

Ballroom Birthday Bash

DJINN FISSURE AND SILKE R. FALKNER

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djinn: Even 10 months ago, if someone had told me I'd want a ballroom dance for my next birthday party, I'd have thought they were crazy. I couldn't waltz, let alone fox-trot, samba, or tango. Sure, I'd always harbored a secret wish to ballroom dance, and even pretended that someday I'd actually get around to taking lessons, but there was invariably that major barrier that seemed insurmountable — I'm a woman, and I wanted to learn the 'man's' part. Yet another limitation inflicted on me by the straight world. I carried on dancing 'freestyle.'

Silke: In 1998, I had the opportunity to visit a Lesbian Tango Bar in Berlin — sensual music, bodies, movements in an all-women environment. Not knowing how to tango, I could only sit and watch, but that was pleasant enough. And that wasn't the only time in my life where not knowing standard dancing became an issue. I grew up in Hamburg where the rumored annual "Lesbenball" attracts women who don formal attire and know the steps. But I don't live in Berlin or Hamburg, or even Montréal any more, where I know lesbians also don't have to look too far to learn ballroom dancing. No, I live in Saskatoon where the one gay bar has its entrance in a back alley. Sure, there's a ballroom dancing club with over 1,300 members and numerous classes for various levels and styles, but it's

for straight couples. What are lesbians to do when the instructor says “men over here and women over there”?

djinn: So there we were, both of us wanting to learn, but apparently stymied. Then we heard that a woman in Saskatoon had once taught a ballroom dancing class for gays and lesbians. So we came up with the idea of getting a bunch of people together who wanted to learn, finding out who that teacher was, and offering her a ready-made group willing to pay her. I'd like to report that our plan worked perfectly, so that those of you in the hinterlands of Canada secretly aching to learn ballroom dancing (and I know you're out there) could take heart and try the same approach. But we never actually got a chance to implement our idea. Instead, believe it or not, at the very next community dance that same instructor passed out business cards announcing an upcoming ballroom dance class for gays and lesbians.

Silke: Of course we signed up for the class right away, and we've taken three or four more since. Each class consisted of four two-hour long sessions on consecutive Sundays, plus a potluck supper at the instructor's house after the last session. The instructor was concerned there wouldn't be enough people in the first class to make it worth her while, so we promoted it to everyone we knew. One of the couples we knew wasn't all that excited about the idea initially, but for some reason they finally agreed to try it out. Immediately after the very first lesson, they were both totally enthusiastic, to the point where the four of us have gotten together almost every Wednesday night for the last eight months in order to practice between classes.

djinn: There were an awful lot of unexpected bonuses. I thought it was just going to be about learning something new, but it was fun, too. It was great quality couple time with Silke away from the kids, our social circle expanded to the point where I wonder if we even had any friends B.B. (Before Ballroom), and the enjoyment I get out of going to a community dance has increased immensely. We dance almost every dance now, I actually pay attention to every song that is played, and I even make requests. I don't just dance with Silke anymore either — I like teaching the basic samba and rumba steps to complete strangers, and they seem very happy to learn.

Silke: Now, whenever we hear any music anywhere, we always ask ourselves, "What could we dance to that?" It's surprising how many 'pop tunes' one could polka to.

djinn: It hasn't all been smooth sailing, though. Right off the bat, we had to agree who would be the 'Lead' and who would follow. My refusal to be the 'Follow' under any circumstances should have meant it was a nonissue, but for some reason Silke wanted rational, logical reasons included in the decision-making process. I think I came up with some good rationalizations, but even months later, somehow I still feel obligated to justify the outcome.

Silke: Tell me again why I can't be the 'Lead.'

djinn: Silke even had a special dance skirt made and I've bought a pair of dance shoes. We get a real kick out of dressing up for community dances, as if we were at a competition. We both wear the same color and we lean toward the theatrical in matching the theme of each dance — red for Valentine's, green for St. Patrick's Day, formal for New Year's, and so on. We always generate a lot of attention.

Silke: And now that I've invested in a whole new wardrobe, femmy and all, and have taken on a dancing persona as a 'Follow,' we're determined to continue with lessons. Unfortunately, the teacher we've had so far isn't able to offer more than beginners' classes because of numbers, so we decided we'd just have to get our courage up to join the intermediate level at the aforesaid 'hetero' ballroom dancing club.

djinn: Joining a straight group wouldn't only mean that we'd be dancing together as a lesbian couple in front of a whole lot of straight people. Dance instruction theory strongly advocates experience with multiple partners, so we can expect that the instructor will regularly ask us to change partners.

Silke: djinn doesn't think the straight men will hesitate at all to dance with me, but whether I'll want to dance with them is another issue.

djinn: And I have the reverse problem. I have no hesitation about dancing with straight women, but will they be comfortable with me

as a Lead? Thankfully our 'Wednesday Nite' dance buddies decided to sign up too, so we know at least we'll have them to switch with if no one else.

Silke: And more good news: apparently this year, for the first time, the posters advertising the 'straight' ballroom dancing club say "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Friendly" at the bottom, and apparently the registration forms ask whether you are a Lead or a Follow, instead of man or woman. It looks like it won't be as hard breaking new ground as we thought.

djinn: As for my recent birthday, I had the best birthday party I can remember. (And no, I'm not too old yet to remember any of the others.) We cleaned out the garage, decorated it with garlands of lights, had a half barrel of beer and coolers on ice and a table groaning with food, and we waltzed, jived, rumbaed, sambaed, tangoed, and two-stepped the night away with two other lesbians, two-transgendered women, and two gay guys. Between us we knew 30 different dance steps. What a blast!

Silke: We're thinking of applying for a dance-hall licence for our garage.

