

Social Dancing Workshop: In Defense of the Slow Dance

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Belgian choreographer Koen De Preter brought his workshop *Social Dancing* to this year's What You See Festival, reflecting his commitment to accessible and inclusive dance experiences. Known for collaborating with performers of all ages and backgrounds in diverse settings, De Preter's artistic practice embraces openness and diversity. In *Social Dancing*, a mix of salsa, ballroom, rock'n'roll, clubbing, and contact improvisation, is all brought together in a single room.

Participants begin by gathering in a circle, each of us sharing a favorite dance move for the group to replicate. Under De Preter's guidance, we move freely around the room, occasionally following specific prompts. The rhythm builds steadily, and at one point we split into groups to emulate a "battle of the sexes," engaging in exaggerated "feminine" and "masculine" moves. As the energy in the room rises, bodies heat up. We move individually, in groups, and with constantly changing partners, the pace is accelerating.

Then, the rhythm slows as the choreographer asks us to pair up for a slow dance. Caught between adrenaline and a sudden shift in tempo, I find it surprisingly difficult to adjust. But here I am, holding my dance partner close, thinking this feels like something straight out of an American prom scene. Once the giggle fades, I focus. My partner and I hesitate, stepping on each other's feet as we try to synchronize. She's shorter than me, her dark hair just below my eye line, and I become acutely aware of the intimacy of this moment. Vulnerability sets in; slow dancing demands attention, presence, and the uncomfortable art of "slowing down." There's an awkwardness to moving in slow motion, and the unease deepens as time seems to stretch. De Preter gently urges us to "go slower," resisting our instinct to speed up. He also comments on the decline of slow dancing, particularly among younger generations, and I find myself nodding in agreement. "When was the last time you remember dancing slowly in a nightclub?" he asks, prompting me to think about how rare such moments have become.

When I get back home, I ask the internet for answers. The titles that pop up are quite apocalyptic: "The Death of the Slow Dance" and "The Fast Decline of Slow Dancing",

among others. Once a hallmark of social gatherings, slow dancing now feels anachronistic, to say the least, especially among younger generations. Reflecting on this, I realize I've rarely slow danced, except as a child with my grandfather. For my generation, slow dancing is perhaps an anomaly, a relic of an out-of-date imagination. Why is that? Perhaps its face-to-face confrontation, paired with a desire for slowness, clashes with the over-mediated, hyper-stimulated reality we're accustomed to. Slow dance feels awkward rather than pleasurable, but through this workshop, I discovered it's both confronting and comforting.

Dim the lights, slow down, and you might feel awkward, but that's the point. Slow dancing is "social" not because of group dynamics but because it forges a moment of shared vulnerability and presence with another person. Slow dancing forces you to be fully present with your partner and yourself. You become acutely aware of movements, bodies, and rhythms. Your sweat-coated skins are pressed together, and their scent lingers in the air. As the body cools down, your pulses are the new soundtrack. It's about connection, but it also reflects something larger: our society's unhealthy obsession with speed. Yes, slow dancing is awkward, especially when you don't get to choose your partner. But maybe that discomfort is what makes it valuable. It reminds us how much we've lost by prioritizing fast-paced, individualistic interactions, whether in dance, conversation, or everyday life. In a world where we often rush through moments without truly connecting, slow dancing forces us to confront the need for shared, intentional presence.

Will I sign up for a slow dance class from this day forward? Probably not. But the next time I find myself in a moment of stillness, whether it's a pause in the conversation, a lingering goodbye, or simply standing in the presence of another, I'll approach it with the same attentiveness slow dancing demands: a readiness to be present, to embrace the awkwardness, and to find meaning in the pause.