The Russians Are Coming, Stepping Lightly

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Body

The brothers Atanasov -- Dimitre, Vladimir and Alex -- grumble about their after-school lessons like typical American boys; in their case, boys who are being forced to take up to five hours a week of ballroom-style dance lessons.

"I'm there 24/7," said Dimitre, who will not even tell his friends at Dyker Heights Intermediate School that he spends his afternoon dancing. "I spend more time there than at home."

But the brothers, children of an immigrant from the former Soviet Union, do not dance like typical American boys. The other day Dimitre, who is 14; Vladimir, 12; and Alex, 9, spun three stylish girls across the gleaming wood floor of King's DanceSport Center, an island of elegance in the jostling streets of Midwood, Brooklyn.They did a rumba to the music of "Skylark" and a jive dance to Ellington's rendition of "Take the A Train." The couples were not just counting ***steps*** but doing splits and raising legs in the air with Astaire-like panache.

The brothers are graceful evidence of how immigrants from the former Soviet Union and the Soviet-bloc lands are infusing new life into ballroom dancing. A telling result is that in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, immigrants from the former Soviet Union now own 11 of the 23 Fred Astaire dance studios, the chain of franchises Astaire founded in 1947. And there are an additional hundred or so ***Russians*** who teach in the 89 other Astaire studios around the country.

The Russian dominance of ballroom dancing stems from an influx in the last decade of exquisitely trained dancers from the former Soviet Union who have migrated to the United States seeking greater financial rewards for their skills. In the process, the ***Russians*** are spurring something of a revival of cheek-to-cheek dancing.

"Ballroom dancing has increased in popularity and a big factor are immigrants," said Archie C. Hazelwood, president of the United States Amateur Ballroom Dancing Association, the governing body for competitive ballroom dancing known as DanceSport. "It's helped a lot to have so many people ***coming*** in who not only know ballroom dancing but appreciate it and are very dedicated to it."

Immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have become the luminaries of professional and amateur competition in the United States and have elevated its quality, executing their rumbas and waltzes with a grace, flourish and precision rarely seen here since Astaire's heyday. They have dressed up their moves with Fosse-like angling of the hips and shoulders, giving dance more of a postmodern edge. "This is extremely athletic, very energetic," said Steve Malanga, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute who is one of the organizers of the Manhattan Amateur Classic run by the dancing association. "It's almost in your face. That's something they've contributed to."

In Brooklyn's Russian neighborhoods and in New Jersey's suburbs, Russian instructors have started a dozen schools where hundreds of children learn sambas, waltzes and mambos while their ambitious mothers fret in the

waiting room. Many of them are training for a swirl of local competitions and are the seeds of a more expansive future for dancing.

Most of these students are children of immigrants from Russia or the former Soviet Union. But at Brooklyn College, Sergei Nabatov, a 48-year-old Ukrainian and onetime international champion, offers four classes of a one-credit course in ballroom dancing. It is popular with garden-variety Americans as well as students born in the Dominican Republic, Israel and Colombia.

At 8 o'clock one recent morning -- not exactly waltz time -- Mr. Nabatov put 37 smartly dressed students, some of them still hobbled by the gawkiness of youth, through a series of swirling rumbas and lindys. It was their finals, and Mr. Nabatov was grading them. The students seemed to relish the test in a way they probably would not have had it been in organic chemistry.

"I was a girl who sat out dances," said Julia Mach, a 19-year-old whose parents immigrated from Vietnam. "Now I enjoy it so much, the feeling you get when you can match the mood and the music. I love it."

The ***Russians*** here were born to dance. In the countries of the former Soviet Union, reflecting traditions that paradoxically may have their roots in the great czarist balls, children take dance lessons in the first grade and continue at least through the fourth grade.

Afterward, many parents send children for lessons. Just as for gymnastics, the Soviet Union set up rigorous dance programs for the most promising young people so they could shine in international competition. Even now, dance contests are often on television.

Dr. Anna Shternshis, an assistant professor at the University of Toronto who studies popular Russian culture, said the interest in dancing as an expression of what she called culturedness was especially strong among Russian Jews.

In the Soviet Union, they were often barred from religious expression so they adopted secular expressions, filling their homes with books and giving their children music and dance lessons, she said.

Russian parents here are often too burdened carving out new lives to spend money on dance lessons for themselves. But they enroll their children in schools. "It's better than sitting at the computer all day long," said Irina Atanasov, the Russian-born mother of the dancing Atanasovs. She is a professional dancer and her Bulgarian-born husband, Dimitre, manages a Fred Astaire studio on East 43rd Street in Manhattan.

The elder Dimitre tried to explain the lure of ballroom dancing. The studio he manages offers lessons to single people who want to dance without stumbling too badly or seasoned couples who want to put a little romance back into their lives.

"Most of these guys have never held a woman in their arms dancing," he said of some of his students. "I had a Wall Street executive. He juggles millions of dollars on the exchange, but when he ***steps*** on the dance floor he is like someone in Madame Tussaud's wax museum."

Former champions like Taliat Tarsinov, who with his wife, Marina, owns the Fred Astaire studio on East 86th Street in Manhattan, have brought a professional polish and intelligence to the world of dance instruction.

"When I teach a couple ballroom dancing, I tell them it will be a reflection of life," he said. "I will teach you how to lead and follow, how to give each other space so everybody will feel comfortable, how to be next to each other but not in the way of each other."

But they are learning some of their capitalist skills from Americans. "We're learning how to run business, how to be successful, how to make dance studio a hot spot," Mr. Tarsinov said. "We ***Russians*** don't know how to sell and we like to learn."

Instructors like Mr. Tarsinov do not run studios just to prepare people for weddings and bar mitzvahs; they train dancers for competition. At his studio, Mr. Tarsinov was working on subtly refining the moves of Felipe Telona Jr., a Californian of Latino descent, and his wife, Carolina Orlovsky, a Russian born in Canada, for the Manhattan DanceSport Championships, which will be held in early July at the Regent Wall Street hotel.

Once they learn the basics, young adults like the students in Mr. Nabatov's class at Brooklyn College can go to nightclubs like Roxy or Swing 46 in Manhattan and Astoria in Bay Ridge to try out their skills. At least some of the dances at those clubs can be classified as ballroom.

But ballroom dancing has yet to catch on with American teenagers and younger children. "The big struggle is to get kids born in America to start," Mr. Malanga said. "They think it's weird, their friends will make fun of them. By contrast, in the Russian community it's cool to do this. I think having these Russian-American kids doing this will help break down the barriers."

It will also help the ***Russians*** achieve a revenge of sorts. In the 1957 hit musical "Silk Stockings," Astaire played an American who wielded his elegant footwork to convert three comrades and a long-legged Ninotchka, played by Cyd Charisse, to the joys of capitalism.

Now, in real life in the United States, the ***Russians*** seem to have turned the tables, wielding their elegant footwork to take over the art Mr. Astaire is most identified with, and doing so in true capitalist style.

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Graphic

Photos: Dan Horowitz gets a dancing lesson from Larissa Malikhina, left, at a Fred Astaire dance studio on East 43rd Street in Manhattan. Below, Sergei Nabatov, who teaches a one-credit course in ballroom dancing at Brooklyn College, grading his students. Mr. Nabatov is a onetime international champion. (Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times); (Librado Romero/The New York Times)(pg. B4); Russian-American children at King's DanceSport Center in Brooklyn, one of many studios run by immigrants. (Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times)(pg. A1)

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