

Do You Know... that much of dance is illusion!

By Kaye West

That is to say, what we *see* is often not what *is done*. Our brains have a way of filling in information so that we “see” what we *think* we see.

In beginning dancing, emphasis must be placed on the *feet*. Which foot is moving? When? What direction? Where does it *end* in relationship to the other foot or to the hall? So initially we do not pay much attention to the body, and the result is that we are often fooled to “see” something which actually is not there: it is an illusion. In dancing, however, the body continues to move *between* weight changes making body awareness important for efficient and effective dancing. As dancers begin to understand the character of the various rhythms, recognizing body mechanics becomes important and reveals the illusions.

A situation to consider is when a step is made in one direction followed by the next step in the opposite direction. Below are examples of a *back step* followed by a *recover* or *forward step* which demonstrate the importance of understanding how the whole body moves to create the illusion as well as the character of each rhythm. (Similar principles apply to a *forward step* followed by a *recover* or *back step* in *Bolero*.)

In each case ***the foot is actually placed so that the toe of the moving foot is close to the heel of the standing foot*** (when moving forward, the heel of the moving foot is placed close to the toe of the standing foot). We *see* it as a large step because at the end of it and prior to the next weight change the free leg moves to make *space between the feet* creating the *appearance* that the step was a large one. But it is just an illusion!

Why is this important to know? Think about it: when one takes a large step backwards, because of the law in physics that says that a body in motion wants to continue in motion in the same direction, there must be much energy exerted to overcome that residual momentum in order to *recover* or *move forward* on the next change of weight, making it more difficult to do than is necessary. On the other hand, if one simply places the foot just behind the standing foot (underneath the body), the trunk of the *body* does not move very much so there is very little residual momentum to overcome.

In **Jive**, this occurs in the *Rock, Recover* (Back Rock or Rock Apart) at the beginning of many of our figures. A characteristic of Jive is bending or lifting the knee of the unweighted leg. So, as one steps under the body as described above with the left foot, for example, the right knee lifts up (a little or a lot) and there is space between the feet. As the right knee is lifted (forward), the left hip remains back, so the hips are on a diagonal. If the dancer then “settles” into the hip, the slight residual momentum from taking a step “back” is absorbed in the hip. Voila! It looks like a bigger step because there is space between the feet! The “settling action” of the hip provides a counterbalance to the unweighted leg on the opposite side of the body, keeping one’s balance point approximately centered instead of having to shift from one leg to the other.

This phenomenon also occurs frequently on the second weight change in **Bolero**. In his clinic notes (see [Convention Syllabus 2018](#), p. 51, on the [ICBDA website](#)), Tom Hicks described the technique for half of a Basic as “*glide, drop, and drift*” with the length of the steps, in order, as long, ***short***, and medium. Larry Caves, my dance coach, describes the three changes of weight

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as “elevate, *drop*, glide.” In either case, dancers have the highest elevation at the **end** of the first step (their legs are straight and they may be high on the ball of the weighted foot) so that they can **drop** straight down to change weight on the second step.

This means that at the very end of the first step, dancers must have positioned their body in what Tom calls the “Cuban cross position” where their legs are both straight and very close together and, in a back step, the toe of the moving foot is very close to the heel of the standing foot (the moving foot is on a diagonal in relationship to the standing foot). Then as the body sinks straight down (the knees bend), the leg takes weight just as the beat of music is heard, and the opposite leg straightens to extend forward beginning the drifting action for the third, medium-sized, gliding step. It thus *appears* that the second step was a long one, but it is just an illusion! Roundalab describes step two as a “slipping action.”

The same phenomenon occurs in the third weight change of the Whisk, whether the rhythm is **Waltz** or **Foxtrot**. It *appears* that the step is a long one, but skilled dancers again simply place the toe of the moving foot close to the heel of the standing foot because as the moving leg accepts body weight both knees bend and immediately the newly-free leg straightens in preparation to move forward so the heel can connect with the floor as the first beat of music is heard for the next measure to begin the process of “rolling through the foot.” Another illusion.

There are similarities as well as differences in the character of the Waltz and Foxtrot. Both rhythms emphasize flight (long strides created by bending the knees and pushing off from the weighted foot) and using normal walking action of “rolling through the foot” in instances such as the first step of a figure or when stepping forward between partner’s legs as in a Three-Step. However, the major difference is that Waltz emphasizes extremes in the *vertical* dimension and Foxtrot attempts to promote smooth *horizontal* movement with minimal change vertically.

The result of flight is apparent on the second step of the Whisk in both Waltz and Foxtrot. Because the body is moving forward on the first step, it can’t make a 90-degree turn for a side step. Rather, residual forward momentum influences the second (side) step, which some describe as “side and forward” for the Lead and “side and back” or “diagonally back” for the Follower.

While the placement of feet is essentially the same in both rhythms, the characteristic difference is that the Waltz accentuates rise and fall so when full weight is taken on step two, the legs are straightened and dancers are as high as possible on the ball of the weighted foot, then as they *take weight and move forward* for step three, the knees bend and the unweighted leg straightens. In Foxtrot dancers attempt to remain as much as possible at the same height by bending the knees with each step and keeping the heels as close to the floor as practical. Heels must leave the floor when rolling through the foot and swivels are done on the ball of the foot, so saying Foxtrot has “no foot rise” is an exaggeration. A current expression uses “half rise.”

So whether or not you knew before, now you know **one** of the ways in which much of dancing is illusion. And perhaps you learned some of the techniques used to create the character of four rhythms to try in your own dancing.