



DARREN AND LILIA'S DANCE CLINIC

I'm a female dancer who loves Latin, but I don't feel comfortable with girly or "sexy" styling. Can you suggest something fiercer/stronger than the traditional approach?

Lilia: In my opinion, there's no such thing as "traditional" female styling – it's up to the individual to express themselves. Don't shop for what's fashionable, rather what suits you. And remember, Latin is about two people, so whatever you choose, it has to be in harmony with your partner.

Darren: Styling also comes through the characterisation of the dance, particularly the timing, like hitting accented beats in the cha cha. Dynamic rhythmical interpretation will naturally give you a stronger look.

I start out with a lovely ballroom hold for my follower, but it disappears by about the third step! How can I maintain it?

Lilia: It's about muscle memory, which comes from practice. Practice, practice, practice! Lots of beginners hold the frame with their arms, not their back and core, which makes you tense up and hunch over.

Darren: As an exercise, look in the mirror, put your fingertips together and bring your arms ➤

Marianka Swain puts our readers' burning questions to *Strictly* champions and top coaches Darren Bennett and Lilia Kopylova



Darren Bennett
and Lilia Kopylova

Photograph by Snooty Fox Images



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but body energy. You need to connect through your centre and be aware of your partner, but stay standing on your own two feet.

Lilia: You're giving each other information, not relying solely on the other person or taking control of them. For toe heel swivels, try touching fingertips rather than holding hands, so you can feel each other but hold yourself as well.

How do other Brits ever get their heads around the rumba? I'm just starting and I feel ridiculously self-conscious. What's the answer – alcohol?

Lilia: The important thing is not to try and fake it! Concentrate on the steps first, build up your technique, connect with the music, and it'll start to flow into your body naturally. You can't always teach the feeling of a dance, and it looks awful when someone's been told to wink and point without knowing why.

My partner really wants to try doing lifts, but I'm not sure we're ready. How can we tell if it's a good idea, and are there any safe, simple lifts we could start with?

Darren: You can't do lifts in competition, and they're not part of the foundation of ballroom, but they can be fun in shows.

Lilia: Lifts should enhance your dance, not just be stuck in there for no reason.

Darren: It helps if they match accents in the music. And be

up to chest height, and work on keeping your elbows the same height and shoulders down as you extend your frame into ballroom hold. Concentrate on how it feels to create that, so you can do it without looking.

Lilia: And no drooping elbows!

I find it hard to keep in the character of the dance at more technically challenging moments. Do you have any tips?

Lilia: Everyone experiences this – don't worry! When you learn a new skill, your brain has to focus

on that information until your body has absorbed it. Just give it time. When it works without you thinking about it, you can move on to characterisation.

Whenever we do toe heel swivels in jive, I end up falling over backwards. My partner says it's my fault for not keeping my centre, but I'm sure it's his fault for pushing too hard. Can you adjudicate?

Darren: When you do any movement where two bodies come together, don't think about giving your partner body weight,

careful! You can be badly injured if you don't know what you're doing.

Lilia: Remember, lifts are 50/50. **[Darren:** Are they?!] The lady needs to support herself as well. If you want to practise, start with a simple drop, to get an idea of trusting one another and building up that skill.

Do you have any tips about how to maintain the bounce action in the samba? I feel like I'm doing it, but my teacher says I'm not bending my knees enough.

Lilia: People tend to jump up when they hear "bounce", but samba and jive bounce action should go down, into the floor; it's very earthy.

Darren: Never go flex to straight, but bend to flex – and it has to be continuous. Think of bouncing a basketball, bouncing it down into the floor as soon as it comes up.

Lilia: At home, practise flexing your knees and at the same time lifting up through your feet so your heels come off the floor – lots of people bounce with flat feet. Tuck your pelvis under you and don't rise up.

I think it's time for a new pair of Latin heels (I've had mine nine months, three classes a week), but my husband doesn't agree... How often should you change shoes?

Lilia: As a competitor/performer you can go through four pairs of shoes a month! It really depends on how you like them to feel. I prefer flexible dance shoes, but

when they're too soft, they stop supporting your ankle because the back of the shoe breaks down.

If you're a regular social dancer, find a sturdy style that lasts, but if you've had the same shoes for nine months, perhaps it's time your husband opened his wallet...

We're starting samba rolls next class and we're both pretty nervous. Any tips for this quivering intermediate couple?

Lilia: Well, it's one of the hardest steps, so you're not alone! Rolls are all about the shaping, and you have to master that by yourself before you do it with someone else.

Darren: When you try it with your partner, do the shaping without the steps first and be very aware of how your bodies fit together, then add steps and timing. Break it down slowly, otherwise it'll look sloppy and you'll get annoyed with each other. And always retain your

centre. It's not just about bending and flexing, but also control.

Our teacher told me I should drive more, so I'm doing my best to cover more ground, but I keep stepping on people's feet. What am I doing wrong?

Darren: Driving comes from the standing leg. Whoever is going forward, whether that's the leader or follower, prepare by getting your body weight over your standing leg and use that to power forward. If you just stick out the other leg, you're actually stopping your body's momentum.

Lilia: You need to be body, space and partner aware! You can't start driving unless you're communicating through your centre and you know who's around you.

Is there any way to do a batucada without looking like you're stuck to the floor and having a fit?

Lilia: Keep your upper body still – don't wave your arms around at 100 miles an hour – and just think about moving your hips, centre and feet. If you shake everything at once, the step gets lost.

Darren: Think about a pole going from the top of your head to your toes, keeping a nice strong bodyline. Your hips and ribcage rotate around that pole, working in opposition to each other, while your shoulders are a strong anchor. And keep pressing into the floor – the floor is your friend! That gives you momentum without you having to generate it by going crazy. ●



Andrej Skufca and Melinda demonstrate the samba roll

Photograph by Ron Seif