

They're Dan

BY BILL MOAKLEY

Photos by Robert Taylor



cing!



Remember when the Union Ballroom lived up to its name, the big dance was a big event, and couples actually knew the steps?

Well, brace yourself; it's happening again.

One-two-three, one-two-three, rock, step. A shuffle, a twirl, a twist. Such are the rhythms to be found on any given Monday in the Oklahoma Memorial Union Ballroom.

Thanks largely to First Lady Molly Shi Boren, University of Oklahoma students no longer must rely on black and white photos to experience the tango, cha-cha or fox trot. They need only find their way to that ballroom.

continued



It's finals time for ballroom dancing instructors Gary Bramlett, Gina Macias and Michael Pone, from left above, and their 635 spring semester enrollees. At right, Cathy Belew and Harold Stokes take the floor to show what they have learned.



The terpsichorean resurgence began with a walk across campus, including a stroll through the Union, shortly after OU President David L. Boren left Washington and the U.S. Senate to return to Norman in November 1994. Looking over the Ballroom sparked a longing in Mrs. Boren. "I thought, before we leave, I would really love to see students dancing in this space," she recalls.

Dancing they are. OU's ballroom dancing classes have grown from 72 in a single beginner class four years ago to some 635 in three class sections this spring, two at the beginner's level and an advanced section. Waiting lists grow each semester.

"I really thought if we offered the classes, there would be interest," Mrs. Boren says. "I'm thrilled. It's kind of like that line from the movie [*Field of Dreams*]: 'If you build it, they will come.' It's been that way for the ballroom dancing class."

Mrs. Boren's vision of a ballroom dancing renaissance among OU students has been bolstered by support from her husband and Mary-Margaret Holt, director of OU's School of Dance.

"I'm grateful to the president and to Mary-Margaret Holt for her interest," Mrs. Boren says. "She has been extremely supportive of the program."

Holt has been pleased with the student reaction to the classes. "We're delighted by the interest, the amount of sustained interest," she says.

For Holt, the value of offering ballroom dance to the general University student body is not only in the teaching of dance itself, but also the exposure to what for many is a new form of art and expression. "We have a window of opportunity at the

University with young people to introduce them to new experiences, and this is a wonderful way to take advantage of that."

For students whose only experience in a ballroom might have been a few painful hours at high school proms trying to avoid stepping on their partners' toes, the introductory course familiarizes them with six traditional dances—the waltz, tango, swing, cha-cha, salsa and two-step. After mastering the basics, students can enroll in the advanced class, in which skills are sharpened and a few more dances are introduced. Each class carries two hours credit.

Teaching the courses are adjunct professors Gina Macias, Michael Pone and Gary Bramlett, veteran dance teachers in the central Oklahoma area whose students at their Dance Masters studio in Oklahoma City include the Borens.

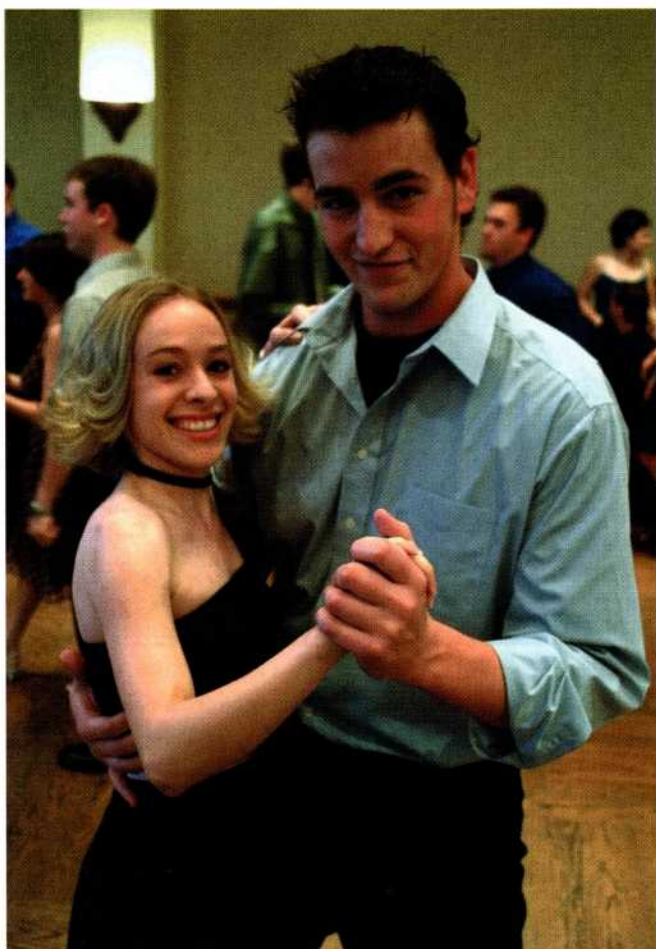
Beyond learning the dance steps, students also come away with enhanced confidence and refined social skills. "It gives them a lot of social confidence," Mrs. Boren points out. "I think in college the social skills and graces you learn impact everything in your life. It's very important to the total college experience because it translates into other areas of their lives."

She hopes the classes also help inspire a larger appreciation for dance in general. "I believe if students learn to enjoy ballroom dancing, it will lead to their enjoying other forms of dance," she says. "I'm hoping we're also creating an audience among our students for our dance programs and in dance in the communities where they end up living."

"It's a big confidence builder," Macias says of the encouraged interaction between students. "[Students] become more socially



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The Union Ballroom, at top in 1949, is once again OU's Dance Central. Heather Mead and Michael Schipul, above, found ballroom dancing instruction a welcome break from more serious academic pursuits, while Kevin Smith, at right with Alyssa Reeves, was so taken with his first class four years ago that he is now a teaching assistant for both the beginning and advance classes at OU and also teaches at Dance Masters.



While the term “semi-formal” is open to wide interpretation among today’s students, the Sooners above dressed up and took very seriously their final examination in Ballroom Dancing, held at the end of the spring semester in the Union Ballroom.

at ease and more confident in themselves. Their etiquette skills also improve. At first, the men are like, ‘Hey, you wanna dance?’ As the class progresses, they’ll say, ‘May I have this dance?’ They really pick up on it.”

Kevin Smith, a senior business major from Oklahoma City, who took the first class offered four years ago and now serves as a teaching assistant in both the introductory and advanced classes, agrees the classes help students with more than their dance skills. “Going up to hundreds of different girls in a week and talking to them has helped my social skills,” he says. “Also, the etiquette you learn in here is not just etiquette for ballroom dancing; it’s etiquette for civilized life.”

On most class nights, Macias acts as an academic choreographer, a kind of waltzing professor. From a platform in the middle of the ballroom, with Pone and Bramlett mixing in the sea of students, she guides hundreds of couples as they dance their way around the ballroom, some tentatively, some not so tentatively.

“It’s fun to be able to dance with someone, and you both know the steps, and you’re not dancing all over one another,” says Heather Mead, a junior from Purcell majoring in interior design. “I never realized how much fun it is to actually dance, and everyone knows what’s going on. When the guys are really good, they can lead, and everything flows really well.”

Of course, not everything flows well from the beginning. Macias experiences great satisfaction in seeing the progress made

by many students during the course of a semester. “We watch them from the first class to the last class, and there is a very dramatic difference.”

Students also are learning a little bit about music, namely that some of their favorite performers—whose music the older generation keeps asking them to turn down—can serve its purpose in the ballroom. Along with the expected Frank Sinatra and big band selections, Macias is likely to throw on something from Santana, Michael Jackson, Ricky Martin or even Pink.

“We try to make them aware they can have fun with traditional music as well as rock music,” Macias explains. “They have no idea when they first come in that someone like Santana is one of the original great Latin artists who play cha-chas and rumbas. They only know him from his recent songs.”

Students also find that the classes serve as a much-needed form of stress relief during days crammed full of classroom time and other obligations.

“I really look forward to it for that reason,” Mead says. “I’m here (in a College of Architecture design studio) all the time. On Monday, I’m usually here from 10 a.m. until 8 p.m., when I go to dance class. Even though I come back, it’s a nice hour where I can unwind.”

More than 3,000 OU students now have danced under the tutelage of Macias, Pone and Bramlett. The classes also have struck a cord with former students who remember the days of big dances in the Union.

“I think it’s fabulous that they’re doing it,” says Janie Cotton,



Beginning ballroom students, such as Katie Mazur and Darcy Adams, at left in red, and their comrades-in-dance below, learn the waltz, tango, swing, cha-cha, salsa and two-step. Burgeoning interest also has led to a Ballroom Dance Club that holds twice yearly formal events reminiscent of earlier days.



a 1954 OU graduate and Chi Omega sorority alumna who remembers when formal dances in the Ballroom were the social order of the day.

Dances that were popular when Cotton was a student are experiencing a revival. Members of the newly formed Sooner Ballroom Dance Club meet once a week to learn new dance steps. The club sponsored its first formal dance last winter, attracting more than 150 students, the spring dance nearly 200.

Mrs. Boren hopes the interest will continue to rise and that Sooner dancers soon will challenge schools like Brigham Young University and the University of Georgia, both of which have talented ballroom dance troupes, for supremacy on the dance floor.

"My dream is to one day have enough students to have a ballroom troupe here," she says. "We aspire to giving BYU a run for their money."

The ballroom dancing program may not be quite ready to take on the Cougars, but it already has received a weighty endorsement. When in Norman to speak at the dedication of OU's new Law Center, United States Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor insisted on dropping by the Union to see the Ballroom after being told by Mrs. Boren about the dance classes. O'Connor and her husband, John, are among Washington's most elegant ballroom dance couples.

"She thought it was great we were teaching it," Mrs. Boren remembers. "She was thrilled with it, and she was very sorry she didn't get to see the classes while they were here."

As much fun as the classes are, ballroom dance students do not escape the rigors of an end-of-the-semester final when they all come together for a semi-formal dance to display for their instructors just how skilled they have become. It is an evening Mrs. Boren loves to witness.

"You have every level of student dancing together," she explains. "It turns into a great social evening. They use both the dance skills and the social skills they have learned. It's a very special evening."

When he attends his dance final, Smith expects to leave the Ballroom with more than fluid feet. "If all you ever did was sit in a classroom and listen to lectures, you'd get burned out," he says. "In here, they're not just drawing a picture and saying this is how the waltz was danced 400 years ago. They're saying, 'Get a

partner; we're going to show you how.' A tremendous amount of knowledge comes from that.

"'Real life skills' is the perfect term for what you learn in these classes. It's stuff you can really use. It's not just dancing they teach."

Sparked by that quick peek into the Union Ballroom 10 years ago, the first lady's dream of seeing students dancing there has been realized, and more.

"The Borens have been so supportive of this," Macias says. "They've given these kids something that is going to last them forever. They're going to use it when they get married. They're going to use it when they attend business functions. They're going to use it in all of their lives."

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