

DANCING FOR TOMORROW'S STARS

When I was a kid, my mother took me to the Will Rogers Theater in Chicago to see all the great MGM movie musicals – movies like “Singin’ in the Rain” and “American in Paris.” I guess that’s why when all my friends’ movie heroes were cowboy stars, like Gene Autrey and Roy Rogers, I personally favored song and dance men like Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly and Donald O’Conner. So when Sandy Stone and Marie-France Lefebvre approached me to be a “star” in the Newport-Mesa Assistance League’s “Dancing for Tomorrow’s Stars” fundraiser, I jumped at the chance.

Actually, I didn’t jump immediately. It was only after they introduced me to the pro who would be my teacher and partner, a petite, lithesome Latvian/Russian dancer by the name of Oksana Kalinuka that I jumped. It wasn’t so much that she is attractive, though that she is. Rather, she seemed to me to have the kind of personality that suggested she would have the patience needed to teach an old guy how to dance. Another major factor: Even with heels, Oksana is a little shorter than I – a “tall” order given my diminutive stature.

So the deal was struck. The Assistance League would provide 10 lessons for Oksana to teach me the two dances. Then, at a gala fundraiser, we would compete against six other dancing teams – pretty much like the TV show “Dancing With the Stars.”

To introduce the dancers to one another and give us a better idea of the cause we would be helping, the Assistance League scheduled a tour and lunch at their facility in Costa Mesa.

As we walked around the Thrift Shop, which is a part of the larger center, what really struck me was how efficiently everything ran. I marveled at the incredible work of volunteers selling donated clothes, furniture and antiques to support a dental center and outreach programs for the less



Assistance League of Newport-Mesa

fortunate children in the community. It was particularly gratifying to see so many high-school-age volunteers helping out. Anyone who wants to see volunteerism in action should visit the Assistance League of Newport-Mesa Thrift Shop.

Here's how it works: Let's say an article of clothing that otherwise would have been tossed out is donated to the Assistance League. Volunteers price it and place it for sale in the Thrift Shop. Every few weeks, the price is lowered until the item finds a buyer. And if it doesn't, it's eventually given away. This is one heck of a "green" organization.

After the tour, lunch provided a better opportunity to meet my competition. The other male "stars" were Steve Myers, Wing Lam and Jon Wampler. The females included Susan Adams, Julia Argyros and Charlene Prager. As we introduced ourselves, Steve mentioned that he is already a ballroom dancer currently at the bronze and moving to the silver level. He added that he's been dancing several years with his partner, Melaina Larson, and would be dancing with her at our competition. As I looked over at Jon and Wing, I noticed a collective "gulp."

But nothing lights my fire more than tough competition, so I looked forward to my first lesson. Oksana was waiting for me when I walked through the door of the Judi Garfi-Partridge Dance Center on Chapman’s campus.

“POSTURE!” she yelled at me. I straightened up as she pressed my shoulder blades back and stretched out my neck. Oksana explained that nothing is more important in dance than good posture.

We decided our two dances for the big event would be the tango and the quick step. I picked the tango because I imagined myself as Richard Gere tangoing with Jennifer Lopez as they did together so seductively in the movie “Shall We Dance.” As for the quick step, Oksana thought I might have the stamina for it since I run marathons.

With that settled, Oksana started to demonstrate basic tango moves like the “promenade close” and “pivot.” So I could practice the dances by myself in my driveway, she wrote out the count and steps:

TANGO COUNT AND STEPS

	Beat	Step
1.	Slow	Left foot forward and right foot forward pointing to front facing corner 3.
2.	Slow	Step right foot across and forward with left pointing to corner 2.
3.	Quick Quick Quick Quick	In rocking manner, pivot turning to left, then left to right, passing through with right foot and turning to corner 4.
4.	Quick Slow Quick	With weight on right foot, pivot after first “Quick.” Then rock 2 left rights and end with promenade close.

Every time Oksana added more beats and steps to the above, I asked expectantly, like a small child on a trip, “Are we almost there? Is this the end?” The lesson plan continued on, filling eight pages before the “end” finally came. To help me figure out how I would “lead” Oksana in the proper direction, she drew out a chart (*see Oksana’s Chart of Tango Dance Steps*).

Oksana explained that the tango is much more than memorizing and executing dance steps. There is also an unfolding drama that needs to be played out by two consummate actors with the following defined roles:

STAGES OF THE TANGO

Stage I – The Pursuit

Aggressive pursuit by male while female playfully evades escape.

Stage II – Romance

Female’s disdain of pursuer ultimately gives way to romance and passion.

Stage III – Climax

After triumphant climax, male smokes a cigarette and goes to sleep.

During the “pursuit” stage, Oksana’s choreography called for me to drop on my knees and spin around the floor. My knees hurt big-time after only a few spins. I joked with Oksana that maybe I could wear knee pads, like the kind gardeners use, over my sexy tango pants for our performance. The look she gave me suggested that she actually believed me.

The major problem I experienced was trying to fit my dance sessions with Oksana into my schedule. We exchanged many text messages similar to the following:

TEXT MESSAGE LOG

Me: Sorry teacher. I can't make our lesson tonight. Too busy at Chapman. But I don't need lesson. U said Italians are best dancers.

Oksana: Unbelievable!!! Bad bad student ☹ You may be Italian but u r not hot hot dancer.

Me: Hey Ruskie – This Italian is hot hot!

Oksana: Not so hot hot. You need to come to more practice to get hot hot.

One evening, we were practicing the tango in Chapman's Partridge Dance Center when the chair of our dance department, Dale Merrill, walked in with a woman I'd never seen before. Turns out she was chair of the academic team visiting Chapman to consider our dance program for national accreditation. When Dale did the introductions, I could see she was pleased to discover that the president of the university was a dancer. So I asked if she'd like to see us do our tango number. She clasped her hands together, and responded with an emphatic, "Yes, yes, I would like nothing more."

I don't know quite how to explain it, but that particular evening I performed the tango in a way I never did before or since. To put it mildly, it was an inspired performance. I exuded strength, passion and sexual tension. When the dance came to a climactic end, with me dramatically catching Oksana in my arms, I turned to see the chair of the accrediting team in some sort of emotionally-inspired catatonic stupor. After

taking a few moments to regain her composure and catch her breath, she clutched at her heart and shouted, “BRAVO!”

TEXT MESSAGE LOG

Oksana: Hey Baryshnikov – I think the lady who watched you dance will be having hot hot dreams tonight.

Me: It’s all ur fault. Ur expert teaching is helping me release all my hidden Latin charisma.

DANCING FOR TOMORROW'S STARS — PART II —

One week after executing a flawless tango before a dance pro heading up an accreditation team visiting Chapman, my swollen head was quickly deflated. It happened when Oksana and I demonstrated our tango to the mothers of students in her children's class. Afterward, one of the moms came up to me and said, "Not bad, but you need to show more love, feeling and aggression. Most of all, you need to EMOTE, EMOTE, EMOTE."

While all this was going on, rumors were flying about our competition. It was heard, for example, that Wing Lam was not only skipping his practices, but when he did show up, horror of horrors, he danced in flip flops. That gave me hope that at least I wouldn't come in last.

I figured, though, if I didn't win the judges' vote for best male dancer, I might win the "Audience Favorite Award." This award is given to the male or female dancer who raises the most dollar votes from friends and family and from those attending the gala.

Doing my best to get as many dollar votes as possible, I badly timed trying to hit up one of my buddies who was reeling from the real estate collapse. He said, "You're going to be in 'Dancing with the Stars'? That's nothing, I've been dancing with the banks and it's not cheek to cheek."

After striking out with him, I checked on-line to see how Oksana and I ranked in dollar votes. We were dead last.

TEXT MESSAGE LOG

Oksana: Do u know u r not popular? Ur many so-called friends r not voting for u at all.

Me: Hey Ginger Rogers – I don't see ur friends coughing up any money either.

Oksana: My friends r poor. Ur friends r rich.

Me: U were an economics major. Have you noticed there's a recession out there?

Oksana: Nooooooo – I don't want to hear economics lecture. Just get ur friends to start voting.

In our last run-through before the big event, we focused on the quick step. It wasn't good. Oksana shouted, "Noooooo, HORRIBLE!" Not only was I forgetting some of the basic dance moves, but at one point, I ended a quick step line and then inexplicably moved into a tango segment. The pressure was getting to me.

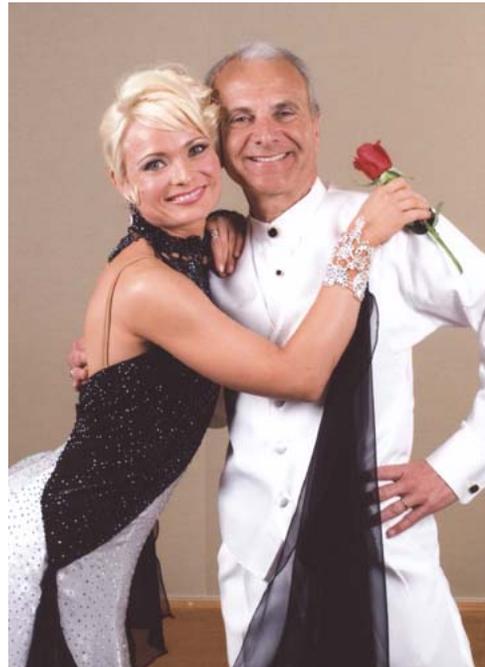
TEXT MESSAGE LOG

Day of the Event

- Oksana: Good morning my best dancer! I hope you had great sleep and are now full of energy. We are going to be great stars today. I got my tan last night.
- Me: I hope I don't confuse you with Edyta Slowinska.
[Note to reader: Edyta Slowinska is a darkly tanned, tall Russian dancing pro on TV's "Dancing with the Stars."]
- Oksana: Need more than a tan. Maybe stretch my legs a little.
- Me: Forget about Edyta. After tonight everyone will be saying we're next Fred and Ginger.

It was all stars, spangles and beads for the big night. Paparazzi flashed away as we walked down the red carpet toward a back-stage area. From there, we watched on teleprompters as our competition performed on stage before a black-tie-packed audience. What was intimidating was that they were all good... really good. Even Wing, despite doing his practices in flip flops, danced with grace and skill.

Then Oksana and I were called to our place behind the curtains for the last dance of the first round. Over the loudspeaker we heard, "And now, doing the tango, Jim Doti with his partner, Oksana Kalinuka."



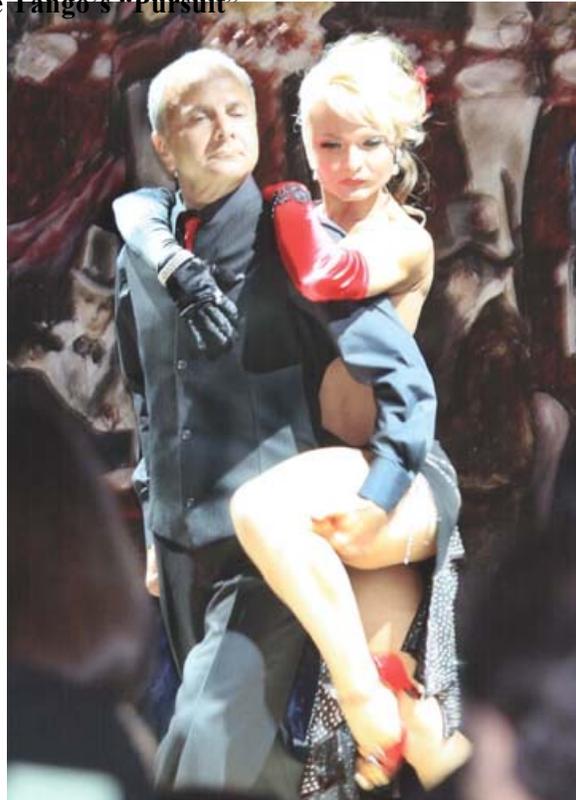
With my heart pounding and legs shaking, I walked out on the dance floor to bright lights and loud shouts and cheers. My heart pounding then intensified to the point where for me it drowned out the music.

Thankfully, Oksana grabbed me and started leading in a way that made it look like I was doing the leading. Nice touch, and it seemed to work. Finally getting into it, I began to focus.

Regrettably, during a dramatic contra check move where we were close to the three judges, I decided to give an impromptu wink to the only female judge – Ruth Ko. It would have been a cute little move, but she missed my wink since she was looking at Oksana. That caused me to lose my train of thought, and as a result, I missed a few steps. I recovered, but that had to have cost us some points.

When the scores were announced, it turned out that the bronze and soon-to-be silver dancing team of Steve Meyer and Melaina Larsen scored strong: 8 – 8 – 9. Despite my miscue, Oksana and I followed in second, only one point behind, with 8 – 8 – 8. So we still had a chance to pull it off in round 2 if we got a higher combined score.

The Tango's "Pursuit"



In the second round, Steve and Melaina did a well-executed, humorous take on the tango. Their score was almost perfect: 10 – 10 – 9. To even tie them for the combined total, Oksana and I would have to come up with a perfect 10 – 10 – 10.

To the tune that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers made famous, Oksana and I danced out on the stage to a fast-pace beat of “Cheek to Cheek.” We forgot the audience and did our thing.

Doing the Quick Step



As Oksana predicted, all those years of marathon running prepared me for this rapid-fire dance. The crowd cheered as I effortlessly flipped and twirled Oksana around. The synchronized steps, switching from jumps to leg swings and then to intricate foot patterns, went flawlessly. This was the stuff of magic. The crowd screamed with delight.

Then it happened. At a point where I was supposed to lift Oksana after twirling her around the floor, I got her halfway up and then my foot caught the edge of her dress. Not only did I slip and come crashing down to the floor, but I brought Oksana with me.

The Audience Favorite Award

The judges generously complemented us on our quick recovery and “carrying on with the show.” But our score of 9 – 9 – 9 was not enough to beat Steve and Melaina.

The dancers came out together to applaud for Steve, who received the “Best Male Dancer” award, as well as the recipient of the top female award – Julia Argyros. All I could think of was what could have been: A perfect 10 – 10 – 10. Now, all down the drain because of one clumsy foot.

Suddenly, I was shocked out of my reverie by Oksana, who was excitedly hugging me and wildly jumping up and down. I heard the cheers as the emcee, Ed Arnold, walked toward us holding a large crystal award... the “Audience Favorite Award.”

TEXT MESSAGE LOG

Oksana: Hey Fred – Ur lucky.
U have a lot of friends.

Me: Yes, that’s true Ginger.

Oksana: They are also very
generous.

Me: Yes, Ginger, I know.

Oksana: Sweet dreams, Fred.

Me: Back at u, Ginger. 😊

