

Do You Know...

... that in dancing one's body is nearly always in a *contra body* posture?

By Kaye West

For about my first dozen years in round dancing, I thought that the “trunk” of the body was like a rectangular block. The legs moved and the arms could be in different places, but the rest of the body was essentially one solid, unchanging block. I would not be surprised if many others seem to believe that too. The idea might be influenced by attention only on where the feet are placed or the concept some claim that “small steps make small mistakes.” These days I realize from ballroom lessons and social dancing that how the *body moves* relates to implementing the *character* of the different rhythms. Additionally, large steps communicate more readily than small ones when leading the partner.

The concept of the body being in *contra body* was first brought to my attention when pioneer round dance leaders MaryAnn and Bob Rother explained that in **Banjo** and **Sidecar** the elbows are aligned with the direction of movement; an imaginary line extending from one's own elbow to the next “points the way to move.” I knew that the legs had to step outside the partner's body, but initially my body remained essentially unchanged; I rotated my whole body as one singular piece. Therefore, I ended in what they called a “barge” position with the *true side* of my body dividing the front from the back next to the *true side* of my partner, especially at the hips.

The concept of *contra body* literally “blew my mind,” or created the *cognitive dissonance* that made me rethink how I understood dancing in those positions. I realized that my upper body was ninety-degrees off from where it should be! The change was so extreme that it necessitated revising my book *Cold Feet: How to Get Them Dancing* to the second edition, *Cold Feet II*. These days, I realize that the “sides” which are adjacent are *aligned with a lady's bra strap and a man's suspender*! And to achieve the positions, the body *twists* at the waist as one moves into **Banjo** or **Sidecar** with the upper body (shoulders) rotating one way (remaining facing the partner) and the lower body (hips) rotating in the opposite direction (so legs can move as normally as possible)! That is how to achieve the positions without distorting the frame (*the joints at the shoulders stay essentially unchanged*).

So what does *contra body* mean? It simply means that the body is “against itself” or that the upper body (shoulders) and lower body (hips) are not on the same vertical plane. The difference can be a little or a lot. When the shoulders and hips *are* totally aligned, they are considered to be “square” or in a “neutral” position. But since legs are attached to hips, when walking normally (forward or back) the hips slant as the legs move; bodies are neutral for only a split second as they continually alternate being in *contra body* (twisted at the waist) one way and then the opposite way. The degree of difference is readily apparent when comparing normal walking and “power walking” (in power walking the degree of *contra body* is much greater). Perhaps this concept isn't often mentioned to dancers because of how frequently *contra body* occurs!

Dancers need to learn that dancing involves how the *whole body* moves, and they will learn *how and when* to move the body as they refine their dancing. And one of the first concepts about the body to realize is that *the hips move as the legs do*, so their upper and lower body constantly are twisted in one direction and then the other. Knowing that should encourage normal-sized steps, using normal hip rotation in the Latin/Rhythm dances, and improving dance position in **Banjo** and **Sidecar**.