

Parquet Dictionary

Step One.

Two-three, step-one-two-three. Step One. Two. Three.

The first skill you learn in dance class is that of counting under your breath. This is literal: under the breath, beneath the exhalation, so that the numbers emerge fully-formed, slipping out from the cavern of the mouth. In the same way that a musician can anticipate which note will ring in the air before he hits the ivory key, so too should the dancer expect the count.

II. Warm-up

Ex-Soviet parents in New York have a common love for pushing their children into every after-school activity that can be contained in 24 hours: pre-calculus for prekindergarten, art for adolescents and piano for prepubescent Peters and Paulinas.

But perhaps one of the more absurd classes that Russian children are sent to is ballroom dancing. In the dingy subculture of expats, into the world of competitive dancing, kids arrive in pale little droves, with the girls in black leotards and too-tight buns, boys with pointy-heeled shoes and poorly-tied laces. Sequins flash from skirts like owl eyes. At age 8, you should be able to wear heels like a professional, and shame on you if your eyelashes have not yet been amplified by mascara.

III. Backbeat

I learned dancing in the White Hall. The dance studio was housed in a health club, in the pale-gray basement of a large apartment building with a driveway constantly under repair. Every Friday I would walk through the revolving door, greeting the black-mustache doorman who would tip his golden visor.

The White Hall was owned by a couple, Misha and Masha, younger than my parents and with less fluency in the language: they were budding entrepreneurs, because capitalism came earlier to them. Misha always insisted that we call him by that name, though to any other adult he was Michael (don't forget to shake his hand firmly). He had ink-black hair and stank of men's perfume, and on his belt he wore a walkie talkie. His wife, Masha, had a yellow mop on her head – not blonde, but actually yellow – with darker roots. She had grown rotund with the years, and wore her hips luxuriously, so that they bobbed of their own accord at the slightest movement. She was most like a *matryoshka* – here they call them “nesting dolls”. Every layer of her seemed tucked in. She was fit for a propaganda poster: a wholesome peasant woman on a farm, with a jug of fresh milk. Misha and Masha ran the White Hall, running about and managing the influx of babysitters, elementary schoolers and construction workers.

I began to dance in second grade with my twin brother. We were eight years old.

IV. Hall of Mirrors

The White Hall was a rather unremarkable place. Carpeted rooms abutted the long hallway, and inside after-school activities carried on: kids in small karate suits with red rope tied around their waists yelled in Japanese, and little children in another room dabbed cheap acrylic paints onto canvas. Only our room, the room of the dancers, was glamorous.

We danced in a ballroom. Golden, ridged poles lay on outstretched hooks, suspended several inches away from the walls. There were mirrors everywhere, walls upon walls of mirrors; reflective surfaces stretched five, six images deep until you could no longer tell where the source of the picture was. In the middle of a *chacha* turn, I would momentarily see myself come full circle, my face and body refracted into several million shards. I half-imagined a talent scout of some sort walking out of a mirror and saying: “*Devochka*, child darling, won’t you join our troupe?”

There was an air of anticipation every time the music started, in the preliminary counts before your toes even began to point right – the bated breath of greatness, curled up behind the door. And then, to some extent, there was a bit of magic, too – there cannot be mirrors without a fun house, without a slightly vaudevillian feeling of staged mockery, of deception. There was some polished secret to the mirrors: you could never catch yourself wholly in their surfaces. If you went into a corner and tried to catch your own gaze in both intersecting planes at once, it was impossible.

In the ballroom, there was an element of class that I encountered nowhere else. I wore dancing shoes with heels earlier than any other girl in my class: these were serious, copper-tone satin no-funny-business shoes, sturdy with straps in a woven pattern over my foot. The leotard was black. My skirt was crimson red with a black trim, with uneven layers that made it look like a red velvet cake.

IV. Toe-Heel

Boris and Diana taught me to move, toe first and heel following. Boris and Diana – for really, could they have any other names? Would there be anything more stereotypically satisfying than a Boris and Diana minding their dance studio? No, and yet they had not stepped out of a storybook. They were verily real, physical...but then, we were Latin dancers, not ballroom waltzers.

Boris had moist red hair which he gelled back and dark. He wore black skinny jeans and could wobble his stomach as if it was water. Diana’s heels had heels, even when she was barefoot. Under the makeup her eyes were tired and, but on the dance floor she was ferociously powerful. Her lips were tight on her face when the beats began.

I always loved watching them together. They smiled at each other like controlled lovers, and in the *chacha* their affection was contained and structured; as if one could convey emotion in a triple step. They were young, very much alive, and when they disagreed about a technique one of them would storm out, slamming the door so that the mirrors would quiver slightly. They burned with energy, but it was confined to the toe-heel of the walk that my brother and I were taught to adopt.

V. Language

I don't really know any distinctly Russian dances, except for the ones that my father improvises at bar-mitzvahs after he has graduated from seltzer to vodka. His spontaneous dances all stemming from the *prisyadka*. This simple move literally means "the sit-down" and involves dropping down with knees bent in the air and balancing there, a few inches above the ground, then kicking the legs out and yelling some vaguely ethnic-sounding exclamation. Then there are some others, acquired along the way; the *troika* (literally, yes, *threesome*) where three men build a wall and run forward exuberantly, or swing do-see-do and alternate; and sometimes the *korobushka* (the box) with a lot of back and forward- stepping, and a bit of twirling built in. These sort of dances – you can tell they are ethnic by the italics, the English can't even accommodate those strange combinations of consonants and vowels – are performed to the tune of *balalaikas* and *gusli* (suffice to say, string instruments) plucked rhythmically. These dances are costumed marvels with woven slippers and peasant blouses, under that too-general category of "folk" or "world" music.

Maybe Russians send their children to dance salsa, because they long for the fearlessness, the fire of Latin music, something saucy and forbidden; some form not clogged by folklore already perverted into Communist propaganda of the proletariat.

At least, I think, there is a different dialect to be learned in dancing, a new lifestyle to be found in the steps.

VI. Translation

For Russians, there is value in translation – oftentimes, a Russian will praise a translator as highly as an author. My parents praise certain translators as much as they do literary giants; the power to interpret but mimic is, after all, one of great value.

Over the years, I learn that there is a system for translating movement, almost as there is a key for translating sound. Labanotation converts dancing into symbols, generic so that every body type may adapt it but specific to the arch of the heel, the thrust of the chest.

There are three lines, three very vertical lines, and one reads them bottom to top, ascending. The staff is divided into four empty spaces; the quarters are divided into halves, so that every resulting eighth is a column – a head, a body, a leg, an arm (symmetric, so that they are doubled) and a support column, a little aside. The support column shows the weight distribution; it is the heaviest and the lightest column, depending on the step.

There is timing, too, in the form of strokes and beats that are in line with the support column. Directions are little skylines of angles that point – 45 degrees right, maybe 270 degrees south. And there are – oh, precious poetry of movement – relationship pins, to directly inform orientation: left backward of, right forward of, and so on. Direction symbols indicate the movement of legs and arms, small triangles standing in for limbs. And the smallest hooks become foot gestures: a hook for the ball, for the heel, for the 1/8 ball and the pad of the toe and the nail. Jumps, turns and twirls are added until the staff resembles a helix. Body parts become runes: a separate lexicon of little machines represents a letter in an alphabet of the corporal self.

And space, the measurement of air and our interaction in it – this realm also finds a notation. There are degrees to an enveloping of space, and terms to denote it: "narrow", "wide" and – bless the leotard of Laban – also "folding" and "unfolding", and "joining" and "spreading".

Labanotation is mentioned to me at some program late, very late – long after I have stopped dancing. But I suddenly recall Boris saying: “Stronger accent on the toe!” and pointing, and my incomprehension – how does one place an accent (a streak, an exclamation) upon a narrow foot? I remember Diana telling me to freeze mid-turn, then touching my fingers with her manicured nails and saying, “Emphasize, darling, it should be effortless but strong.” And I remember giving up, sitting down, and then Boris and Diana would stand and dance perfectly, working circles and spaces, folding and unfolding in the room like peasant blouses ruffled in the breeze on a laundry line. At the end of their dances they always bowed. Labanotation would say that Boris bowed vertically – one phrase, a flex- and Diana, horizontally – holding the motion, grazing the ground with her hand.

I understand the language in retrospect. I speak four other languages but Labanotation eclipses them. There is one value to describing concrete objects with nouns, to verbalizing even concepts with words. But then it is another dimension entirely – hold the accent, perfect the landing with a 1/4 of a ball of your foot in 45 degrees left backward of yourself – to understanding and recording the language of the body, which is the truest thing. Define space, and you’ve defined the world.

In Russia words will cost you, spaces were supervised, and dancing was disco. In America, words are free, spaces are public and dancing is divine.

I ask: Why, Masha and Misha, do you feed this enterprise and why does it flourish, with Soviet parents insisting on turning their elementary scholars into stars? Misha abandons his walkie talkie and claps his hands in my face; I smell cologne as he waves over Masha and whispers in her ear. She looks at me, wiggling her hips. They start dancing.

When she moves, half-ton Masha loses a pound per mirror; her weight is distributed until it is no longer. She sparkles. Misha is suddenly smooth. Diana applauds, and Boris wolf-whistles playfully.

VI. Maturity

Children are the thread of continuity, of a chance for reforming your family through its upcoming branches. But when there are no children to be had – or none desired – Russians adopt the dance to themselves.

For some reason and most frequently on Thursdays, Innokenty Bogalyubov and his wife come to visit. Enough of a mouthful? Let us call them Kesha and Nina. Until recently, they would visit together but nowadays only he arrives.

Kesha is bald, and his face is perpetually a mezzo-red color, as if he has just laughed heartily. He usually wears khakis and a button-down shirt of some mustard shade. Always, he wears a fisherman’s vest with little gimmicks and pins peeking out of wayward pockets. He is my parents’ age but he is inscrutably not middle-aged, as befits men with fishermen’s vests. He doesn’t fish, as far as I know, but every time he visits, my mother buys *kilka* from Brooklyn – *kilka* is a small, fat little fish, you can look her up in a Caspian Sea primer. We sit at the table and bare the fish, removing first the spine – don’t let the bones get caught – leaving gold-silver scales on our fingers.

My father asks, “And where’s Nina? Was she too busy today?”

Kesha looks up, and because he is bald it is as if the whole redness of his face is smiling, says: “Away in North Carolina. Another dancing competition. She’s staying at beach house – it’s like, a reality TV show or something – with the other dancers, there are some blond guys from Sweden, you know.”

They used to dance competitively, salsa and tango and rumba, until Nina surpassed him in skill. They still dance together, but she wins more often.

Kesha and Nina choose not to have children, which is unusual in the formula for among Russian expat families. It almost sets me on edge, so that when I look one of them in the face I feel unwanted, as if they have rejected me and my whole generation. To compensate, it seems, they have lives infinitely more intriguing than those of our circle. They go to penthouse parties and drink rich mint julep of the South. They are both designers, and Nina sometimes brings us sampler bags too good for labels, and Kesha gives us wrapping paper with steampunk robots that he has drawn by hand.

VII. Costume Jewelry

For the competitions, the heats and the tournaments, my mother and I go make the costumes ourselves. We buy a generic dress at Loehmann’s, a funny black thing with spaghetti straps and a skirt to the knees. My mother harbors grand ideas for the dress: it will sparkle, in the mirrors and in the flashbulbs of cameramen.

We go to *Michael’s*, then, to stock up on our supplies. In the 5th aisle we find super glue with a tight red cap. In another aisle, a bureau stands, every drawer filled with jewels. Here are the plastic sapphires and the artificial emeralds, the diamonds at twenty-cents-a-piece and precious stone collections for a dime.

We choose luminescent rhinestones with a name from a fairy book – *Lapis Aurora*. For good measure we throw in small black sequins and white opalescent beads.

At home my mother glues on each rhinestone with exquisite care; I am poised to wear a salsa wedding dress, a red-black glittering costume. Every sequin that falls must be salvaged with needlepoint from our wooden floor. Every thread used for altering the dress is carefully chosen so as to match the shade of the fabric.

in the few days before our final competition, my brother and I attend dance class several times. My mother comes to watch, and before the lesson she straightens my skirt and ties up my hair like she used to when she brushed it in the bathroom mirror.

My brother and I dance, whirling spots of red, black, silver in the golden ballroom.

When we arrive at the competition center in Westchester, we are among the last at the registration booth. In the reception area of the rented hotel ballroom, young couples float. I count their numbers, which are pinned to the back of each participant. Girls in pale-yellow crepe things and turquoise blue or jubilant saffron or deep green dresses whirl about, majestic and clack-clacking on their heels.

In the glowing heat, the rhinestones are valued above pearls.

I am playing dress-up with costume jewelry and hair gel, but in that hall I am suddenly older, more beautiful, in my red dress with its shimmering stones.

My mother remarks that she has never seen so much color. St. Petersburg had a dull, off-white shade, but these transplanted Russian have learned to paint their children in so many dyes.

VIII. Step Softly.

Step softly, tread slowly.

I wonder why my parents would like me to learn an art they never mastered. The mystery does not nag at me or eat into my brain like a large existential question; it only burns a bit at the heels when I hear Gipsy Kings or Al Dimeola on his guitar.

But then I read Brodsky, who writes of St. Petersburg, of his room and a half. He speaks of his mother, who warned him never, but *never*, to slide barefoot on the parquet. *Parquet* is a cognate in English and Russian; I take solace in the fact that Brodsky's mother and my own have the same warnings to tell:

“She insisted on us wearing shoes or slippers at all times. Admonishing me about this matter, she would evoke an old Russian superstition; it is an ill omen, she would say, it may bode a death in the family. The parquet's affinity with wood, earth, etc. thus extended in my mind to any ground under the feet of our close and distant relatives who lived in the same town. No matter what the distance was, it was the same ground.”

The parquet in the White Hall was always waxy like a cuticle, polished to the point that you could spy your face in the wooden grain. My parents lived not far from Brodsky's parquet, in the city of white nights, distant relatives in the same town. I dance far away, on the same parquet, different country, the ground under my heels.

IX. Applause

I meet Lisa Zimmerman at a writing workshop. A seasoned critic, she speaks of dancers like cousins: my uncle Alvin Ailey and my aunt Martha Graham and my granddaddy Merce Cunningham and my errant brother Mark Morris, who has a fascination with fabrics and women. She says: “Dance is dying. They are firing critics; they consider us an expiring breed.” She wraps herself up in scarves; I see a slightly older, plumper Isadora Duncan in orange floral print sitting in front of me. Then she sits up straight, and looks around and hands each of us a card and says: “We need people. Young people. Let me know when you're ready.” She knows we are coming, the new generation that dances in prose.

X. The Dance of Life

I have heard my parents' friends laugh at each other when they discuss what they took from Lenin land. Russian immigrants are holding on to the most ineffective, worthless items, lugging them across continents where they can be sold for just a few pennies. They take books, books in *samoizdat* (hand-printed, banned), books yellowed with age that smell like old apartments and water stains and woolen blankets. If one was to note the weight distribution in Labanotation of

In my parents' bookcase, I find the dance I have searched for, from an exhibition many years ago in the Modern Museum of Art, an Edvard Munch retrospective. People flocked to see *The Scream*, but I stood in front of *The Dance of Life*, oil on canvas, sometime between eighteen-ninety-nine and nineteen-hundred.

I open the art book – it is in Spanish, the language of Latin dancing – and on the right-hand side of the spread is the painting, black and white. Here are the figures, embracing and moving. To the left hand side with her arm outstretched, perhaps beginning to spring, an accent on the right knee bent is the young maiden in white. In the center, the couple, fluidly connected but already off-balance; the line of the sunset upon the water has passed them and they are aging as they spin. And finally, to the far right, the woman is solitary once again, hands clasped.

The dance continues: the dynamism of the picture is tragic and drawn towards the center, with the woman in white and in black looking towards the couple. In the heat of the dance, that is all that matters – whether two types of death surround you (prior to conception, following burial) – there in the middle, suspended in time and space is life.

The Last Dance

The last dance is always the hardest, the deepest...simply, the most. I danced my last in fourth grade, at a competition, wearing half a bottle of lavender-smelling hairspray. We received a shiny blue participation ribbon that was swept off my table the week afterwards. Boris and Diana moved to California. Misha and Masha opened up a gym in Yonkers and never returned.

The White Hall is gray now, and the ballroom is rented out for social events and community activities. On Tuesdays, it fills with elderly aerobic groups. Energetic grannies spin hula hoops and balance on air-filled cushions, waving their arms with purple sweatbands and drinking from brand-name water bottles.

The reflection in the mirrors changes.

In this matter of the soul, it is wisest to defer to Leonard Cohen:

*“Dance me to the wedding now, dance me on and on
Dance me very tenderly and dance me very long
We’re both of us beneath our love, we’re both of us above
Dance me to the end of love.”*

The mirrors in my room are made of memory. I reflect in them.

I store the copper heels in my closet and fold the rhinestone dress neatly on a shelf. I raise a pen and begin to transcribe my experiences into Labanotation: the weight distribution of emotion – of love, of disappointment, nostalgia and yearning– expressed through English characters and the toes of letters, their half-turns on paper and the skirts of their sounds.

I pass through time and space with a tempo; to hear the music is only a matter of counting numbers under your breath.

I now record the rhythm of my life in words.