

## Here's Looking at You

Get your eye contact right and you'll achieve maximum communication on the dance floor. You'll also manage to exhibit perfect symmetry to the audience. Fail to make good eye contact with your partner and you can lose your audience's attention. Get it completely wrong and you can sabotage an otherwise great performance. Rachel Holland investigates.

The advantages that accompany maintaining good eye contact with your dance partner are many. Not only will you communicate better but also the position of your head, shoulders, arms, hips and legs are fully synchronized to mirror each partners' feelings and movements for the music.

"Eye contact plays so many important parts in dancing - whether you are a beginner or a pro" says dancer and teacher Debra Mitrov Kee, who has been instructing social dancers for over 36 years. "When I am teaching men, I always tell them 'the toes will follow the nose'. This helps them to look where they want to go, before they step into a pattern. It creates contra body motion (specific coordination), gives a lead and prevents the lady from guessing where they are going," she says.

"Since the average head weighs 9lbs, it makes for more work for the leader if the lady is looking elsewhere," adds Debra. "I haven't met a dancer yet who wants their dancing to be hard work by dragging around an extra 9lbs. My 'toes will follow the nose' rule helps a dancer to get around in their spins and turns - IF they look for their partners eyes. Your body will follow your head - with time to spare!"

The importance of keeping good eye contact cannot be stressed enough – especially with the Rumba - since through your choreography, you are basically telling a story. "Dance is a multifaceted discipline," says ballroom dancer and teacher Elizabeth Anderson. "Not only are you working on the physical execution of movement, you are interpreting an artistic meaning behind that movement, a story".

Official dance etiquette advises that for salsa, eye contact needs to be kept sensual and passionate. The Cha Cha however, is flirtier whilst the Rumba is a very sensuous and all about seduction. "A rumba just isn't very seductive and sexy without eye contact, says Debra. " If you think of a romantic waltz, a flirty cha-cha-cha or a strong tango WITHOUT eye contact, you have lost the story".

However, if the look of smouldering passion doesn't come easy to you when dancing, or if you frequently find yourself gazing at your partners forehead instead of their eyes, then here's some helpful strategies for improving things.

## Get Intimate

"I think of each dance as a three minute movie," says Debra. "My sense of humour reminds me that a dance is usually the most intimate three minutes I ever get with a man, and eye contact helps that to happen".

## Forget Yourself

A key hindrance to achieving good eye contact is self-consciousness. One of the reasons some dancers find it hard to hold eye contact with their partners stems from awkwardness with the required flirtatiousness, sizzle or passion demanded of their particular routine.

Beginner dancers are the most prone to self-consciousness, often looking wooden and as though they are just going through the motions. Getting the giggles also stems from self-consciousness. Ultimately, you are focusing too much on HOW you are feeling and not simply feeling it. Try instead to shift the focus away from how you are actually feeling and concentrate instead on what you are DOING. You'll be surprised how well this can work, and so will your dance teachers. Dancing is a lesson in letting go.

#### Audience Participation

"If you are stuck trying to remember what you are doing then you'll appear to have a glazed look in your eyes," says Elizabeth. "You have to remember that if you are performing for others then you need to communicate with them also". Try to connect with your audience, especially at those key times in the routine when it matters the most.

#### Eyes Wide Shut

It can also be helpful to briefly close your eyes whilst dancing, in order to aid your attention. Be careful with this one, though. This is most useful in practice for brief periods, while you work on specific issues such as turns or to "feel" the step better.

#### Don't Overdo It

"As with in conversation with somebody, if you completely locked eye contact continuously then it would ultimately look creepy," warns Elizabeth Anderson.

#### Faking It?

Lack of chemistry with your partner can also hinder eye contact. How can you be expected to look and feel like there are sparks between you as you dance when there clearly are none. If you don't want to experiment with switching to a new dance partner, try instead to focus on something ACTIVE such as flirting with your partner, seducing your partner, playing with your partner, all things which put you in an active role. Try to genuinely FEEL the passion, allowing it to naturally flow, making looking at your partner easier.