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Breaking Into and Succeeding



BALLROOM DANCER

Jennie S. Bev & Eric J. Leech

StyleCareer.com eGuide
**Breaking Into and Succeeding as a
Ballroom Dancer**

**Jennie S. Bev &
Eric J. Leech**

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Eric has since put every degree to good use with a variety of career accomplishments. These accomplishments include seven years as an actor/model and Production Assistant for various television and film projects. He also maintained a successful business as the co-owner of an outdoor living structure design company for several years before pursuing his full-time career as a freelance columnist/writer.

Since that decision Eric has been featured on such international magazines as the *Circle (India)*, *Urban Male Magazine (Canada)*, *UNO (Philippines)* and *Coffee House Digest (International)* and has found a comfortable home with **StyleCareer.com**.

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The Myths, the Realities, and the Basics

I love dancing, but I'm not a professional dancer.
My dancing skills are limited.



The love of dancing is most likely the reason that you purchased this book and it will also be the key to your success. You do not have to be a professional dancer to get started, and best of all, the skills can be built.

It was recommended by every professional dancer we spoke to that you at least have a sense of rhythm and an ability to speak clearly if you are interested in becoming a professional ballroom teacher. Much of a dancer's success rests on their commitment to the art and how much time they are willing to invest to reach their goals.

It is true that not everyone capable of being a world-class professional ballroom dancer will be able to make a living completely from their dancing. However, if you are also willing to dance professionally in commercial setting and even teach dance to adults, teens or even kids, your chances of making this into a solid career have now tripled if not quadrupled.

Keep focused on your love of dancing, rather than your statistics as a professional. Most ballroom instructors you will encounter will be more interested in your desire and enthusiasm than your current professional level.

I have never won any dancing competition.

Some professional dancers today have never won a dancing competition. There are different levels of being a professional that will be explained in Section two. **Professional dancers range from competition winners, to commercial stars, to instructors and most of them will transfer into these different areas over their lifetime of dance.** You will not have to stay in any one area once you choose to go down a certain path. There is plenty of room to change around into different areas of this profession.

I don't have a perfect body to become a dancer.



This statement comes from the days of old. **Today, there are dancers of all shapes and sizes and they all have a niche that they can fill.** Classic ballet continues to have strict expectations for the shape and build of their dancers, as

that creates a uniform look that ballet has become known for. But Ballroom dance is concerned more with the moves of the dancers and their ability to communicate with each other through their bodies. Get the thought of a perfect body out of your mind; there is no such thing in the realm of ballroom dance.

A healthy body and mind is what you will achieve through your goals to become a dancer and this will just come naturally from your exertions. Dance is of course not for anybody who is severely out of shape, but you will build on your stamina over your course of training and you will become a healthy machine capable of lasting long periods on the dance floor. The body comes with the practice, so this should in no way be an impediment to anyone's dreams of being a dancer.

I have never become a “professional” of anything; I’m not that confident.

This statement encompasses the above statements of defeat more than anything. It is usually one's confidence level that is going to limit them from achieving their goals as a dancer. This is exactly what this book is designed for. To give you solid information on the steps you need to take to succeed. Listen to the advice from some of the best professionals in their field on how to become a dancer and succeed in it as a lifelong career.

The word professional is the confidence builder in itself. Once you have reached the stage to be able to call yourself a professional you know that you have arisen to the top. It takes a little while to get to this point and it is to be expected that at times you may not feel as confident in yourself as you would like.

What you need to do in these moments is realize that it is going to be your own feelings of defeat that are going to be your failure. You can make this dream come true to some degree of success if you truly want it. Focus on where you want to be and see yourself as a professional, even when your experience level may not back you up. Believing in yourself is the first step before anybody else will!

I want to make a living by being a professional ballroom dancer, can I?



Absolutely you can. Part of being considered a professional of any field means that you are making money from it. This book is designed to give you the information to not only learn how to dance, but also create a lucrative business from it as well. Competitions can offer prize money. Commercial projects and theater can offer enough money to make a good living. You can also become an instructor at some point in your career if not initially, many professionals take this position later on.

The skill level necessary to build a career ranges from moderate to very high. Most any dancer will ultimately have a very high goal of where they would like to be someday, but regardless of where you actually make it, there will always be a way for you to make a living as long as it is the dancing that is your true passion and not the fame and glory that comes from competition and commercial success.

Do I need to travel a lot being a professional ballroom dancer? With family commitments, I may not be able to.

Most of the professional dancers we spoke to do not necessarily travel unless it is their wish to do so. If it is competition that is truly in your blood, then yes, you will find yourself traveling to the various shows around the world in order to compete. **However, in both commercial dancing, instruction and**

ownership of your own studio you can stay within your local area and compete in shows that are within your distance limitations.

There will be plenty of time to compete when you are able, so there is no hurry if you have family commitments currently. It used to be that dance was a young person sport, but today there are competition levels that give everybody the opportunity to compete. Enjoy your time as an instructor or owner of your own studio and take advantage of local shows in your area. When your schedule opens up you may decide that you would like to travel the world as a dance competitor, or you may find you are quite satisfied dancing in your own studio and local productions.

Ballroom Dancing in a Nutshell

Definition of Being a Professional



The basic definition of a professional in almost every career is that you are paid for what you do. A hobby is done out of love for the art and it makes no difference if you are paid or not.

In this definition, there are also two viewpoints as described by **Chuan Chee of Toronto Dance** (<http://www.torontodance.ca>). A professional is either considered to be anyone who performs their dance for money either commercially or through competition wins or they can also be an instructor who teaches others for profit.

You, of course, have to be skilled to accomplish either task, but the commercial/competition professional will need to have the most skill and ability to rise amongst the ranks and promote themselves exclusively in this relatively small market. Before you reach this ranking, you will have to spend sometime among the amateur levels.

Interestingly, Chuan mentioned to us that oftentimes it can be the amateurs who are actually the better dancers than the professionals, as the term professional does not necessarily have anything to do with how good a dancer you are. This is a big misconception among beginners. An amateur dancer may have trained with the best for years, but has simply done it as a hobby and never had the need to make a living from their art, either because they are independently wealthy or have another career that is supporting them.

A professional is sometimes even at a disadvantage, chuan says, because they must dance to make a living and take jobs that are necessary to pay the bills and they may not always be beneficial to their art form and technical ability. So this is where we pay tribute to the millions of talented amateurs who deserve the same credit as the professionals and truly deserve it.

Being an amateur does not necessary mean that you are not as good, but more so means that you are not making a living from your art. The choice is yours, you can either use this book to gain insight on how to become a better dancer, or you can listen to the business suggestions and also learn how to create a positive cash flow from this profession.

What is Ballroom Dance?



One thing is certain and that is there will never be an exact definition of ballroom dance. **Some say there are a series of specific steps and patterns that must be followed exactly, while others see it more as an ever changing art form that will never be the same from day to day.**

You see, there is a very classic element to ballroom that could be said to never change, however, the ballroom dances themselves are always changing and adding new variations and steps to the timeless classics. The Waltz is considered a 19th Century ballroom classic, while the Fox Trot, Tango and Two-Step followed in the 20th Century. Then the age of the Swing birthed, Hustle and country line dancing. Some people say that these modern forms are not ballroom, while others disagree.

While it is not in our agenda of this book to make a stand as to whether these modern forms of dance are ballroom or not, we hope to arm you with some historic knowledge to be able to make a stand for your opinion if you should ever become challenged. One thing for certain is that over the centuries we have seen the popularity of ballroom rise and fall, sometimes encompassing the attention of the younger generation and other times being drowned out by their desire to dance alone and be seen as a single entity.

Currently, ballroom couple dancing is at an upslope and gaining popularity with the younger cultures, as it is being publicized through television and movies. This marks a perfect time to begin your lessons and journey into ballroom as a profession while it is growing in popularity and the jobs are plentiful.

Types of Ballroom Dances

Chuan Chee offered us this break down of available ballroom dances:

Ballroom/Dance Sport Dances				
Style	International		North American	
Division	Standard	Latin	Smooth	Rhythm
Dances	Waltz Tango Foxtrot Viennese Waltz Quickstep	Cha Cha Rumba Jive Samba Paso Doble	Waltz Tango Foxtrot Viennese Waltz	Cha Cha Rumba Swing Bolero Mambo

Social and Nightclub Dances				
Style	Swing		Nightclub/ Latin club	Miscellaneous
Division	Fast Swing	Slow Swing		
Dances	East Coast Swing - Triple - Double - Single Lindy Hop Jitterbug	West Coast Swing Carolina Shag Hand Dancing	Salsa Merengue Bachata Salsa Rueda	Argentine Tango Nightclub 2 Hustle Line Dances (ballroom) Line Dances (country) Brazilian Samba Lambada Theatre Arts Cajun/Zydeco

For beginning dancers, **Chuan** recommends:

- International Waltz, Tango, Quickstep
- International Cha Cha, Rumba, Jive
- American Waltz, Tango, Foxtrot, Viennese Waltz
- American Cha Cha, Rumba, Swing, Bolero
- East Coast Swing (triple and single)
- Lindy Hop
- Salsa, Merengue, Bachata

For more experienced dancers, Chuan recommends:

- International Foxtrot
- International Samba, Paso Doble
- American Mambo
- Jitterbug, West Coast Swing, Argentine Tango

History and Description of A Few of the Most Popular Dances



Waltz

The Waltz is described as a very smooth and romantic dance that is performed on $\frac{3}{4}$ time as they say. In other words, the rhythm has a very strong beat followed by two lighter beats. These steps are accomplished rather slow and deliberate with a very obvious unity between the couple. It is almost as if the couple is one in body and mind and knows what the other person is saying to them through the motions of their body.

The Waltz has been said to have been born in the alpine region of Austria and in fact, much of their popular tunes can be traced back to the simple yodeling of the peasants during the time of its emergence. France was the next stop for the Waltz in the middle of the 18th Century and this is where it was introduced and fallen in love by high society.

It was not taken in with open arms completely, however, as many people believed its ease of steps threatened the profession of the minuet (and other court dances) that took considerable practice and professional tutoring to accomplish properly. In addition, the basic dance hold of the Waltz, was decidedly closer than the minuet (this was considered “dirty dancing” back in its day).

Queen Victoria of England and her great love for the Waltz, coupled with the fact of its resistance from the older generations caused its popularity with the younger crowds, making its popularity and eventual emergence around the world almost inevitable. By the 19th Century, most every dance program in civilized society featured three fourths of its energies towards the Waltz and the other fourth towards all the other dances.

Today, two popular forms still exist, the Modern waltz and the Viennese Waltz (quick step). The Viennese is very similar to the modern Waltz, except is accomplished with a quick whirling motion of grace and poise across the dance floor. The basic Modern Waltz is very easy to accomplish, it would make a good starting point for any beginner as it's basic step, rhythm and motion is very basic in slow in comparison to many of the other ballroom dances. The Viennese Waltz will be decidedly harder and should only be taken after mastering the basic step of the Modern Waltz first.

Quickstep

The quickstep is a very basic motion that is comprised of lively walks and “chases” where the couples almost appear to be gliding around the room with the energy and enthusiasm of a child, but at the same time, with the elegance and stature of a royal court matron.

The quickstep had the humble beginnings in the Caribbean and Africa areas and did not develop in the America's until World War II in Suburban New York. It is said that the quickstep became popular in Britain because of its usefulness in keeping warm in the cold winter and today some say it is still one of the most popular dances in the world and burns as many calories in a minute as running a mile at full speed. The English developed the quickstep using the origins of the Charleston and also with a mix of the Foxtrot to give it its “kicks.”

A few of the more well known moves of the Quickstep are the “Running Right Turn,” “V6” and the “Fishtail.”

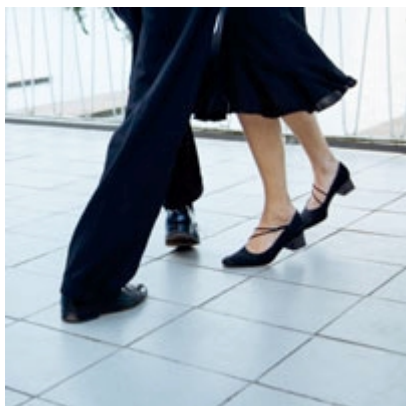
Foxtrot

The foxtrot has been described as the most difficult ballroom dance there is to execute correctly due to its graceful essence of the mixture of control and style. It gained much of its popularity during the “Big Band” era and that music still to this day ensures its thriving existence, interest and popularity.

The Foxtrot comes from the origins of Vaudeville actor Harry Fox in the summer of 1914. During his act, Harry would perform a trot down the steps to ragtime music and that soon came to be known as “Fox's Trot.” Mesmerized by the unique steps that Harry had created, it eventually captured the attention of G.K. Anderson (from London) and Josephine Bradley who won many competitions using that very style and form.

To fit with the times, The Foxtrot was developed to be used as a dance that a couple could perform while standing in the same spot, rather than travel around the room. This way, large numbers of people were able to enjoy dancing as it allowed more room without the possibility of collisions galore. The Foxtrot is unique in that it combines both quick and slow steps and permits the couple ample flexibility beyond the normal one-step or two-step. Because there is so much flexibility that the dancer is given and because of the many variations, the Foxtrot is one of the most difficult dances to learn in general and would be even harder for the beginner with little experience in dance.

Tango



Defined with passion and staccato movement, the Tango is represented by sharp music and regimented movement. There are many different styles of Tango and each are performed with a slight difference in execution. There is the Argentine, Gaucho, International, French and American Tango. The American Tango takes what it likes to call, “the best parts of each,” and mixes them up into an ultimate Tango experience. The principles of the Tango are first, it must fit with the music being played, second, that it must be performed with its unique characteristics and third, that it must be and appear comfortable and enjoyable.

The Tango has been described as a beautiful love story with paragraphs and sentences. The paragraphs are the major phrases of the dance, while the sentences are the minor phrases. To end each sentence, every part of the story must have a period, or in other words a “close.” The connection of partners is of the utmost importance during the Tango. The couple is said to be connected

through the heart and each of their motions must represent this both visually and emotionally.

The origins of the Tango have been traced to Spain and Morocco. It was introduced to the New World through Spanish Settlers. During the 19th Century, the Tango became a dance for a single woman to perform by herself. As it developed into a couples dance it was naturally considered immoral with its flirtatious music and execution. But this is common with almost every dance in the world and it was soon accepted and replaced by another dance that was considered to be immoral.

The best story we have heard for the actual development of the steps of the Tango is said to have developed through the Gauchos (cowboys) of Argentina. These men would travel to the crowded night clubs after work, smelly and sweaty, still wearing their chaps and ask the local girls to dance.

With the Gauchos stench, the woman would choose to dance within the crook of his right arm, holding her head and nose back away. Her right hand was held low on his left hip, where she could be within easy reach of his pocket and hopefully payment for her dancing with him. The dance was executed in a curved fashion, as the floors were small and filled with tables and he was forced to dance in between them.

New York Salsa



This is a combination of Puerto Rican Salsa mixed with the seventies dance craze, the hustle. This is Heather Berman's most favorite dance style and it had been gaining worldwide recognition over the past years and would make a great dance for a beginner to become accustomed to. The New York Salsa is not a competitive dance per say as of yet, but its popularity would make it a great dance to specialize in as a teacher or within your studio.

Heather describes the participants of this dance as a “click of people” that are made up of competitive dancers (Mambo) and casual amateurs. You can find out more about this unique and specific dance through **SalsaNewYork.com** (<http://www.salsanewyork.com>).

Dancing Related Statistics



According to the **U.S. Department of Labor** (<http://www.bls.gov>), there were 38,000 jobs available to dancers and around one-fifth of these were self employed. Major cities employ the most dancers and offer access to the full-time dance company jobs. The smaller self-employed studios were generally found in the outskirts of major cities or in small towns.

The outlook is supposed to have even growth through 2014 and the public infatuation and interest in dance suggests that it will remain strong through these years. It is important to note that many dancers retire from competition in their late thirties, which opens up new possibilities to new dancers each year. Of course on the other end, these retired professional then move on to gain employment in teaching and opening studios. In general however, there are a strong number of openings per year in this industry and those who work hard to gain these positions will have a very good chance at claiming one.

The salary of a dancer can be fairly high for celebrity status dancers and rather low for the beginner. The median hourly earnings as reported by the Department of Labor were \$8.54 in 2004. The industry is broken down with schools/instruction and performing arts being the highest paid at just under \$15. The lowest rates were held by dancers in more recreational settings at just over

\$7. Keep in mind that these figures do not take into account that many dancers also received room and board and compensation for overtime work that has not been calculated into these figures.

Dancers who were employed by the larger companies enjoy union contracts and basic agreements specifying minimum salary rates, benefits and maximum work hours. If possible, any dancer should be aware of such contracts and always make sure that they are being treated fairly for their work. **The American Guild of Musical Artists** (<http://www.musicalartists.org>) will be your guiding hand in such matters.

Trends in Ballroom Dancing



Chuan Chee comments that the Salsa is becoming very big in certain cities because it can be seen in many bars (with dance floors) and “Cuban” type music is gaining popularity.

Latin-Ballroom is gaining momentum due to various TV shows and movies. “It used to be popular (in the) 1930s to 1950s,” says Chuan. “Since the 1990s, it has been gaining momentum.”

With the great popularity of ballroom on the rise, it is not surprising that one of the hottest trends right now is wedding first dances. Both Heather Berman and Chuan Chee, who helped tremendously in the writing of this book, have personal classes they offer for wedding couples who want to perfect their traditional first dance for their reception. This is a great way to freelance your talents as a dancer and make a good income on the side of the other projects you are involved with.

Couples in general are moving towards dance as a means of fostering love relationships and building upon both good and troubled relationships. Media has opened the door to this new therapy that brings couples closer, opens trust and allows them to work as a team. Some therapists have even begun recommending dancing to troubled couples as part of their therapy in healing. Many couples who take up dance find themselves in a renewed love and often end up changing their whole lives in order to incorporate dance into their lifestyle.

Another trend in ballroom dancing now is people are beginning dance later in their life (40+) and it is becoming very accepted and welcome to do so. There was a time when most dancers started as teenagers and then danced through their late 30's where they would then retire and take up lessons for the remainder of their career. This is still the case in some instances, but many great dancers are starting in their 30's and then dancing well through their 50's or even 60's. There is no standard in age these days and everyone is welcome to start dancing at any age or stage of their life.

Another current trend in competition is a copycat attitude that Forrest Lance described to us in his interview in Section Five. The young stars of today are so busy trying to be like everybody else, they have forgotten to set themselves apart and tell a story in their dance routine. This is of course a bad trend and something that a beginner should try to avoid following after.

Standing apart from the crowd can also be a valuable competition strategy, it really all just depends on the judge and what they like to see. This is another bit of good advice for competitions; know your judge and what they look for in any particular dance. Then you will know what to focus on while performing your routine in front of them.

Pop Culture Infatuation with Ballroom Dancing

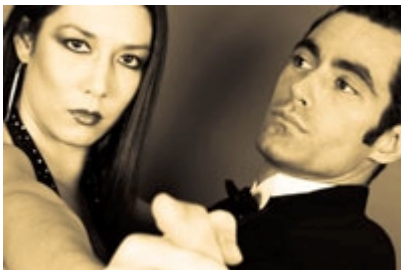
This is one of the reasons that ballroom dance is back, so this book would not be complete if we didn't at least mention it briefly. The popular culture has always been important for determining the ultimate success of most things today. It is true that with reality shows such as **"Dancing with the Stars"** and **"So You Think You Can Dance"** that people today have been pushed to becoming fascinated by the idea of dance and in a way it has been glamorized through films such as **"Take the Lead," "Honey," "Shall We Dance"** and videos like **"Mad Hot Ballroom."** It was only natural that it was going to take off with the huge success and popularity that it is today.

To ease your mind about the future, dance has always been an infatuation with the public in general. Some generations are more into dance than others, but at any given point in time there are always at least a few generations who are amongst some sort of dance craze, giving the competitor, performer and instructor reason to continue pursuing their passion.

The career that you are pursuing right now has as much validity today as it will twenty years from now and many professionals have bet their livelihood on it. Breathe easy; you are embarking upon an age old, time tested occupation.

Getting Ready for the Big Break

Pathways to Become A Professional Ballroom Dancer



If there is anything we learned through the help of our featured professionals who helped to make this book possible, is that there is no set pathway to take in order to be a ballroom dancer. To understand what we are saying better, just turn to Section Five where we tell the biographical stories of several dancers and how their careers evolved.

There are some basic similarities, but in general their stories are all unique and none of them would tell us that there was necessarily one particular path that a beginner should take, or a particular time in someone's life when they should start. But this should all be good news to you, because it offers everyone of any walk of life the opportunity to reach this dream.

There are a couple of aspects of the business of ballroom dance that every dancer will have to deal with at some point.

How to Find a Good Partner



According to **Chuan**, “Having any kind of relationship, whether it is marriage, friendship, co-workers, can be challenging at times. Many have said that a competition partnership is even harder than marriage. I can attest to that because you have two people seeing so much of each other, trying to attain a goal. Not only do you have to have similar goals but also a similar speed in achieving that goal, otherwise tension can arise, as it did in my case. We had to learn how to “argue” properly (just as in normal life). Our undoing was the way we practiced; I liked to be intellectual about it and my partner liked to just repeat things as many times as possible.”

There are many sources to finding a good dance partner according to **Chuan Chee**:

- In general, there are more women who want to dance than men so men have the advantage.
- There are websites where you list your desire to find a partner. You would state your geographic location, your qualifications and your goals.
 - **DancePartner.com** (<http://www.dancepartner.com>)
 - **DanceDanceDance.com** (<http://www.dancedancedance.com>)
 - **1GreatDanceSite.com** (<http://www.1greatdancesite.com>)
 - **Dancers4Dancers.com** (<http://www.dancers4dancers.com>)
 - **Artrhythms.com** (<http://www.artrhythms.com>)

- Dance schools know of people searching for partners.
- Take lots of dance classes and keep an eye out for a potential partner.
- Go out to competitions and dance during any available general dance periods and be seen.

Attending a Ballroom Dance School



Characteristics of a Good School for the Beginner (as prepared by Chuan Chee):

- **Instructors who know how to instruct beginners-** Different skills are required to teach beginners vs. advanced dancers. Different skills are required to teach a private lesson vs. a small group of students vs. a large group of students.
- **Good instructor vs. good dancer-** Some students flock to instructors who have a good reputation of being a good dancer or they have seen them perform and liked the way they danced. However, a good dancer isn't necessarily a good instructor; teaching and dancing are different skills. So in searching for a good school, it is similar to searching for a good restaurant or a good movie or a good sports instructor; check reviews/testimonials, ask people for references, and don't be afraid to try out some classes first before signing up.
- **Affordable rates-** Some studios charge a package of private lessons plus group lessons plus dance parties. Most people don't have time to

use more than one of the three so they are wasting money. Some students push students into taking private lessons on top of their group classes. Group classes should be able to give the students what they came for without the additional pressure to spend more money.

- **A good curriculum catered for beginners-** Some schools simply put a “random” set of dance figures together, irrespective of the figures’ complexity. Many schools teach an entire routine so a student must memorize a list of figures from beginning to end and this is not particularly a good way of learning to dance. Some schools have drop-in classes where people simply attend when they wish, but this is not good because students in those classes have different dance experience and there is no way of ensuring everyone’s progress.

Students must be able to learn dance figures and have the confidence to piece them together as needed depending on the abilities of whomever they are dancing with and on crowdedness and flow of the dance floor. There should be coherence in the set of figures being taught on a certain level.

- **Classes are enjoyable-** Most beginner students attend classes for various reasons such as learning a different activity, having fun, having some physical activity, having a social life, etc. Some schools expect students to be serious or expect them to eventually compete (studios can earn more money if they convince students to compete). A school can be successful by making their students happy without additional stresses. They always say it is easier to keep a satisfied customer than finding a new customer. For most beginners, this is their first attempt at any form of dancing so their first experience should be enjoyable.
- **Truly care for the students-** Some studios don’t care if a student shows up or not, they figure that a student has pre-paid for a package and the school has already earned their money off this student. A good studio follows up with the student and finds ways to get them caught up including offering free make-up classes.
- **A flexible schedule-** A beginner will need to find a reasonable schedule that they can handle. Something which can accommodate their busy work schedule. A big enough school can afford to hold many classes of the same level throughout the week or with start dates spanning different weeks.

These days I find people cannot make the same day every week due to having to work overtime, having to travel due to work, illness, family emergencies, social obligations. When students are able to complete the curriculum they paid for they feel they have accomplished something rather than having wasted their money. The last thing a student should feel is that they will never be able to learn to dance.

- **A Good quality teacher-to-student ratio-** Some classes have over 100 students to 1 or 2 instructors. Some classes have 6 students in a class with 1 instructor. Some classes have instructors and assistants. So which is the better situation? It isn't simply the mathematical number of teachers/assistants to students; it is the quality of those teachers/assistants. It is possible to have a lousy teacher to 6 students. It is possible to have an excellent teacher teaching 100 students. And yet some excellent teachers have their limits, such as 20 students, 30 students, etc., after which they become ineffective.
- **Good male/female student ratio-** Many beginners don't realize that they may be in a class with a large ratio of female students vs. male students. How would these "extra" women learn to dance? Some schools rotate the women among the men. But can you imagine a school that manages to get almost equal numbers of men and women so everyone is always dancing at all times; the class will learn at a faster rate.
- **Measures of quality.** Aside from measuring teacher quality, there are other ways of measuring quality. One way is measuring the percentage of students moving onto the next level of learning; some students proceed to the next level one or two terms later than they should. Another (sometimes more important) measure is how much a student retains one week, one month and even one year after they stop taking classes.

Top Ballroom Dancing Schools in the United States and Canada

In the United States

American Ballroom Theater

<http://www.americanballroomtheater.com>

25 West 31st Street
Fourth Floor
New York, NY 10001

Ballroom dance champions, Pierre Dulaine and Yvonne Marceau founded the American Ballroom Theater in 1984. In 1989-1990, they received the prestigious Fred Astaire Award for Best Dancing on Broadway with their roles as a couple in Tommy Tune's "Grand Motel."

In 1994, they incorporated classrooms and teachers into their American Ballroom Theater and began to teach children the art of ballroom dance, called "Dancing Classrooms." His story of this is featured in the movie "Take the Lead", starring Antonio Banderas. The program is used to teach children of all ages, self esteem, confidence and an awareness of themselves and the arts.

Teachers of this program are taught extensively on the art of ballroom dance with a 60 hour course that begins the end of October with weekday classes for approximately six weeks. They have auditions for acceptance to the program; however they do not require extensive ballroom experience a prerequisite. All that is needed is a passion for children, passion for creative and verbal expression, flexibility in schedule and a good sense of humor.

Pierre has recently franchised this idea and you will soon find classrooms popping up in different areas of the U.S. as well as internationally. Contact their offices for further details about classes available in your area. This is how Heather Bergman, who is one of our featured Dance professionals in the last chapter, discovered her passion for ballroom and has since gone on to teaching her own classes for wedding couples. Their franchise program may also be a helpful alternative to opening your own dance studio.

American Ballroom also has a commercial studio that can be found through (<http://www.pierredulaine.com>).

The bonus of the commercial studio is that they have more refined teachers of the “star” status who focus on the fundamentals of ballroom dance rather than just strict form. The traditional classes are known for their fast paced environment and intense learning sessions.

These are best if you are concentrating on perfect form for competition. For beginners or professionals who are looking to refine their techniques and get a new viewpoint of technique and style, the commercial studio of Pierre Dulaine is an excellent route to take beyond their American Ballroom Theatre.

Fred Astaire Dance Studios

<http://www.fredastaire.com>

Corporate Office
10 Bliss Rd
Longmeadow, MA 01106

The Fred Astaire Studios is well known across the nation to have accredited instructors and a proven program of excellence. Fred Astaire is similar to the American Ballroom Theater in that it is Franchised to over 100 national studios, which not only gives the beginning dancer the opportunity to train within their local area, but open their own franchise down the line.

Fred Astaire was co-founder of the program back in 1947 and today it offers courses in everything from Ballroom to Country to Salsa to Nightclub style. Their website offers a free dance lesson clip to give their prospective students a taste of how the course operates and the kinds of steps they will be learning

Paul Pellicoro’s Dance Sport

<http://www.dancesport.com>

22 west 34th Street
NY, New York
(Next to the Empire State Building)

Paul’s Dancesport is advertised as the largest Ballroom studio in all of New York, which says a lot. In Paul’s studio one can learn to Salsa, Mambo, Argentine Tango, Swing, Ballroom, Latin, among a few others. There are over 100 group dance classes each week and the dance lessons are split into all levels, styles and ages. They offer a complimentary one hour orientation class and a 30-minute private lesson for \$20. Their basic classes charge \$25 per separate visit, but they offer discounts if you purchase full courses featuring 4, 8, 12 or 16 classes.

In Canada

Chuan offered us a list of some prominent ballroom schools in Canada catering to beginners. There are good schools catering to the more experienced dancer and to those interested in competitions:

UBC (University of British Columbia) Dance Club

<http://www.ubcdanceclub.com>

University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1

They have been around for 57 years. They have a lot of students and offer classes for beginners to competitors.

U of A (University of Alberta) Dance Club

<http://www.uadc.ca>

2nd Floor
Student's Union Building
University of Alberta

They have been around for 50 years. They have over 1700 active members yearly with a full range of classes and social events.

Toronto Dance Inc.

<http://www.torontodance.ca>

38 Elm St., Suite 3107
Toronto, ON
Canada. M5G 2K5

This school has only been around for 5 years but is one of the largest ballroom (privately owned) schools in Canada for beginners. It is the largest in terms of the number of active students attending beginner classes each week and the largest number of students attending a dance outing to a ballroom dance venue. Toronto Dance also has salsa classes and is the largest salsa school in the entire Canada in terms of the number of active students attending classes each week and the largest dance outings. In fact there is no single salsa dance venue large enough to hold the Toronto Dance salsa students who wish to go out dancing.

Pros and Cons of Specializing in a Particular Dance

The most obvious pro here is that specializing will end up being much more cost effective, especially when you are involved in private lessons. Specializing also allows the dancer to concentrate fully on the mastery of one art form and they will subsequently learn much quicker and reach professional status sooner. There is also a great amount of joy and sense of accomplishment in specializing your abilities and conquering one dance completely and being a master of it.

For the cons, the first on the list is that it will limit the number of jobs you will be able to perform. If you are specialized in the Salsa, then the salsa is probably what you would teach and the main dance you would be up for in a show. Another con is that sometimes a lack of interest can set in if you have been concentrating solely on just one thing. And finally, in dance you will find that the techniques and steps of each individual style feed off of each other and a good dancer can mix these styles and create unique steps that would never be possible without a broad knowledge of dance steps.

Specializing one dance at a time however allows a dancer to conquer one dance completely at a time before moving onto a new dance. This would probably be the most recommended path of specialization. It will be the most cost effective over the short haul and it will ensure the dancers mastery of each dance before they move onto the next dance they wish to conquer.

Getting a Private Tutor Pros and Cons



Chuan said, “In my second year of competitions, I had a coach, Ann Harding-Trafford, who made a pivotal change my dance ability. She is a highly

acclaimed instructor, coach, and international judge. Because she traveled a lot, she taught me how to teach myself when things went wrong. This was important because instead of just memorizing the dance steps and technique, I learnt why. She asked me whether I was willing to re-learn my technique and having low results during that one year of retraining.”

“Having said yes, I was pleasantly surprised that exactly one year later, I won the competition at the level I was competing. Through the years of training with her, she would occasionally ask me to teach her a step that I had already learned so (as to) see if I really knew it and she will fill in the words I was missing. This method allowed me to develop a very different way of teaching group classes—(enabling) even a student who hadn’t finished my courses and hadn’t danced in one or two years, to still remember 50% of what they learned! That is one of my definitions of providing quality courses.”

A private tutor is the best way to excel. This gives a dancer the chance to find new moves and styles of a dance and the instructor can customize the lesson to the student’s greatest weakness and build upon their greatest strengths. Almost every ballroom professional we spoke with however said that they would not necessarily advise private lessons in the beginning because they are unnecessary. You can learn the basics of a dance up through an advanced level before you will even be able to properly utilize a private dance lesson.

For those individuals whose schedules are very erratic, the private lesson may be their only choice. Some studios offer single group lessons that welcome drop-ins, so that a person whose schedule is always changing can commit themselves to certain weekly classes and then drop into different ones if they are unable to make it to their usual. But once you do make it to the point of needing private lessons to go beyond the advanced basics, your biggest challenge is going to be how to find a qualified teacher.

The most often method of finding a private tutor is using the group instructor and requesting a private session for yourself. Of course this is not always the most practical and sometimes a student may actually excel past the ability of their original teacher and then it will be time to find someone who will be able to continue to teach them beyond their current level. Most dance websites will feature advertising sections where dance teachers can offer their services. A lot of the Associations found in Section Five, offer the same service.

Besides asking around at a local dance school, the Internet can be a rather powerful search tool. You can use a search engine such as Google or Yahoo! and type in your city and approximate location and then type a “+” followed by “Dance Instructor.” A list of both personal websites and schools should list themselves and you can then follow-up with e-mails and calls. Many instructors will offer a reduced price for the first 30 minute lesson to allow you to get know them, or sometimes they can schedule short interviews free of charge. Finding a good instructor is like applying for colleges, it is very important to find one that offers what it is you’re looking for.

There are also website forums that allow people to read through dance instructor biographies and ask others in their area who they might recommend. One such site example of a locally run site is the **QPDC Forums** (<http://queerdance.ipbhost.com>) for the California area. But there are also sites such as **Lesson-finder.com** (<http://www.lesson-finder.com/s/dance/Ballroom-Dance>) that offer a statewide search of lessons and teachers in a variety of popular cities. Such sites are also useful to take note of, as someday if you open your own studio you might want to remember them so that you could advertise your services to new beginners who are in the same position as you at this moment.

Buying Costumes



Chuan talked extensively about costumes for competition and these were his recommendations of where to purchase a quality costume from a reputable source:

- **A Professional Ballroom Costume Designer/Manufacturer**– The costume must be fitted to the individual, so there are no real short-cuts to

finding one through a cheap source (such as eBay (<http://www.ebay.com>) or Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com>)). This will be your most expensive method and probably not your best bet if you are a beginning dancer just getting into the sport.

- ABC Dresses (<http://www.abcdresses.com>) offers affordable ballroom competition dresses for Latin and Rhythm, Smooth and standard quality designs.
- Dance Savvy (<http://www.dancesavvy.com>) offers dresses, accessories and men and women's shoes.
- **A Local Costume Designer**– Often times your best bet to a costume is to find a reasonably priced seamstress and approach them with a few of your costume design ideas. You will also find that some dance professionals supplement their income by making costumes. Either way, you should be able to get a reasonable quality custom fit costume at quite a substantial price break to the typical manufacturing studio.
- **Buying Second-Hand**- Generally this will be a competitor who has only worn it a few times (a top-world competitor) or possibly for a year. You will need to make sure that the costume is still in style if you go by this method and you will also need to get it fitted and altered to fit your body type. Pick someone whose measurements are as close to that of your own as you can to minimize problems. Keep in mind that it is always easier to take away fabric than to add it.

Chuan said, “Costumes must be specifically made to flow properly when competing. For example, a man's tux must have the shoulder portion lay flat when his arms are raised. A lady's dress must flow properly when moving/turning in ballroom or Latin. Dresses must be made to create certain shapes when turning.”

“Most of the cost of a lady's Latin costume is in the number of rhinestones (they must be manually applied). The material chosen must be wrinkle-free so that it is easily put in a bag when traveling. The lady's ballroom costumes with feathers from the early 1990's were hard to transport and had to have a large luggage bag of their own and had to be checked in on a plane flight. You want to be able to bring your costume on-board in case your other luggage gets lost or delayed by an airline.”

“A man’s costume could cost anywhere from \$500 to \$2000 new. A lady’s costume could cost anywhere from \$1000 to \$5000 new. Normally, a used costume loses 50% off its worth each year, assuming it is still in fashion.”

Competitions

The competitive version of ballroom dancing is called **DanceSport** and is currently working to become an Olympic event in the near future. The website **Dancesportcomps.com** (<http://www.dancesportcomps.com>) is the ultimate guide to dancesport competitions worldwide available to its members at the click of a mouse. They have several levels of membership, with the most fundamental being free.

The advanced free subscription offers the dancer advanced search tools, calendar and newsletter, plus:

- Worldwide Ballroom Competitions
- Competition Calendar run by (WD&DSC, IDSF, NDCA, USABDA)
- Access to archived DSC Newsletters
- 12 months of competitions

For an additional \$10 a year a member can access newsflashes and receive a personal competition planner for your use. For \$150, you can advertise your studio or services on their website. Chuan Chee says that each province within Canada has an Amateur Association that lists up-coming competitions; amateur, meaning they do not teach.

Further details will be provided in Section Five, with Chuan Chee giving descriptive insight on the thrills and defeats of competition and seven-time ballroom champion Forrest Vance offering his advice on standing out in the crowd and becoming a winner.

How to Become a Professional Dancer on TV (Background Dancer)

Chuan Chee said, “It helps that there have been many TV shows featuring dance and showing lots of people 20-40 years old. There are shows such as ‘**Dancing with the Stars**,’ ‘**So You Think You Can Dance**’ and theatre shows such as ‘**Floor Play**’ and ‘**Dirty Dancing**’ in Toronto. There are also movies

such as ‘**Dirty Dancing**,’ ‘**Dance with Me**,’ ‘**Shall We Dance**,’ ‘**Take the Lead**’ (with many Toronto competitors dancing in the background), ‘**Strictly Ballroom**’ and ‘**Mad Hot Ballroom**’ (featuring one of our featured professionals, Heather Berman).”

Heather Berman has enjoyed the success of a dancer for many celebrity filled shows and she contributes much of that to her training and enthusiasm early on in her career. Part of your success in this particular niche of performance is going to depend on your location. Obviously, if you live in Oklahoma, you are going to have a very limited chance of ever dancing in a celebrity status production as compared to living in either New York or Los Angeles.

Theater experience will come in handy for this realm, as many of the dancers that appear in music videos or television specials have agents and work in a wide variety of different productions, from theater, video, television and sometimes film. You will probably benefit from having an agent to coordinate the auditions and arrange for any meetings with potential projects of this magnitude.

The world of a professional dancer can be a confusing place for someone who is inexperienced. One of the biggest reasons that you may want to have an agent is to help you find the good paying high profile jobs while you are busy working them. Your agent takes care of submitting your dancer card, negotiating contracts and following-up with the clients until you have been paid. There is enough work to be done as a professional dancer, so it may be worth the 15-20% to let an agent take some of this load off your shoulders.

Caveat Emptor of Agencies

There are several things that you should be aware of are:

1. Be very careful of any classified ads that are looking for dancers. Most reputable agencies and casting directors receive so many submissions per day from candidates that it would be very unnecessary to put out an advertisement.
2. Beware when a local agency in a smaller town is boasting ties with famous New York agencies and talent. The top agencies do not normally correspond with smaller agencies around the world, so be careful of smaller agencies claiming big connections. Pictures on the walls of famous models that obviously have nothing to do with an agency are also a big red flag.

3. Any mention of an up-front fee to evaluate and sign you is either a scam to take your money or an indication of an agency that is hurting for money and not making very much on model commission.
4. The dance school/agency. Any successful agent should be much too busy to be dealing with teaching. The whole idea of a dancing school and agency is a conflict of interest and the two will never be found legitimately intertwined!

If you are ever unsure about a particular agency you can always contact the **Better Business Bureau** (<http://www.bbb.org>) to see if any complaints have been lodged against them. It does not take long for complaints to build up on an agent who is not doing their job. This leads up to one of the second red flags, which is a new agent who has not been around long enough for anyone to know anything about them. You will want to be especially careful in these situations.

How to Stand Out

Elizabeth Anderson of Fred Astaire studios says there is two obvious points to standing out:

1. “Your actual physical skill.” You need to be incredibly trained and every line counts from the tip of your fingers to the tip of your toes, there’s nothing that can be left out. Your entire body has to be doing something with purpose.
2. You are performing for other people and not just yourself. You need to engage those people. I think that’s what stands out in a crowd is someone that actually is dancing for that audience and interacting with that audience or with their partner. You can have all the skill that you like, but if you aren’t interacting with your partner and your audience then people just don’t watch you. You should probably take some acting classes—I would recommend that.”

Starting a Ballroom Dancing Studio or School

Preparations

Chuan Chee said, “I run a dance school that rents space at different locations. I don’t own/lease a single location. This is another option that you have if you are interested in beginning your own school and you do not want to invest in an entire building space. You can actually rent out space by the evening, day, week or month and travel around to the different parts of your city to better reach your niche client.

This would be particularly helpful for a beginning business on a shoestring budget, but there are going to be many other important decisions that are going to have to be made. Such as, finding the primary location (or locations), promoting and marketing your services, hiring help, purchasing the necessary equipment and finally creating the programs that you are going to be teaching. These and more will be discussed next.

Heather Berman recommends for the beginner in dance to train within a studio as a teacher before going out and starting their own studio. This allows for guidance from someone who has (hopefully) been in the business awhile. If you are on your own as a teacher you must be at an ultimate advanced level to be able to teach the vast majority of dancers. As an instructor in a studio, if you run across a more advanced student, you can go to the head of your program and request lessons advanced enough to teach more skilled clients.

As a relatively new beginner with your own studio, if you run into advanced students it will be up to you to progress yourself to the point that you will be able to teach beyond their current skills. It will be your responsibility to keep up on the newest styles and advancements which can take a lot of time for a new business owner who is relatively green in the dancing world as it is. Ultimately it will be up to you as to when you are ready to open your own studio.

In the beginning, one of the best ways to train and get the best pricing available will be to offer your aid in an established studio in return for free lessons. This is probably one of the most cost effective methods to get to know the business, while also learning to dance. Ultimately the most freedom and satisfaction will come from owning your own dance studio. Plan your strategy of opening a studio well and you will find that the pros far outweigh the cons.

Here are some of the aspects to consider as you plan your own dance studio:

1. Finding Niche and Specialty Based on Proficiency

Elizabeth of the Norwood Fred Astaire Studios, “I didn’t have to find my niche because it is a franchise and they did that for me. If you have a very highly entrepreneurial spirit a franchise may not be for you—because there is a very specific system you are going to be working within. In marketing there are a lot of directions that they head us in. There is a lot of support—web templates, advertising templates—I just have to put the pieces together.”

Chuan says his business success comes from, “capturing a very niche market and offering business practices that are appreciated by students but not valued by other dance schools. I paid attention to what made big businesses successful.” He highly recommends taking the time to find a particular niche.

He adds, “Many studios accept “anyone” because they feel there is not enough people in a single niche.” This is probably also true for most other niche businesses in the world. “However,” Chuan warns new dance studio owners. “If you choose a single niche, it has to be the “correct” one that will bring you the profit you wish... then you would have to market it properly too.” A person must also keep in mind while deciding on their niche, that a particular niche could be addressed by other studios and they may have to go to another city. If you are an instructor

for a studio, you need to be able to teach the dances that the studio is marketing for.

Vanessa Villalobos of the American Ballroom Theater told us that one of the most popular niches today is the attraction of a champion dancer. A competitor who has a few titles behind them does not need a niche per se, as their main student draw will be from their credentials and championship wins. If you don't have any championships under your belt and neither do any of the other instructors working in your studio then Vanessa recommended finding something unique to your studio that nobody else in the area offers. For the American Ballroom Theater, part of their draw was with their very unique and strong children's program that was high in demand.

To gain recognition, Vanessa says that creativity will be your key draw for new students. "Do not call your lessons 'Introduction to ballroom,'" says Vanessa. "But say something like club dancing—make it sound a little more unique." Vanessa also says that today the personality of the studio is not enough and a niche will be very important to drawing in a crowd in the beginning.

2. Finding a Location

"Location (neighborhood and city) are important (as with any successful business), says Chuan. "Some people don't want to spend too much time traveling, so you need to choose a location that has a high density of the niche you are aiming for." This is particularly important if you are located within a big rural area with many different subdivisions of people. "If you have no niche," reminds Chuan. "Your location has to be near people who can afford the prices you are charging."

Part of the location also involves thinking about who and where your broad base of customers are going to be located "If part of your business is teaching or performing at the customers' locations," instructs Chuan. "Then you should be able to get there in a reasonable amount of time."

Vanessa Villalobos recommends for any beginning dance studio to strategically locate itself on the outskirts of a metropolitan city. "I've heard of various people who have moved out into the middle of nowhere and are doing just excellent—smaller towns are much better (than cities)." One reason this would not be the case is if you have a big

budget, partnership or franchise with a lot of money and big marketing efforts taking place. In the inner cities, the competition is really extreme and you would need some strong marketing dollars to compete.

3. Promoting Creatively on a Shoestring Budget

Vanessa told us that promotion on a budget can be very difficult, because it will really depend on your teaching staff. Word of mouth is what many studios rely to draw their crowd. Studios, such as the American Ballroom Theater have never had to advertise in any other way; everything has been word of mouth since they began 10 years ago. Being a social studio rather than a competitive one has also helped them find a niche and specific audience. “Your wedding couples, your students who walk away with the wonderful experience—those are going to be your real advertisers,” says Vanessa.

“If you own your own studio,” says Chuan. “Promotion and marketing is how you get revenue. However, how you promote is very important to get the proper ‘return on investment (cost of marketing)’ and the proper niche (if you have one).

“If you are in an instructor for a studio,” says Chuan. “They would promote you or you could promote for your own students—(the) studio would usually want some kind of fee from you for using their studio for your own students or a percentage of revenue from your students.”

4. Hiring Help

Chuan Chee says, “Many novice instructors will teach the way they were taught. However, everyone learns differently so an instructor must learn many ways of teaching. People learn through auditory, visual, and tactile methods and combinations of them so a good instructor must incorporate all those methods especially in a group class. This is why sometimes I think good ballroom instructor needs about 6 years of teaching experience before I personally consider them good (remember that there are so many dances to teach in ballroom).”

Following with the promotion of your studio, part of your success with word of mouth promotion is going to be the draw of your teaching staff. “You do not want people who are just fantastic dancers,” says Vanessa. “But people who also have people skills.”

“Hiring an instructor is the same for any employer for any company, says Chuan. “You need to interview them and monitor the quality of instruction—this includes their ability to draw in students and retain students.”

It is clear from these opinions that probably a helpful, patient and pleasant personality should be one of your main qualities you look for in an instructor. The only time that you may want to be lenient with this, is if you have the chance to hire an instructor who is well known for their championship titles and success. As already mentioned, this will be a big student draw in itself, but of course if the champion dancer is unkind and treats his students poorly, word will get out and the studio will suffer for it.

The key to hiring a good dance instructor is moderation. Make sure that they have some business sense, people skills and of course strong dance skills. The next decision you will have to make about your instructors is whether you are going to require them to be certified (we will be discussing this in Section Five).

Most of the bigger dance studios and franchises require all their dancers have some type of certification that gives assuredness that they have the skills and knowledge to teach others the art of dance. Smaller studios that do not have the draw of their larger counterparts sometimes have to accept instructors who are not certified. It may be a good idea in this circumstance to hire them with the understanding that they will achieve their certification within a certain amount of time. Part of a studios draw can be the fact that their entire faculty is dance certified and that gives new students the confidence that at least the instructors are adequately trained.

5. Equipment Required in a Studio or School

For the studio owner, Chuan recommends the purchase of sound equipment, mirrors, and either the installation or upkeep of high quality flooring. “Floors and mirrors cost a lot,” says Chuan. “Then you need your normal office stationary and equipment—you also need property and liability insurance.”

“If you are in an instructor for a studio,” says Chuan. “(The basics) would be supplied but you have to check if the liability insurance covers you.”

We asked Vanessa Villalobos this same question and she rattled off the most important pieces of equipment as:

- “A good sound system”- You want your students to get the feeling of a big dance party when they are in the studio. The system can really draw in a big crowd when you have your weekly dance parties, of which Vanessa highly recommends for any dance studio.
- “A full office with a good computer system, copier, credit card machine.”
- “A TV... DVD player, VHS for students to watch”
- “Good video camera, for when you start taping student showcases—can be used to start archiving for a media package”
- “Mirrors... and lots of dance photos (around the dance studio)—it conduces the mind to thinking about the movement.”

The dance floor will be the biggest expense of anyone opening their own studio, Vanessa reminded us. “You want a wooden floor that is firm and soft on the knees when people are dancing,” says Vanessa. “A nice open space is good, which is sometimes hard to find in metropolitan areas (they usually have a lot of columns).”

Creating Your Own Program vs. Franchise Programs

Heather Berman states that in general a beginning couple should be able to reach a nice comfort level with their dancing within 10 lessons. This is a good basis to start at for a program dealing with a very basic dance. Most people start out dancing on a very basic level and once they become hooked they want to continue on with private lessons.

Many studios offer a wide range of beginning classes in as many different styles of dance as the teacher (or teachers) feels they are qualified to teach. Beyond these introductory courses of 10 classes or so, there are often intermediate and advanced courses as well as private tutor lessons to cater to the individuals needs.

The wedding dance private lessons are generally taught within the standard 10 lessons as well. This is the base line of any dance and if a couple would like to be at a more advanced level and then they will require more lessons.

Part of the program decision is going to be how many classes you teach in group format and how many will be set aside for private. To properly do private lessons it is advisable to have several rooms you can use on any given night. A good example of such a studio is **Paul Pellicoro's DanceSport**.

Their budget has allowed them to purchase a space with several rooms to conduct several lessons at one time, all with different music and instruction. Sometimes a studio will get students who ask about the format of the private lessons. They want to know if they will be in their own private room or out in one large room along with another group of students. This brings up the thought of private lessons vs. personal.

For the **American Ballroom Theater**, they only have one large space, so to accommodate what they like to call "private lessons," they use curtains to separate the different classes. Besides the privacy not being as straightforward as a "private lesson," the personal lesson student will be listening to the same music as the group students. This is definitely something to consider when looking for a space from which to use to offer your programs. "You may lose some students doing that (personal lessons)," says Vanessa. "The terminology you use with your 'private' or 'personal' lessons can become very important."

Vanessa reminds the individual who is looking to open his or her own studio, which it will be the easiest to open a franchise. They are given a set syllabus from which to follow and will not need to struggle in order to put a personal program together that will effectively teach their students. Such Franchises that have these programs are **Fred Astaire** and **DVITA (International Dancers Association)** for example. The programs are well designed and laid out for the individual studio and they will not have to concern themselves with the thought of designing a program.

For the dancer who is more experienced, they may find the experience of designing their own program more to their liking Vanessa explains. "For example Pierre Dulaine (of American Ballroom Theater), learned and came up through different schools, but when he opened his own business he developed his own syllabus," explains Vanessa. "He combined several different steps from different programs and that is our draw, people want to come here to learn his (Pierre Dulaine's) syllabus."

As far as pricing goes, generally \$50 to \$100 an hour for personal lessons is fairly typical, while \$10 to \$25 per group lesson is the median average. The more experienced, professional and certified the instructor, the more you can charge, so it does pay you in the end to get extra training and certification.

Being Successful

Personality Traits

Chuan says, “Personality-wise, you need to enjoy dancing, be motivated, be able to pay attention to technical details, devote time to practice, understand music, and have good interpersonal skills (you do have to work with a partner after all). It helps if you also understand geometry (such as radius, angles, arcs, triangles, rhomboids and 3D shapes), physics (such as forces, vectors and momentum), and the skeletal and muscular structure.

“Who would have known that you could actually apply high school knowledge in a dance career? Spatial awareness is also important to be able to navigate around the dance floor and to avoid bumping into another couple. With all the above factors, this is why I found ballroom extremely satisfying because I need to use so many disciplines. Not all good dancers need to know those disciplines mentally but they would have physically experienced all of them without knowing that they did; it’s just that I find you don’t need to practice as hard if you know what and why you are doing; it reflects the working world.”

Chuan Chee believes that there four major personality traits of Ballroom, Salsa, Swing and Argentine Tango that will make-up a successful dancer and they are:

1. You must be seriously committed to the class you’ve paid for.
2. You must have ability to concentrate and practice. Not to perfection, but to a tolerable level, say 80% accurate.
3. You must be observant.
4. You must be inquisitive and ask good questions (this keeps the mind active to absorb more).

It also helps to find a partner who believes in the same number of classes and practice sessions. For those leading the ballroom dances that move around the room such as Waltz, Foxtrot and Tango, they should be especially coordinated and balanced in order to dance counter-clockwise around a room and avoid bumping into others. Many good ballroom leaders actually have a background in computer science, engineering, mathematics, medical, and other sciences. Ballroom, especially for leaders, is a science.

Chuan Chee says, “Interestingly good male ballroom dancers end up being gentlemen. He must learn to treat women with respect. Why is this? My own theory is that a ballroom dancer must spend a lot of their time learning many dances (at least 6 different dances) and practice, practice, practice. If a man is not respectful of women, they eventually run out of women to practice/dance with. If a man is only learning ballroom to pick up women and or are sleazy, they don’t put in the effort to be a good dancer and so they won’t be good.”

Having strong social skills is also very important, as dancing is very much a social event. Especially if you are interested in teaching, then you will be at an advantage if you have an open, inviting personality that will give you an instant attraction to beginning dancers who will feel comfortable in your presence.

Characteristics Required by the Dancer

To be a good ballroom dancer, you should have the following characteristics says Chuan:

- **“Practice a lot but practice the right things”**- It helps to actually understand the movements, how to lead and follow each movement and try to determine if the movement is correct. I don’t believe that it is good enough to simply repeat something hundreds of times and hope that your muscles will remember the movements.

The problem is that as you get higher, you’ll forget how to do the basic movements. It’s funny how some extremely good dancers who start teaching have to relearn the basic steps again. How much practicing should you do? I would start out 2 hours a day, 3 days a week. Why so much? Because in ballroom, you need to learn many dances at the same time. Eventually you would proceed to 2 hours a day, 5-6 days a week.

- **“Do competitions”**- This forces you to take private lessons to improve even the minutest details. You can also compare yourself with other competitors and this gives you the drive to strive for success. After all, to be a paid dancer or instructor, you should be better than others. Competitions also make you concentrate on your performance/ presentation skills and musicality/interpretation of music. Judges look for all 3 factors: technical, presentation and musicality.
- **“Perform shows”**- This allows you to select a song and concentrate on a particular choreography and bring out the nuances of the song. This is when you could consider charging for your performances.
- **“Know both leading and following parts”**- It helps to know the other part since it will help your own leading and following skills. You don't need to know the other part proficiently unless you plan to teach. To prepare to be an instructor, you definitely have to know both parts proficiently because you can't always rely on having a partner to teach with you. It helps if you have a dance partner who will switch roles with you so you may practice both leading and following.
- **“Leaders/men in ballroom tend to have a career in computer science, engineering, medical sciences or architecture”**- I've pondered this statistic for many years and concluded that any dance that requires a leader and a follower requires structure. Dances that move around the floor must move counter-clockwise around the floor and so only certain figures can be danced after the current figure or else the couple will move the wrong way on the floor.

As such some dancers who prefer freedom of expression think ballroom is too structured. Given this, I've surmised that the leaders/men who are in the above careers are used to rules and structure; but there are allowances for creativity within those careers, just as there are allowances for creativity and musical expression within ballroom. Unfortunately, when you have to learn so many dances, it takes a while before you have enough technique to even attempt musical expression.

Professional Certification and Associations

In order to reach freelance or open your own studio, certification in a dance style can be a helpful attribute, but may not be necessary. Working for another studio as an instructor you may find that you will be required to have certification in order to train.

Keep in mind that this is in no way the same as a trainer in health clubs, where they are required to possess a certificate in order to teach. Anyone can be a good instructor and a certificate may or may not be a positive step for a dancer depending on their background and current employment status.

There are many reasons why a dancer may want to get certified and here are a few of the more prominent reasons:

Become a Better Teacher

You will improve your presentation skills and learn the precise vocabulary. You will understand how dancing and music relates to each other and how to watch your students and correct them efficiently and uncritically.

Become a Better Dancer

You will learn the rules and language of dance, which many instructors today are not even fully aware unfortunately.

Receive a Certificate of Professional Excellence

The certificate you declares your expertise, allowing you to be able to attract more students and job opportunities. This is one step to being recognized as a national expert.

The International Dancers Association (DVIDA) certification is one of the most popular and widely accepted programs. You can find their list of Professional Degrees at (<http://www.prodvida.com>). The vision of ProDVIDA is to develop the teaching skills of teachers around the world and insure that new students will be faced with the best available methods of teaching.

The Association itself is open to teachers and competitors alike who combine talents and knowledge to help re-develop higher standards and business innovations to continue the celebration of the fundamental art of dance. The base pricing of membership is rather inexpensive at \$40 for one year's

membership and \$60 for two. ProDVIDA requires that the dancer be 18 years of age or older and has either professional competition or teaching experience.

The benefits of ProDVIDA are:

- Inclusion in their online Member Directory to allow potential students or employers to validate your certification.
- ProDVIDA, the Professional Dance Vision International Dance Association, is an organization established by some of the most widely recognized and successful people in the dance business.
- ProDVIDA is a member of the National Dance Council of America, which means your Professional Certification will be recognized by the (NDCA) National Dance Council of America.
- ProDVIDA allows for special internet access to the ProDVIDA Professional Membership website where you can communicate with your fellow professionals on subjects from dance technique and competitions.

The National Dance Council of America (NDCA) is a mainstream organization for dancers in the United States (<http://www.ndca.org>). Its advertised purpose is to represent the interest of dance professionals on a nation-wide basis during competitions and establish a standard for teaching professionals to be recognized within. This is a standard association for anyone in the business to take advantage of as it is recognized by everyone and will give helpful guidelines during the acclimation of a beginner to a professional status dancer.

The annual Registration fees are as follows:

- Amateur Student Competition- \$20
- Amateur Adult Competition- \$35
- Dance Teacher- \$30
- Pro-Am teacher or competitor- \$70

The World Dance Council (WD&DSC) is the world authority on professional dance, choosing to take a commercial stance at promotion of events (<http://www.wddsc.com>). The site splits itself into three parts (General Council, Dance Sport and Social Dance)

International DanceSport Federation (IDSF) is recognized by the National Olympic Committee and is working for the inclusion of DanceSport as a medal sport in the Olympics (<http://www.idsf.nett>). Every different country has its own

section they can log in to receive information about their specific location and upcoming competitions.

USA Dance (USABDA) is the United States dance chapter that promotes, supports and organizes programs, DanceSport events and competitions (<http://usabda.org>). Their website offers a competition calendar and information on getting involved in Ballroom dance. During the last 12 years USABDA has focused on growth of all styles and forms of ballroom dance, both competitive and recreational. They also foster activities such as workshops and social dances in local communities, colleges and secondary schools. Annually, the USABDA conducts national, regional and local DanceSport Championships.

The annual membership dues are as follows:

- Recreational Ballroom Dancer- \$35
- Social Dancer- \$25
- Student Athlete- \$20
- Adult Athlete- \$60
- Professional- \$70

The American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA) benefits performers and dancers involved in various paid performances that are AGMA affiliated (<http://www.musicalartists.org>). AGMA represents the Men and women of opera, chorus and dance occupations and protect their rights from being abused or their talents from being discriminated while on the job.

AGMA has a one-time \$500 fee for membership if your application is accepted and then the basic yearly dues after that will be \$78 a year until you cancel. The AGMA also requires 2% of all its members' earnings from jobs that are under their protection. This due can only be implemented up to the first \$100,000 made and then the dancer no longer has to pay a percentage for the rest of the year.

Training

According to Chuan Chee, this is a training routine for a beginner to be a good dancer:

- Practice every day, even by yourself. If a dance instructor has taught you well, you may only require 2 to 10 minutes a day to make sure you know the dance steps.
- Practice with a partner in a private space and in a dance venue.
- Take private lessons for the little tips that make you stand out. These tips are usually not taught in group classes because most people are not that interested in them since they may be struggling just to learn the dance steps.
- A beginner competitor will practice 3 to 5 days a week, 1 to 2 hours a day. A high-level competitor will practice 5 days a week, 2 hours a day. As you can see, a high-level competitor doesn't have much of a social life!

Training routine for a beginner to be a good dance instructor:

- Practice every day.
- Dance with lots of people so that you understand various dance skills.
- Assist and dance classes.
- Learn and dance both the leader and follower parts.
- Read about learning and teaching skills. You cannot simply teach the way you were taught or they were you learn because everyone is different.
- Be an apprentice.
- In my view, a good ballroom instructor requires about 6 years of teaching experience! Of course the time span depends on how fast a person learns how to teach, and how many hours a week they teach.

Top Trainers

Chuan Chee has taken lessons from many dance instructors during my 21 years of ballroom dancing, from Canada, USA, Britain, Ireland, Slovenia, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore. Each instructor has strengths and weaknesses, and

some are good at certain levels of dance experience. The following are Canadian instructors who have been a significant influence with a unique skill:

- **Kenn Fennell of Toronto:** From my pre-competition days, he always taught me the way he taught dance was by teaching movement skills and when you happen to put them together, you get a dance. I definitely use that methodology at Toronto Dance Inc. I've also used a few other teaching philosophies he taught me.
- **Jitka Bouma of Toronto:** She instilled the important of dance practice. A few years later when my partner and I were having personality issues, she sat down with us and explained how to resolve problems calmly without offending each other. This ability is important in any type of relationship whether it be in dance partnerships, friends, co-workers, and significant others.
- **Ann Harding-Trafford of Mississauga:** She taught me simple dance movement rules and taught me how to teach myself when things when wrong. She also encouraged me to truly understand dance figures including asking me to explain the figures to her. Instead of memorizing dance figures, I could actually figure it out from movement principles. This is exactly how I learnt math and physics in high school so this method of learn was perfect for me. Toronto Dance Inc. uses this method of teaching.
- **Jane Edgett of Halifax:** The influence for us was sitting down and writing out short-term and long-term goals. This is one of the tools used by successful people. Another thing that she pointed out about me (which I didn't realize) was that use the philosophy of "you'll see it when you believe it" (there happens to be a book with that title) while most people use the philosophy of "I'll believe it when I see it". Just that non-trivial point of view can make a huge difference in a person's success in any endeavor they attempt.
- **Ginette Cournoyer of Montreal:** She was the first to notice our ability to dance musically, but it was untrained. She eventually got through to us about how to interpret music on the fly and dance with musical interpretation, especial with the Latin dances.
- **Benoit Drolet of Toronto and Great Britain:** He created some of the most beautiful ballroom routines for us to use in our competitions.

- **Denis Tremblay of Vancouver:** He really knew his geometry, physics, musical structure, and the skeletal and muscular structure. He was able to impart that knowledge to us.

Success Profile Interviews

Heather Berman

Dancer, Actress and Spokesmodel
New York, USA



Heather Berman has been featured in our spokesmodel book and we are once again proud to feature her here as both an accomplished professional dancer and teacher. She was part of the famed Radio City Music Hall Rockette's early in her career and she holds a BFA degree in dance from Point Park University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Heather is a professional both in the fact that she has made a career out of her dancing as a Rockette, principal ballroom dancer for Disney film, "Enchanted," dancer in film "Let it Be" and appearance in documentary, "Mad Hot Ballroom," etc. She has also fostered a career as a respected private teacher of ballroom and currently freelances her talents to individuals and groups for private lessons.

One of Heathers favorite aspects of her private teaching is watching the progress and excitement of beginners learn to dance for their first time. "A lot of people are watching TV and watching these TV shows, going, boy I really want

to know how to do that, but I don't think I can," says Heather. "Yes you can, you can learn—I have taught beginners with no rhythm (and concept)." The learning curve for beginners is so large that once they begin to pick-up the steps they are usually amazed that they are actually dancing and moving around the room. This is something that a lot of beginners cannot ever see them doing and when they do it is a pure joy for both the student and teacher alike.

I was able to speak with her about her personal history with dance in hopes to uncover some of the good fortune and magic that has blessed her life over her years as a professional entertainer. She made sure to tell me that there is no easy route to becoming a professional dancer or dance teacher, but she also assured me that she believed that most people who have the desire and enthusiasm to learn can probably make a career out of some aspect of this industry.

Heather mentioned to us that competitive dancing on both the professional and amateur level can get expensive if you do not plan out your lessons and costumes in advance. The private lessons will be much more costly than group, so she recommends starting on a group level and working your way until you find a dance that you really like and specialize in it. This is where you may want to take private lessons, once you have achieved this level of knowledge and experience. To keep the cost down on costuming, she recommends using a seamstress to design your costumes, rather than use the vendors that can be found at most of the competition shows.

Here is Heather's story on how she succeeded as a professional ballroom dancer:

Where did your love of dancing begin?

Heather: "I am originally from Pittsburgh Pennsylvania where I came out of the womb dancing! I begged my parents to let me take dance lessons after realizing they were not going to travel with the circus. I wanted to be a trapeze Artist! After I exclaimed I wanted to be a star and practicing backbends on the front lawn and falling on my head.....my parents figured I really meant what I said. Finally, at age 7, I studied ballet and acrobatics, later adding jazz and tap.

"I was driven at a very young age and always new I wanted to be in show biz on the stage, dancing, singing, acting, whatever! My parents supported this dream paying for dance lessons and voice lessons and helping me along. I went to Carnegie Mellon for a pre-college summer intensive, which incorporated acting

dance and singing. I really just wanted to dance at that point so I attended Point Park College, which is now a University. I earned a BFA in dance in 4 years dancing day and night.”

What were your goals to make it as a dancer?

Heather: “All along, the goal was to move to NYC and make it on Broadway. I had the trade paper sent to me in Pittsburgh and I went to NYC for a week before moving there to audition for the summer stock spring auditions. I got hired by a small stock theater in Hampton New Hampshire, did the season and on the third show was paid Equity –scale and received my Equity card!”

“I Moved to New York and pounded the pavement. My resume lists a lot of what I have done but some things have been omitted because of space and importance. One of those things omitted is the video I did on “How to Lambada!” I danced on the video with a partner and there were other partners and then we all got hired to be on Soap Opera called Loving (no longer on the air). We danced at a party where the leads were seducing one another with this “forbidden dance”... very funny!”

At what point did you become interested in ballroom dance itself?

Heather: “I auditioned for a magician who incorporated ballroom dancing into his act. He hired me and he taught me a lot of the dances and lots of steps and introduced me to a woman who had just opened her new studio. She bartered with me, if I took beginner classes for her I could take as many advanced classes I wanted. Actually taking ballroom classes was like living out a dream from childhood. I watched numerous Fred and Ginger movies loved Gene Kelly and Syd Charise and one of my all time favorites *The American in Paris* with Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron.”

“I (was) cast in a film about ballroom dancing, *Let It Be Me*. During a break, in the bathroom, I ran into Leslie Caron who was one of the stars in the film and I exclaimed ‘I have always loved you in *The American in Paris*; you are such a beautiful dancer!’ She replied by saying she noticed my dancing and said I was an excellent dancer as well. What a thrill! One of the people you admire from childhood and you not only meet them but they complement you.”

You have worked with the ballroom greats, Pierre and Yvonne, how did that come about and what was that like?

Heather: “I saw a little casting notice in the Back Stage about the American Ballroom Theater dancing classrooms. I wanted the job as soon as I saw the notice. I was tired of not knowing when I would work. Something consistent would be nice for a change, I had remembered seeing the company perform way back when I was taking classes at Stepping Out.

I loved the company and I had seen Pierre and Yvonne perform in *Grand Hotel* on Broadway and was blown away by them. I remember thinking Yvonne looked like a beautiful sleek cat so elegant and smoothly graceful with the longest neck. The audition was fun and all of my training came in handy from all of those years. I got the job! Yea, I was so happy. Ballroom came back into my life.”

“So we went through a rigorous trainingnot only to learn how to teach the dances but how to teach 4th 5th and 6th graders. An expert, Danielle Quisenberry, taught classroom management. I got hit with the bug again after training. It’s like an addiction. You want to know more and more. I had always loved the Latin dances the best so this time I started to explore the NY salsa scene. It was intimidating at first but after just a few classes I could hold my own and even got mistaken for a Latin woman twice! It was dark! Now I am an avid Salsera!”

Pierre’s life is documented in the movie *Take the Lead*, starring Antonio Banderas. Can you talk a little about your experiences with his dance teaching program with kids?

Heather: “My first school was in the Bronx. Six classes a day. I had never been to the Bronx. I was nervous but pleasantly surprised by how much I learned from these kids and how much I had to give to them. I had a lifetime of dancing, acting, traveling and performing. If you had asked me if I would teach dance way back when, I would have said no way. But this experience with these children has so enriched my life.”

“I return to this school a year later...I’ve been asked back and the teachers have said I was the best teacher they have had. I guess its chemistry. I was greeted with hugs and kisses when I returned for orientation and seventh graders asking why they couldn’t have ballroom again. There is nothing like the feeling you get when you know you influenced a child’s life in a positive way.

These kids went to competition last year and didn't win but boy did they make me proud. They will never know how much they have brought to my life."

Update: Heather got in touch with us recently to let us know that she was in the process of starting her own Ballroom Dance Company:

Heather: "I have a very important piece of info fore my bio to add. I have been putting together a biz plan to start my own Ballroom Dancing Company. We will provide ballroom and Latin Dancers for corporate events, private parties etc. Doing some research and finalizing the name. I think maybe HB Productions or Heather Marie Productions. Ultimately it will be a way to market myself and others for all kinds of work. I even might be able to book other spokesmodels for jobs."

Congratulations Heather, we wish you luck!

Chuan Chee

Accomplished Software engineer, Dancer, and Teacher
Toronto, Canada

www.torontodance.ca

www.weddingdance.ca



Chuan Chee was an amateur dance competitor for 8 years. He started dancing in 1985 and then started teaching fulltime in 2003 with his own dance school which is highly successful in Canada. Chuan's salsa division is the largest in Canada (in terms of the number of active students per week) and his ballroom division is one of the largest as well. Chuan professional career can be read about through the website (<http://www.torontodance.ca/publicity.html>).

Chuan has competed in Tokyo and Blackpoll and all the major cities in Canada. He had always known he would teach ballroom after finishing competition, so he was in preparation during his 18 years of learning. "I observed how various instructors taught in a group class and private lesson, and also what worked and what didn't." says Chuan. "I viewed Toronto Dance as a business, so I concentrated on marketing, PR, a business plan and solid business practices. In Chuan's opinion, many instructors don't know enough about business when they start. This is one of the downfalls to being purely an artist without some knowledge of being an entrepreneur as well.

Chuan's business, Toronto Dance, is a known brand name in Toronto; especially in the salsa world. Toronto Dance provides classes and performers

for special events, weddings, and corporate events. Toronto Dance has been featured in many TV shows, newspapers, radio spots, magazines, etc. Chuan has recently added a Wedding Dance section (<http://www.weddingdance.ca>) to his repertoire that provides dance lessons catered to couples learning to dance to their 'first dance.

We interviewed Chuan about his personal experiences with Ballroom dance and these were some of the things he had to say:

Talk a little about becoming interested in ballroom dance and what exactly about it made you leave your booming software engineering career?

Chuan: "My parents have been dancing ballroom ever since they were married. I grew up thinking that it is a romantic thing for a married couple to do. In 1985 I started working full-time at Bell-Northern Research (taken over by Nortel Networks in 1989). One employee had actually taught at a dance studio for 5 years previously so she would teach a group of us at work after-hours. I gave myself 4 months to see if I liked it and I was committed to ballroom after 2 months. An interesting aspect of taking ballroom dancing seriously is that it makes a man more of a gentleman in terms of being more courteous to women and having the ability to talk to women and having lots of female friends, great for shy men!"

"I decided to go to University of Waterloo (1980-1985) with their 5-year co-op program (alternating every 4 months with studies and work). I graduated with Honors Co-op Computer Science with Electrical Engineering minor. I found the computer programming classes reasonably easy, especially with my strong interest in it and 5 years of programming prior to attending university. My undergrad average (of all my classes during my undergrad) was 92%, the second highest in my entire faculty."

"I competed in the Standard/Ballroom division and Latin division from 1995 to 2002 (8 years). I worked my way up the 6 levels of Standard competitions and 4 levels of Latin competitions. This included 5 days of practicing or lessons, 2 hours a day and 2 hours of commuting every day to the various dance studios. It paid off since my partner and I managed to attain 15th in Canada in Standard/Ballroom. This is a better achievement than you may think because of my age. Many non-dancers think that ballroom is for old (over 50 years old) people but in competitions, once you are over 25, you are over-the-hill! Even the senior category is for competitors over 35 years old (Adult is over 16 years

old). I was 41 years old competing in the 16+ Adult category and still managed 15th in Canada!”

“From my second year of dancing (1986), I was already offered a teaching position because the instructor saw my potential to be a good instructor. I didn’t accept the position but it seeded the idea of teaching for fun in the future. Many of my instructors realized that I took a very intellectual approach to learning so they enjoyed teaching me. We had some very high-level discussions about dance steps taking into account physics, geometry, kinesiology and musical interpretation. I was always very musical having played violin 1971 to 1979 so my dancing had musical interpretation, which was not an easy task during a competition. I was also considered one of the most technical dancers in Canada.”

What was the pivotal moment that the decision to become a ballroom dancer was made?

Chuan: “Unfortunately throughout year 2001-2002, Nortel laid off 60% of their staff—no one was safe, including myself. I took some time to study the computer programming industry and realized it was changing toward outsourcing. So I concluded the hey-day of the industry was over. However, it is extremely hard to outsource dance instructors because you need face-to-face interaction. It is even hard to learn from books or a video or a friend. I suppose in the future they could invent virtual outfits with remote tactile sensors, dancing robots and halo-decks (a.k.a. Star Trek). So, it was time to switch careers completely and since I loved teaching and loved dancing ballroom, I could put combine both. What is better than a career doing what you love?”

“Toronto Dance was created August of 2002 and it has boomed since then, becoming one of the biggest dance schools in Canada in a mere 3 years! What was the secret of success? I was simply a dancer who decided to teach, not knowing anything about business. During my computer career, I paid attention to marketing, public relations, customer service, and as stated earlier, studied how good instructors taught. I also learned that businesses that survive more than 5 years typically have written a business plan so I had a business plan prior to starting. Interestingly, the 5-year target was met in 12 months!”

Where would you like to go with your career in the next 10 years?

Chuan: “What do I have planned in the future? The salsa division of Toronto Dance grew so big that I was able to sell the business to one of my instructors in 2005. We are still cooperating as if we were one large corporation. I plan to develop the ballroom division by training new instructors and hiring existing good instructors (I may be hiring an established instructor moving from Ukraine to Toronto). As to whether I am willing to sell the ballroom division in the future, we’ll have to see. Some of my ballroom instructors may be interested in being partners with me or running the business.”

We would love to hear a few stories about your competition days. What were some of the struggles you had?

“A highlight of my competitions occurred in my third year of competitions. There was a special competition where dancers at all levels were allowed to compete in a Waltz competition and had to memorize an easy routine. The judges were looking for good technique and musical expression. Out of 36 couples (some who were already at the top 20 in Canada), I ranked 6th, beating some of the top couples!”

“I also competed in Tokyo as a very prominent competition and also in Blackpool and another competition near Blackpool. The Blackpool competition (in the north-west part of England) is considered the Wimbledon of ballroom where the best competitors in the world go to compete in this prestigious event. Usually only competitors in the top (6th) level bother to compete there. But I didn’t have an ego problem so I competed there when I was in the 5th level – didn’t do well but it was an amazing experience, dancing among the world’s best competitors!”

How would you classify your stages as a competitor to now mostly teacher?

Chuan: “Most new instructors usually find they don’t really know how to teach, or maybe only teach the way they were taught. The danger with a high-level competitor turning teacher is they may teach too technically. Most adult beginners want fun more than technical expertise.”

“With my 18 years of dancing, it gave me time to develop my skills and yet figure out ways of teaching a beginner. Teaching beginners and experienced dancers are very different. The years also allowed me to build my business

skills. Also my financial situation allowed me run the business without worries about making ends meet so I could offer more for less, a very good strategy for success. Students can tell if you are running a business for money or for the sure joy and enthusiasm.”

“As a competitor, you are more carefree because you don’t have to worry about customers. And yet a competitive life is extremely expensive due to private lessons (\$100 to \$200 per hour), costumes, traveling, etc. Since I was young, I’ve always loved presenting to a large group of people, whether it be playing violin in an orchestra, giving speeches or dancing for an audience. So I definitely loved being a competitor and could have done it for many more years.”

“As an instructor and business owner, I really enjoy teaching and implementing a teaching method that I developed that is different from other instructors. I tried to capture the best methods from each instructor and meld it into a new method of my own. Obviously it has been successful so it helps to continue the business.”

Do you prefer being a competitor or instructor?

Chuan: “Unfortunately I love both. If I had unlimited money and a compatible partner, I would love competing for many more years. As to dancing for 18 years before coming an instructor, I think it gave me a lot of maturity resulting in a successful business. I could have started earlier but it might have only been part-time while being employed.”

Many of the professionals I have spoken with started as a competitor or professional dancer and then later turned teacher. Is there another route to take in your opinion?

Chuan: “Teaching and dancing skills are different. To earn money as a dancer, you need to be an extremely good dancer and performer. Of course as a dance instructor, you need to know both skills. But it doesn’t mean you have to be the best dancer. Many dance students want to flock to the best dancer hoping they may look like them one day but if that dancer doesn’t know how to impart dance information to a student, it would be a waste of money.”

“I know of an instructor who never competed. Other instructors don’t give her as much respect as she deserves. However, until about year 2000, she was one of three of the best competition ballroom coaches in Canada! The only thing that

happened after 2000 is that good instructors from other countries moved to Canada so now Canada has many really good instructors.”

“There are different paths that a dance instructor such as myself can take. One of the popular paths is to market yourself and teach for one or more dance studios or community centers. Another more difficult path is to start your own dance school/studio. However, to be successful in the latter, knowledge of good business practices is required. Running a business is difficult, supported by the general statistic that 80% of businesses fold in 2 years and 95% fold in 5 years.”

“Toronto Dance Inc. is now 5 years old and has been running strong since 1-year old. The myth is that most people think that being good in a particular trade mean that they can succeed in business. Some factors that made Toronto Dance Inc. stand out are:”

- Doing market and industry research for many years
- Implementing good business practices
- Understanding the market
- Finding a good market niche.

What are your absolute greatest moments in ballroom dance?

Chuan: “I’ve always loved performing on a stage. Back in 1988, I managed to perform with a group on a stage. I’ve performed a few times on a stage since then but my most memorable stage performance came in 2004 at an event called “Fashion Cares” in Toronto. It is a huge annual gala event in the fashion industry raising money for AIDS.

It is an evening filled with fashion models, superstar singers, and various dancers. There were 5000 guests in the audience! Getting professional makeup and wardrobe and seeing how things ran backstage was quite an experience! I also managed to get photos taken with supermodel Linda Evangelista, superstar Patti Labelle, and internationally-known TV host Jeanne Beker of “Fashion Television”.

“With Toronto Dance Inc., I am very proud that it has beaten the odds and thrived for 5 years and it is still growing! There were many great achievements, each one unexpected. Within 12 months, it reached the 5-year goal set out in the business plan. In 2 years, the profits were larger than what I earned at Nortel (which paid quite well). The business became the largest privately owned

school in Canada (in terms of the number of students per week) and definitely shatters the image of a struggling artist. To think my original career was in computer programming as an employee and now it is a dance business owner—what a dramatic shift!”

Forrest Vance

Seven-time Undefeated U.S. Dance Champion
Scottsdale, AZ

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As many of the other professionals we had the pleasure to feature in this book, Forrest grew up with dance in his life. His mother was a waitress and nightclub singer, which gave him a very early introduction to the world of song and dance.

Forrest was a math scholar in college (he hated math actually) and majored in special education. His life took a very different turn one day in 1978 when he walked into a dance studio that he had passed by many times and quickly became one of the best nightclub dancers in all of Baltimore. In 1979, Vance became an instructor in Oklahoma City and soon found himself the United States American Rhythm Champion and held it unrivaled for seven consecutive years.

Forrest moved on from competition and began teaching eventually. He has been part of several movies, including “**Shall We Dance**” and “**The Honeyymooners** (remake),” working with stars such as **Vanessa Williams**, **Richard Gere**, **Steve Martin**, and **Goldie Hawn**. Recently, Forrest has organized and hosted the annual **People’s Choice DanceSport Competition** at the Ritz Carlton in Phoenix Arizona every Memorial Day weekend. Forrest

was also invited to dance on season one of “**Dancing with the Stars**,” but declined. Interestingly even though Forrest did not take part, he was still a factor in the show with having taught three of the featured professionals, **Tony Dovolani**, **Brian Fortola**, and **Jonathan Roberts**.

Forrest can be reached for lessons, coaching and choreography, but he also has a program available through his website (www.forrestvance.com) called “**Learn to Dance with Forrest Vance**.” These consist of a series of instructional videos and dance lessons that members are allowed to login and receive detailed instruction on dances like Salsa, Cha-Cha, Rumba, Mambo, Foxtrot, Waltz and Tango all at their own pace.

This is the only online dance instruction course available today. The course features a free membership that allows prospective students to get a peek at all the site has to offer and then for \$9.95 they can upgrade to a dance student with unlimited access to all dance resources with absolutely zero advertising.

Forrest has a number of impressive credentials and achievements he has earned over the years and these are just a few of the highlights:

- NDCA, NADTA and FADS Certified Adjudicator
- Member and examiner for DIVIDA
- Seven-time Fred Astaire American Latin Champion
- Four-time Canadian American Latin Champion
- Two-time Fred Astaire International Champion
- Three-time Triple Crown Champion
- Two-Time U.S. Rising Star Latin Champion
- Five-time U.S. American Latin Champion
- Top Teacher at the United States Dance Championships eight times.

We caught Forrest at his home and were able to ask him a few questions about Competition, instructing and dance in general:

What advice do you have for our readers on getting involved in both competition and dance instruction?

Forrest: “As far as getting involved as an instructor, you really just have to have the desire for dance and people. Whether you’re young or old and you’re going to become a teacher, you have to remember that dancing on a professional level is only one aspect of the business. Not all people are good competitors—

they don't have to be great dancers or a young and beautiful person to want to work with people. The great thing about teaching is that you have to like to teach and encourage people."

"Most people that take lessons are not stupid, they usually are successful in their own business—they have earned the money to extend their education. They must be smart and just need encouragement."

How to you recommend standing out in the crowd as a professional?

Forrest: "For me, I was a little bit controversial because I was always trying to reinvent or push the limit—even if it was something like trying to get more movement in the body or designing a costume that was possibly over the edge."

"Back in the early/mid-eighties when I first began winning we did my partners hair down and of course that was very controversial—she wore a turban with her hair in a bun—then we did the rhinestone bra cup... so it would look like you were looking at a bra that was rhinestone. Years later we cut out the hips and put sheer fabric on the actual hips. You want them some way talking about you; whether it's positive or negative at least their talking. They may not like the costuming, but it's not about the costuming, it's about the dance."

"Everybody tries to do what the current champions are doing—like right now there is no real originality. There was a day when on any given night any of the top five to six couples could win because they each had their own look and they were in style—that was very exciting. Nowadays, everybody is trying to look like the other guy, so everybody looks the same. The costuming, choreography, hair, make-up, it's all generic, it's all the same."

Where do you see the trends of dance going in the next few years?

Forrest: "I can't answer that because I don't know what more they can do because right now everything's about speed and trickery and I don't know how much faster a person a person can spin or how much more choreography they can shove into one little bar of music. So, I couldn't tell you where it's going to go. Everything is retro, every 10 to 20 years it makes a full circle and I think people will actually tell a story with their movements and the way that they look at each other. That is what we used to do."

"We used to say, 'why are you moving your arm there,' 'why are you looking there,' 'what are you trying to say to your partner—to your audience in your

movement and in your choreography.’ Now they say, ‘I don’t know, someone told me to spin, somebody told me to kick, somebody told me to put my hand there.”

“If you’re doing Bolero and your doing the dance of love and you take your woman and you slam her back, that’s a little sadistic. You have to think about the characteristic of the style of the dance and what you’re trying to say. We’re trying to get the younger dancers to reinvent or bring back into fashion the story of the dance and the partnership.”

Elizabeth Anderson

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Born in 1979 in London, England, Elizabeth began dancing at the age of Five studying Jazz, Rock & Roll, continuing onto Ballroom & Latin, then predominantly contemporary & ballet. She began her teacher training at the Spencer Dance Center a prestigious school in England. Being very fortunate to train with Peggy Spencer and Geoff Hearn at the age fourteen in exchange for professional and theoretical training, and was offered a full time contract at 16, gaining three Associateships in, Ballroom, Latin American & Freestyle Dance from the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dance.

Elizabeth attended the British Record Industry Trust (BRIT) School for the Performing Arts and Technology, Croydon, 1994-98, graduating with GCSE's in Dance and Theatre and then an A-level and a BTEC in Dance. She then went onto the Laban Centre London 1998-99 studying Dance Theatre, Labanalysis (the notation of dance), critical writing and choreography. She freelanced in London from the ages of 17 to 21, teaching, performing and choreographing.

In August of 2000 Elizabeth moved to the U.S.A to work full time with Fred Astaire Dance Studio's beginning in Connecticut as an instructor, she realized after just a few months of training with Kim Haidinger (Director, Fred Astaire Franchised Dance Studios of New England) and Jack Rothweiler (President and CEO of Fred Astaire Franchised Dance Studios) what a wonderful opportunity she had Waltzed upon and that this was the place to be.

In a short time she progressed to studio manager, and then moved up to the Boston area in the summer of 2003 to purchase the Norwood Fred Astaire Franchised Dance Studio. Elizabeth is currently striving toward developing her staff to have the same opportunities and experience that the company offered her. She is also beginning to learn Spanish and Portuguese as she wants to travel to Cuba, Argentina and Brazil, to study and learn more about the origins of some of the dances from these countries, Mambo, Rumba, Bolero, Tango and Samba.

Elizabeth represents our franchise pathway and discussed her experiences with Fred Astaire and her dancing career in general during our interview with her:

What are the earning potentials of Fred Astaire Franchise Instructors?

Elizabeth: "The low potential is probably \$25,000, while the high potential is \$80,000 a year. It depends on your experience and skill. We provide them with the students initially and assist them with training, but usually the more lessons they are teaching the higher skilled they are."

What has your experience with Fred Astaire been like?

Elizabeth: "I think you have to have a real commitment with the company, but that is what made me so successful initially. Whatever they trained me to do, I did it and it worked—I think it was very easy for me to stay with the company."

What trends to do see in dance right now?

Elizabeth: "There is a trend in Latin fitness classes, Latin fitness videos—it is all Latin, Samba. Exotic dancing for housewives was a trend about six months ago, but it is out now. We gear our marketing towards it as well to stay in with the current (trend)."

Where do you purchase your costumes?

Elizabeth: “We have a co-company called Dore Designs; that is where we get our designs. It insures us customer service and quality. How much do they cost? They are expensive, the average Latin dress right now—is \$1500 and the average smooth dress is probably \$2300 or more. There is usually more material in the smooth dress, more material and more styling.”

What advice would you offer our readers for dancing with a partner?

Elizabeth: “In terms of dancing with a partner you definitely need to have an appreciation for the person you are dancing with—there has to be equality, there has to be generosity and empathy and patience and something that they can teach you.”

What about individual competition?

Elizabeth: “Just keeping in check what your motivation is, using the competition as a means to strive to be better in terms to be better in your own dancing rather than just beating someone—I don’t think that is healthy. Also just being a good sportsman, gracious—humble if I did win because there is just a fraction of difference between you and the other person.”

Has your competition experience helped with your current business?

Elizabeth: “Of Course, people can see the talent that you have—Ballroom dancing has a slightly narrow view in terms of career opportunities. I see it as a performance opportunity and people can see how you can dance. It helps to network and bring attention to your studios’ skill—I think you can do that as well by getting involved in your community, doing shows, performances—we do shows all the time.”