

Body Awareness – Walking

By Kaye West and Larry Caves

When beginning dancing, one concentrates on (1) timing and (2) where the feet move (the “beat and the feet”). As dancers begin to implement the character of the various rhythms, however, they begin to pay attention to how one moves, or how one walks.

The two most common kinds of walking in dancing are likened to *regular walking* and *stepping*, both of which are familiar practices. The two have many things in common, but differences as well. *Normal walking* is like that done commonly in the Modern Ballroom / Smooth rhythms of Waltz, Foxtrot, and Quickstep; *Stepping* has similarities with that done in Cha Cha and Rumba in the Latin / Rhythm categories.

To demonstrate differences, Larry has asked his students to compare and contrast someone walking normally with someone *stepping up* on a portable step and *stepping down*. It is a simple experiment which anyone can replicate. Essentially when one walks, the body always remains erect (perpendicular with the floor) and midway between the feet when the legs are apart. In contrast, when people step, typically they place their head and foot forward as they move (in other words, the body is no longer perpendicular with the floor). And, Larry says, legs in American style Cha Cha and Rumba are like *walking uphill* (the knee is bent when taking weight) and in International style legs are like *walking downhill* (the leg is straight when taking weight).

Other differences as well as similarities occur in (1) contra body action, (2) body posture, legs and feet, and (3) timing. While many of the concepts apply to multiple rhythms, the following generalizations can be thought of as pertaining to Waltz and Foxtrot in the Modern Ballroom / Smooth category and Cha Cha/ Rumba in the Latin / Rhythm group.

Contra Body Action

Many new dancers (for whatever reason: Concentration is on what the feet do? In dance position they do not want to step on their partner’s feet?) walk while keeping their hips and shoulders on the same vertical plane as if the body is a solid block and only the legs move beneath the body. As they begin to relax and incorporate more natural movement in their dancing, they allow their hip to move forward as their leg moves forward as in regular walking.

Thus, *in all dancing*, as a leg walks the *hip* also slants forward with the shoulders not moving in the same way, resulting in a condition called “**contra body**,” meaning simply that the *hips and shoulders are out of alignment with each other*. When in Closed Position (*aka* “Dance Position”) and simply standing in one place, the body is in a “neutral” or “square” position (the hips and shoulders are aligned on the same vertical plane). As soon as one takes a step, however, the hips and shoulder are no longer aligned, so *contra body occurs constantly* in dancing. There is also a split second when the body *is* in a neutral position when changing from one leg more forward to the other one more forward.

Because one hip is forward as the leg and foot move forward, some describe a forward step as “same side leading.” When moving back, the hip of the moving leg is prominent in the direction of movement, so that side of the body is considered the side that is leading. How same side leading occurs is different in the Latin / Rhythm dances from the Modern Ballroom / Smooth dances.

Most people believe that as one walks forward the arms swing like a pendulum forward and back. Careful analysis, however, demonstrates that much of this is an illusion. Keeping the arms pointed straight down while walking reveals that the gap between the hip and arm is created by the hip moving forward and the “swing” appears because the body moves forward taking the arm with it, creating the appearance of arms swinging (though there certainly can be an exaggeration of the swing).

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	Waltz, Foxtrot, Quickstep	Rumba, Cha Cha
Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dancing involves contra body action <i>of hips</i> when taking forward or back steps. • Banjo and Sidecar positions (described often as CBMP or contrary body <i>movement</i> position) involve contra body action with hips aligned to step forward as normally as possible and shoulders aligned to face partner as much as possible. • As the whole body moves forward in a forward step, one part of the body “remains back” (it continues to move forward because the whole body is moving; no part of the body actually <i>moves</i> back). 	
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After the body moves forward (e.g. with left foot) the opposite (right) shoulder <i>remains further back than the hip</i> (thus out of alignment) so the right shoulder can <i>roll down</i> to propel the subsequent step with the right foot to swing forward (for “CBM or contra body <i>movement</i>) to end with the (right) side leading. * • Semi-Closed position involves contra body action with hips aligned to walk as normally as possible and shoulders facing partner as much as possible and with the Follow more “open” (facing direction of movement) than the Lead since she is slightly behind him. • Arms are relatively stationary (in International style dancers must remain in Closed Position; in American style, fluid arms can extend outward from normal holds). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As the body moves forward (e.g., with left foot) the opposite (right) hip <i>remains back</i> (thus out of alignment) creating the exaggerated hip movement and the illusion of forward poise while the shoulders “fight” to keep “still,” though there is a slight slant of the shoulders. • While Semi-Closed is sometimes used, an L-position (allowing partners to face each other more fully) is more common; also there is more space between dancers (to allow maximum hip action). • Arms are used in dramatic ways, accentuating the contra body action. • More extreme contra body action is used.

* While this description retains the basic principle, there is variation of exactly how and when the body moves in various rhythms.

Banjo *aka* “Outside Partner” or “Outside Partner Right”

Sidecar *aka* “Partner Outside” or “Outside Partner Left”

Semi-Closed *aka* “Promenade Position”

Body Posture, Legs, and Feet

While most people think of walking as moving one foot forward after another, it is helpful in dancing to realize that in walking there are elements of change occurring with *both* legs simultaneously, and how the legs move also affects other parts of the body. There is continuous motion throughout the entire body.

While there are many considerations involved, including the placement of the feet (their tracks), how the feet move (how the body accepts weight on the feet), how the body is positioned, when the legs are straight or bent, and the timing in relationship to the music, it can be a lot to consider. As a general rule, consider walking in the Modern Ballroom dances to be like normal walking, and for Rumba and Cha Cha realize that mastering the *hip action* is the most important element which allows the others to be done “automatically.” See also **Body Awareness – Cuban Motion / Latin Hip Action.**

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	Waltz, Foxtrot, Quickstep	Rumba, Cha Cha
Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bodies are erect (perpendicular to the floor). • Knees bend first and then straighten in taking steps. • When one leg passes the standing foot, the ankles are adjacent. • The lower leg is poised (forward and pointed) prior to taking a forward step. • In taking a backward step the leg is straight from the hip to the toe. • Sometimes the standing foot (on the “dancing leg”) can push off the floor to propel the body forward. 	
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hip slanting is similar to that in normal walking. • Body weight is considered over the whole foot or over the back of the foot. • Sways can be very dramatic with a straight line sometimes extending from the foot through the entire body. • As forward or back steps are made, the legs operate like scissors with both legs moving apart at the same time and together at the same time; side steps are made like tweezers. • Generally knees bend at the same time and straighten at the same time (sometimes called “sympathetic knees”). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exaggerated hip slanting can be nearly parallel with the direction of movement. • Body weight is considered over the front of the foot (though “forward poise” is an illusion because a hip is back). • While the shoulders often lead the hip movement, the “sway” extends only to the hip. • As steps are made, one leg walks while the other leg remains in place as long as possible before moving for the next step. • Knees bend and straighten at different times (sometimes one bending while the other straightens). • In International style body weight arrives on a straight leg and the opposite knee bends to move forward; in American style body weight arrives on a bent knee and the leg straightens as full weight is achieved.

Tracks

	Waltz, Foxtrot, Quickstep	Rumba, Cha Cha
Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paths feet make on the floor can be thought of as “tracks.” • Though consistent within a rhythm, the tracks are not always the same. 	
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Closed Position the tracks are approximately shoulder-width apart, and because the right foot moves <i>between</i> partner’s feet there are <i>four</i> tracks. • In Semi-Closed the Follower’s left foot remains <i>behind</i> the Lead’s right foot, so there are <i>three</i> tracks. • In Banjo and Sidecar the foot next to partner steps on the <i>same track</i> as the previous step; the next step is on a parallel track, so alternately there are <i>two</i> then <i>four</i> tracks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because of the exaggerated hip slant, the tracks of the feet narrow so steps are made nearly aligned with the standing foot. • Some claim the heel is on the same track as the toe of the back foot. • The tracks in the Cha Cha Forward/Lock Forward or Back/Lock Back change slightly to allow the subsequent foot placement to be as nearly on a straight path as possible (essentially the third weight change moves slightly to the side).

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Foot Action

	Waltz, Foxtrot, Quickstep	Rumba, Cha Cha
Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of the moving foot remains close to the floor when taking steps. 	
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The sole of the moving foot is parallel to the floor when passing the standing foot. Body weight “rolls through the foot” on “heel leads” (first step of a measure, when stepping between partner’s feet, and on a slow count). A forward heel lead is described as heel/ball/toe”; a back step is “toe/ball/heel” or “toe/heel”); a quick step is described as “toe”; a quick step lowering in preparation for a slow step or the first step in a new figure is “toe/heel.” Feet are parallel and toes point forward when moving forward. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The toe of the moving foot grazes the floor when passing the standing foot so the knee of that leg is prominent. Footwork is described as “ball/flat” which means that the front part of the foot hits the floor first followed by the whole foot. Because the opposite hip is back and the back foot swivels with the toe as pivot point, the feet appear to be pointed outward when placing the foot and when landing. In order for the knee to move over the toe, the outside edge of the foot reaches the foot first in International style; the inside edge in American style. Stepping with toes pointed out without narrowing the track can cause knee injury.

Timing

Since dancing is visually portraying the music, it is helpful to understand that the moving foot always hits the floor **as the beat of music is heard**. That is the only place within a count of music that anyone can perceive so that dancers can synchronize their movement just as the musicians synchronize playing notes on their instruments. The beats are instantaneous; the movement of the body occurs *between beats*.

	Waltz, Foxtrot, Quickstep	Rumba, Cha Cha
Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A part of the foot hits the floor as a beat of music is heard on every step. Each step is shared (or split) weight / change weight. 	
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On a forward step on an “extended stride,” only the heel of the moving foot hits the floor as the beat is heard; the feet are far apart with straight legs and evenly split weight (so part weight on opposite toe). Full weight of the body occurs when the free foot is adjacent to the moving foot midway through the beat (On “&” on a Quick beat and on count 2 of a Slow beat). The lower leg is <i>moving into position</i> on the count of “a” of the previous beat. There is continuous motion (“drifting through the beat”) throughout the step. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The body lands erect over the moving foot with the majority of weight over the moving foot, the other toe remaining on the floor so the heel rotates in space with the toe as pivot point The free foot is adjacent to the standing foot on the “&” count on a Quick beat and on the “&” count on the 2nd beat of a Slow count. The lower leg <i>reaches its position</i> by the count of “a” of the previous beat. There is movement and pauses in movement as steps are taken.

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Delayed Forward Walk Turning or Forward/Spiral

There is another forward walk which deserves attention. This walk is very common in Rumba and Cha Cha and can also occur in other rhythms when doing a spiral. It is called a Delayed Forward Walk Turning (in Latins/Rhythms) because body weight is transferred on the *second half* of the step rather than the *first half*, and the purpose is to turn easily as the second action of the step. The (one-half) turn is left-face when walking with the right foot and right-face when walking with the left foot. The rationale is to keep the body weight evenly distributed as a turn is made since taking a regular walking step and turning leaves less than half of the body weight over the stepping foot which causes one to lose balance during the turn.

To accomplish this action, the opposite hip and shoulder must be forward (when stepping with the right foot, the left hip and shoulder are forward) so the thighs are strongly crossed, then when there is weight split evenly on both feet, the (left) hip “pulls back” (rotates left-face) as the weight is transferred to the stepping (right) foot, so the body *ends* with full weight over the (right) foot after the half turn. (Anatomically, muscles *contract* to move the body, so it is the muscles in one’s rump .. in this case the left ... which cause the turn). This technique allows for greater stability as the turn is made because the body weight is split during the turn and the floor resistance is also less because it is split between the feet.

To become a *spiral*, the turn is overturned up to 7/8 of a turn (so 3/8 more) to turn nearly completely around causing the lower legs to be crossed and a bent knee on the leg that is prominent (in stepping with the right foot, the left knee would be bent).

When one attempts to have full weight over the foot and then make the turn, there is much floor resistance created by the entire body weight on one foot in addition to the weight being offset (and the wider one’s hips, the greater the offset-ness) which combined make such action much more difficult than it needs to be, even though some teachers insist that is how it is *always* done. Folks *can and must* learn a new balance point for the body since in actions like a riff turn or a three-step turn, or even when making a change of direction in the midst of a figure (like a hover to Semi), one *does* have the entire body weight over one foot as a turn is made. Generally this is done as a spin or for a turn less than one-half).

See also **Body Awareness – Understanding Timing.**

The “Prep” Step

Since the position of the legs for beginning to dance is commonly legs together when in most rhythms the legs are apart to begin a forward step, many ballroom teachers add one “preparatory” step with the opposite foot to get the legs apart so the entire body motion can be observed as the figure itself is demonstrated and for dancers to experience the complete figure.