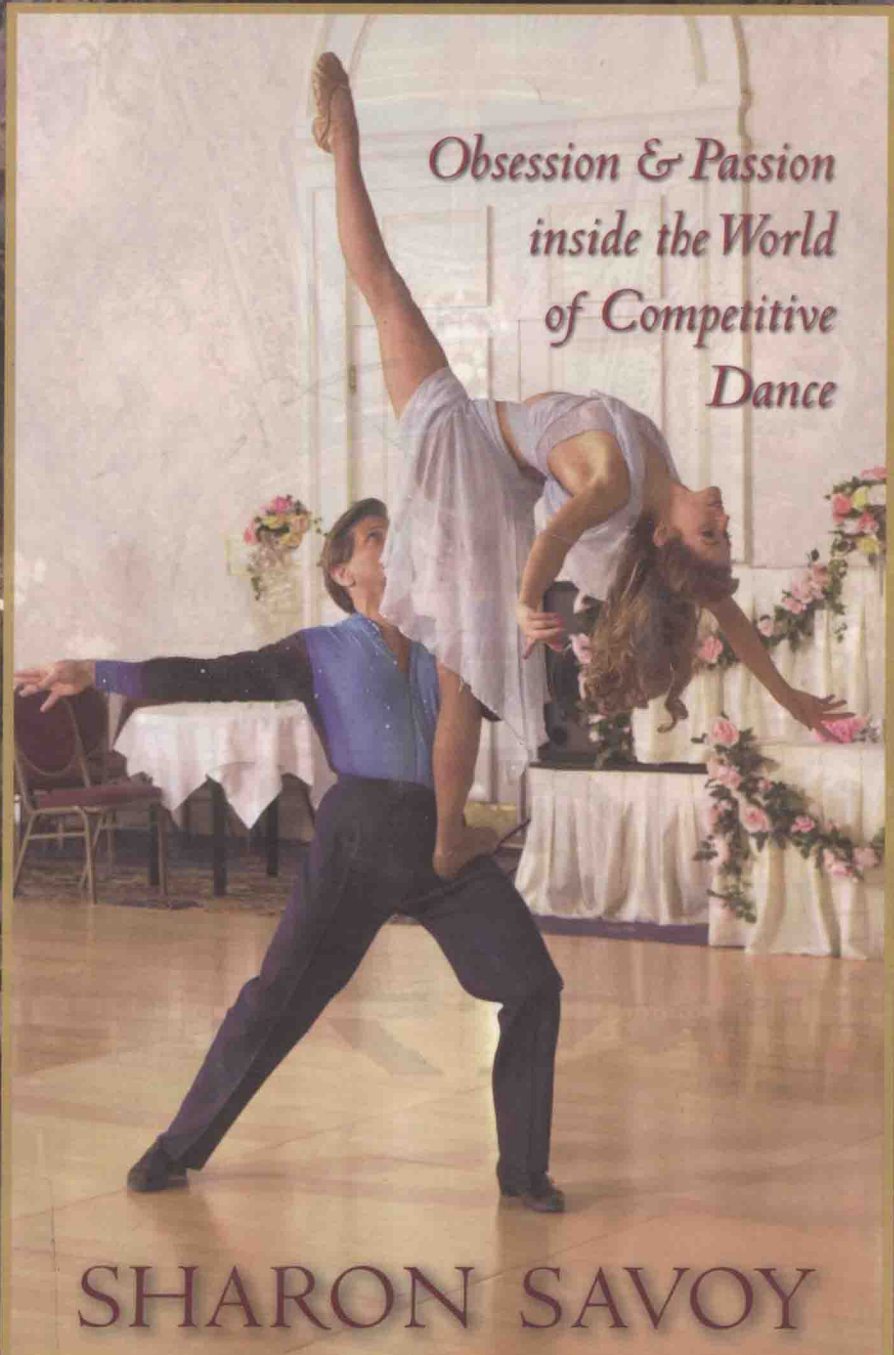


# BALLROOM!

A male and female ballroom dancer are captured in a dynamic pose on a polished wooden floor. The male dancer, wearing a blue sleeveless top and dark trousers, is in a wide, low stance, supporting the female dancer. The female dancer, wearing a light purple dress, is performing a high kick, with her right leg extended vertically towards the ceiling. Her left arm is extended outwards, and her head is tilted back. The background shows a grand ballroom with ornate decorations, including floral arrangements and white-clothed tables.

*Obsession & Passion  
inside the World  
of Competitive  
Dance*

SHARON SAVOY

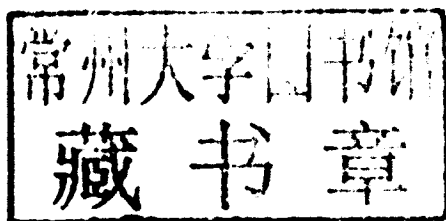
THREE-TIME WORLD CHAMPION

# BALLROOM!

*Obsession and Passion  
inside the World of Competitive Dance*



*Sharon Savoy*



UNIVERSITY PRESS OF FLORIDA

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# *Competitive Dance Categories*

## *International Latin Event*

The five dances are Cha-Cha, Rhumba, Samba, Paso Doble, and Jive.

## *International Standard or International Modern Event*

The words *Standard* and *Modern* are synonymous and are used interchangeably to describe the five ballroom dances: Waltz, Fox Trot, Tango, Quickstep, and Viennese Waltz. (Blackpool's Standard or Modern event is the only ballroom event that does not include the Viennese waltz.)

## *Exhibition Event*

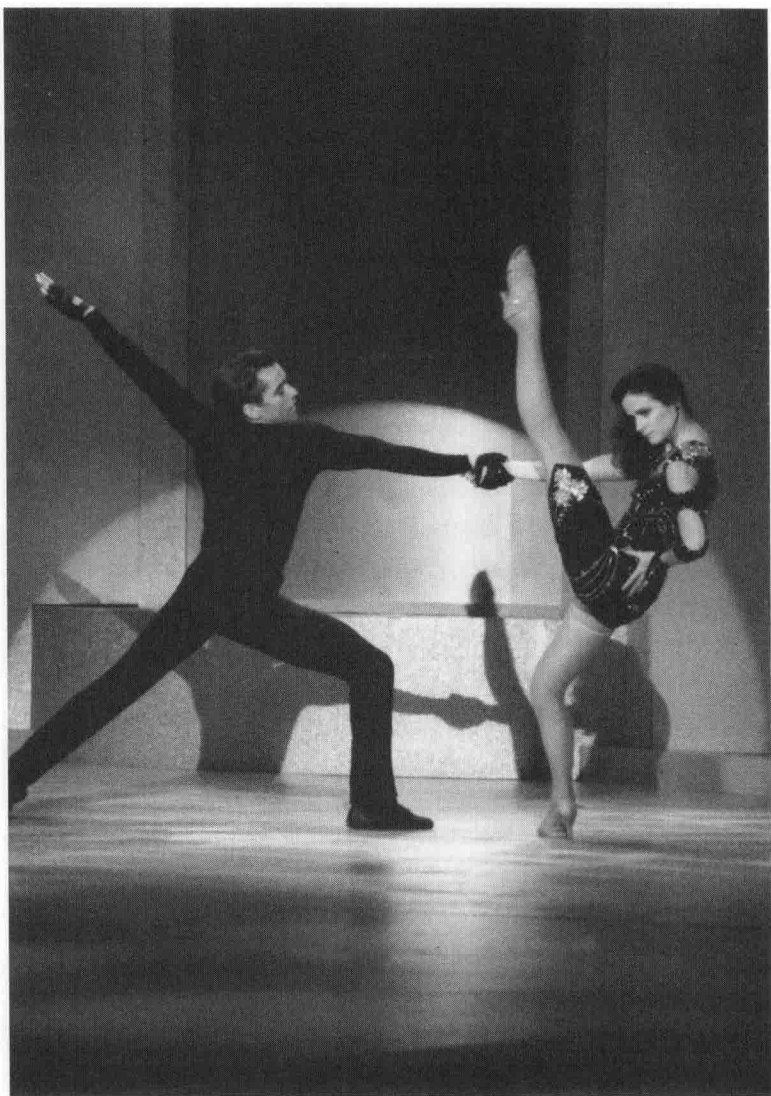
Also known as Theater Arts, Cabaret, or Adagio. Exhibition is the event of no rules, except for a four-minute time limitation. It is most often distinguished by the overhead, aerial lift work that is not allowed in the other ballroom dance events.

## *American Rhythm*

Similar to the International Latin. The five competitive dances are Rhumba, Cha-Cha, Bolero, Mambo, and Swing.

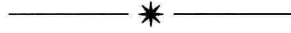
## *American Smooth*

The four competitive dances are Waltz, Fox Trot, Tango, and Viennese Waltz.





## BALLROOM!



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# I



## *Thoroughbreds of Dance*

*I don't want people who want to dance. I want people who have to dance.*

George Balanchine, choreographer and artistic director of the New York City Ballet

*A dancer who relies upon the doubtful comforts of human love  
will never be a great dancer. Never!*

Boris Lermontov, ballet impresario in the movie *The Red Shoes*

Welcome to the world of tanning, rhinestones, and high heels—even for the men! Welcome to ruthless behind-the-scenes political maneuvering where the judges are the true deciders of every dancer's fate. In this beautifully gilded ballroom, every audience member can feel like an emperor of Rome and give either a thumbs up or a thumbs down to the competitors below. Even if you are just a mere spectator, you are in some form a judge, helping to shape each dancer's destiny, and most assuredly everyone who attends this celebrated and distinguished event has an opinion.

Welcome to the Empress Ballroom, at the Winter Gardens in Blackpool, England, home of the most prestigious ballroom competition on earth. Welcome to the gladiator pit of ballroom dancing!

The setting is Blackpool, the Wimbledon of Dance. Blackpool is to ballroom what Wimbledon is to tennis. You can win the World Championships, but until you have conquered Blackpool you have not fully made your mark on ballroom dance history. This renowned dance floor is the sacrificial altar that devours and determines the future of every ballroom

dancer's dream. The stakes are deliriously high. The winner is awarded fame and travel and achieves lifelong status. For everyone else, there is only the hope of next year.

This was my world, the world of competition dancing, but my dance career began several decades ago in ballet. By age sixteen, I moved to New York to pursue my love of dance by seriously training in ballet. The dance world takes no prisoners: to live for your art is not enough. You must be willing to sacrifice it all. Dance, especially ballet, does not call to those who want wealth, comfort, or a normal life. Dance beckons to those who, when God created them, were immersed in the vat of dance and left to simmer. When God finally returned, his creation's purpose was fully formed and predetermined. A dancer's life is devoted purely to dance. Dance is the pinnacle. Nothing can rise above it or come before it. A dancer's devotion is unquestioned, ritualistic, borderline fanatic in its religious and monastic devotion, grueling and unyielding in its demands. This was the life that I chose without reservation and repeatedly chose over and over again with all its permutations and consequences.

I find myself now standing on the edge of the world's most renowned ballroom at the most prestigious competition of the year—referred to by ballroom aficionados simply as Blackpool. Tonight is the Professional International Latin competition; tomorrow is my event, the Invitational Exhibition competition, and on Friday will be the International Modern. I had won the Exhibition event with my former partner twice. Could I win yet again? I would know in less than twenty-four hours. But the clock ticked very slowly, and with each passing minute, my stomach coiled more deeply in knots of anxiety and anticipation.

Blackpool is ballroom's Olympics. We have the same level of dedication to our pursuit as any Olympic athlete—without the equivalent level of reward in publicity, endorsements, or money.

People don't start or stay in dance for monetary gain or fame. They dance because they must. This is the real-life *Red Shoes*, the movie starring the beautiful Moira Shearer, about a woman who attempts to choose between love and dance and dies tragically.

Lermontov, ballet master: *Why do you want to dance?*

Vicky, ballerina: *Why do you want to live?*

Lermontov, ballet master: *Well, I don't know exactly why, but . . . I must.*

Vicky, ballerina: *That's my answer, too.*

When you must dance, everything else in life is put on hold or at least put on the back burner. Many people may have had the inspiration or initial idea that they wanted to dance because a movie depicted a glamorous girl dancing or a suave guy with cool moves, but in the end it is those who love it for the art itself who dance. Whether it is ballet, ballroom, or Latin, each form takes tremendous dedication physically and mentally. It has been said that "art is in the details." The attention to the refinement of the placement of your pinky finger down to the curve of your foot has to hold an obsessive importance, or one will never make it as a dancer. There is always room for improvement, no matter who you are. Dance is a lifelong pursuit of perfection that you must accept you will never fully master because it isn't humanly possible to be perfect. The drive and desire to attempt this impossible feat must exist regardless of the inevitable barriers of human imperfection, reality, and the limits of time.

A dancer's performing or competitive career typically runs from age eighteen through the late thirties and, if successful, into the mid-forties. It is rare for someone to dance longer, even though ballet notables such as Margot Fonteyn, Rudolph Nureyev, Mikhail Baryshnikov, and Maya Plisetskaya danced into their sixties and seventies. Most dancers physically begin to fall apart and slowly disintegrate from injury. Their ability to dance with the same speed, power, flexibility, and endurance lessens with age. In a precisely inverse proportion, this lessening of physical capacity happens at the same rate that their artistry increases. The depth of maturity in older dancers allows them to present themselves and perform as seasoned professionals, adding artistic nuance and subtleties that a novice dancer and a novice audience do not necessarily see or appreciate. The young bucks who are faster, stronger, and flashier are always nipping

at their idol's heels. This fishbowl, this microcosm of life, is heightened by the format of ballroom and Latin dancing—a competition.

The arena of a competition is not like a performance where the audience attends to be entertained. Competition, especially Blackpool, is a gladiator pit wherein even the audience evaluates and determines your fate with its response—either an adoring approval of applause or polite but lackluster clapping. It is a “kill or be killed” mentality, “dance better or be eliminated” world of survival, and you can only climb up the ladder of success at the demise of your rivals. The thrill of winning with all its pride, glory, and relief cannot compare to the feelings of losing that are devastatingly deep wounds that you carry with you for life. The mere fact that the majority of dance competitors are never winners but only contenders is in and of itself a testimonial to the love of the art, regardless of the outcome.

Still, in spite of the built-in tension and pressure cooker atmosphere of competition versus performing, there are many ballroom dancers who thrive and even prefer the competitive environment. I am not one of them. Some dancers feel they peak from the pressure. In their drive to outdo their rivals, they rise above themselves and find more attack, more speed, or more expression on the floor. Competition focuses their energies more intensely and gives them a purposeful goal—to beat someone else. They have the perfect mind-set for competition. I do not.

I mentally force myself to breathe deeply as my body is picking up the intense energy of the Latin competitors who surround me. I watch them pace, like caged tigers, scraping their shoes with their shoe brush or nervously prancing like thoroughbreds before they harness their energy and enter the starting gate. The competitors appear composed, but they are anxiously waiting to hear who will be the six remaining couples chosen as finalists to compete on the most famous “floor” in the world of ballroom dance. The room is exceedingly hot, brimming beyond capacity with all the spectators standing or sitting shoulder to shoulder. We are all waiting with varying degrees of excitement and anticipation. The only ones who appear cool and unaffected are the judges—all of whom are past champions. It is part of their “above it all” persona, which requires that they

retain a look of almost bored indifference. They only complain among their elite chosen group of how many hours they have been standing and judging and how taxing it all is. The Latin event began at 6 p.m. It is now past 1 a.m., and we all energetically await the pinnacle of the evening—the final. The male judges are dressed in tuxedos and the female judges in floor-length gowns, jewels, and high heels. They stand around the perimeter of the floor framing the competition dancers in the round. They are like precious antique gemstones that encircle the shiny, flashier jewels of the current Latin stars. They hold the power to crown the most polished diamond from the group. A diamond's beauty is created by the crushing pressure of Mother Nature, just as the champion is formed by the pressure cooker of competition. This elite group of judges, mostly English, and all former champions, have earned the right by their own ballroom baptism of grueling competition to be the ultimate decision makers of the six couples who will now dance before them. Some have already made up their minds, some have helped make up others' minds, and some have been persuaded and been lobbied hard for their vote, long before or right up to the moment before they stand on the floor, pen and judging pad in hand.

The final will be called shortly, and while we wait, the orchestra plays a little social dance music for the audience to enjoy. The dance floor slowly fills with people, mostly confident spectators or competitors from another night. They dance nonchalantly, yet with complete awareness that they may be noticed. There is a sense of a constant ongoing assessment that occurs at a ballroom event. How does someone look? Do they still appear fit and look young? The *nouveau amateurs* can be spotted instantly, as they are dancing a competitive style instead of social dancing and are trying far too hard to look accomplished in their technique. They have not yet learned the artful sophistication of cool understatement that the old pros know and exude so well. Here and there you will spot one of the star couples, such as the Hiltons, or Anne Lewis and John Woods, or the newly retired champions, Stephen and Lindsey Hillier. The women, especially the stars of this world, are dressed in elegant floor-length fashions that would rival Hollywood's Oscars for glamour. The men invariably wear a

tuxedo or dark suit unless of course they are stars in the Latin division, in which case they may sport a bolder, more fashionable jacket. As we all await the announcement of the final six couples, each from our own seat and perspective, my mind drifts back. I am poised on the perimeter of the world's most renowned ballroom competition, an ocean away from home, watching the best dancers in the world compete, awaiting my own turn to dance on the floor of fate and fortune. I cannot help but reflect back on how it all began.





## *The Invitation*

*There are three kinds of dancers: first, those who consider dancing as a sort of gymnastic drill, made up of impersonal and graceful arabesques; second, those who, by concentrating their minds, lead the body into the rhythm of a desired emotion, expressing a remembered feeling or experience. And finally, there are those who convert the body into a luminous fluidity, surrendering it to the inspiration of the soul.*

Isadora Duncan

*If one had to define one essential gift with which a dancer needs to be endowed, there might be a rush of answers. A beautiful body, grace of line, graciousness of spirit, joy in the work, ability to please, unswerving integrity, relentless ambition towards some abstract perfection. Certainly all these factors determine a dancer's character, and every element exists in some combination within the performing artist's presence.*

Lincoln Kirstein, general director of New York City Ballet

The letter arrives in late January—a crisp white luxury envelope with international postmarks. We know immediately what it is, who it's from, and what it means—even before tearing it open.

It is the official invitation to compete at the most prestigious ballroom competition in the world, Blackpool. It is signed by the official organizer, Ms. Gill MacKenzie, and what does it mean? Everything!

Between six and eight couples receive an invitation to compete in the Exhibition event at the Blackpool Dance Festival, held annually at the end of May. It is a competition with such prestige that it can make or break your career and give you a place on the map of the ballroom dance world if you win.