

The Rhumba walks – American versus International: a brief history

by Frank Regan

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In recent years (by recent I mean anything from the sixties on) much ado regarding the difference between the Rhumba walks in American Style contrasted to that of what is now known as International Style has been a hot topic to which continuous emphasis is lent with the emergence of each new generation of dancers.



Augie and Margo

As with everything; less than perfect communication results in individuals and groups “taking a stand” on subjects and principles on which to base an opinion. If one is unaware of the evolution of an art form or lacks the historical context for its presence in the world, one is listening through the wrong end of the ear trumpet. What constantly shows up is a fragmented, need I say miniscule, understanding of the subject at hand.

Let me take you back over 50 years to a time when the expressions “American Style” and “International Style” had not been baptized or even born. It was the heyday of the Rhumba, Bolero, Guajira, Son Montuno, and the Mambo. Truly magnificent stage dancers who were having a hard time surviving on Broadway sought a new source of income. Boys and girls teamed up, created dance acts and earned a living performing in the Catskills, at the Palladium, and various other night clubs in New York. Rhumba and Son Montuno exhibitions were, needless to say, extremely popular “on stage” in many of the more sophisticated clubs.

Naturally, the sensuous action of the female form was explored to its fullest in the technique of walking with impact and appropriate character. Many of the dancers who performed in those clubs were highly trained professional dancers with a background in Ballet, Jazz, and Flamenco.

The context that they had for a so called “Rhumba walk” came out of two very distinct skills that they had acquired in their training. One was based on the tendu action from Ballet, and the other was based on what we all referred to in those days as “Cuban.”

The Cuban action was a coordinated physical formula for rhythmic expression which of course had its roots in Cuba and incorporated a type of action which was motivated from the emotional center (the ribcage) and manifested itself as a distinctive action of the hips instantly recognizable as something related to the “Latin” character.

Back in those days all the great dancers took class with a man on Broadway called Phil Black, who was a phenomenal Jazz dancer. Phil incorporated the “Cuban” action as a fundamental aspect of his classes together with a movement of a somewhat opposite nature which he called “Rock” and was also known as a Boogie walk used to a great extent in Swing dancing.

Close by in the Times Square area, we would also take class with Katherine Dunham who drilled us in Afro Cuban principles — some of her students at that time being non other than Shirley Maclean, Sydney Poitier, James Dean, Warren Beatty, Augie et Margo, Mike et Elita Terrace and Eartha Kitt. Marlon Brando would drop in periodically to Play Bongos or Conga . All the classes were done with live percussion. Just minutes away was the studio of the innovator of Jazz dance on Broadway, the famous “Luigi.” Everyone congregated at Luigi’s in order to acquire upper body style through his legendary technique.

When not pursuing the Jazz route, dancers would invariably be found taking a Ballet class from one of the many fine teachers in New York.

The girls would spice their movements in the Rhumba by utilizing the Cuban walk on the slow with the sharply contrasting tendu walk on the quicks. To the audience as a whole this was simply entertainment. To the dance teachers, observing this, it meant much more. This was an opportunity to quantify, standardize, document and essentially come up with a methodology for marketing a product to the public.

The American dance teachers very quickly realized that the Cuban action, even if executed in a

less than perfect way, would have a more natural feeling than the tendu approach which, if done well, would look beautiful, but if done badly, would have a somewhat grotesque effect.

English dance teachers enthusiastically attempted to teach the Rhumba to their dance followers. The English ended up mainly with a “discombobulated” type of action which was in effect “upside down Cuban motion” or Cuban motion in reverse. They opted for the tendu walk which when done badly looked a little better but still had the look of reverse Cuban motion. This unfortunate syndrome spread like a virus to Europe and other parts of the world until knowledgeable people like Walter Laird and Doris Lavel brought things back on track and managed to bring the tendu walk back to where it was before.

What does all this mean? It means simply that the words “American” and “International” are superficial terms that are misleading and inaccurate. The Cuban walk and the tendu walk were initially launched in America by American dancers! The 21st century now heralds an eclectic acceptance of what was seen in the past as two different styles. Today’s generation of talented dancers has absorbed the eclectic principles of both “Cuban” and “Tendu.”

The dance community will, no doubt, continue to make references to “American” and “International” for some time to come. Old habits die hard but for those who wish to take a scholarly and authentic approach to terminology—my gift to you are the words “Cuban” and “Tendu.”

This is an excerpt from a soon to be published book by Frank Regan who is a former multinational champion, college lecturer, dance historian, published author and award winning Maestro choreographer for the Miami City Ballet.