



How NOT to have an “odd” dance facial expression

I think we have all seen it and most of us have done it...that highly expressive joyous or passionate look that just looks a bit off.

It can be pretty hard to prevent the over-the-top rapture in rumba or the downright terrifying intensity in tango but looking flat or bored may be worse.

Consider these tips to help your facial expression show just right:

1. Use your tongue, but keep it inside your mouth.

Prevent your smile from looking too extreme by pushing your tongue toward the roof of your mouth and the back of your teeth. This will relax your muscles a bit so your face hurts less too.

2. Make sure your emotion does not look like you are in pain.

Wrinkling your brow generally only happens in life for only brief periods of time, unless you are in pain or need to use the washroom very badly.

A good rule of thumb in dancing is to keep brow wrinkling to only brief periods as well.

3. Smile for real or, at least close to it.

Smile in a way that you can hold for a while.

You can have brief flashes of a brighter smile but super bright smile 100% of the time strains your face a bit and actually looks a bit scary unless it is real.

4. Just because you are doing a bit of acting, doesn't mean it has to look that way.

If you need to jump start your smile, make sure your eyes are a bit squinted to help you engage your eyes in the smile.

Your eyes are always a big part of a real smile.

If you are not sure about this, go to the mirror and make a huge smile without your eyes and you will see what I mean about what looks real.

5. Engage your brain by looking at someone or something.

A blank stare into space sometimes can look like a blank stare into space.

Focus on anything even for a split second at a time and you will look more sincere and more intelligent.



6. Practice your looks like you practice your lines.
Models and actors know the importance of face practice.
Dancers are performers as well and it is no less important for us.

7. Try to match as a couple.

If one of you is super intense and the other is not, it may look like the intense partner is upstaging and the other is thinking about the next partnership.

This may not be the case...I am just talking about how it could look.

8. If it is real, do not hold back.

The best looks come when you just enjoy the music and let full joy or passion show on your face.

If you feel emotion, show it without holding back and you will not go wrong.

If you feel nothing, remember tips 1-7 and fake it until it comes!

12 Important (Ballroom) Basics



Everyone needs the basics. If you are beginner, knowing and perfecting the basics will make everything else you do easier and look better. If you are advanced, the minute you forget or gloss over the basics, is the same minute you will start to slide back.

The most basic of the basics is to connect to your partner, then move.

In Standard and in closed positions in Smooth, lack of good posture and frame will impact everything in your dancing and set an impression even before you start.

1. The elbows of both partners should be in line with their own shoulders; not dropped, not elevated and never having one out of line with the other.

Ideally, height differences between partners are addressed through the bending of knees not the dropping of elbows.

Shape is also through the bending of knees; while maintaining alignment with the body and remembering that the position of the arms does not change.

2. The leader's left palm should be perfectly flat and forward facing to invite a connection to the follower's right palm; the leader then places their wrist on the edge of the follower's underarm and their hand under their partners shoulder blade.

3. The follower's thumb and wrist should be in line with the leader's arm as they place their hand on the arm. The follower's hand and upper arm should be placed lightly so it does not create weight on the leader's arm.

4. In Tango the left forearm of the leader and the right forearm of the follower are positioned slightly lower (or flatter to the floor) than in the other dances.

This matches the feel of the lowered body position that is created by more lowering of the knees in Tango than in swing dances while the more compact position makes Tango's sharp movement easier and gives the dance a more grounded and aggressive look.

5. For both partners, the neck should be pulled back to ensure that it is in line with the spine. The belly should be pulled in; the chest should be flat and down; and the butt should be tucked in. This is all to prevent a sway in the spine and broken lines.

6. Body contact is made on the right forward facing side of each partner's body. The follower is invited to make contact and is the one who is responsible for establishing it. The contact extends from the follower's upper thigh to mid torso. This contact then sets the base for a comfortable stretch.

Once connected properly, you now are ready to move.

The other key basic, is quality of movement and when people refer to quality of movement it largely means movement that is clear, has well executed technique and looks purposeful.

1. It is best if you think of movements or actions rather than steps, even if you mean steps. The word step makes people think of foot placements. This is important, but movement is more likely to have you think of your whole body, which is much more appropriate for what is needed in good dancing.

2. First and foremost, your movement must never disrupt your partner. The contact for closed, promenade and outside partner positions are simply variations on how each body is oriented to the other. It is important to remember that within each of these orientations, the body position of each partner is maintained in a static way. You can stretch. You may shape. You might even bend, but no wiggles or shakes.

3. Movement across the floor is initiated with a lowering of the knees-down and forward. The lowering allows you to push off the standing leg to move with greater power and reach. In swing dances it is also important to keep both feet on the ground and move by sliding your feet.

4. Each movement is actually the result of a weight shift. Being very aware of the need for the weight shift will add clarity and a look of purposefulness to each move. Movement is much more balanced and elegant when the weight shift from one foot to another is clear, and ends with your body in perfect alignment over one foot.

5. In general, your feet are always parallel to each other. As well, when turning, the foot that you turn on is placed straight forward, before you swivel on the ball. This supports balance, length in your strides, and the clarity of movement that was mentioned before.

6. Never wrinkle your sides. It is tempting when moving, turning or swaying to inadvertently drop one side or another. This can happen even if you are vigilant about maintaining the position of your elbows, and may look particularly broken if arms are up while you drop a side. Think about keeping the line of each side perfectly smooth, without wrinkles or creases, and you will maintain a position that can then be beautifully finished with properly positioned arms.



The Outside Change (Waltz)

A basic figure in the Waltz; three simple steps (technically four but that last step is actually part of the next figure), yet as simple as it is, within those movements exists a world of technique that can make the figure look spectacular.

I once heard a student complain about the Outside Change in their routine, claiming that it was a boring figure and hoping that their teacher would consider removing it from the routine.

That's sad because it has such potential to make your dancing stand out from the crowd when danced with understanding.

The [Outside Change](#) consists of three steps.

In the technique book, a fourth step is included in the Outside Change but essentially that's the start of a new figure so I'll ignore that step for the purpose of this article.

The figure is a "change" step partly because it changes feet (you only have two feet so any odd-numbered group of steps will change feet) and also because it changes direction.

It's an "outside" figure because it ends in such a way that the fourth step is taken outside partner (but it can also finish by opening to Promenade Position).

The figure can turn different amounts!

Most of the time it turns one quarter to the left but it can turn quite a bit more.

The figure is used as the ending three steps of the Weave and the Weave from PP.

It can begin either in Closed Position with the lady stepping in between the man's feet or from Outside Partner Position with the lady stepping outside the man on the first step.

There is only one musical beat count for each step but, as usual in the Waltz, we can cheat the timing to make the second step visually longer for added impact.



What impresses me about the Outside Change is the way that it emulates a common action that [Fred Astaire](#) applied in his dancing; where he would rotate while drawing his feet underneath him.

This creates the effect of making the body appear to hover in space over the legs before moving on in another direction.

Basic Technique

The basic figure begins with the man stepping back with his left foot, backing diagonal to center. The lady steps forward with her right foot between the man's feet, or outside depending on the previous figure.

The man uses his toe but the heel lowers as his body arrives over the left foot.

This technique is known as "no foot rise". The lady uses her heel on step 1, switching to the toe as her body moves toward and over the right foot.

For the second step, the movement continues in the same direction.

The man steps back with the toe of the right foot, continuing to rise. The lady steps forward with her left toe, also continuing to rise. There is some Cross Body Movement (CBM) on this step.

At the end of step 2, the lead creates the desired amount of rotation.

You can only effectively rotate on your toes or on your heel (note that the body turns a little less than the feet).

After rotating, the man steps forward with the left foot. The lady steps back with her right foot (or forward if in Promenade Position).

With the bodies slightly under turned in relation to the foot positions (CBM), the man can now step outside the lady with his right foot in CBMP on the fourth step (this step really belongs to the next figure).

There is no sway on any of the steps.

Improving the Styling

Where this figure goes wrong is usually because one or both partners are too quick to place their foot to the ending alignment.

They kind of ronde the leg sideways to point in a new direction and by swinging the leg out to the side, the momentum of that movement and the weight of the leg pulls the partnership into the final position too early.

Not only does this pull the partner off their foot, it also takes away from the beauty of this figure.

What makes the Outside Change shine is the act of drawing the non-supporting foot underneath your body before stepping out with it.

This happens as the body moves toward the standing foot in between steps 2 and 3.

Drawing in that foot has the effect of bringing the feet fairly close together, even in a slightly crossed position if there is a lot of rotation.

The third step is taken on the toe.

Again, this is where many dancers ruin the appearance of this beautiful figure, by dropping onto a flat foot too early.

Keep the heel up until the moving foot collects to move past the standing foot and by lowering the heel gradually your movement becomes smooth and elegant rather than looking clunky.

The Open Finish

An alternative ending is the open finish (with the partners in Promenade Position).

In that case, the lady will step forward with her right foot rather than stepping back.

Too often, when the man wishes to finish in PP, he swings his leg out to the side on step 3.

You should always focus on drawing the moving leg underneath you, and only then leading the Promenade opening.

This lead to the open ending is done by swivelling the feet and a slight rotation of the man's center...think of it as if you are holding the lid of a jar and turning the base of the jar to the left.

When opening to Promenade, in most cases the lady's feet are already in the position they need to be to step forward, so the lady should not open any further; instead, she just turns her head to the right and steps forward.

Just as in the closed finish, the third step is taken onto the toe and the heel only lowers as the back foot passes through to take the next step.

Authenticity in Latin Dancing

Since the mid to late 2000's, the competitive dance world has tended to focus so much on athleticism that it has strayed steadily away from the intent of each dance and, in the process, are losing the character of these dances...and with it their emotional power!



I recently viewed a lecture by Donnie Burns assisted by Gaynor Fairweather (the session dates back to 2007 in Italy).

In the Latin-American style, there are 5 dances; each with unique characteristics and each significantly different from the others in terms of what it is meant to express as a dance. [Walter Laird](#) has pointed out that in other sports; like track and field, nobody is moved by the performance of the athlete. Physicality is not art. It isn't emotional in its purpose.

When a runner puts out '110%' effort to win a world championship, they don't cause the audience to weep because of the performance!

Dance is an art form; like music and acting and writing, part of the intent of competitive dancing is to move the audience; you are trying to tell a story; it's a story of partnership between two people moving together to music.



The contrast between the partners is intentional and a major part of the story and as Donnie Burns put it; Gaynor was elegance and beauty, while he was the beast...yet together they were able to produce a powerful story.

In a simple figure like the Advanced Hip Twist, the man is presenting an opportunity for the lady to show off what she can do with her legs and hips...he is drawing attention to her best features, the whole idea behind that figure!

Each partner has a job to do, but they are different jobs and he gives some examples from different dances; In Jive, for example, there are so many old pieces of choreography now seemingly forgotten, that make the woman's legs look amazing.

In Samba, if you don't have enough characteristics that come from the basic actions, you will never illustrate the musicality that this dance represents and as a result, you won't show an understanding of what Samba is really all about.

In Rumba, the dance world has moved from almost no setup, which agreeably isn't ideal, to a fake setup process that is supposed to illustrate intimacy and passion but comes across as insincere.

As he notes; too often, instead of focusing on authentic characteristics, dancers are instead focusing on pure athleticism and mentions that you can get fabulous body speeds out of basic figures, so we shouldn't just ignore them...you can't use different timings and take advantage of the story they can tell, if you're just trying to go fast all the time!

When couples move too far from the original characteristics of these dances, they start to lose everything that partner dancing is about, because the dances start to blur together to become just a mess of different choreography and they lose their distinctive qualities!

What happens when Samba becomes something similar to Cha Cha? How can you tell a Samba story with Cha Cha choreography? How can you tell a story about a partnership, when most of the dance is spent in side-by-side actions, with the couple not even looking at each other?

He points out some basic elements of good partnering, using the various parts of the body to lead, while ensuring you never use the arms!

Thigh, hip, hip weight, bone, upper body muscularity are all valid sources of lead energy.

They all require the lead to be perfectly balanced over his own two feet, in control of his weight. That gives him the ability to choose any part of the body needed for an effective lead.

The leads should be active, but quiet. They are never busy!

He mentions a technique he had been taught by Walter Laird in which he places a towel under his armpit and needed to keep it there for most lead actions. If it falls, he's "rubbish"!

The exaggerated use of the arms moves the energy outside of that narrow envelope and destroys everything you are trying to achieve.

You can watch the lecture for yourself [here](#).