Dance like no-one’s watching

Dr Peter Lovatt explains why everyone should get moving and start dancing like your dad. By Rebecca McQuillan

“We found that boys of 14 have low levels of dancing confidence, which rises up to the age of 35. When they get to the dad years, at 35, men are at the peak of their dancing confidence. The more confident they are, the bigger their moves become. We also know that men in their 30s are less co-ordinated than younger men.”

None of which will come as a shock to women in their 30s, who observe these bad dance moves regularly.

“Most confident, least co-ordinated, biggest moves: they look like they are dancing on their own because there’s no-one else dancing like them.”

It is precisely this type of dancing that people find least attractive. Dr Lovatt found in a study of nightclub dancers that women rated larger and less co-ordinated moves less attractive than the slightly smaller and more co-ordinated dance moves typically displayed by people in their teens and 20s. As a polling strategy, dad dancing is destined to fail, but then that’s not the point, says Dr Lovatt. The point is enjoyment, pure and simple.

“I think it’s great that men get to the age where they dance freely,” he says. “It’s a bit like being an apple that’s going brown, but I don’t care – brown apples make good cider.”

He often gets asked to judge dancing competitions, but turns down those which are about ridiculing men. That’s the opposite of his aim. “Dad dancing does exist and I think we should reframe it as a positive, it’s good for men’s health.”

“Are there three elements you need to get health benefits from dancing? First, it should raise the heart rate; secondly, it should be repetitive; thirdly, it should be non-competitive. Dad dancing scores on all three points. It is widely accepted that dance is good for mood and psychological health. Dr Lovatt ran a six-week programme of recreational dance for staff at the University of Hertfordshire and over the period they reported improved mood, better social support and improved self-esteem. He is also working with physiotherapists trying to build on previous research suggesting that tango dancing improves balance and gait in people with Parkinson’s disease. The team will assess the effects of tango, yoga, ceilidh dancing and a medley of party dances to find out which helps Parkinson’s patients the most.

Many recreational dancers, though, save their best moves for the nightclub and Dr Lovatt has done experiments looking at the links between our hormones and how attractive we appear to the opposite sex when we’re dancing. “The way we dance in nightclubs – some argue that it’s part of the sex selection process,” says Dr Lovatt.

He’s looked at women’s views of men dancing in a nightclub, and men’s views of women, and perhaps the most convincing data is from the latter which indicated women at their most fertile (around the time of ovulation) are perceived by men to be more attractive when dancing.

His findings also suggest that people are often able to tell if someone is in a relationship just by watching them dance, though this research has to be refined further.

Dr Lovatt says he wants to know why dance matters so much to people. “I don’t carry a flag for a particular theory. When you ask people how they feel about dance, they write the most emotional things. One person told me, ‘You might as well ask why I breathe.” Others say how much they hate dancing, I simply want to understand why people have these passionate reactions; is there any science behind it?”

His fringe show examines this from different perspectives – how improved dance can improve problem-solving, how people “read” dance and perceive emotions, how hormones influence dance and how dance benefits health.

The message he’d like his audience to take away is simple: enjoy it. “Dance like no-one’s watching,” and experience the joy of dad dancing.

Dance Doctor, Dance: The Psychology of Dance, August 8-26, Bedlam Theatre, Edinburgh. Visit bedlam-fringe.co.uk, danceanddance.com

What those on-screen dance scenes really mean

David Brent in The Office:
“Brent is uncoordinated, with violent movements. These moves are the sort people find the most attractive. When someone moves in an unpredictable way, people find it thrilling.”

Al Pacino and Gabrielle Anwar in Scent of a Woman:
“He’s dancing for himself and she looks nervous and tense. I don’t think it’s anything to do with the character’s lack of sight. It was a bit like taking a dog for a walk; she was being instructed. No passion.”

Al Pacino and John Travolta in Pulp Fiction:
“They are demonstrating compatibility – it’s like active listening. Travolta looks relaxed – he’s not trying hard. Men in their 60s and 70s have that quality. They have stopped trying to impress people and you can’t stop watching them.”

Uma Thurman and John Travolta in Battlefield Earth: “There are lots of close-ups, almost as if they’re trying to make the audience feel they’re the stars.”

Umumukhama in Zulu Love.
“Umumukhama is uncoordinated; the dance is very different to the traditional Zulu dances.”

Lil’ Kim in Selma.
“She’s very fast, very much like Lil’ Kim. It’s difficult to work out what is going on.”

Jennifer Lopez in The Wedding Planner.
“She’s very confident, very much like Jennifer Lopez. It’s difficult to work out what is going on.”

And finally, Dr Lovatt himself:
“This is not something I would do in real life.”

H Awesome: he goes like it’s 1979? Do onlookers exclaim. “He’ll put the moves on you out of he carries on like that?”

Are his movements large and uncoordinated, but executed with unbridled joy? Then the man in your life is a dad dancer.

According to Dr Peter Lovatt, psychologist, former professional dancer and a dad who dances, dad dancing – as performed at 40th birthday parties and family weddings – is a malignantly but wonderful genre of dance which should be celebrated for its health benefits, not derided as the last bit embarrassing.

Dr Lovatt, it has to be said, is more co-ordinated than most. Back in the day, he tapped, jived and ballet-danced his way through the theatres of the West End, lounges of cruise ships and in seasonal pantos.

These days, dancer is not the first association that springs to mind. Dr Lovatt is now an academic – reader in the psychology of dance at the University of Hertfordshire – and when we meet outside the Bedlam Theatre, Edinburgh, where he is putting on a fringe show, he looks particularly professional with his curly hair and specs, corduroy jacket and jeans.

When he starts throwing traffic-stopping poses for the photographer – a bit of Saturday Night Fever here, arm shooting up like a lightning bolt, hips jutting, a Billy Elliot jump there – passers-by can’t help but grin. His wife, Lindsay, who has accompanied him to Edinburgh with their son for the duration of the fringe, responds with particular enjoyment when the mood takes her to performance mode, and he actually looks a bit like her dad dancing.

“Dad dancing is not about being a good dancer,” he says. “It’s about being different. The best dad dancers are the worst dancers.”

The fact that he is dancing at all perhaps says as much about the state of the world as it does about our fascination with dad dancing. By the time we wrap up the little show, everyone is laughing. Dr Lovatt does any dad dancing is good for your psychological wellbeing. But what does the research show? Encouraged in the office of Bedlam, because they were not looking at the dance confidence of 14,000 people, 8,000 of whom were men. We asked them, “How good a dancer do you think you are, compared to other people of your age and gender?”