Dancing has been an essential part of self-expression for centuries — way before Anton du Beke first pulled on a sequinned catsuit. And with good reason, says Laura Bond, considering its benefits for health and wellbeing.

At 10.30 on a Friday night, there’s a queue of twentysomethings snaking around the block. ‘I’ve been coming to ceilidhs for the past year,’ says Anna. ‘It’s a great place to meet people, because there’s zero pressure. The dances only last two minutes, so you’re never stuck leaning against a guy that you are not interested in. It offers a chance to connect with people without the need for awkward chat-up lines.

No longer the Cinderella of the arts world, hidden away in community halls, dance has shimmied into our collective consciousness. Even if you’re not one of the nine million who tunes in to Strictly Come Dancing, you can hardly flick through a paper or turn on the radio without stumbling over some story about the show. Dance classes are thriving. Dirty Dancing, the musical, was the fastest-selling show ever in the West End, and the government is introducing ballroom and Latin in schools. Are we merely looking to side-step the gloom of the recession by taking to the dance floor, or is our increasingly isolated and sedentary society — where we’re more likely to touch a screen than another human — propelling us to connect with our bodies and those around us?

‘I think we’ve become enormously cognitive and head-focused,’ says Dr Helen Payne, a dance-movement therapist. ‘People often shy away from dance, as they’re afraid of being seen for who they are. In ancient times, when dance was a normal part of our lives, we weren’t so self-conscious.’

Our ancestors were alive to the benefits of moving to the best. Dance was central to Pagan rituals but, with the advent of Christianity, it was dismissed. However, a renaissance is afoot. Rachel Elliott, of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, organises hundreds of local events across the country. ‘There’s a strong desire to connect with people, which folk dancing provides,’ she says. ‘It’s one of the few leisure activities that’s intergenerational. Our members range from their twenties to their seventies.’

We were born to move to music; we told stories through dance before we had language — but somehow we became alienated from this elementary skill. That is, until shows such as Strictly reminded us of our primal urge to prance. Charles Darwin was the first to suggest a connection between the universal need to dance and sexual selection — but what determines whether we look good on the dance floor?

Dr Peter Lovatt, a psychologist of performance at the University of Hertfordshire, recently examined women’s responses to dance moves deployed by men at nightclubs. He discovered that shy dancers who shuffle from foot to foot were rated lowest in terms of masculinity and attractiveness, while those who incorporate the occasional unexpected movement were eye-catching and appeared more in control.

But, by and large, most British men would sooner fly to the moon than trip the light fantastic. Jenni Kravitz, 48, who runs the dance club Simply Dancing Partners, employs professional male dancers to meet the needs of the growing number of her female clients. With dancing an inherent part of courting for centuries, where did it go?

Kravitz blames her generation for leaving men with two left feet. ‘As teenagers, we would dance together to rock ‘n’ roll, then disco appeared and we told the men we could.’
Dance in numbers

- Research commissioned by Barclays shows that 76 per cent of men now think dancing is a great way to keep fit – and one in 10 has actually taken up dance.

- Between 2004 and 2007, our overall engagement in dance, both at audience and participant levels, increased by 78 per cent. According to the Arts Council England, dance is the fastest-growing art form, with more than 13 per cent of the population now attending dance performances.

- The number of pupils choosing dance has risen by 83 per cent in four years, according to research by the Arts Council England. A third of those are boys.

- Researchers from Roehampton University recently evaluated a pilot scheme to teach ballroom and Latin throughout 29 UK schools (involving 2,500 young people). They found shy children gained self-esteem, less sporty children became more interested in physical activity and, overall, behaviour improved.

- 'dance on our own,' according to Kravitz, the 1940s marked a golden age of dance in Britain. 'In those days, if you couldn't dance, you couldn't go out. Everyone met on the dance floor.' But as a new generation comes of age, the mood is changing. Suddenly, we want to dance with somebody.

- Retro-exercising is in – London studio Frame offers cancan, Lindy hop and tap. Then there's The Last Tuesday Society with its masked balls, while London's Waldorf Hilton has resurrected the Tango Tea Dance.

- The modern antidote to frazzled nerves is often a glass of wine, but there's reason to believe dance might fulfill the same function. 'When we host the tea dances at the Hilton, we always provide a glass of champagne on arrival,' says Kravitz. 'But if you walk around the place, you will see that half of it has been left on the table – part of learning to dance is learning to let your mind go.'

- 'In these trance-like states, people become immersed in the group beat,' says Professor Lawrence Parsons, who has spent years researching the neuroscience and psychology of dance. 'You're breathing fast, you're moving hard, your emotions are alive and the music allows you to focus on a few elemental things – all the other parts of your brain shut down.'

- MRI scans show that just watching dancing has the same neurological effect as dancing yourself. So when a dancer expresses joy or sadness, others will experience it as well. There's also evidence that regular dancing enhances self-esteem, improves body confidence and can even make people less violent.

- In our electronic world, where we are constantly distracted by the flickering screen or the flashing envelope on our mobile, it's easy to forget that dance was our first form of communication, and that until very recently, we were our own entertainment system. 'In previous generations, the only way you could have a good time was to go outside your front door, find other people and mostly dance,' says Kravitz. But it seems that we are rediscovering the rewards of this simple pleasure.

- 'There's even hope for men,' he says. 'When you get a dance move right, you can really see your partner enjoying it,' says Barnaby Wynter, who recently signed up to the newly established men-only classes at Simply Dancing Partners. 'It's at that point that I wish I was dancing with my wife, rather than someone professionally employed. It's an experience you want to be able to enjoy with the person you love.'

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