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Introduction

Interviews are quoted without in-text citations; the full list of interviews cited, along with dates and places, is given at the end of the article. All interviews were conducted by the author during the summer of 2009, and have been translated from Swedish by the author. Social dancers who chose to remain anonymous upon reading a draft of the work have been given alliterative pseudonyms. Dance teachers were interviewed with the understanding that their real names would be used.

In the middle of the night at the 2009 Backa festival in the south of Sweden, Skåne province, Jon Loxbo asked me to dance. As we took to the floor, his unconventional [123/124] martial-arts-influenced dance style kept my attention by keeping me off balance. Jon had asked me to lead, but was not used to following. We wound up trading roles back and forth, playing with energy and motion.

As I found out when I interviewed him the next day, his attention may have been divided at the time. He advised me:

One of the best ways to flirt, if you've spotted someone, is to find one of the best men to dance with, as a man. You take a few turns around with him, so the one you want sees you dancing. Partly because I usually dance much better with men, there's a different kind of energy, you have the same understanding in the dance. And I may be imagining this, but I think it shows that you care about people, rather than gender. The dance is primary. And then she'll come, if you've made eye contact, preferably while you were dancing, maybe tossed her a glance for more than a second, fewer than five, then she knows. And then she'll come and ask you up. Or you just sit by her, and don't say anything. Maybe play with your shoes or something. Then you get her. It's worked very well for me.

The strategy Jon describes exemplifies an interaction between two competing forces that shape current Swedish social polska dance practices. On the one hand, the sexual politics of the dance floor, as in most couple dance traditions, tend to the heterosexual and heteronormative. On the other, many younger dancers have come to show the ability and, increasingly, the will, to dance either role with partners of either gender.

The confluence of these two forces generates results that are not uncomplicated, as the anecdote demonstrates. Jon's tactic of using same-sex dancing to tease out a female gaze while concealing his own until the moment of eye contact demonstrates something of the adaptability of heterosexual courtship practices to changing norms of gender performance. On the other hand, his intention to create a mutual heterosexual gaze does not limit the possibility of other gazes in that moment. The woman Jon wants may not be the only one watching. Our act of dancing together, together with others like it, might also make the floor a safer space for homosexual and

bisexual experiences and seductions. The meeting of heteronormativity and gender flexibility has thus produced a dance scene that has the potential to affect experiences of gender and sexuality for men and women of all sexual orientations.

This tension between the homosexual and heterosexual is only one element of an interrelated network of simultaneous and often oppositional forces that generate the idiosyncratic charge of the present-day polska dance floor. The space is one in which social norms of masculinity and femininity are both intensified and challenged. Dancers sexualise and desexualise themselves in the same moment.¹ The act of dancing is both fantastical and grounded, an embodied, visceral role-play. In all of this there is a great deal of potential for expressive and individual freedom, and yet the social situation demands conformity on multiple levels—to one's partner, to the rest of the floor, and to the established gestures of the dance. This final tension between freedom and conformity is further aestheticised in the very fabric of the music and dance itself. The best dancers and players are those with the capacity to express lightness and weight simultaneously (Farágó 2005:6). [\[124/125\]](#)

Couple dancing is an under-studied phenomenon within the already marginal field of dance scholarship.² Sheenagh Pietrobruno has argued that the field tends to privilege a narrative of female empowerment, to which male-dominated partner dance fails to conform (2006:146). Far more has been written on modern dance, with Isadora Duncan's transformation of the female dancer from weightless balletic object to grounded modern subject occupying a kind of canonic centre to the field.³

But as a locus for the study of human sexuality as socially constructed behaviour, partner dancing is ideal. The three-way tension between individual, couple and society that marks the social process of establishing sexual partnerships is mirrored and formalised on the social dance floor. In the case of the polska, the choreography actually narrates a process of courtship and consummation. The partners move from a side-by-side promenade into a turn in which they lock themselves together in repetitive up-and-down motions. The sexual symbolism may go generally unacknowledged, but then real-life courtship processes have a tendency to be similarly covert. Nor is the behaviour merely symbolic—the function of polska dancing as a gateway to sexual and romantic partnering is well acknowledged.⁴

Beyond this narrative element to the choreography, the contradictory performances of gender that converge on the present-day Swedish social folk dance scene make the polska especially ripe for a study of sexuality. On the one hand, the polska partnership has historically been marked by gender conventions one might call unsurprising: The man initiates the action and courts the desirable woman, exercising his power over the public space to maintain a private sphere within it for her benefit. On the other, recent pedagogical practices have challenged these conventions by downplaying or eradicating gender differences in the dance. Both of these streams of influence claim a powerful presence on the dance floor. Their simultaneity finds deeper root in a dual (some might say conflicting) vision of gender difference and egalitarianism in Swedish society at large.

The majority of my consultants seem to agree that from a purely ideological standpoint the gender-neutral approach is to be preferred. Sweden has a decades-long social and political tradition of insisting on total gender equity (Eduards 1991; Persson 1990). Yet the centuries that people have spent encoding sexual dynamics into gender divergence grant the old ways something of an advantage when flirtation or seduction enters the picture. The romantic narrative of the choreography relies upon distinct masculine and feminine roles. Proponents and opponents of gender-neutrality thus both tend to associate that approach with desexualisation; the former

lauding it for putting focus on the dance as an end in itself rather than a means to sex, the latter lamenting the loss of flirtation as an essential element of the dance.

Consequently, egalitarianism as a choreographic goal faces a practical dilemma. If we rely upon the performance of distinct masculinities and femininities to invoke sexuality, we must abandon gender-neutrality the moment we wish to activate a sexual dimension to the dance.⁵ As my opening anecdote suggests, this dilemma is currently subject to inchoate negotiations on the polska dance floor. These negotiations are my impetus for writing. The question of how to create techniques of flirtation and [125/126] seduction to supplement or replace our well-established habitual ones is critical to the egalitarian agenda, and is one that has not received enough attention by scholars. The process is still in its infancy in the world of polska, and this article may be as much about outlining the challenges as describing the successes, but the story must begin somewhere.

Lightness and Weight: A Brief Introduction to Polska Typology and Style

The focus of this article is on the Swedish polska as danced at urban folk music cafés and rural folk music gatherings and festivals; and as taught in post-secondary programmes at the University College of Dance, Malung *folkhögskola*, and the Eric Sahlström Institute (where I studied folk dance pedagogy for a year in 2006/07).⁶ While polska is the predominant dance form in all these contexts, it is not the only one, and other contexts for polska dance do exist as well. These subjects are beyond the scope of the present work, however, and will be covered in a more general companion piece I am writing on the structure, history and social life of polska.

The Swedish polska is a triple-metre couple dance, generally separable into two broad types. In *rundpolska* the couple progresses counter-clockwise around the floor, alternating between a simple side-by-side promenade and a closed-position clockwise turn that completes a full rotation every three beats.⁷ *Slängpolska* has a more elaborate promenade, in which partners hold hands while circling one another and/or spinning on their own axes, followed by a stationary swinging turn.⁸ Two versions of the *slängpolska* are commonly danced today: *sörmländsk slängpolska*, in which the promenade progresses counter-clockwise around the room; and *östsvensk slängpolska*, in which it holds to a tight and private circle.

Stylistically, Swedish dance is marked by a complete lack of dissociation in the torso. Arms, legs and head may operate independently, but the trunk of the body—from chest to hips and shoulder to shoulder—tends to move as a single unit. Dance historian Joan Lawson has characterised the aesthetic as a combination of lightness and dignity, buoyancy and reserve (1953:132).

In this context, these descriptors are not oxymorons. Self-restraint is not repression but rather the creation of something invisible to lean against as support. When I studied dance at the Eric Sahlström Institute, my teachers did two things to help us generate artificial resistance to our movements. The first was a basic strengthening technique that we were given during the first weeks of the programme. We were asked to isolate and tighten muscles that counteracted our current motion, thereby intensifying the work of that motion and exercising two opposing sets of muscles simultaneously. The second was a conceptual dance technique that we practised throughout the year. The air was to become denser, something that resisted us as we moved through it. The resultant effort was to be concentrated in the stomach muscles, which worked to keep the rest of the body unified and relaxed in our motion through whatever mud or syrup or pudding filled the room. Far from quashing emotional energy, the effort of physical containment

intensified it, gave it form, and [126/127] generated motion that looked and even felt effortless. Buoyancy, then, became an effect of reserve.

Accordingly, a good polska musician is one who can convey both lightness and weight simultaneously.⁹ The lightness in the music inspires the dancers to move, while the weight resists that motion and grants them self-control. Equally important, the musician must be able to vary the ratio of lightness to weight over the course of the metrical cycle. Fiddlers often physically mimic the up-and-down contour of the dance, in both their bodies and their bowing. Moments of relative lightness lift the dancers upwards, while heavier moments draw them downwards. Rising motions allow dancers to move and pivot easily, while falling motions grant them balance and stability. In short, the weight in the music keeps the dance steady, the lightness keeps it easy, and the tension between them generates the energy that pulls the dancers around the room. A good dance floor will manifest this energy as ‘pressure’ (*tryck*) or ‘pull’ (*drag*). The experience of dancing to musicians who can create this atmosphere is one of comfort and ease, because the music does most of the work.

‘It’s Us in the Music’: The Romantic Narrative

It is not difficult to read a romantic narrative into the set dances that swept through Europe in the sixteenth century and hit Sweden in the seventeenth. A man and woman walk side by side, perhaps talking, perhaps not. After the promenade comes the turning dance, in which the couple moves together as a single, intimate unit. This second phase may signify love, or sex, or marriage; the exact meaning may not be entirely clear, but there can be little doubt that courtship always produces a union in the story of the set.

While that seventeenth-century form is no longer danced in Sweden, its narrative structure has been maintained in both *slängpolska* and *rundpolska*.¹⁰ Both begin with a promenade, during which the partners may or may not converse, and move into a turn, in which they generally remain silent. Unlike the earlier set dances, however, present-day polskor are danced to a single tune and have a repeating form. The promenade is followed by the turn, which is then followed by another promenade, and so on, resulting in a continuous loop of courtship, consummation and dissolution. The story is told and reiterated, again and again.

In a social dance setting this cycle actually operates on three levels of scale. On one level, there is the single promenade-turn iteration. A second level begins and ends with the music of a single tune, at the beginning of which the dancers make physical contact, and at the end of which they typically break it. At the broadest level is the partnership itself, which begins when one partner asks the other to dance, and ends with a ‘thank you’ or an expression of sudden thirst.

Since the dance is something that really happens in time and space between two people, the narrative cannot be said to be purely symbolic (Albright 1997:186; Cowan 1990:4). Couple dancing is not love, nor is it sex, but neither is it simply an abstract representation of those things. It occupies a position somewhere between sign and [127/128] referent. Having a proposal to dance rejected or accepted can generate an emotional effect that resonates of failed or successful courtship, and the occasional awkwardness of dissolving the partnership may carry a trace of the uncomfortable break-up. Within the dance itself there is a real relationship.

Some dance teachers have cultivated the charge of that connection in the way they teach the conceptualisation of physical techniques. My former teacher Andreas Berchtold, for instance, tends to work with students on a heel-toe forward step in the *rundpolska* turn that fearlessly enters the space between their partners’ legs. He has also begun to encourage students to think

about such dance movements as

involving your sex, or engaging power from that part of your body. . . . It has an extremely important function, just on the level of pure movement. You can't ignore your sex physically, and possibly not even the sexual connection, if you want your body to work. You can't leave those parts out, because then you're not whole.

Ami Petersson-Dregelid, who founded the dance course at Malung *folkhögskola*, has taken another approach to partner connection in *rundpolska*. Her watchword is efficiency, and to that end she works with her students on a more top-heavy movement pattern, in which the weight of the upper body is what carries the step forward. Body positioning is slightly rounded, allowing for an openness and a surrendering of balance:

You have to let go and not stand on your own. You need to land, to have the courage to let each other in; and it's not that you need to be sandwiched together, you just need to find a common balance and listen to one another. That's what I call dancing 'with' [*hos*].¹¹

On the physical level, these two approaches are mutually exclusive. Tilting the chest in means moving the waist back, and movement from the hips grants a stability that makes the surrender of balance difficult. At the same time, the two techniques are similar when it comes to partner connection. In each case, the interlocking footwork demands that each partner contribute identical energies to the rotation. The result is an intimacy that arises not from one or the other, but as an effect of their equal commitment to the dance. No matter which method is used, the feeling of togetherness is as much passively absorbed as actively cultivated.

The equal commitment to the turn is facilitated by a completely symmetrical closed position, each partner square to and slightly to the left of the other, right arm under left on both sides (see Figure 1). The lack of dissociation now extends to the partnership as a whole. The partners' upper bodies remain in stillness relative to one another in their symmetrical near-hug as the room revolves around them. As individuals they are coiled at their core, stomach muscles tight. Around them the social world is a spinning turmoil of human obstacles. But as a twosome they are relaxed, warm and comfortable. To describe the feeling, fiddler and dancer Roger Hallgren uses the word *innerligt*—intimate, deep, intense, ardent, spiritual, reciprocal. [128/129]



Figure 1 Cissi Strömbeck and the author at the 2009 Backa festival.

Source: Photograph by Claes Tureson (www.claest.se), used with permission.

People often use the same term to describe the music. A good polska musician can evoke a response that is emotional in addition to being physical. The emotional reaction, like the physical one, can be an effect of the musician's ability to compel and inhibit motion simultaneously—opposing impulses on the same potential action are classic elements of emotional response.¹² The resulting combination and interdependence of emotionality and physicality in the music helps grant the dance its romantic charge. In the quasi-metaphorical romance that is the dance partnership, then, the musician is Cupid with his bow. The music is the arrow, powerful and ephemeral, that unites two people in body and spirit. It compels them to move together in ups and downs, with its simultaneous and sequential pull of lightness and weight. In short, if dance movements are the acting out of romantic narratives, then the sound that generates those movements is the love behind the romance.

As dancer Åsa Bergquist suggests, the partnership need not have any significance beyond the dance floor for this effect to be felt: 'You can get into a state, even when you're dancing with people you're not in love with, that you really get the feeling that it's us in the music'. That synthetic love is received from outside and formally scripted in the performance of the polska, and thus permissible as a temporary state beyond the obligations of 'actual' relationships.

Masculinity and Femininity

In order to act out the romantic narrative, the dancers must play certain roles. As in almost any couple dance with improvisatory elements, polska has a separation of functions within the partnership. If the bliss of the twosomeness is to be maintained on an unpredictable dance floor, there can be only one will to act at a time. The partners are leader and follower by necessity, male and female by tradition.¹³ [129/130]

The gender binary of the performance is further reinforced by the imagined historical world that the folk revival is meant to revive. As Roger Hallgren puts it:

It's an extremely heteronormative environment. I mean it's traditionalist, there's no two ways about it, we romanticise and take pleasure in the memory of the peasant society, with our peasant-like clothing, all of it. We're playing a game of that moment, and in that context you just don't show up gay.

Sheenagh Pietrobruno has argued that people use tango and salsa to perform exaggerated femininities and masculinities of imagined Latinness (2006:163).¹⁴ With polska, the fantasy is that of another time and place, a pre-industrial peasant society, but the function is similar:

You go into old, traditional gender roles. And the interesting thing is, I mean a lot of people really get pleasure out of it. . . . People love to get into it. I honestly think it's a big part of what makes it popular, that people dance so much folk dance, that you get to exaggerate the masculine and the feminine. Even though a lot of people here are against a gendered society, and patriarchy. But they love burying themselves in these roles.

The contradiction Roger notes stems from a 1970s folk revival that used the established discourse of culturally conservative folkloristics to cultivate a leftist counterculture movement.¹⁵ A feminism that maintains the romantic illusion of an idyllic peasant society is difficult to sustain. This dilemma resonates for a number of my consultants (and for myself), who

problematised the heteronormativity and gender-essentialism of the folk subculture while simultaneously acknowledging the comfort and pleasure they take in it.

For both men and women this schizoid orientation towards gendered dance norms tends to manifest as an overt critique of dancers who cartoonishly exaggerate the leader/follower functions, coupled with covert acceptance of a more nuanced form of gender scripting. Domineering leaders and listless followers are the straw men and women who make gender hierarchy and unpleasant dance experiences synonymous. The common solution among dance teachers is to dissipate the gender difference. Bert Persson, who directs the folk dance programme at the University College of Dance, puts it most succinctly: ‘I want to create an activity in the follower’s role, and tone it down in the leadership role.’

With the right partner, the difference can be eliminated entirely. A fellow student at the Eric Sahlström Institute, Erika Lindqvist, worked with me on a waltz in which we shared the lead. Either of us could initiate or end a turn at any time, and some movements might even arise spontaneously, with no clear agent.¹⁶ She later did similar work with her classmate Anders Hellström at the University College of Dance, who described the experience as something like a game of Ouija. Problems arose, however, when he tried to bring this technique to the social dance floor: [130/131]

The risk is that it becomes too passive, if these impulses that just arise are too weak for anything to happen. You can do it with someone like her, who thinks it’s fun to dance like that, and who’s used to it. Then it works really well, but when I’m on the dance floor sometimes and I just stop changing directions, or just stop deciding to stop rotating but just keep going, or just do a slow turn and wait for the other person to do something, sometimes it comes, and sometimes it doesn’t. I notice that the person I’m dancing with isn’t really used to being able to take initiatives. Sometimes they might say ‘oh, was I, are you waiting for me?’ or sometimes it just doesn’t work at all.

Especially in flirtatious situations where it becomes useful for the leader to perform chivalry and establish a feeling of security for the follower, the technique can be counterproductive.

Somewhere between these two extremes is the subtler kind of gender scripting to which I referred earlier. I have not seen it taught, nor have my consultants discussed it explicitly; rather, I have gleaned it obliquely from casual comments, observations on the dance floor, my own dance experience, and feedback from my partners. A critical duty that befalls the man is the creation and protection of a private dance sphere for the benefit of the woman. He must keep her safe in the private space he maintains for her as they move about the floor. When she begins to worry about bumping into other dancers, he has failed in his duties. As such, in order to keep her comfortable he must learn to limit her movements without imposing upon her any feeling of constraint. He must learn to grant her a sense of agency. Only when I have succeeded in doing this have I received the most positive feedback: I make my partner feel like a woman, like royalty, like she can do anything.

This script is also implicit in the Swedish dance role terminology ‘*kavaljer och dam*’ (‘chevalier and lady/queen’). The romantic fantasy that the dancers perform is not Arthur and Guinevere, but Guinevere and Lancelot. There is a hierarchy, then, but not quite the one rejected in critiques of the dominant/submissive dance relationship. The closest analogue is perhaps the classic dating scenario, in which the man pays, opens doors, and prepares the woman’s chair—of course, *kavaljer* and chivalry are cognates. The man displays his agency relative to the woman with the power he has over their surroundings, but also implies by his actions that she is of greater value in the relationship. Similarly, he has the socially mandated power to peruse the

public space for a partner, for dating or dancing; and she has the corresponding licence to reject him as unworthy. He has the power of choice, she of rank.

Gender and Gender-neutrality

When I studied at the Eric Sahlström Institute, there was no difference between what men and women learned in terms of the core Swedish repertoire. Elements of masculine and feminine styling might be taught, but they were taught to everyone. Everybody learned to lead and follow, and everyone danced with everyone else, regardless of gender. Today, all three of the major post-secondary programmes for Swedish folk dance operate on the same principle. [131/132]

In my experience, most dancers who have participated in these programmes are still more comfortable in their gender-normative roles when they step on to the social dance floor, especially if they are men. Their ability and occasional willingness to form unconventional dance partnerships has, however, had a significant effect on the general dance scene. Lotta Johansson reports that as late as the 1990s ‘people were provoked’ when they realised she and Ami Petersson-Dregelid were not dancing together for lack of potential male partners. By the time I started dancing in the early 2000s, female pairings were hardly unusual, but it was still rare to see two men dancing together socially. When it happened, the dance was usually overtly comical, often drunken, late at night at a folk music gathering. Over the past five years or so, however, non-parodic male-male social dancing has been on a slow but steady rise. Part of the credit probably goes to a younger generation of increasingly bi-social musicians and dancers at the urban folk music cafés.¹⁷ A major factor, however, must be that the elite circle of educated dancers who have come to serve as models on the social dance floor have all had the training to allow for gender-flexible partnerings.

The difficulty that men have escaping their proscribed gender roles relates to the relative values placed on masculine versus feminine behaviour. I will not be the first to observe that women can gain status by acting like men, while men tend to lose it by acting like women.¹⁸ Dancer Malou Hansson detects a particular ‘lumberjacking’ male ideal in the Swedish folk subculture that lacks a female analogue: ‘It’s the most normative for guys in the world of folk music. It’s not as strict, it’s not as much of a merit for women to be especially feminine.’

There are ways in which current practices in folk dance pedagogy challenge this imbalance, and ways in which they reinforce it. Ami Petersson-Dregelid in her teaching imparts two central concepts to her students, one of which I interpret as having a feminine affect, the other masculine. The first, that of dancing ‘with’, privileges openness, sensitivity and the surrender of balance to one’s partner. The second, characterised by the motto ‘Dare to Refuse Lazy Dancing’ (*Våga Vägra Slödans*), is an aesthetic of constant proactiveness. Ami’s other name for this principle, the ‘mental heel kick’, reveals its implicitly gendered aspect. The slap of the heel to the hand is an iconic masculine accent in Swedish folk dance. The combination of these two principles agrees with a general rule that both agency and sensitivity are essential to each dance role. So far, the masculine and feminine are equally valued.

However, while the ‘Dare to Refuse Lazy Dancing’ rule applies throughout the dance, ‘withness’ mostly comes into play in the turns. When it comes to the moments of promenade or other independent movement, teachers tend to privilege the ‘mental heel kick’ aspect. At the University College of Dance, Andreas Berchtold teaches fundamental dance technique through halling, a classically masculine solo dance full of posturing, heel kicks and acrobatic feats of strength. This dance has become increasingly popular among women as well as men, but there is

no corresponding ‘feminine’ solo dance for men to adopt. At the Eric Sahlström Institute we spent about a month on halling with Andreas, compared with a day or two with our other teacher [132/133] Ingrid Frykmo on the independent spinning that is the classic feminine gesture in the polska promenade.

Dance teachers do sometimes draw a connection between the appropriation of male gesture by female dancers and a corresponding devaluation of the female dance role. On one occasion at the Eric Sahlström Institute, upon noticing that one of the women in our group was dancing particularly listlessly in the follower’s role, Ingrid Frykmo called a group discussion on the subject. She drew a picture of an earlier generation of strong women who exuded confidence and power in their own roles and movement patterns, and would never consider stooping so low as to slap their heels.¹⁹ People who operate within the gender-neutral paradigm will often acknowledge that the approach might involve the loss of a potentially valuable element, a gendered separation of functions and gestures that grants the dance a certain character and spice.

The positive counterexample that comes up most frequently in these moments of self-examination is that of Hungarian dance. A number of Swedish dancers make regular pilgrimages to dance houses in Hungary where the gender differences are typically unquestioned, Andreas Berchtold among them:

When they teach a male dance, a solo dance at the dance houses there, it’s the men that go up. And I’ve been there with Swedish groups, where the women also want to join that class, and it raises eyebrows. ‘Why?’ they wonder. They think it’s weird. Not that they wouldn’t be allowed to, it’s more like ‘why would they want to?’

Women at the Hungarian dance houses have their own dance language, completely separate from that of the men. These women (like those of Ingrid’s older generation) become examples of female empowerment through feminine poise and gravitas.²⁰

I have heard no corresponding stories of Swedish men wishing to learn the women’s steps at Hungarian dance houses. Again, men do not tend to be as interested in incorporating feminine gestures into their dancing as women are masculine ones. The high value placed on masculinity thus limits the dynamic range of male dancers compared with that of women, at the same time as it grants them higher status. In other words, it inverts the traditional gendered power dynamic of male choice versus female rank. Ironically, the privileging of masculine gesture may prove a useful tool in choreographing a more egalitarian heterosexual romance, as we will see.

Flirtation and Rejection

‘It’s not just a couple dance, it’s a coupling dance’, guest instructor Perjos-Lars Halvarsson tells a class at Malung.²¹ Both teachers and scholars have made much of the partnering function of polska.²² This emphasis often serves the function of countering the sterile and sexless image of Swedish folk dance as perpetuated by folkloric stage dancers in colourful costumes performing elaborately choreographed peasant tableaux. The discourse is similar to that which often surrounds the waltz, whose popular image as a dance of upper-class propriety is frequently challenged by scholars and instructors in an attempt to restore its cultural relevance—when [133/134] waltzing first came into fashion, so the story goes, it was nothing short of scandalous (Buonaventura 2004:71–6; Desmond 1997:157). If the dance can get people to fall in love or lust in the here and now, then it retains a real flesh-and-bones social function. Sex becomes a significant marker of authenticity.

Another discourse runs contrary to this; namely that a sexual motive cheapens the dance, which should really be danced for its own sake. The point should be sensuality rather than sexuality, two experiences that dancer Lotta Johansson suggests are potentially mutually exclusive: 'The ones who would say that they're dancing because they're out after a partner, maybe they're not as receptive in their dancing. Maybe they haven't found the sensual experience in the dance itself. The dance isn't primary.' This point of view was particularly prevalent among my female consultants.²³

Individuals within a partnership may not always be dancing for the same reasons, in other words. Here is where the implicitly egalitarian goal of gender-neutral pedagogy meets its challenge. For a balance of agency to be maintained within the couple, each partner must have the same capacity to negotiate their position. They must have equal access to the tools of flirtation as well as rejection.

Where the partners are of the same sex, the gender-scripted internal power dynamic is lessened, and can be neutralised entirely with regular role-switching. The individual who wishes to flirt or seduce in this context instead faces the broader societal pressures of heteronormativity and homophobia. Unfortunately, my research into same-sex flirting has produced limited results, as most of my homosexual and bisexual consultants did not report on the matter. The strongest piece of data here was in fact the lack of data itself, which suggests either that the Swedish dance context does not leave much space for same-sex flirtation, or that my consultants were not comfortable talking to me about it.

My failure to find openly gay or bisexual men who danced polska was also telling. The only one any of my consultants could refer me to by name was Bert Persson, who is more a teacher than a social dancer. He in turn noted that in all his years teaching polska workshops as an openly gay man, he has never once had a male student come out to him. He and a number of my other consultants have suggested that the subculture's heteronormative atmosphere and strict behavioural norms for men may be at the root of the problem. Dancer Stina Bergström reflects:

I think I would be a little more frightened as a man to come and show my soft sides in such a two-fisted world. As opposed to more sensual dance, like tango, where softness is prized, something very positive. Here I think the dance expresses a kind of stability and grounded raw power. I mean I do the *kavaljeriska* moves if I'm going to hit on someone, which is something that you'd mostly associate with men, how they're socialised.

Stina has access to masculine moves even to the extent that she can put them on other women. This may go to explain the lesbian presence on the dance floor and the lack of its gay male counterpart. The same prerequisites are simply not in place for men in the world of polska. [134/135]

Of my homosexual and bisexual consultants, Stina was the only one to discuss techniques of same-sex flirtation. The fact that she models her approach on the traditional masculine/feminine dyad suggests that where issues of gender-scripted imbalance arise within the partnership, they might do so along heteronormative lines no matter the actual identity of the dancers.²⁴ Given that homosexual relations seem to echo heterosexual ones in Stina's case, and that contradictory or corroborative evidence is lacking from my other consultants, the remainder of this article will deal with the specific dynamics of mixed-gender partnerships.

To begin to address the respective access men and women have to techniques of flirtation and rejection in this context, I must first outline what those techniques are. Total rejection is the simplest case. Probably due to the fact that almost every element of the dance is designed to

perform either courtship, love or couplehood, my consultants could consistently cite only one workable technique of rejection from within an active partnership, and that was to walk away. The only difference of opinion related to the moment at which it became appropriate to do so. Techniques of total rejection, in other words, are essentially uninflected by the dancer's gender or dance role.

Standard techniques of flirtation, on the other hand, are often so inflected. One common behavioural shift that people reported when they wanted to flirt was an exaggeration of gender roles—blissful receptiveness to flirt with men, forwardness or chivalry to flirt with women. For straight women, this might mean a move away from the 'mental heel kick' aesthetic privileged in current pedagogy. Magdalena Wallman, for instance, becomes

less forceful and maybe a little more of a dishrag in flirtatious situations. I become more passive as a dancer. And less independent in my interpretation of the music, but that's also because I really want to connect with my partner. . . . It's that lack of resistance, a kind of sloppiness, or the desire to be close, to be yielding. It's something in the back of my neck, if I straighten myself up and hold myself erect [adopts the posture that Ami Petersson-Dregelid teaches her students] then I'm not a dishrag, but if I sink forward [tilts her head back, shoulder blades together, chest out] and put my neck in, it gets a little worse, then I become a dishrag. I had a classmate at Malung who I think had talked to her grandmother about dancing. Her grandmother hadn't danced folk dance, just foxtrot and so on, but she had said 'a good follower should be like a wet sheet'. And I don't want to be that. So instead I say 'dishrag', which is slightly firmer than a wet sheet.

The standard forms for flirting do tend to make use of gender roles that near the level of caricature. Bringing the dance roles to that level is an easy way to invoke those forms. On the other hand, Magdalena seems torn regarding her ability and willingness to shift from one to the other in the service of seduction. Her dancing 'gets a little worse' when she sacrifices integrity for amenability. The 'dishrag', a low-status tool of tedious woman's work, becomes a revealing metaphor in this context.

Because of its symmetry, the *rundpolska* turn also allows for techniques of intimacy that are not dependent upon gender divergence. The mutually exclusive upper-body [135/136] versus lower-body approaches to the turn each allow for their own style of equal-opportunity flirtation, as Roger Hallgren notes:

It can be the classic thing where you hold each other more and lean your head in when you're dancing, and that gives you a real connection, but still, there are a lot of other ways to communicate. The thing with that woman at Ransäter [folk music gathering], that was very physical. And it says a lot that it was the leg in particular—the leg, the stomach, I mean the lower region of the body, that you just feel like [*gasp*] wow.

Moving from the chest makes it easier to maintain an upper-body connection and dance cheek to cheek, which a number of my consultants noted as a classic form of intimacy. Moving from the hips, on the other hand, can establish a connection that is at once more sexual and more covert. Roger speaks of the eroticism of having his partner's leg come between his own, 'the legs that you slip into each other'. The potential sexual charge of this movement can always be camouflaged, however, by its functionality. And although there is no analogous technical excuse for dancing cheek to cheek, even that needs not signify anything beyond the dance. In a choreography of courtship, anything short of kissing is fair play.

Thus, when flirtation operates as a low-stakes game of mutual validation, it thrives on the

ambiguity that the dance context offers. There is no socially mandated limit to the intensity of the connection one can generate before walking away as if nothing had happened, as long as the flirtation remains physical and unspoken. There is no socially regulated number of dances one can dance with the same partner beyond which a romantic continuation becomes obligatory or expected. The dance floor can always be nothing more than public space, the roles played nothing more than roleplay, and the performance of romance no more than nostalgia for a simpler time.

The real difficulties begin where the flirting becomes goal-oriented. Anders Hellström notes that since the dances are structurally flirtatious, it becomes difficult to know whether the signals are meant for him or the part he is playing. He suggests that the standard practice for seductive flirtation in non-dance contexts is to subtly extend behaviour beyond the norms of personal interaction; 'it's always the signal that isn't quite expected'. The normal boundaries of personal space and physical contact are already so contracted in dance, however, that contracting them any further can feel like a violation. Dancer Elin Monie-Landerö argues that

it's completely forbidden to hit on your dance partner. Because you're in a physical situation that you would never be in otherwise, outside the dance floor, unless it was with your significant other or a family member. You'd never be so close for such a long time, and I kind of experience it like you're in a contract. 'Do you want to dance?' 'Yes, please.' Somewhere in that we've decided that now we're dancing, and that means we're this close physically, which we would never be otherwise, but right now we're allowing it. And I think it's completely and absolutely forbidden to break that contract, to violate that boundary. Because you're locked in that situation, you're there in your agreement and you don't have so many ways out of it. . . . I mean it's great if a dance is sensual and intense and intimate and so on, but [136/137] for me there's a line. You just don't hit on someone who's stuck thirty centimetres from your face.

Most of the women I interviewed who reacted negatively to questions about flirtation on the dance floor discussed similar situations of discomfort at having their personal integrity breached.

The established form of the dance thus presents three obstacles to seduction. First, the scripted roles place gendered limitations on both men and women. Second, the choreography of courtship interferes with signals of real seductive intent. Third, the contraction of personal space combined with the social obligation to stay physically connected until the music ends can bring flirtation dangerously close to harassment.

One technique solves all three of these problems at once. Locate a gap in the narrative of courtship, a moment of potential rejection, and maintain the flirtation across it. Those moments, again, are equally available to both partners. There is no scripted courtship in them to confuse signals of seduction. And where tunes and partnerships end, personal space returns to standard proportions; Elin Monie-Landerö marks these as the points at which hitting on one's partner becomes permissible.

I have earlier made note of three such points. All have been mentioned by my consultants as vital for flirtation. Anders Hellström is the only one who has identified the subtlest point of ending, the transition from turn back to promenade, as a point of seduction (he is also the only person I know who has had multiple dance partners throw themselves at him while on the dance floor). Both teachers and dancers often neglect this moment of the dance, in which partners can very easily lose their connection for a split second. At its subtlest level, then, the seductive technique of maintaining a connection that would normally be broken can operate even within a single dance.

Far more commonly cited as a moment for flirtation was that between dances. The sparks may fly in the footwork, but for most the fire will not catch until the tune ends. The easiest signal to send here is simply to maintain the embrace while other dancers on the floor are letting go to applaud the musicians. The normal boundaries of propriety are suddenly re-established when the music stops, and all you have to do to cross them is stay put. Niklas Nordin notes: ‘You keep holding on to each other in between the dances. Longer and longer. If you’re still holding on when the next tune starts, maybe you’ve got something there.’

Finally, there is the moment the dance partnership dissolves altogether, in which the standard practice is to part ways. There, suggests dancer Emma Rydberg, ‘you could ask if we should go drink water. Together. Instead of saying you’re thirsty, it’s the opposite.’ Deviating from the standard script at that moment means moving the partnership off the dance floor, where the relationship automatically proceeds beyond role-play. This point is perhaps the most critical for seduction, because for most people romance will not happen through dancing alone. The move need not be far—Niklas Nordin notes that most things are likely to happen ‘in some corner’.²⁵ The dance spaces at folk music gatherings are typically rustic halls lined with hard chairs and benches, and as dancers force themselves to stay awake later and later into the [137/138] morning hours, the softest surfaces on which to rest tend to be human. On the other hand, relationships may develop over time, on and off the dance floor, in a world as small as that of Swedish folk music and dance.

Most of this is good news for the egalitarian project. Flirtation for its own sake is easy for everyone, both partners have equal access to the basic techniques of rejection, and the most effective technique of seduction is likewise gender-neutral. Yet many women remain uncomfortable with the idea of flirting in the dance. The problem as I see it is the classic hunter/prey model within singles culture as it exists more broadly, according to which women are passive targets, even victims, of seduction. The courtship narrative in polska does reflect this model to a certain extent, and both men and women do play into it. The solution to this problem, then, must engage directly with the roles scripted for men and women within the dance.

Flipping the Script

In July 2009 one of my frequent dance partners was Cissi (Cecilia) Strömbeck, a young woman just out of a semester at Malung. We started dancing together over the course of the week-long series of gatherings around lake Siljan early that month, and continued at festivals in Backa and Korrö. Our dancing was consistently flirtatious, but our flirtation was limited to the moment. Cissi allowed for an intense attachment that ended with the music: ‘It’s like you fall in love, but only within the dance itself.’

The first time we danced a *slängpolska*, I was intentionally inconsistent in my claim over the lead, leaving her wide openings to take over. My tactic here was risky in its potential to undercut my masculinity and leave her with an uncomfortable lack of guidance. I was willing to take the chance because seduction was not my aim, and I knew she had the training to deal with the situation. In this case, the risk paid off. She took the opportunity to share the lead, and the process by which we passed it back and forth became an element of the flirtation, intensifying the experience. The few seconds of awkwardness before she first accepted leadership made her willingness to take over all the more gratifying.

Nevertheless, only the first dance was like this. For our remaining *slängpolskor* we both retreated into our traditional roles. Cissi would take occasional initiatives, but never to the point

of leading. We had shared a glimpse of possibility, an extended flirtation that played on a theme of reciprocal desire, but it was too easy for both of us to slip into old habits. We had both been given the training to subvert our proscribed gender roles, we had no obvious reason to maintain them, and as people who both subscribe to basic Swedish egalitarian ideals, we had every reason to challenge them. We had even found a way to be flirtatious without them, and one that I found far preferable in its capacity to democratise our relationship. Yet to challenge those gender roles takes an energy that performing them does not; and that energy is difficult to sustain, especially while maintaining a comfortable flirtation. The fact that we were able to switch roles without losing that spark, even for a short [138/139] while, was unusual enough. It was probably the first time that had happened in my years of dancing polska.

Cissi suggests that the tendency to fall back on conventional roles in order to flirt has to do with maximising comfort in a challenging situation. Switching roles can often be a good way to kill a flirtation, as Roger Hallgren argues:

If a guy can lead well in *slängpolska*, or in the polskor, so he's not a wimp, the classic stuff, then he gets the girl. That's how it is. And it's not the other way around. If the girl is good at leading, if you say 'would you like to lead?'—I do that sometimes with *slängpolska*, because I think it's hard to come up with ideas—the girl is not going to think 'wow, that's hot'. She might say 'it's nice to finally get to lead', but there won't be a spark.

There is more to this phenomenon than simple habit, however. In Roger's scenario, the girl is a better leader than he, and he is more comfortable following. The deeper dilemma is that a central function of gender scripting, in the dance and generally, is the channelling of sexuality according to established moral codes. The reconfiguration of gender roles may thus result in uncomfortable violations of those conventions if the sexual dimension is not deactivated.

Roger implicitly places responsibility on his hypothetical partner for dousing the flames, and there is something to that as well. While men may be more limited when it comes to gender performance in general in the Swedish folk community, in matters of flirtation women seem to face the greater strictures. Men can actually take on the feminine persona in the narrative of courtly romance fairly easily without being emasculated. The essential qualities of that role are not the softness and passivity that my consultants cite as an anathema to male folk musicians and dancers, but rather presence, nobility and desirability. Not only are those attributes available to men; they may even, as in the halling dance, be central to the traditional performance of masculinity.

For women to take on the masculine courtship role is far more challenging.²⁶ The women I interviewed did not discuss the difficulty of becoming agents of heterosexual romance. Female sexual identity and desire are fairly uncommon topics of conversation in the Swedish folk community generally, at least in the mixed-gender groups to which I as a man have access. These themes do find regular expression, however, in the songs sung in female-dominated singing circles common to many folk music gatherings. Two songs in particular seem to come up again and again in these contexts. Both are sung to polska melodies, and both are quite revealing in their construction of women's sexuality.

The first of these, 'Lars Persson', illustrates the power and limitation of the traditional female courtship role:

Lars Persson has proposed to me, all of these days
But greatly he deceives himself if he thinks he pleases me

He has a cow, he has a goat, he has a cottage, he has a field
He has a sow, plump and fat, he has a boat and net
If he thinks he can have me, he's fooling himself
But his eyes are so fair [139/140]

I don't care about the cow or the goat, nor about his meadows
And I don't care about the cottage and field, nor about his money
Rows of girls all want him, whichever one he wants he can pick
I don't care which one it is, no matter how he twists and turns
But just the same I go and think about
That his eyes are so fair

Again, the man has the power to choose, the woman to reject. The situation is predicated on the covert axiom, the social and narrative paradigm, that men want sex and women do not.²⁷ Proceeding from this basic assumption, female sexual desire becomes pathological and slutty as a function of its abnormality, while male desire is lecherous and creepy as a function of its not being reciprocated. The rules of courtship navigate this treacherous terrain. Lars Persson renounces lecherousness by choosing a single mate despite being desired by many, and our heroine avoids being pathologised by at first resisting the union, generating the courtship period.²⁸ But this means that the woman's power is restricted in that she can only maintain her value by rejecting Lars Persson's proposal. Her aloofness is what sets her apart from the rows of girls who demonstrate their unworthiness by wanting him. She must hold her position as the passive recipient of desire.

The frustrations engendered by this considerable limitation are expressed in the second song, 'Ack, ack':

Alas, if it were day
And all the boys stood in a row
And I could take one that pleased me
Alas, if it were day

Alas, if it were evening
And all the boys hung upon a [fireplace] damper
And I could light a fire and they would burn
Alas, if it were evening

Alas, if it were night
And all the boys sat on their beds
And I lay in the bed, and no one saw me
Alas, if it were night

This song speaks as much to social limitations on female sexual desire as it does to the desire itself. The use of subjunctive throughout reflects that social impropriety, as does the woman's need to remain hidden when she follows the boys to bed. The inclusion of the curiously homicidal second verse reveals the extent of the taboo, by making the level of sociopathy required for wanting casual sex roughly analogous to that of setting a bunch of people on fire.

The moment of hesitation I experienced from Cissi before she took over the lead in our first *slängpolska* was most probably a product of ambiguity. Had I lost the connection needed to lead, or had I ceded it to her? But there may also have been something of the above-described sexual

politics at play. The narrative of courtship is intensified by the choreography of the dance and the air of tradition surrounding the folk revival; it channels the artificial love of the music and the emotion produced [140/141] by conflicting impulses of lightness and weight into a socially acceptable model of monoamorous romance. The roles we play in that story are tied to gender, and not easily revised. I have asked her to become the agent of courtship, but she cannot embody Lars Persson, not having the body for it. If she shows desire for me, she instead runs the risk of devaluing herself to the level of his girls in a row, or worse, becomes the woman-arsonist of ‘Ack, ack’.

The easy solution for Cissi, if she does not want to occupy that sexually dangerous position, has been observed by Roger Hallgren. Accept the leadership role, but let the flirtation die in the same moment. Find safety in sexlessness. If there is no spark, there can be no fire. This solution to the problem of female desire, more than simple habit, may be why flirting in unconventional roles is so unusual.

Still, as Cissi and I saw in our first *slängpolska*, it can be done. The groundwork has been laid by the new school of polska dance, which by granting women access to masculine gesture has both given them the leader’s toolbox for flirtation and inverted their position in the courtship dynamic, trading rank for choice. With this training Cissi was able to continue our flirtation when she took the lead, bringing a new and exciting dimension to the dance. The experience must have been frightening also, or we would not have retreated from it, but the moment was had. And if the vision of a truly gender-egalitarian polska is to be realised, these are the moments that must be cultivated—developed, perhaps, through casual flirtation, but employed, at some point, in the service of seduction.

Afterword: A Conversation with Cissi Strömbeck

The following conversation was conducted with Cissi Strömbeck at the Korrö folk music festival on 24 July 2010, exactly one year after our initial interview and five days after I had given her a draft of the present article to read. She had spent the intervening year studying dance at the Eric Sahlström Institute in Tobo. The idea was to have her comment on the work in a context that was less a standard lead/follow interview and more a balanced conversation in which each of us could take initiatives and respond to the impulses of the other. This Reader’s Digest version is cut and translated from a much longer transcript of our 80-minute conversation (available for download from <http://www.informaworld.com/REMF> or upon request from the author). Some repetitive and extraneous information has been removed without comment; ellipses represent larger gaps of conversation that have been skipped.

Cissi: I’ve thought a lot about what you wrote about our dancing, because I had no idea. For me the experience wasn’t so clear, about maintaining sensuality when I lead. But it was interesting to read. I wish I had read it earlier. What you’re going to get now is just my immediate reaction. Why it doesn’t usually happen, or why we maintain our traditional roles: It’s like I said, it’s easier to relax. Leading is something I’ve been schooled to do. It doesn’t come naturally to me. But at Ransäter I made a discovery, something just clicked. I was dancing with a girl in my class from Tobo. And we never decide who’s going to lead, we just share it. But it was so easy [141/142] all of a sudden, so I thought ‘what are we doing?’ And I realised that it’s just like I’m following, only I’m a step ahead of her, and she’s following in my wake. So that was a breakthrough. But the other thing that makes it difficult to lead is something you don’t learn in school—I’m always bumping into people when I’m out at a gathering. In the classroom you always have a lot of space. Even if you construct a tiny

dance floor, you know everyone. I mean that's something you can only learn when you're out.
David: But I felt like you were more comfortable this year when we danced in Ransäter. You didn't even hesitate before you started leading me in *slängpolska*. I figured that had happened during the year. On the other hand, you didn't flirt.

Cissi: No, maybe I didn't.

David: Not with me, and not with anyone else I don't think. That was interesting.

Cissi: Yeah. In that case I'm not sure when I'm flirting and when I'm not.

David: Okay.

Cissi: But, have I done it later on this summer? I feel like we have now.

David: Yeah, now we have. Absolutely.

Cissi: It's fun to talk about this.

David: But I was thinking, you've also read what I've written now. It gets a little strange. But—

Cissi: I think I can handle it. But it's a weird vibe.

David: Yeah, part of the point is you're not supposed to talk about it. I'm going to go get the tea, so it doesn't boil over. . . .

David: One of the people I interviewed said that when he was in an outside relationship he could be more forward with the person he was dancing with somehow, because then it's only about the dance floor, and nothing else.

Cissi: That was right at the beginning. [This quote was cut from the final draft—Ed.]

David: Right. I was thinking about that a propos my dancing with you compared to the woman I was dancing with yesterday, because I don't know if she's single, but I am now. And somehow it's more demanding to flirt with her, I mean it's still exciting, but—

Cissi: Because then you don't have the security of knowing how far it can go.

David: Yes exactly, it's like you have this wall that you can lean against, like when you're dancing through porridge or whatever is in the air, I don't know if Andreas did that exercise with you—

Cissi: Yeah.

David: There's safety, you can lean into that boundary, you know there's a limit to how far you can go. That can feel very secure, and you don't have to worry about all those other feelings. Because then it's harder.

Cissi: To show where you stand, or to flirt?

David: Well, it can be stressful. If you're single and your partner is too, or you don't know, and there's a flirtation, you can be like 'whoa, what's happening now?' or 'what does this mean?' And that question doesn't come up if you know that wall is there. Which it's always been for us, because I don't know if you were single last year, but I wasn't.

Cissi: Yeah, now the situation's reversed.

David: Exactly. But it's the same thing, I know there's a wall, it's very easy to—

Cissi: And for me it's the opposite. I had a much easier time flirting last year. But then it was more about a dance connection. I wasn't thinking 'I'm going [142/143] to flirt with this person', only it came about as a result of the dance, that I felt my partner was sensitive to me, or that we clicked on the dance floor. It was like a blank page, I had no plans or expectations, I just let things happen. But now I feel more responsibility toward the other person. Now I can't send out the wrong signals, in case my partner gets hurt, or misunderstands. Or for example with Fredrik Fasth, because we have a good connection, and we flirt a lot, you've seen that.

David: Yeah, well that's something I noticed in Ransäter, I mean last year you flirted with me, but also with Fredrik. So when I realised it wasn't there between us in Ransäter this year, I looked for it between you and Fredrik, and it wasn't there either.

Cissi: No. Because he also has a girlfriend. I think.

David: Yeah.

Cissi: And so he didn't either, I don't know, it's a little harder. Because we never talk when we aren't dancing, we don't socialise. It's funny, we're dance buddies, and we have been for a long time, but we don't talk like this. So it's something you just have to feel out, because last year I hadn't

reflected, I wasn't so worried about this stuff, and I don't know how he feels about it, but now I have to respect the fact that you don't flirt like crazy with someone who's spoken for, that you don't cross that line. Also because the world of folk dance is so small. My partner and I are very open-minded, and he also flirts a lot when he's out dancing, which I think is fun. It's part of the dance. But it can look bad, 'what's she after? Now she's dancing with him.' Everyone knows everyone else. We both know a lot of people. So you have to be careful about your reputation, too.

David: A propos the dance floor as a little society, I don't know how much I wrote about that, but I've thought about it a great deal, that it's a kind of model for relationships. That there's a society on the dance floor, but there are also couples and individuals, everything. And social control is also a part of that.

Cissi: Yes exactly, it's transferable. . . .

Cissi: About this old man, speaking of people who get too close. I had danced with him, and thought it was going well, and he was pretty stable. I was a lot more amenable to old men back then. [laugh] I've had some bad experiences, and as a result I don't dance as much with old men these days. But I was dancing with someone else, and he came and interrupted: 'can I please dance with you?' and he just grabbed me, but I said 'sure, we can do that later'. And then when we danced he kept touching me, hugging me and taking my arm, so that after a few dances, I thought he was kind of a pain, so I said 'I'm going to get a drink.' But 'no. I'm not going to let you go now, now that I've gotten to dance with you, you're always taken.' And I said 'you don't have a title deed to me,' and he said 'yes, I do for tonight'. At that point he'd crossed a line. I was not amused. And I got mad, so I stopped dancing with him altogether. And he noticed, and he came to me and said 'Cecilia, you only dance with everyone else.' And I said 'that's right'. And since then he hasn't been allowed to dance with me. So when I feel like an object it bothers me.

David: Yeah. That seems like an extreme case.

Cissi: Yeah. But it's so clear also, some people I've danced with just get too close. And that doesn't have to mean physical distance, just that they push their way in somehow before you've managed to establish a relationship. It's like, [143/144] some people you can talk to right away, you land very quickly with them. But with others it can take a long time, you never go past a certain point, because the boat is so unstable when you get in it. Sometimes it just rights itself and you can talk about anything, but then some people will just jump around in the boat even though it's rocking like crazy. They get too close. It's terrifying.

David: Yes, I understand.

Cissi: I've been trying to figure out why some people are so discomfiting.

David: Right. But that's interesting. You mentioned old men.

Cissi: Yeah, not just old men, but old men do have a tendency to be a little more, 'why ain't you just a fine young thing' or whatever, objectifying comments.

David: Does it have to do with age somehow?

Cissi: I think it has to do with age, and also those roles. I've danced with really pleasant old men, who were sensitive, and I've had great, sensual dance experiences with them. It's usually not so flirtatious, because often they have their wives with them, so you have to feel out that situation. I never used to, I'd go ask an old man to dance and I'd be insulted because they only danced the two dances. But then I realised they had their wives with them, and then you can't dance with young women.

David: Right. I've also thought about this in writing this article, that as a guy you don't want to wind up in that category. To be, 'ooh, that guy is creepy'.

Cissi: Right, of course. It's not the same for women, right?

David: Women don't have to worry so much about winding up in that category, that people will start talking about you. Because I've had that experience, and it's stressful, since like you say it's a small world. And you don't know who's talking to who. So I've also thought about it from the other side. Exactly what is it you're doing when you cross that line? Because it can be pretty blurry.

Cissi: Yeah. That's interesting. Like you say, I never have to worry about somebody thinking I'm creepy.

David: I've also thought about this, a propos old men, that the boundaries of what's okay must change depending on how interested you are in the other person. That's gotta be the case.

Cissi: Yes. That's right, for courtship.

David: Exactly. Because I feel like, I don't get courted as much as a guy, but it happens. And of course I feel much more uncomfortable if I'm being courted by someone who doesn't interest me.

Cissi: Yeah. Well, I can see being courted by someone even if I'm not interested in them, if I like the person in question. Some people I like being courted by, even if my only interest is in the courtship itself.

David: Well that's another thing I've thought about, there are multiple categories. That's what so nice about dancing, that you can have that flirtation with people who don't interest you beyond the dance. You can be more generous in terms of how much you like people when you're on the floor.

Cissi: Absolutely. . . .

Cissi: I was thinking about what you've written about male and female roles, that being able to follow isn't, I mean anyone can follow. I feel like that's the general assumption. But being able to lead, well then I make the decisions, and that's an art. So I'm a little ashamed, I've studied at Malung, I've studied at Tobo, I still don't think I can dance, because I can't lead. But Anders said to me at some point 'I've noticed you've become a much better [144/145] follower.' And then I thought 'well, maybe I haven't seen that as a valuable quality, because I've always done that. It comes naturally to me.'

David: I feel like leading is far easier than following. But you're right, leading grants much higher status. People don't talk about following as an art. But it's hard.

Cissi: It's like being able to speak versus being able to listen. A little harder to define. And maybe it's because I'm a woman, but you notice the leaders. If you see a good dancer it's usually the guys you notice. I don't notice the women as quickly.

David: Yeah but that might have to do with the fact that you're looking for guys.

Cissi: It might be that I'm looking for guys.

David: Because I might notice both, but I'm definitely in the habit of checking out the dance floor to see which of the women are good dancers.

Cissi: Of course. Guys often get nervous when I lead them, because they think the signals I give are too unclear. And that makes me nervous. And with the navigation, they usually take over anyway, because they're used to it. Like I say, the situation isn't entirely comfortable. You need to give it time.

David: It's too bad that navigation isn't part of the schooling. But it's a practical question.

Cissi: Eventually it will get better, because I do lead, but my position as a follower is already so established. And you want to have the best dance experience. Korrö happens once a year, and I don't want to spend half the time leading when I can just relax and enjoy the music.

David: Right. But I was thinking that particularly in *slängpolska*, this constant switching back and forth could be developed to be a lot of fun. More fun than just leading all the time. I was thinking that in a pedagogical situation where you were working a lot with *slängpolska*, of course you'd want to get people doing that. Switching the lead in the middle of the dance. And maintaining that contact and the flirtation. A propos what you were talking about earlier, about that wall that some people have, where you can't make contact. It's all too common. And I don't think it's emphasised enough, or maybe, I haven't studied with Ami, but maybe 'dancing with' has to do with something like that.

Cissi: Well, she hasn't talked so much about 'dancing with'. But you can't force someone, I mean technical things you can always be very specific about. You can't force someone to open up, to expose themselves.

David: I think that as a teacher you can do exercises that get people to open up. I mean, sit still and look into each other's eyes for two minutes. . . .

Cissi: I remember an exercise we did with Andreas. It was one of the first days, and he said 'put up your hand and radiate warmth through it'. That stuck with me. It was great. It was a way to establish

contact, and it was so concrete, I mean warm hands. Receptive hands. How people hold on to you is really important. It says a lot. So you can work on that, what you say with your hands. And you can work with contrasts, like dancing with someone who has hands like dead fish. Terrible.

David: Yeah, that's right. But it happens more than you'd like.

Cissi: Yeah, that kind of contact. It's like what you said, it's connected to flirtation. Eye contact, physical contact.

David: Maybe you wouldn't use that word in pedagogical contexts. You have to be careful.

Cissi: Physical? [145/146]

David: Using the word 'flirtation'.

Cissi: Yeah, you can't say that. Shit. 'Intensive course in flirtation.' No, that wouldn't work, because then you're also deciding what the dance should be about. Now I'm wondering if you have to flirt for the dance to be interesting. I'd like for dance to be a higher form of interaction. [laugh] I mean it can be nice to meet friends and sit and talk, but when you're playing and dancing, you don't have to make such an effort to like the person, that happens anyway. You're interacting in a way that I think is somehow more basic.

David: Maybe not flirtation, but some kind of—

Cissi: Contact?

David: I don't know. I was thinking of love. That's a fairly powerful word, but it wouldn't have to be erotic love, just the kind of love that you can have for everyone.

Cissi: I don't think that would work. Maybe for some people, but I'd think it was awfully strange. To say 'we're going to do an exercise now, feel the love.'

David: Right, of course.

Cissi: Especially if it's someone with a wall.

David: No, that wouldn't work.

Cissi: You'd need to bake it into the lesson somehow, a little graham flour in the pancake batter. Like that thing with warm hands, something that's clear. Concrete.

David: Yeah.

Cissi: Most of the interesting dances I've had have been flirtatious. But I think there should be able to be something else too. Well, when I dance with my girlfriends, because then I don't have that interest, then it's much more about communication and listening.

David: But I was thinking, does it have to be flirtation? The problem is that flirting and courtship and love, they're such loaded concepts, they refer to things outside of the dance. Like we've said. But I think it would be good if you could always get the person you're dancing with to feel like 'I think you're worthwhile.' It doesn't have to be courtship.

Cissi: Some form of validation?

David: Exactly. That when we're dancing it's about us, and not about me.

Cissi: Of course. And how do you introduce that into your teaching?

David: I wasn't thinking about teaching so much, more about the dance itself.

Cissi: Yes. That you see the other person.

David: Right. Because a lot of the women I've interviewed have wanted to distance themselves from flirtation. 'This is an art, and it's not about that.' But it's too bad, I mean it's connected to not wanting to be seen as an object, and that everything shouldn't be about sex. But it would be nice if you could avoid that without having to put up that wall.

Cissi: Exactly, that you don't have to put on your seat belt.

David: Exactly.

Cissi: Now I'm going to lead. 'click'. Or is that what you were thinking?

David: Yes. Not just when the woman takes over the lead, but in general if you're dancing with someone who has that wall, usually the reason it's there is because they're being very careful about their boundaries.

Cissi: Yeah. I don't know how it is with other women, you'd know better from your interviews, but not wanting to be seen as an object, I'd think it'd [146/147] almost be more exciting to lead. Because

no one will see you as an object any more. I mean I like leading, because I often get to hear ‘oh, you’re so cute.’

David: When you’re following? Or in general?

Cissi: In general. It’s a compliment. But it’s condescending. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy, it puts you at a disadvantage, that people have the right to pat you on the head. So I think it’s more interesting to show other sides, like leading and showing that you’re still interesting, and that you don’t have to put on your seat belt. But I think it also depends on the guys being willing to follow.

David: Yeah. I’ve also thought about this, when you switch roles, I’m still the one who decides when we switch. Not because I want to be, but because it’s rare that I dance with a woman who says ‘now I’m going to lead’. Best case scenario, ‘what side do you want?’ But never ‘I’m going to stand on this side now.’ That they feel they have a right to it, as a woman. I don’t know, do you usually take on that role—

Cissi: Without hesitation?

David: Without asking?

Cissi: No. Not if it’s someone I know I dance well with. Sometimes I’ll do it because I know the other person is insecure and unsure, then I’ll take that responsibility. But I wouldn’t do it unless it’s an explicit decision that ‘now I’m going to lead’. I danced with a guy who was studying at Malung, who was visiting Tobo. Let’s see if I can remember what happened. I think we were dancing and we didn’t get all the way around. He thought we were, but I got stressed out because I had to do a lot of pulling to make it work. So I took some kind of initiative to fix it, a little extra help. And he made some comment afterwards, like ‘oh, you don’t think I lead well enough?’ He was offended.

David: Had you taken over the leadership role?

Cissi: I hadn’t switched sides, but I think I had made some decisions, and I think that made him insecure, like his dancing wasn’t good enough. But I felt like I had to step in to make it work for us. The problem is you can wound someone’s male pride if you’re too decisive.

David: But he wasn’t wrong.

Cissi: Nope. But then you’re assuming that he’s responsible for making the dance work, and if I go in and do something I’ve appropriated his responsibility. Not that we’re equals and that I might need to adjust something. But I mean, if someone were dancing with me and in some authoritative way corrected my arm position, if it wasn’t someone I knew, I might also think I wasn’t good enough. Or if someone did a bunch of new moves I couldn’t follow.

David: But that’s the role, as a leader you have the responsibility to make your partner feel secure on the dance floor, even if it’s very crowded. And of course, if as a follower you come in and do something corrective, that shows I haven’t established that sense of security, that I’ve failed.

Cissi: Yeah. It’s kind of an unpleasant distribution of labour.

David: But the thing is, it’s problematic, but when I’ve succeeded in creating this sense of security, it’s part of the courtship, I’m your servant somehow, and it’s my duty to keep you comfortable. It makes both of us feel great, in my experience. The woman feels validated, and I feel capable.

[147/148]

Cissi: Absolutely. When I don’t have to navigate, there’s no better experience. ‘I’m so glad you can do that, I’ll cook and you can do the dishes.’

David: [laugh] Right.

Cissi: And I’m just glad there are other people who like to do that. I mean it might be a problem for some, but if it didn’t suit me I wouldn’t do folk dance. I might dance long dances, where those roles don’t exist. . . .

Cissi: I feel like I’ve said what I have to say. But it was fun to read.

David: It was fun to interview you again. Or rather, to have a conversation.

Cissi: You can use my real name.

David: Great.

Cissi: You can introduce me as Cecilia, but my name is Cissi when I dance.

Notes

- [1] For instance, Jon makes himself a sex object by feigning disinterest in sex.
- [2] The research that has been done has heavily favoured the couple dances of Latin America, especially salsa and tango (see, for example, Fischer 2004; Kapchan 2006; Pellarolo 2008; Perez 1987; Pietrobruno 2006; Taylor 1987; Washabaugh 1998).
- [3] Not all scholars agree that Isadora Duncan and her cohort were completely responsible for this transition, nor that their innovations were entirely liberating. The debate does, however, seem to centre around her and her moment (see, for example, Hanna 1988:212–4; Manning 1997:163). Consequently, the partner dance that may have received the most scholarly attention is not a couple dance, but rather contact improvisation, a subdivision of modern dance within which desexualisation is a rule (see, for example, Albright and Gere 2003; Kaltenbrunner 1998; Novack 1990; Pallant 2006; Thomas 2003:102–7).
- [4] ‘One can love passionately and flirt within a dance, without it leading to seduction in any other sense, but it can also end with a real sexual seduction’ (Nilsson 2007a:31–2, my translation; see also Toft 2006:308). The connection between couple dancing and sex extends beyond the Swedish context, of course. Judith Lynne Hanna refers to the phenomenon of dance partners winding up sleeping together as ‘sign becoming referent’ (1988:55–6).
- [5] Even homosexual and bisexual dancers can find themselves ruled by these conventions, adapting the masculine and feminine roles to same-sex flirtation. See also note [24].
- [6] A *folkhögskola* (lit. ‘folk college’) is a kind of Scandinavian post-secondary school that does not grant degrees but rather emphasises personal development and/or college preparation. Note that in 2010 the University College of Dance changed its name to the University of Dance and Circus; to avoid confusion I use the older name consistently throughout this article.
- [7] Here I describe only a very basic form of *rundpolska*, although many variations exist. Other possible elements include a slow (six-beat) turn in either direction, or a more embellished promenade similar to that of *slängpolska*, or in some cases a closed-position promenade. No matter the variations, however, the steady counter-clockwise path around the floor is always maintained throughout.
- [8] Present-day usage of the term *polska* applies it to a family of dances that have historically gone by numerous names, including *polska*, *springlek*, *pols*, *hamburska*, *bleking*, *trinning* and *bosk*, among others. *Slängpolska*, likewise, has come to cover a subset of these dances that may historically have been called other things (e.g. *bleking*). Even today, some regional variants may be *slängpolskor* morphologically but not nominally (e.g. *trinning*), while other *rundpolska* variants may go by the name of *slängpolska*. These cases are exceptional, however, and by and large my usage here is consistent with present-day conceptualisation of the term *polska*: a promenade-and-turn triple-meter dance whose turning phase can be either stationary (*slängpolska*) or progressive (*rundpolska*).
[148/149]
- [9] My flute teacher Jonas Simonsson, in one private lesson, went rapidly through a series of related binaries to help me achieve a danceable playing style: the music should be at once percussive and continuous, forceful but gentle, grounded yet energetic, heavy and light (17 January 2002). A comprehensive discussion of techniques by which musicians are able to balance lightness and weight will be included in the aforementioned companion piece to this article.
- [10] The courtship–consummation narrative is particularly manifest in *slängpolska*. In the *östsvensk slängpolska* promenade the partners take turns moving in front of one another, displaying themselves in spins, before transitioning together into the turn. *Sörmländsk slängpolska* underscores the narrative further with an actual move from public to semi-private space when the courtship is consummated. Because the promenade occurs in the direction of the dance and the turn does not, the shift from one to the other necessitates moving out of the stream of dancers and finding an uninhabited corner of the floor that for the duration of the turn becomes the private sphere of the dancing couple.
- [11] Helen Thomas has used similar terminology, describing the dance partnership in contact improvisation as a ‘with’ (2003:106–7).

- [12] Psychologist Nico Frijda posits the following Law of Emotion: ‘*Every emotional impulse elicits a secondary impulse that tends to modify it in view of its possible consequences.* The major effect is response moderation. Its major mechanism is response inhibition.’ (2007:17; original emphasis; see also Beall and Sternberg 1995:431) If emotion produces conflicting impulses, then the intentional activation of conflicting impulses might be the best way for a musician or dancer to synthesise an emotional effect (or at least the physical effects of emotion).
- [13] I use the terms ‘leader and follower’ here because they are fairly standard in couple dance pedagogy, both in Sweden and internationally. I do find them somewhat problematic, however, and have coined the alternative terms ‘impulse and balance’ for use in my own teaching.
- [14] I have chosen not to italicise the words ‘tango’ and ‘salsa’, terms that may have entered American English to a greater extent than British. To mark them in this way would have problematic political implications for my American readers. I would be suggesting that words and dances of Latin-American origin are always essentially foreign to the United States, no matter their prevalence there. Given the current anti-immigrant sentiment directed at Hispanics in the United States, I err on the side of arguing that those words are now a part of the English language. My decision not to italicise ‘polska’, on the other hand, is aesthetic rather than political. I use the word so frequently that to emphasise it would disturb the flow of the text.
- [15] Jan Ling writes of the ideological relationship between the conservative folk music movements of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and the leftist revival of the 1970s in his landmark article ‘Folkmusik—en brygd’ (1979:13–33; see also Ling 1980: 18–42). Mats Nilsson (2007b) gives a detailed history of the polska dance revival in the book *Norden i Dans*.
- [16] Upon reading a draft of this article, Erika Lindqvist wrote: ‘Regarding a dance where lead and follow come together to become one and the same, these are my thoughts: By taking as a point of departure that we who dance together *create* the dance in every moment, the point is not to lead one another but rather to lead the *dance*, which we shape in collaboration. It’s a paradigm I’ve borrowed from contact improvisation, where the point is that the different dancers *don’t* have separate roles, but rather that the dance is an activity that allows them to create something together. As I see it, this way of dancing demands that the focus on realising specifics (steps, rotation, frame, and so forth) be made secondary in order to make room for improvisation. The key for me has been to not plan my dancing and not to expect specific results from the impulses I send out.’ (personal communication, 9 August [149/150] 2010, translated by the author, original emphases) The common Swedish waltz position is the same as for polska, which is to say completely symmetrical.
- [17] Dancer Stina Bergström suggests that her cohort at Stockholm’s folk music and dance café Skeppis has done much to break down traditional gender barriers: ‘In my own self-centred world I’ve thought that there have been big changes at Skeppis since we stepped onto the floor.’
- [18] ‘Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short and wear shirts and boots because it’s okay to be a boy; for girls it’s like promotion. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, according to you, because secretly you believe that being a girl is degrading.’ (McEwan 1978:55–6)
- [19] Classroom discussion, 9 January 2007.
- [20] Dancer Simon Svensson describes his impressions: ‘I met some Hungarian dancers a while ago, and there it would be unthinkable for the woman, the girl, to lead. It’s always the men who stand there styling with all their slaps and hits and so on. But I still felt like the women took up a lot of space, that there was a lot of strength in them. You didn’t feel like they were defeated little creatures who just followed along and spun around. And I like that there’s something powerful in the follower also, that you can make use of that. So it doesn’t wind up being so uniform, “oh, let’s have everyone be followers and leaders to the same extent”, where you wind up completely devoid of any kind of contour. I like those extremes, if you’re going to call it a masculine power, it might as well be a feminine power, but using that power to its full extent. Dare to be male, so to speak.’
- [21] Interview, Magdalena Wallman, 20 July 2009. Perjos-Lars Halvarsson credits the expression to fiddler Jonny Soling (personal communication, 6 December 2010).
- [22] Dance instructor Olof Olsson says: ‘I think there should be a lot of flirting, and then it’s up to each

and every one whether they want to go home with the partner they came with or not. That's none of my business, they can make those decisions on their own.' See also note [4].

- [23] Malou Hansson, to give another example, dances 'only for the sake of dancing. Period'. She suggests that women are more likely to have this attitude than men because 'as a woman, if I were out after a man, I wouldn't think "I'm going to start folk dancing"', because, well, the selection is minimal. There aren't a lot of men who dance folk dance. But if I were a man I'd be thinking "yum!" If I were heterosexual in that case. "Yum, what a smorgasbord!"
- [24] Research on lesbian courtship practices has revealed a range of scripts, some of which use heterosexual courtship as a model and others of which do not (Rose, Zand and Cini 1993:71–80). In the case of polska dancing, however, the embedded leader/follower dynamic of the choreography may favour the heterosexual model. Also, the relative youth of many dancers may play a role; the research suggests that younger lesbians are more likely to adhere to traditional gender roles (Rose and Zand 2002:90–1).
- [25] In the realm of club dancing, David Walsh notes that nightclubs often have places for people to talk quietly or get a drink, specifically for the purpose of solidifying romantic and sexual connections initiated on the dance floor (1993:117–8).
- [26] After our first interview, Anders Hellström was inspired to experiment with total role-reversal for an entire night at a folk music gathering. He apparently spent much of the time waiting to be asked to dance. Then, on occasions when women did ask him, 'first I told them I wanted to be led, and they didn't understand. Then I said I wanted to be seduced also, and they didn't quite get it, they got a little offended. They found it disturbing, I would say.'
- [27] The 'sex-positive' movement within third-wave feminism arose in part as a response to this paradigm (see, for example, Duggan and Hunter 1995; Friedman and Valenti 2008).
- [28] The song also neatly resolves Simone de Beauvoir's marriage-as-prostitution dilemma by making the man rich, but having the woman interested in him for reasons other than his money (1952:70–145). As in a Jane Austen novel, the man's wealth is a measure of his worth, while the heroine's initial disinterest in it is a measure of hers. [150/151]

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