

Ira Weisburd

DANCEWITHIRA

NULINE DANCE

Once upon a Time

THE GOLDEN STORY

by MONICA BHASIN

LD

LINE DANCE FOUNDATION
WWW.LINEDANCEFOUNDATION.COM

Merry feet
Line Dance

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DESIGN BY

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Scale in from the cosmological to the molecular as Diane and Ira sit for a cup of tea in their room in Miami Beach. We wait for the class to start, and for us Line dancers, the parenthesis of time across countries has condensed to that one hour. On Streamline I have enjoyed the short virtual two in one visits to his class and home.

As we finish our introductions before our chat, he tells me that he met a lady called Reena in 2010, on a cruise, where they danced on the popular Indian song, Raghupati Raghav. He is probably the first Line dance instructor who has heard of Line dancing in the business town of India, Mumbai, also known as Bombay. It is known for its Bollywood film industry, which is the birthplace of a popular genre, the Bollywood dance.

I tell him that India has a range of classical dance forms like the Kathak, Bharatnatyam, Odissi, and many others, each with cultural and mythological references in their rendition. Line Dance, however, is not very well known in our country.

MerryFeet in Delhi, is the only formal Line dance club I am aware of. Every state has a folk dance and some states have as many different folk dances as the number of districts. Diversity at its best.

Diane, his wife, walked in to say hello at this point, and to discuss their car insurance for which they were negotiating a deal. He had realised that it was time to settle in for the chat and had handed the job over to her. 'Diane hates doing this', but the insurance was costing them a dent in the pocket and had to be addressed. Plug in into the real world for everyday stuff, and into the virtual for stories. Thanks Ira for your time.

What has happened is unanticipated and uncontrolled but the Line Dance community has been an important influencer in stepping up with the need of the hour. It has forged a relationship with the virtual world like no other dance form. He tried to enthuse his folk dancers about the use of social media, quoting this as an example.

'I WAS A FOLK DANCER'. HE WENT ON TO SAY THAT ETHNIC DANCES OF THE BALKAN STATES AND OTHER COUNTRIES HAVE INFLUENCED HIS TRAJECTORY IN DANCE. HE SPOKE ABOUT A CHASSIDIC AND INDIAN DANCER, HADASSAH EPSTEIN, 'LIKE FAMILY TO ME', WHO WAS A STUDENT OF RAVI SHANKAR'S NEPHEW ANANDA SHANKAR. THIS PART OF OUR CHAT GOT ME NOSTALGIC BECAUSE I HAVE GROWN UP DANCING TO ANANDA SHANKAR'S MUSIC. HADASSAH CHOREOGRAPHED A DANCE TO RAGHUPATI RAGHAV, MAHATMA GANDHI'S FAVORITE SONG. SHE DANCED IT SOON AFTER MAHATMA GANDHI'S DEATH. SHE CAME FROM AN ORTHODOX, VERY RELIGIOUS ISRAELI FAMILY, AND SHE STUDIED INDIAN SCRIPTURES TOO. ALSO THE FIRST TO CREATE JEWISH DANCES, IN SPITE OF SOCIAL RESTRICTION FOR WOMEN. HADASSAH WAS AN INSPIRATION TO MANY.



HADASSAH EPSTEIN

He has fifty golden years of teaching from the time he was in college, from the time he started in the seventies till now. His students were mostly retired people then, and they would drive fifty miles to dance with Ira in Miami Beach. They would pool cars and reach the venue. They invited him to travel to their local community centre where two hundred of them collected to learn from him, each weekend. I wonder if we will ever feel the same about the present, two decades in the future. The proud, 'we used to' is captivating because it suggests interesting layers of stories lying within.

Back then there were single men and women who kept their days busy with music and dance. Ballroom dancing used to happen in one room, and Line dancing in the other. The latter was called the 'widows dance' says Ira and sadly the ballroom dancers objected to their music being used for Line dance. 'It is sacrilege' they would say. Ira tried to change their outlook by asking. 'Are you going to sit at home if you do not have a partner'.

Line dancing was not popular with young people in those early years. Country was 'hee haw' and was meant only for seniors and singles. There were seven to ten dances then and those were repeated all night, every week. Music from the forties, fifties and sixties was popular for the Merengue, Cha cha cha, Fox Trot, Tango and Ballroom. People would get up and dance the same steps to any of these tracks. Thirty two counts, no tags and no restarts, sometimes 'terrible counts', seventeen and eighteen, kept timing for these dances. 'There are no new steps under the sun', says Ira, but when he started teaching Line dance, he wanted to choreograph.

He thinks Electric Slide and Watermelon crawl 'would never fly' today but they were popular then. Achy Breaky Heart was danced in every club, every social gathering. 'People loved it because they could get up and dance' and in the eighties there was a Line dance boom. He said that a Line dance teacher who was teaching at the same venue would steal his music. 'She was nothing special at all' so his students convinced him to start teaching Line dance. His first few choreographies Linda Eh, Whipped Cream and Tie a Yellow Ribbon were written in the seventies because he felt that there was a need to have new dances. 'There was no Copperknob back then'.

HEMING IN THE IMAGINATION, I UNDERSTOOD THAT THE EVOLUTION OF LINE DANCE WAS UNFOLDING IN HIS WORDS. STORIES COME FROM WALKING, WALKING DOWN MEMORY LANE.

His travels made him realize how people separate Country from Line in the UK, and hence the perception that it all started with Country dance alone. In a magazine interview, he remembers talking about how this dance was popular in Asia too and there were different influences that led to Line Dance as we know it today. Back in the Hairspray days, the Maddison and Alley Cat were Line dances of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. It was called Novelty or Party dancing. We have to decentralise the journey that Line dance took across the globe. 'You do Country and we do Line' myth had to be redefined. There was no one country that could claim its right over the origin.



Folk dancers thought Line dance was not their style. Because for them it was not 'authentic' enough. He goes on to say that he hates the word when it interrupts the growth and reach of an art form. For Ballroom dancers and Folk dancers anything that was new and created was not authentic. They are too worried about copyright whereas Line dancers have their dances on youtube so that people can enjoy them. Line dancers are having the last laugh because they have used social media for maximum reach.

Cumbia Semana, his dance from twelve years back, was his first on Youtube. People did not know what Cumbia was then, and that dance went viral with three million views. 'I was pinned as a Latin dancer because I do a lot of Latin dances'. His grandmother and he enjoyed Latin music together. Europe was riding the Country dance wave and was not interested. And now he has done some Country too. It has been a confused yet willing reception of variations, the 1980s effect being an important influence in the impression that people carry about Line dance.

'Line dancers do not get paid for choreography'. He enjoys working with musicians Ronnie Beard, Jonny Martinez and others for his dances. It works well for all. If a dance is going well on a piece of music, why write another dance on it. Rather than being in the race for grabbing the latest music, he is happy to wait for them to send their music to him. Both music and dance get their popularity together, and copyright issues are avoided. The popularity and recognition is reward enough, low earnings notwithstanding.

'The Corona has become personal for me'. His mother succumbed to it. He and Diane have spoken about how online classes have been his lifeline. He says he might have been depressed if he had not continued teaching. LDF in his opinion is doing what is needed most in these times, keeping communication for all alive. 'We need to keep ourselves busy and work together'. Giving to Ldf for charity is good, it is a very difficult time.

Turning my gaze away from the monochromatic palette of the Corona, I heard him engrossed, as he talked about the dramatic expansion of the medium in his journey with dance. He feels proud and happy to have introduced Line dance in Poland, traveled to Indonesia where he was pleasantly embarrassed to see his face on the billboards as he drove through the city, and conducted workshops in the Reunion island in Mauritius. He says Guillame Richard had already introduced Line dance in Mauritius.

Folk dancing is on the decline, and 'I have to say Line dancing saved me', says Ira. He has toured the Balkan countries, among them Macedonia, Bulgaria, Northern Greece, and finds that there are no formal Line dance groups. He has conducted workshops there and they do both Folk and Line. He hopes to give shape to more formal dance groups there. In other places of interest like Latvia, Estonia and Czechoslovakia he will be very happy to introduce more regularity to this dance form.

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He was doing fifteen classes in a week when he started teaching in 1973. Reasons for his longevity as instructor? He reinvents constantly and that is the reason why. It is hard work to start a new club, and then one cannot be sure of the attendance. A Singles' Club with dance workshops, exhibitions, gifts and shows was his prized project for many years. He was also selected to be President of Internet World Wide which hosted exhibitions, dances and magic shows as part of global events. It came to an unnatural end when the owner was found missing with mounting dues he owed to many, Ira included. He has had financial constraints over the years. After all, it is not always smooth.

I exercise my privilege here as an LDF Ambassador to inform everyone that you have been a regular donor, Ira, and we are very inspired by you. LDF and the entire team are great influencers in sensitising us to the current livelihood situation for our Line dance instructors, says Ira.

His annual Line and Folk dance camps are much awaited. Huge dormitories and a central dining area are packed with happy faces. 'It's like when I first started dancing and 'I wanted the whole world to dance'. He speaks of his forty day forty night tours on the East Coast which he did in Diane's car. She joined him in the middle of the tour when she could leave her rehab where she was being treated for a fractured hip. After his SBS Shuffle Boogie swept the country in a Flash Mob event and went viral after, he was traveling for six months in a year. He looks forward to Line dance cruises which are on a halt right now, but the one to Malta with Ivonne might happen because it might be safer. In the meanwhile he posts his dances on Youtube which his Folk dance friends say is not wise. They tell him that he will not be invited as an instructor if people have seen it all. Well, Ira does not need to explain. He is happy, he stays inspired, though he misses the travel and the new experiences at every turn that come with it.

My research pile on your story is six inches over my head, Ira. So I should mention this before anything else. All it takes is music and dance to keep him out of his blues. 'Dance and music make me happy'. A kind word here and there is enough to please him. 'I am a simple man', says Ira. The best thing is to be yourself, he says. The students have to know that you are there for them. Let them feel free to interact, post their comments, and give feedback. 'Be very encouraging when you are teaching'. Once I decided I was going to teach in 1973, I knew I had to take care of my students, be on time to give them value and keep them engaged.

He came from a school and age where competitions and awards were not a part of dance events. He says Yoav Ashriel who he met in 1981, an Israeli instructor, was his Guru and inspiration for understanding the essence of dance. Ira's Boi Malka was the first dance from a non-Israeli which was not only accepted and danced widely, but also became a classic in Israel. And to get there was not easy. Every dance had to be approved by Yoav Ashriel and a committee, and the scanning was done only for dances written by Israelis living in Israel. When he tweaked the rules a little, Ira was there at the right time.

The Mama Papa kind of dance classes did not focus on technique. It was about getting some exercise, fun, and social time. When his friends, Raymond Sarlemijn for instance, dance, they take it to another level with technique. The Ira perspective is different and both find a place in this world. You have traditionalists from Folk dancing who will dance the ones written in villages. Traditionalists in Line dance think it is Country alone that can be called authentic. To map any logical progression or reasoning is a challenge. And of course if you do not know who choreographed it, it has to be authentic.

His oldest student survived the Spanish flu and is a hundred and two. She is the live wire of dance evening she attends.

'My grandmother was a survivor from the Titanic or so she thinks'. Ira says it could be fantasy but they did check all records of the people on board and did not find her there.

Whispers of so many more fascinating stories, very happy to have another walk.

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