancers find their studio tables and their instructors; they begin to warm up. Each dancer takes a turn around the floor with his or her professional instructor. Certain fright and the pride to hide it can be seen on the face of every dancer. Some hide their fright better than others, an aloof confidence in their frame and movement. Others, letting their fears take hold, fumble and fret. Finally, the moment arrives. Dancers clear the floor; organizers make opening remarks; judges are introduced; the dancing begins.

The Competition itself is, for the spectator, as fleeting as a dream. The dancers are divided by age, level and style to form heats. One after another each heat comes onto the floor, performs their dance, and exits. Upon entering the dance floor, each couple finds a strategic spot. The music begins. Suddenly, the dancers are transformed into music, color, and emotion. If the dance is Latin, such as Cha Cha, the costumes and the movements are wild and exhilarating: fast rhythms, quick steps, short skirts, fiery hips, and a lot of legs. If the dance is Smooth such as Fox Trot, the costumes and the movements are smooth and mythical: soft rhythms, sweeping steps, elegant gowns, dreamy expressions and statuesque postures. The dance lasts no more than two minutes. The music stops, and the dancers lithely leave the floor. The motive to compete seems obvious and appropriate; it seems to be a fun and logical piece in the development of one's dancing, like a glamorous version of the voice recital or tennis match. It was not until I learned of the business of ballroom that the motive for amateur dancers to compete grew vague.

Amateur ballroom dance competitions are deceptive: They are not conducted for the purpose of establishing an accurate hierarchy of dance skill, but rather for the purpose of making money and

inspiring the dance economy. The organizers of competitions charge an entry fee for each dance (around twenty dollars). Thus, more students and more entries per student equates to more profit. Cunningly, the studios that contribute the most entries have a way of winning the most places. This gift of placement is done to ensure that the studio contributing the most entries is rewarded with the top studio award: a generous monetary prize determined by the number of entries and places won. For, as Alexei Petrov (name changed by request), a professional dancer in the Portland area, puts it, “they (the organizers) know whose bread they eat” (Petrov). While favoritism is often shown to dancers of the major contributing studio, it is also shown to dancers of the local studio. This is a common trend, observed by professionals and amateurs alike: students belonging to local studios tend to win the top places (Eddy). Such favoritism is done to encourage the local dance economy, which in turn supports the financial future of the competition (Petrov). For most sports, money is certainly an important aspect, however for most sports, judging and scoring is a legitimately regulated process. Legitimacy allows athletes to use competitions as assessments of skill. Dancesport does not offer such assessment, and thus for those that compete, the motive is the sensation not trophy.

Despite the intriguing money flow, the amateurs are buyers not sellers. Indeed, one has much to consider when addressing the cost: entry fees, costumes, private lessons, travel expenses, and more. One can easily spend thousands of dollars depending on how glamorous or plain one wishes the experience to be—a large price to pay for an illegitimate assessment, if assessment is what one seeks. Although monetary prizes are often awarded to top places in certain heats, these winnings do not and cannot exceed the dancers’ expenses. The USA DanceSport a, “quasi-governing body” (Eddy) of the United States ballroom community, states in its 2002-2003 rulebook that, “the total amount of monetary prizes plus the total amount of scholarships accepted by an amateur in any given calendar year must not exceed the total amount of allowable expenses paid by the amateur during that same time period”(rulebook 26).

While amateur dancers cannot gain financially from dancesport, they are also unable to gain an accurate or noteworthy assessment of their skill, which further muddles the motive to compete. The

judges of dancesport are not tools for accurate and legitimate representation, but rather they are tools through which organizers and even studios direct monetary flow. “Like any entertainment sport such as football or baseball” one devoted dancer states, “it’s all about the money. Ballroom, however, lacks a solid licensing and regulating body, and is thus susceptible to subjectivity.” One must recognize that a certain degree of subjectivity exists in any sport that relies on adjudicative opinion. Dancesport, however, puts subjectivity to financial use. “The competition world,” Eddy states, “is very small. The informal information network - word of mouth, is so powerful that it can color decisions that get made on the floor.” Thus, amateurs do not compete for the assessment, for there is no real assessment being made. Each judgment is employed for financial gain.

Adjudicative manipulation is not unique to the Portland community. In Ballroom Dance chains across the country, such as the Arthur Murry schools, judges often “know who will win before the dancers set foot on the dance floor” (Petrov). A studio will often have “strategic students” (Petrov) who contribute greatly to the studio’s purse. Such students, in order to ensure their continued investments, are often given first place whether their skill warrants such placement or not. If a strategic student is obviously of lesser skill, a separate heat is often created for that student alone to ensure a first place (Petrov). Even professional dancers must pay for private lessons with top judges in order to secure a first place (Petrov). It was the discovery of this competitive pretence that made me question the motivation of amateur dancers. Why do they compete and invest so much money if their placement is indirectly related to their skill and performance. The surface charms of dancesport alone do not explain the enthusiasm, dedication, and financial investment of amateur dancers. One finds a compelling motive only when one looks to the sensation of being on the dance floor.

In most sports, amateur athletes cannot acquire great wealth by competing. Like amateur dancers, their participation is their hobby not their profession. However, unlike dancesport, competing enables them to receive an external critique of their skill as well as recognition for their skill. Dr Harold Sullivan, an avid golfer describes his motivation to compete: “when I compete my experience is more intense and

my game becomes more focused because, I want to win.” He focuses because he knows that if he plays well, he can win. This is where ballroom is unique and hard to understand. Many dancers are aware that their performance is not directly proportional to placement, yet they continue to compete. Even the dancers I interviewed that were unaware of the strategic judging, stated that it would not effect their desire to compete. Athletes competing solely for the amusement and challenge competition offers still do so with out the extreme financial investment necessary in dancesport. Amateur dancers “pay to have fun” (Shoykhet). Thus, considering all the inexpensive and honest hobbies, dancesport is an illogical choice unless it offers something other activities do not.

In the attempt to understand what motivates amateur dancers to compete, I felt that the most efficient way would be to simply ask. When asked why they compete despite the illegitimacy of the dance world, my subjects answered with surprising ease: “the experience” one dancer states, “I compete for the feeling of being on the dance floor” (Charles). Their motivation takes root in the sensation. The glamour and intrigue of the competitive dance world “appeals to the narcissistic elements in our personalities” (Eddy).

While many speak of competition as a tool for self-critique and motivation, the core drive to compete is the fantasy it offers. Amateur dancers want to be swept away. The ballroom is a secure place to manifest the many playful and romantic wants and desires that crave expression. As one devoted amateur dancer puts it “it makes you feel like Cinderella. You know what she felt like when she went to the ball. In our society, there are few opportunities for both men and women to be totally and utterly swept away. In America the only opportunity a woman has to feel like a queen is her wedding” (Petrov). Human beings have an inherent need to feel important, powerful, and beautiful, and somehow, the majestic aura of the dance floor, provides that for many people.

Competitive dancing is much like theatre. One is given the permission to explore the repressed aspects of one’s self in the safe shell of one’s character. The mundane rhythms of the ordinary office life

cannot compare to and cannot replace the awakening rhythms of the dance floor. One young dancer, Cinzia Bagala, describes the sensation: “it makes me feel alive. When I dance I don’t have to think so much and it’s a totally different environment from what I do during the day.” Another dancer describes competing as her “escape from reality” (Charles). Indeed, to enter the ballroom is to leave one reality and enter an entirely alternate one. The world of ballroom is, however, bound by four walls. The two are united only by the imagination of the dancer. They share meaning through the accentuation and diffusion of inherent narcissistic needs. Clifford Geertz describes a similar social construction in his study of the Balinese cockfight. “The cockfight” he writes, “is ‘really real’ only to the cocks-it does not kill anyone, castrate anyone, reduce anyone to animal status, alter the hierarchical relations among people, or refashion the hierarchy” (Geertz 443). Like the cockfight, the dance is only real in the imagination of the dancer. It does not directly affect one’s status or influence in the dance world. One cannot hope to change a judge’s vote by the quality of one’s dance, and one cannot hope to profit financially by high placement. Similarly, poor performance has no bearing on one’s status or financial investment: “anyone that can pay can compete” (Eddy). Because the dance is real and important only in one’s mind, it is whatever one needs it to be; it is a dream, a fantasy, a fairy tale, and a painting. Like the cockfight, “what it does is what, for other peoples with other temperaments and other conventions, *Lear* and *Crime and Punishment* do” (Geertz 443). It captures one’s needs, emotions, themes and symbols, and manifests them, making them “real” in an ideational sense (Geertz 444).

Part of the fantasy that manifests on the dance floor is a kind of sensual extreme. Many dancers describe the sensation as an irreplaceable adrenaline rush. Petrov describes his moments on the dance floor as being the most memorable moments of his life. The dance adrenaline he feels, “far surpasses that of professional skiing” (Petrov). Another dancer describes the sensation as “a roller coaster” (Kirillova) and, “indescribable” (Kirillova). This aspect is the hardest piece for a spectator to grasp. From the seats, the glamour is apparent, but why one needs to compete to feel such glamour is not. In fact, it was not until I competed for the first time that I began to understand the addictive force of dancesport and why

actually being on the dance floor was so critical to the sensation. Walking onto the dance floor is like stepping into a movie screen. It is like falling through the sky and hitting the point of free fall. The moment is surreal and breathtaking. Once the music begins, time stops and a sort of dream-time takes over. The intensity and the magic awake a subliminal place that cannot be ordinarily tapped. Like a skydiver, or a boxer, the pressure and sensory overload throws you into a zone, a zone in which your body begins to accomplish awesome things, and in which your fantasy becomes somehow tangible. This feeling is why amateurs compete despite the burdensome costs and lack of reward. This feeling is the addiction. The terror it elicits is strangely therapeutic, and magic it creates is unforgettable. This experience or this “repositioning” (Rosaldo) is what has allowed me to understand (to a fuller degree) the motive to compete. For the amateur dancer, competition is much more than a “big girls dress up party”(Petrov). It is more than a test of endurance; it is fantasy come to life.

Fantasy is notably an elusive and personal thing. We all come from different realities. One could argue that dancesport offers no insight into universal narcissistic needs, only into my needs, or the needs of “the dancer”. Dancesport has changed me, and I have certainly changed it. I love dancing and love the sensation of competing. Marina Eddy states in her interview that she competes and will continue to compete because “(she is) a dancer.” So, perhaps those who compete, myself included, do so because they are inherently dancers, not because they need to manifest some unfulfilled fantasy. In her essay, “Yup Lives And How We See Them,” Ann Fienup-Riordan acknowledges that an observer will often see, to some degree, what he or she wants to see (202). Like a child trying to catch a bubble, once caught, the bubble pops. However, the bubble does not disappear, rather it simply is reshaped. Both soap and space exist; it is only their relationship that has changed. While I have altered dancesport both by being a dancer and by attempting to catch it, its core holds true. Our needs may not be the same, but we all share the need to manifest our repressed qualities. We are all “other peoples with other temperaments and other conventions” (Geertz 445). Whether one dives off a plane thousands of feet in the air, joins the local community theatre, or participates in the world of dancesport, the core motive is the same: We all need to

be taken to the limit and swept away. In the day to day social constructs we create, certain aspects are elicited and others are repressed. It is human nature to balance itself by constructing additional structures in which it is allowed to manifest the repressed aspects craving expression. Dancesport is one such structure; providing no benefits that have meaning in the “real” world, the ballroom exists only as a kind of fantasy playground.

The world of dancesport is a fantasy world. Its structure offers neither financial Profit nor accurate assessment, yet curiously, amateurs continue to invest thousands of dollars in this illegitimate activity. Naturally, there are many various motives for amateurs to compete, however, the most common and the most powerful motive is this need to be swept away. It is our nature to seek outlets for our repressed inner needs. The fairy world of ballroom is one such outlet. Indeed such outlets take many forms: the movies, the theatre, skydiving, gambling, fighting etc. For the dancer, dancesport is a way to manifest one’s fantasy and to be taken to the edge. The dancefloor is a cliff, and the sensation is free-fall.

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