

A Time to Dance

Walking down Freie Strasse, Basel's answer to Fifth Avenue, can be a recreational activity in its own right. On some afternoons street performers provide more entertainment — intended and unintended — than an evening at the theatre. The fabulous Russian accordionist invites you on an excursion to Moscow, the motionless golden statue beckons you to stop, the elderly violinist makes you wish you had earplugs. If you're in a hurry to get from Bankverein to Marktplatz, you've gotten impatient by the time you get to Papyrus and have started overtaking the saunterers. Then, suddenly, you catch a few bars of music that make you stop in your tracks. A big band is playing a classic 1940s tune, but where is it? You hesitate for a moment longer, pulled by an unidentified yearning, and then go back to your errand. Another time at the same spot, the sultry tones of South America waft to your ears. Again no musicians in sight. You pause and look up. The windows are open at number 34, even though it's midwinter. What is going on here?

When my husband and I decided to take ballroom dancing lessons (well, actually I decided and did some heavy persuading), we became initiated in the mysteries of Freie Strasse 34, home to Tanzschule Fromm, the oldest ballroom dancing school in Switzerland.

At street level, Freie Strasse 34 is nothing special — an ordinary-looking drugstore and the recessed entrance to the upper floors. Only from across the street can you see the Neo-Gothic façade with its intricate paintings. The crowns in the ironwork of the balcony represent the *Zunft der Hausgenossen*, the guild of silversmiths and goldsmiths, who bought this building in 1388. When Freie Strasse was widened in 1894, the building was moved back five and a half meters and largely rebuilt. The glorious ballroom on the second floor clearly dates from that time: its molded ceiling work, gilded mirrors, chandelier and huge *Kachelofen* (ceramic-tiled stove) inspire you to move elegantly even as you enter the room.

Embarking on dancing lessons as a couple is a bit like marriage therapy. You certainly find out a great deal about the behavioral patterns in your relationship: who is really the boss, who's got rhythm and who hasn't, who's more flexible — literally. Although of course the man is supposed to lead, it doesn't always happen. (Ideally, men should take lessons on their own for a year or two until they actually know what they're doing.) Couples try out various strategies for survival: leadership by force, by persuasion, by debate, by default. Our solution was remote control. We preserved the outward semblance of male leadership, while using my ability to remember the steps. During lessons, communication between partners ranges from whispers to curses, giggles to accusations, reproachful glares to loving gazes. In contrast to the anesthetic effect of watching TV together, which deadens the senses and dulls the relationship, dancing together enlivens both.

I should warn about one side-effect, though. One of the courses we attended disbanded because virtually all of the women were pregnant by the end of it. This may be only chance, but a fellow dancer cited George Bernard Shaw, who said that "dancing is the vertical expression of a horizontal desire."

However, striving to master gravity, torque and conflicting wills and achieve stability generally leaves little room for romance. During the lessons, lips are more likely to be used for counting beats and reciting steps

than for kissing. Sooner or later, though, the foot patterns embed themselves in the body's memory and become automatic. Stress diminishes with increasing proficiency and the rewards of persisting are well worth the investment. One of these rewards is outing your skill at one of the many balls that take place each year in Basel. No matter how grown-up you are, going to a ball is like stepping into a fairytale. With or without doormen and red carpets, dressing up like princes and princesses and swirling gracefully (more or less) around a ballroom to beautiful music is enchanting.

Part of the magic of dancing is that it compels you to live fully in the moment. There is no time for anxiety or regret or other thoughts or feelings. There is only the music and now. Especially these days, as we are all mourning for the loss of innocence in our world, we need to remember that there is also a time to dance.