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Having a ball

December 15, 2002

(from the *Weekend* section)

A blur of tuxedos and gowns on New Year's Eve

By ANNE GALLOWAY

Dancing has never been my forte. When I'm not tripping over my own two feet, I'm stepping on my partner's. And my idea of what a waltz consists of was formed in junior high, which means that when all else fails I clutch my partner in a death grip, and we shuffle like a pair of penguins until the music stops.

I may have been born with two left feet, but I've inherited a closet full of dance garb my grandmothers wore 50 years ago, when big bands like the Glenn Miller Orchestra were popular and learning to sashay around the ballroom with elegance was still considered de rigeur.

I have, thanks to both grannies, a sartorial legacy tucked away in layers of sheer dry-cleaning plastic: a 1920s silk shift, a floor-length strapless satin gown, a black dress with bead fringe, and a black velvet cape, plus the full assortment of elbow and wrist length dress gloves and a dozen hats composed of feathers from what were probably endangered, if not now extinct, bird species. The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals would have a field day in my closet.

Trouble is, I've got all this wonderful stuff to dress up in – plus the courage to wear it, and even dance – but up to now I thought I had nowhere to go.

If you face the same problem this year, if you have a ballroom dress or tux with tails and the chutzpa to show off, it's worth considering attending a New Year's Eve dance in Colchester this year, where Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett are still kings, people wear their best best, and everyone knows how to waltz.

The Green Mountain Chapter of the United States American Ballroom Dancing Association, or USABDA (pronounced you-sawb-daw) for short, is sponsoring a New Year's Eve bash at the Elley-Long Music Center on the St. Michael's College campus. The event is alcohol-free.

Here, even if you're as clueless as I am about stepping out onto the dance floor, you're bound to master a few moves. The Green Mountain Chapter of USABDA is

composed of ordinary people just like me who started out not knowing the difference between a foxtrot and Lindy hop.

Katie O'Connor, of Shelburne, is a recent ballroom dance convert. During the day she is the state director of economic development for Verizon Vermont. By nightfall she's dancing her heart out at private and group lessons, or one of the workshops and dances sponsored by USABDA. For O'Connor, 40, who is newly divorced, dancing is an entrée into a new social group. "The dance community welcomes and supports new dancers and that's what's wonderful about social dancing because you dance with people of all ages and all levels," O'Connor says. Another tangible benefit: she's had an opportunity to access a whole new wardrobe. "I took all these dresses out of my closet, and I get to wear them," she says with an irrepressible giggle.

O'Connor is learning seven new dances. On Monday nights she studies three Latin dances: the cha-cha, rumba and merenge. On Tuesdays it's all ballroom: the foxtrot, tango and waltz. She takes Wednesdays off, tackles the salsa on Thursdays and hits the USABDA dances on weekends. "I'm a dance junkie," she admits. O'Connor compares her diverse dance menu to "going to a party and checking out all the hors d'oeuvres."

Last Tuesday she worked on her ballroom technique at a class with dance instructor Kevin Laddison at The Champlain Club in Burlington. Laddison and a group of four dancers – three women, including O'Connor, and one man – practiced the waltz and the tango with something more than just the rudiments of these two deceptively simple dances in mind. They focused on posture, finesse, balance and that intangible quality all dancers try their best to exude as they move – grace.

The dancers, dressed up even to practice, stand at attention with their arms upraised embracing imaginary partners as Laddison quietly inculcates the rhythm of the waltz with his sonorous voice, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, over and over again, occasionally interjecting comments about technique. "You notice that as I turn my body I'm indicating that it's time to take a turn," he says as he too waltzes alone toward the others. It's as though the dancers are under hypnosis. Then Laddison changes his chant to meditations on steps: toe-heel, toe-toe-heel. The group sways and slowly turns in unison, and then comes to a halt.

Laddison then leads them through tango steps, coaching the students on how to keep their thighs touching without bashing each others' knees. He tells the ladies to arch their spines and coyly toss their heads back as they fall into their partner's arms.

Sarah Wagner, 26, a nurse at Fletcher Allen Health Care, and Pradeep Thiagarajan, 25, an electrical engineer at IBM, seem more comfortable with the tango than they did with the slow pace of the waltz. This is the pair's first foray into ballroom dancing – up to now they've been salsa devotees.

As Wagner works on the steps she complains aloud about how much she would dislike dancing the tango with a stranger. "That's the thing about the tango, it's an incredibly sexual dance because you're dancing so close," Laddison says. He gives the women some tips on fending off men who seem to be taking advantage. Eloise Beil, 51, suggests an old-fashioned remedy: "Just say, 'I'm feeling a little light-headed.'"

After the tango Laddison puts on a Frank Sinatra album, and pairs up with Beil. Sinatra croons "Try to Remember" as the couple's individual movements blend together, and they glide across the dance floor.

“People are afraid of dancing, but once you start doing it, it’s an addiction,” Wagner says. Thiagarajan agrees. “It takes away the stress,” he says. “You get to enjoy nice music and good company.”

As it turns out, Beil, Wagner and Thiagarajan are almost as obsessed with dance as O’Connor is. All four take lessons whenever possible, and go to USABDA dances.

And they’re not alone. Everyone I interviewed for this story is crazy about dancing. Timna Dulmer, president of The Green Mountain Chapter of USABDA, says the nonprofit has 80 dues-paying members, and 70 to 150 people attend the nonprofit group’s monthly dances.

Dulmer dances her socks off on a regular basis too. And a few years ago she became as taken with one of her partners as she was with the sport. She met her husband in a ballroom dancing class. “I got very lucky,” she says. “He’s a nice man and he likes dancing, and that’s even better.”

Most of Vermont’s USABDA members are social dancers, that is to say they like to talk to people, listen to music and get a little exercise. They are not aspiring national champions. But there are a few dancers in the club who have taken ballroom and Latin dancing to the elite competition level. Bobbi Davies, a former national ballroom dancing champion and co-owner of Vermont DanceSport Academy in Burlington, is coaching three Vermont couples who are competing on the regional and national levels.

But Dulmer says there’s no reason for non-dancers to feel intimidated. She describes the USABDA dances, including the New Year’s Eve bash, as free-for-all get-togethers.

“Ballroom dancing is for everyone,” Dulmer says. “We have everyone from high-schoolers to senior citizens. We have singles and couples. We have everyone from absolute beginners who walk in off the street to competition ballroom dancers.”

Everyone, even the two-left-footed folks, like me? Dulmer assured me that even those who shuffle and rock back and forth like penguins can do it: “We have people who say ‘I have two left feet. I’m never going to be able to do this!’ And by the end of the night they’ll know three or four steps and really be able to dance.”

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