

PICTURE FIGURES: The Magic Act In Dancing

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Picture figures in smooth dancing are big expressions of the body, when the feet stop but the bodies continue moving to the music.

The body expresses music through shape, rotation, rise and fall, and sway. Like a magic act, what you think you see as a graceful couple dances a picture figure is generally not what is happening. When we attempt to copy them, the results are usually too little, or too much. Too little expression and you have the feeling of “just standing there” waiting to get moving again. Too much and the partnership becomes contorted, balance goes out of whack and one or the other partner complains about a pain in the back (or lower!).

The magic of picture figures depends on three primary factors:

- 1) *Balance* The two bodies remain in balance with weight over a standing foot, and the partnership of them together has its own balance.
- 2) *Continuous Movement* Even though the feet stop, the two *bodies* continue dancing, completing the music choreographed for the figure. Use the music and strive for the type of body motion that befits the rhythm. In waltz and foxtrot, you want continuous movement of the body throughout the figure; the tango look calls for fast shapes and holds. Although artistry plays its hand here, we offer a formula to help make it flow.
- 3) *Lady Finishes The Picture* Man must remember that the picture is finished by Lady. Man sets the frame, then allows Lady to extend and make the picture. Problems occur in picture figures when the Man tries to shape the same as his partner.

I. **Body Mechanics: Balance And Other Laws Of Physics.**

This elegant art form we call dancing relies on several physical principles. Newton gave us one of them: Two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time. The *Chair (phase III)*, the most elementary picture figure we do, epitomizes this principle.

To do a chair properly, Lady must wait for the Man to move his inside leg forward, then she can move hers in behind him. Moving them at the same time causes the infamous “hip to hip” position with twisted shoulders. The figure is often followed by the cues *recover and slip (making it phase IV)*, and again, Lady must wait to slip until she feels her partner begin the slipping action. This delay is imperceptible to someone sitting on the sidelines but it is enough to create room for Lady to move comfortably.

Balance is achieved when a dancer moves his or her center of gravity over a standing leg. Lady can remain in a contra check or throwaway oversway—even if her partner walks away—

when her weight is balanced. Balance for the partnership is usually achieved by one partner counter-balancing the other, i.e. Man's upper body will have a shape that offsets the Lady's extension.

II. Putting A Sequence To The Movement.

All picture figures work through a sequence: First, set the base (1), then move the body (2) and finally allow the heads and/or a stretching of the body to finish the picture (3). In any line, when stretching one side of the body do NOT scrunch the other side.

Contra check (phase V)

From CP, set the base by lowering on Man's R with slight LF body rotation, causing Man's forward step L (with heel lead) to land in front of R. He does not step across the track of his R, but his legs should feel connected at the top inside of thighs. Lady will lower on her L and match the rotation, drawing her R under the body and extending it back. Her right knee should tuck in behind her left knee. Her weight will be balanced between feet, and she will NOT lower the heel of her R. Taking her weight to the R or lowering the heel will make it difficult to come out of the figure, overbalance it and cause her to pull her partner onto her.

With the base set, the partners each have a diagonal LF stretch through the body, then the heads complete the picture (Lady stretching and looking up and out over her left shoulder; Man looking over Lady's head). Lady must NOT do a back bend; Man must NOT lean over the Lady. Rotating before the base is set will cause over-rotation and throw the partnership off balance. Man's frame from elbow to elbow is set (but not stiff and rigid); his arms from elbow down can breathe allowing his right hand to *follow* the Lady's back as she extends and finishes the picture. If she feels heavy to him, he is holding her too tight.

Right lunge (phase IV) and Right lunge with roll & slip (phase V)

Man lowers on L (Lady R) and sets the base by stepping side and slightly forward (Lady side and slightly back) as though trying to step under their elbows. Man maintains a counter balance; Lady remains balanced over her L while stretching to keep her right side to partner and look out over her elbow.

To create the "roll" from the lunge position, Man will lift his right side while rotating his left side slightly toward Lady, causing her to roll her head to open position, then he recovers L and slips R back bringing Lady into closed position.

Same foot lunge and variations (phase VI)

This is usually cued as "*preparation to same foot lunge*" to put the partners in proper position on the same feet. Both lower on L; Man steps side and very slightly forward R, to set the base, Lady steps back crossing R behind L. Lady should feel a connection through the outside of her left thigh against the inside of his right thigh when she steps back. Both will have their L legs extended in the same direction. Lady's head is usually open to start, closes with Man's LF body rotation, and can be opened again with Man's RF body rotation for change of sway.

Same foot lunge line is simply a lowering on the R and extending the L, with no side step into the figure. When complete, it looks the same as the same foot lunge. A same foot lunge line often follows a hinge or throwaway, with a rise out of the previous figure to bring Lady up to stand on her R foot. She then swivels on her R, then both lower and extend their L legs into the new line.

A variation is the *same foot lunge & flick*. Man does the SFL, rotating RF after getting on his R. Lady steps back, stretches her left side and flicks her L across in front of her R knee. Man's shape keeps her head open throughout.

Opposition points (phase VI action)

Here, Man and Lady both lower on the same standing foot (his R, her R) and extending the same free foot (his L, her L). Both will rotate RF slightly and stretch their right sides to have an arching away from the center of the partnership and look in the direction of their extended feet. The preceding figure will end with a transition to put partners on the same feet, as having Man close and Lady touch. It can be done with the opposite feet.

III. Not One But Two Pictures For The Work Of One.

Some picture figures—those that rotate LF—actually make two pictures, the first while setting the base and then the final picture. This group includes the *oversway*, *throwaway oversway*, *hinge* and *left whisk*. Each begins with a *high line*, then rises, lowers or extends, and rotates into the final picture. The difference between them depends on how fast or how much they rotate and whether they rise, lower or dance through the high line.

A *high line* is defined in the RAL Glossary as “any one-count picture figure that ends with a high poise.” This generally occurs as a side step in semi-closed position, onto a flexed knee, free leg extended back, looking up and over joined lead hands, and a strong “up” feeling through the body.

Oversway and Promenade sway (phase IV)

An *oversway* begins with a momentary high line (picture #1) but immediately has a softening through the knees of lead feet, a stretch of Man’s left side (Lady’s right) and slight LF rotation to close her head. Too much rotation will put a strain on backs and knees.

The *oversway* is often combined with an extended high line to make the *promenade sway and change the sway*. *Promenade sway* is a form of high line with a stretched right side (Lady’s left). You often get a full measure of music to develop the *promenade sway*, then another measure to slowly change to an *oversway*—a lot of time to wait for “the next thing” if you rush through it.

Throwaway oversway (phase VI)

The name comes from the feeling the Man has in executing this figure. What he is “throwing away” is the Lady’s left side (while still maintaining contact). From CP facing RLOD, Man lowers and steps back R, then back L swiveling 1/16th into SCP. His swivel and diagonal stretch through the body create Picture #1, the high line. He lowers and quickly rotates LF, bringing Lady to CP and causing her L to come under her and slide out behind her. The base is now set, and he can stretch his left side to finish the line.

Lady steps forward L from CP, then forward R into the high line, swivels LF extending her L to the 6 on the clock on the wall while her R points to the 2 (the 2:30 position) to keep a thigh connection with Man. With her base set, she creates a diagonal stretch from her right hip up through her body and finishes the picture with her head to the left looking over her shoulder.

Errors: Man shapes too quickly, not allowing the first picture to occur and his center rotates away from Lady; Man uses his arms to turn Lady; Lady shapes into the final picture while still moving from SCP to CP (set the body before finishing with the extension); Lady arches her back, throwing shoulders straight back to finish the picture rather than extending head toward her left shoulder with a diagonal LF stretch through her body.

Hinge (phase V)

This begins like a *throwaway oversway*, except Man rises in the high line, lifting Lady into CP, drawing her L in and causing her to change weight, so that when he lowers, her right foot will extend forward and she will have a feeling of sitting on his left inside thigh. She has an “up and over” feeling that distinguishes the lead from a *throwaway*.

Left whisk (phase IV)

From CP facing RLOD, this figure also begins with the first two steps of a throwaway, into a high line in SCP. Instead of just rotating his center at this point to close the Lady as in a throwaway, Man continues to move his center LOD, hooking his R behind his L with a delayed LF rotation. Lady follows, hooking her L behind her R instead of extending it behind her. Lady can finish by flicking her R high across her left knee or across the front of her left foot. Error: Man using arms to swing his upper body (and Lady) into the hook before the base is set.

IV. Same Figure, Different Look.

Tango is staccato, creating a sense of quick movement followed by stillness. Forget fluid continuous motion (except for special effect). Almost any waltz or foxtrot figure can be done in tango by applying this characteristic of the tango rhythm. For example:

Right lunge:

Lower and step *sharply* side and slightly forward for Man to set the base, sending Lady out fast, then holding the pose. Throw in a tic for effect.

Some lines are fundamentally tango. For example:

Left lunge into Spanish drag:

Man: From CP, flex R knee, step side L on flexed knee, keeping pressure on right big toe. Straighten L and stretch left side to drag up, close R to L and turn to SCP. Lady: Flex L knee, step side R with flexed knee keeping head closed, weight over R with strong right side stretch, left leg extended; drag up straightening R knee and looking at Man. Extra connection occurs through inside of Man's left thigh and outside of Lady's right thigh. Problems here will occur mostly when Lady does not step big enough onto her R and she will be pulled off her feet in the drag, or Man uses his arms literally to drag the Lady.