Why Men Should Dance
Crossing Borders
Teaching Great Group Classes

The Woman is the Painting:
The Man is the Frame
Quick-Quick With A Heel-Ball-Toe

Female, Black, poet and ballroom dancer, this combination might be
called the Grand Slam of minority
eexperience encompassing gender, race,
vocation, and avocation, two by nature,
two by nurture, a veritable punishment
stew with oddsmakers in Vegas handi-
capping a life destined for disappoint-
ment and pain. Rita Dove defied those
considerable odds. She parlayed her
reality into a rich and rewarding life that
includes a Pulitzer Prize, a term as Poet
Laureate of the United States, a devoted
family and a new book of poetry that
honors ballroom dance entitled
“American Smooth.”

A Short Biography
Born in Akron, Ohio in 1952, Rita Dove is
the daughter of the first Black
research chemist to break the race barrier
in the tire industry. In high school, she
was recognized as one of the country’s
outstanding students and invited to the
White House as a Presidential scholar.
She attended Miami University in
Oxford, Ohio as a National Achievement
Scholar, graduated summa cum laude
with a degree in English, and followed
that up with two semesters as a Fulbright
Scholar studying at Universitat Tubingen
in Germany.

She earned her Master of Fine Arts
degree at the renowned University of
Iowa Writers’ Workshop. While there,
she met her future husband the German
writer Fred Viebahn, a Fulbright fellow
attending the University of Iowa’s
International writing Program. They
married in 1979 and their daughter
Aviva Chantal Tamu Dove-Viebahn was
born in 1983.

Rita Dove has published numerous
poetry collections The Yellow House on
the Corner (1980), Museum (1983),
Thomas and Beulah (1986), Grace Notes
(1989), Selected Poems (1993), Mother
Love (1995), On the Bus with Rosa
Parks (1999), a book of short stories,
Fifth Sunday (1985), the novel Through
the Ivory Gate (1992), essays under the
title The Poet’s World (1995), and the
play The Darker Face of the Earth,
which had its world premiere in 1996 at
the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and
was subsequently produced at the
Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.
and the Royal National Theatre in
London.

Her book, Thomas and Beulah, a col-
collection of interrelated poems loosely
based on her grandparents’ life, earned
her the 1987 Pulitzer Prize, making her
the second African American poet (after
Gwendolyn Brooks in 1950) to receive
this prestigious award. Her many honors
include the Academy of American Poets’
Lavan Younger Poets Award, a Mellon
Foundation grant, an NAACP Great
American Artist award, Fulbright and
Guggenheim Foundation fellowships,
and grants and fellowships from the
National Endowment for the Arts and
the National Endowment for the
Humanities.

In 1993 Rita Dove was appointed
Poet Laureate of the United States and
Consultant in Poetry at the Library of
Congress, making her the youngest per-
son -- and the first African-American --
to receive this highest official honor in
American letters. She held the position
for two years.

She is currently the Commonwealth
Professor of English at the University of
Virginia in Charlottesville. In 2004, the
governor of Virginia, Mark Warner,
appointed her as Poet Laureate of the
Commonwealth of Virginia.

Ballroom and the Lightning Bolt
Rita Dove’s love affair with dance began
at an early age. She once observed, “In
African American culture, dance has
always been a key element--a communal
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activity that soothed and united all levels. Everybody was expected to know how to dance, which usually meant hand-dancing (jitterbug or shag), as well as whatever new dances came along on the R&B scene. I grew up believing that any get-together was a good enough excuse to dance. She danced all through college and at parties, but like most of her generation she tended to shuffle around the dance floor.

Many people claim their love of ballroom struck them like a bolt of lightning. Dove’s claim may be taken literally. Late one September night in 1998, lightning struck her home, setting the place ablaze. Fire soon engulfed their home, reducing much of it to ashes. A week later, while sitting through the ashes, Dove’s neighbors stopped by with tickets to a benefit in hopes of raising their friends’ spirits.

Dove remembers her neighbor saying, “Rita, go get yourself a gown; Fred, buy a tuxedo. We’re all going dancing.”

Dove and her husband attended the benefit. “It felt miraculous to preen, wondrous to zip into fabric that gleamed and slithered. And later, when the band started playing and a couple floated by our table—there’s no other word for it—and everybody agreed that we’d always wanted to learn how to do ballroom, someone said, “Well, why don’t we?” So we all signed up for a free introductory lesson at the local dance studio.”

Like many couples who find themselves in a similar situation, Dove and her husband were the only couple to stick with the dance lessons, having discovered an activity that gave both partners joy.

“When you have something like a fire, when you’ve lost so much, you feel like you can do anything you want,” says Dove. “We thought we’d dance for five or six weeks, but after three months something clicked. It’s been so much fun.”

For the past six years, Dove and Viebahn have embraced dance with a

vengeance, dancing in showcases and taking private lessons.

“When you start out, you are concerned initially with the steps, box steps, what angle, where’s the center of the room, inside of the toe or not -- down to that small of a point,” she says. “Then in the end, no one should be watching you; they should be transported by the dance itself.”

Although her most recent collection of poetry is named for the Smooth dances, those are not her favorites. Dove notes, “Though there’s nothing like a jazzy fox-trot to combine both the Western and the African American traditions, and the quickstep is essential if you want to feel both light and swift, I prefer the Latin dances—cha-cha, rumba, mambo—but samba is my favorite. That dance has sass! And it’s terrifically difficult to do well, because for all that wriggling and grinding, it demands tremendous restraint. Coiled energy, grace, and punch—just like poetry.”

American Smooth

For a period of time following the fire, Dove lost her desire to write. A traumatizing event can have that effect. Her love affair with dance helped revitalize her desire. Although she did not set out to write a collection of poems with dance as a central theme, that is what happened.

“We stumbled into this crazy and wonderful world of ballroom dancing,” Dove says. “At first I thought of it as a hobby. Then I began to wonder how it was going to fit in with the rest of my life. It’s so very different from being a poet. But then the poems began to happen. When I began dancing it was the relief from reality, the fire and the day-to-day life. In the end if became part of my reality.”

In "American Smooth," Dove utilizes ballroom dance not just as a steppingstone for other explorations, but as metaphor for structure and for freedom. This exciting new collection pays homage to America’s kaleidoscopic cultural heritage: from the glorious shimmer of an operatic soprano to Bessie Smith's mournful wail; from hot-shots at the local shooting range to the Negro jazz band in the First World War, whose music conquered Europe before the Allied advance. She writes about angel food and intimations of angels.

“As the poems about dance began to happen it became more than just poems about dance,” Dove says. “It became about doing something with a kind of panache. About enjoying life but enjoying it with a certain kind of flair. Our spirit of improvisation.”

The volume is divided into five sections, including poems about dance ("Fox-Trot Sundays"); black American soldiers in France during World War I ("Not Welcome Here"); and a commissioned series that is displayed in the rotunda of a new courthouse ("Twelve Chairs"). Her collection includes persona poems on Hattie McDaniel, the first black to win an Oscar, and blues diva Bessie Smith.

All of Dove’s trademark themes and artistry -- from the personal heritage that characterized Thomas and Beulah to the brilliant, heartfelt craftsmanship of On the Bus with Rosa Parks and other works -- are showcased in American Smooth.

American Smooth can be found at a bookstore near you. And remember a bit of Rita Dove’s parting advice, “Time is short and you never know when lightning is going to strike, so get out there and dance.”