

# Passionate competitors: the foundation of competitive ballroom dancing in South Africa (1920s-1930s)

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**Abstract:** By the turn of the nineteenth century ballroom dancing had become a popular social pastime in Europe, North-America and South Africa. The years leading up to the First World War saw a number of South African social dancers, like their Western counterparts, striving to perfect the steps of these imported, ballroom dance routines. Dancers danced partly out of a sheer passion for movement but, more importantly, to maintain and increase their social status within society. Various international and later local dancing organisations were formed to organise and control these dancing events. The creation of these formal bodies unavoidably forced ballroom dancing into a competitive phase that transformed it from a mere social past time to a highly competitive sporting activity.

This article will focus on how the founding of prominent international ballroom dance organizations influenced the creation of the South African Dance Teachers Association (S.A.D.T.A.) and how both the British and South African organizations developed competitive ballroom dancing during the 1920s and 1930s. It will also consider the infrastructures required by these official organizations, the shortcomings as well as the determining impact that this had on South Africa's ballroom dance history. As a result of a number of prerequisites, competitive ballroom dancing is not a sport for the masses, and its formalization in the first half of the twentieth century saw an increased segregation in the dancing halls based on race and class. However, the passion that the 1920 ballroom dancers had for competing laid a firm foundation for the development of dance as a sport in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Competitive ballroom dancing, folk-dance, South African Dance Teachers Association (S.A.D.T.A.), Amateurs Dancers Association (A.D.A.), *National Association of Teachers of Dancing (S.A.)*, *South African Dance Sport Federation (SADSF)*, *South African National Council for Amateur Dancers (SANCAD)*, South African Amateur Ballroom Championships, Foxtrot, Quick step, Waltz and Tango, *Jitterbug*.

**Disciplines:** Historical studies, cultural history, sports history.

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## Introduction

By the late 1990s ballroom dancing was, according to *Newsweek*, the third most popular leisure activity in South Africa, after soccer and boxing.<sup>1</sup> This “social activity” is defined simply as “social dancing in couples to music in conventional rhythms...”<sup>2</sup> or “a choreography of varying elaborateness invented by a professional dancing-master...”<sup>3</sup> It is also generally characterised by formal couple training, extravagant costumes and music. This activity which originated in the West spread widely throughout the world particularly in the wake of colonization.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, ballroom dancing was thus already a prevalent social activity, reaching the height of its popularity in urban centres in Europe, North-America and South Africa. In the years leading up to the First World War, a number of South African social dancers, like their Western counterparts, strived to perfect the steps of these imported, ballroom dance routines. Dancers danced partly out of a sheer passion for movement but, more importantly, to maintain and increase their social status within society. Various international and later local dancing organisations were formed to organise and control these dancing events. The creation of these formal and sometimes informal bodies, unavoidably forced ballroom dancing into a competitive phase, that transformed it from a mere social pastime to a highly competitive sporting activity.

This article will focus on how competitive ballroom dancing developed in South Africa during the 1920s and 1930s. It will discuss the determining role that the South African Dance Teachers Association (S.A.D.T.A.) had in promoting ballroom dancing, the infrastructure it required in order to function and how its close ties with Britain influenced the nature of this competitive art form in South Africa. This article will also briefly consider some of the shortcomings of the official dancing organizations. Competitive ballroom dancing is not a sport for the masses and this article will show that its formalization in the first half of the twentieth century resulted in increased segregation in the dancing halls based on class as well as race. However, the passion that the 1920s and 1930s ballroom dancers had for competing laid a firm foundation for the later development of a multi-racial dance sport in South Africa.

## Literary overview

In South Africa ballroom dancing has indeed a long standing history that closely reflects the developments and trends in the Western World. There are a wide range of sources available on ballroom dancing, including books, articles, and archival, audio-visual and oral sources. However, literary sources giving an exposition of dance history, especially in South Africa, are limited and generally discuss ballroom dancing as a mere social pastime. These include, amongst others, Victor de Kock’s study entitled *The fun they had! The pastimes of our forefathers* that comments on the “merrymaking” and “boisterous measures” of dancing in the early

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1 Cited in S. Dalton, “Ritmes, passies en swier”, *Insig*, Maart 2000, p. 36

2 P. Weber (ed.), *Collins paperback dictionary*, p. 51.

3 Grove music, ‘Ballo’< <http://0-www.grovemusic.com.innopac.up.ac.za/data/articlea/music/0/01910.xml>> s.a. Accessed: 10/07/2005.

leisure activities of South Africa.<sup>4</sup> The studies of A.F. Hattersley<sup>5</sup> and C.G. Botha<sup>6</sup> emphasize the “regularity” of dancing in eighteenth century South Africa.<sup>7</sup> Other South African history texts that appeared later and that also mention the popularity of ballroom dancing include *The Oxford history of South Africa* by Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson, as well as a short, but very specific overview of ballroom (social) dancing that appeared in the 1971 *Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa*.<sup>8</sup> South African journalist Peter Joyce’s popular pictorial history mentions the first national ballroom dance competition held in 1928<sup>9</sup>, while passing reference is also made to specific ballroom dances, like the Tango and the Waltz, in more recent texts such as *Cape Town the making of a city*<sup>10</sup> and *South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century chronicles of an era*.<sup>11</sup> For the most part in these texts, ballroom dancing is mainly considered as a form of “white recreation”.

There are only a few sources that explore why ballroom was so easily accepted in a diversified South African society. An example of this is David Coplan’s<sup>12</sup> *In Township tonight!*<sup>13</sup> which emphasises black popular culture and the influence that industrialisation and urbanisation had on music, theatre and dance in the townships. Focusing mainly on the period between the mid nineteenth century up until the 1980s Coplan refers to ballroom dancing both as a professional white activity, as well as a preferred black and coloured past time.<sup>14</sup> Coplan’s extensive research on this period and his indepth knowledge of popular black culture makes this book a useful source of information on a phase of dance development in South African history.

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- 4 V. de Kock, *The fun they had! The pastimes of our forefathers* (Howard B. Timmins, Cape Town, 1955), p. 47.
  - 5 A.F. Hattersley, *An illustrated social history of South Africa*, (A.A. Balkema, Cape Town, 1969), p. 17.
  - 6 C.G. Botha, *Social life in the Cape Colony with social customs in South Africa in the 18th century* (C. Struik, Cape Town, 1973), pp. 51, 85.
  - 7 C.G. Botha, *Social life in the Cape Colony with social customs in South Africa in the 18th century* (C. Struik, Cape Town, 1973), pp. 51, 85; A.F. Hattersley, *An illustrated social history of South Africa*, p. 17.
  - 8 M. Wilson & L. Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford history of South Africa* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1971), pp.145, 162, 266; D. Dymond, “Dancing Ballroom”, in D. J. Potgieter (ed.), *Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa III*, (Cape Town, NASOU, 1971), p. 558.
  - 9 P. Joyce, *Reader’s Digest: South Africa’s Yesterdays* (Reader’s Digest Association, Cape Town, 1981), pp. 102-103.
  - 10 N. Worden & E. van Heyningen & V. Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town the making of a city: An illustrated social history* (David Philip Publishers, Cape Town, 1998), pp. 139, 148-149.
  - 11 P. Joyce, *South Africa in the 20th century chronicles of an era* (Struik Publishers, Cape Town, 2000), pp. 31, 141, 176, 103.
  - 12 David Coplan is an anthropologist at the University of the Witwatersrand. He has done extensive research on the music, theatre and dance history of especially black South Africans.
  - 13 D. B. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre*, (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985).
  - 14 D. B. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre*, 1985, pp. 129-130.

Besides the above secondary sources, there are a few articles published in academic journals, biographical accounts as well as a handful of master's theses that discuss the South African passion for social dancing. David Rycroft's article on the prevalence of African music in Johannesburg<sup>15</sup> and Peter Alegi's work on sport and cultural performance in the 1920s to 1940s are examples of journal articles.<sup>16</sup> As regards the biographical trend, leading South African ballroom dancers, Bill and Bobby Irvine produced a book in 1970 which traces the story of their dancing career and more specifically their experiences of dancing in South Africa.<sup>17</sup> Like earlier autobiographical sketches on the social experiences of travellers in the country, this publication mainly focuses on their perspectives and their problems in South Africa.<sup>18</sup> Like its nineteenth century counterparts, it provides comment on the passion that South African ballroom dancers had for dancing.<sup>19</sup>

As regards theses, Matilda Burden as well as Ranke Hamona have specifically focused on the presence of dancing in South Africa. Burden's study entitled *Die herkoms en ontwikkeling van die Afrikaanse volksdans (The origin and development of Afrikaans folk-dance)* mainly explores the existence of social dancing in South Africa between 1652 and the 1940s as portrayed in travel journals, diaries and mainly Afrikaans magazines, newspapers and also includes Afrikaans based questionnaires. Hamona's study, *The impact of ballroom dancing on the marriage relationship*, takes a totally different approach by exploring the psychological value that social dancing could have on a marriage in the twenty first century. Although both studies provide insight into the social value and place of dancing in South Africa, the limited range of the authors' questionnaires and interviews and the relatively few primary archival documents used, make both studies rather limited in scope as they fail to explore ballroom dancing outside of its leisure milieu.

As the above sources indicate social dancing continued to form part of leisure events throughout South African history. However, in this article the focus will be more on the use of primary documents<sup>20</sup>, English medium newspapers<sup>21</sup>, and the dance journal *The South African Dancing Times*,

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15 D. Rycroft, "African music in Johannesburg: African and Non-African Features", *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 11, 1959, pp. 25-30.

16 P. Alegi, "Playing to the gallery? Sport, cultural performance, and social identity in South Africa, 1920s-1945", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35, 1, 2005, pp. 17-38.

17 B. Irvine, & B. Irvine, *The dancing years* (W.H. Allen, London, 1970).

18 Earlier biographical studies that mention the value of ballroom dancing in South Africa include R. Semple, *Walks and sketches at the Cape of Good Hope. A journey from Cape Town to Blettenberg's [sic] Bay* (C & R. Baldwin, London, 1803); William, J. Burchell, *Travels in the interior of Southern Africa* (C. Struik, Cape Town, 1967); W. Bird, *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822* (C. Struik, Cape Town, 1966), facsimile reprint as well as J.L.M. Franken, *Duminy-Dagboeke, Duminy diaries* (Kaaopstad, Die Van Riebeeck-vereniging, 1938); A.M.L. Robinson, *The letters of Lady Ann Barnard to Henry Dundas from the Cape and elsewhere, 1793-1803. Together with her journal of a tour into the interior and certain other letters* (A.A. Balkema, Cape Town, 1973) and D. Fairbridge, *Lady Ann Barnard at the Cape of Good Hope 1797-1802* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1924).

19 B. Irvine, & B. Irvine, *The dancing years*.

which reveal that by the mid 1920s ballroom dancing, was moving away from the milieu of “social evenings”<sup>22</sup> and “grand balls”.<sup>23</sup> It shows how ballroom dancing changed into a highly competitive sport orchestrated by formal organizations.

### Laying the foundations

A major milestone in the Western history of ballroom dancing was the establishment of the Ballroom Branch of the Imperial Society of Teachers Dancing (ISTD) in Britain during 1924. This society created uniform rules for ballroom dances, making it easier to compare, teach and judge the standard of the dances and consequently turned social dancing into a competitive activity.<sup>24</sup> The South African counterpart of this organisation, the S.A.D.T.A., was formed in the early 1920s under the guidance of a South African dance teacher, Madge Mans.<sup>25</sup> At first this organisation focused on operatic dancing and ballet as competitive art forms. However, even at the beginning of the 1920s it was clearly evident both in the popularity of social dancing and in the increased interest in ballroom competitions, that South Africa had the potential to form a reputable ballroom dance organisation.<sup>26</sup> In the second half of the 1920s a ballroom section was consequently added to the S.A.D.T.A. with branches in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and at the beginning of the 1930s, also in Durban.<sup>27</sup> While the S.A.D.T.A. was not the only dancing body in South Africa at the time, it dominated the ballroom dancing scene having not only the most prominent teachers as members, but also the most

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20 SAB, Pretoria: GG 2318 2/221: L. Smith-The secretary for their Excellencies Lord & Lady Claredon, 13/03/1933 regarding the dance recital at the *Majesty's Theatre* in Johannesburg; SAB, Pretoria: GG 2318 2/221, Jean Botha-The secretary to his Excellency the Governor-General, 03/08/1936 regarding the inaugural ball of the National Association of Teachers of Dancing of South Africa; SAB, Pretoria: GG 2318 2/221: J. Calder-The Major Lewis, 03/09/1936 regarding the *Calders' Academy of Ballroom Dancing's* annual championship ball.

21 *Rand Daily Mail* and *The Bantu World*

22 Anonym, “Dancing and the ballroom”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 19/11/1927, p. 3; *Rand Daily Mail*, 22/01/1921, p. 3 inviting members of the Unionist Party Club to a Jazz dance evening.

23 *Rand Daily*, 07/01/1921, p. 4. Report of the “Brilliant function in Johannesburg”.

24 V. Silvester, *Modern Ballroom dancing: History and practise*. pp. 31-32; Imperial Society of Teachers of dancing, *Teach yourself ballroom dancing*, p. vii-viii. The *Imperial Society of Teachers Dancing* was founded in 1904.

25 A. Grant-Smith “Dancing notes”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 26/02/1924, p. 9; Anonym, “Controlling dancing affairs: S.A. Dancing Teachers' Association”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/10/1931, p. 14; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 05/03/1932, p. 3.

26 “Members of the South African Dancing Teachers' Association”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 04/06/1925, p. 13; A. Smith, “Dancing notes”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 26/02/1924, p. 9; Anonym: Advertisement, “S.A.D.T.A. Ballroom Championships. Semi-Finals and Finals Ball”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 20/02/1925, p. 5; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 30/07/1932, p. 7.

supporters and actively worked at training more competitive dancers.<sup>28</sup>

From its inception the S.A.D.T.A.'s ballroom branch aimed to "refine" the social dances by creating a uniform ballroom dancing syllabus detailing accepted dancing steps, rhythms and variations.<sup>29</sup> Aiming to promote the association and increase the quality of dancing and better manage the administration of the association, especially in the northern parts of South Africa, various accomplished dancers were appointed at top management level. These included amongst others: the Pretoria based South African Championship Standard couple, Mr and Mrs Jack Calder; dancing teachers like Miss Poppy Frames; as well as influential and knowledgeable dancers like Madame R. Ravodna and Miss Ella Scott.<sup>30</sup>

After less than a decade the changes in the wider dancing fraternity became even more apparent with the establishment of an additional ballroom dancing organisation, the Amateurs Dancers Association (A.D.A.). The A.D.A was founded in South Africa in 1933 mainly to promote a high standard of dancing amongst amateur social dancers.<sup>31</sup> This organisation became a forum where more serious social dancers could display their skills and was further regarded as a stepping stone for future professional dancers to test the competitive dancing field while fine

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27 Anonym: Advertisement "S.A.D.T.A. Championship", *Rand Daily Mail*, 13/02/1925, p. 6; A. Grant-Smith, "Dancing notes", *Rand Daily Mail*, 26/02/1924, p. 9; Anonym, "Controlling dancing affairs: S.A. Dancing Teachers' Association", *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/10/1931, p. 14; T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 05/03/1932, p. 3.

28 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 09/04/1932, p. 3. where the different dancers and dances are listed that were danced at the *S.A. Dance Festival Matinee* as well as the South American dancing show. At a specific ballroom dance competition held in Johannesburg during 1935 the *Rand Daily Mail* reports that four hundred dancers attended. Lancer, "In the dancing world: Record entries for the Easter festival", *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/03/1934, p. 6 (Lancer appears to be a pseudonym used by an author writing regularly in the *Rand Daily Mail* and has no initials); Lancer, "In the dancing world: Why not a National Board of Control?", *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/03/1935, p. 6; Lancer, "In the dancing world: Brilliant success of the dance festival", *Rand Daily Mail*, 23/03/1935, p. 6; T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22/12/1928, p. 5; T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22/06/1929, p. 5; Lancer, "In the dancing world: Dancing experiences on journey to England", *Rand Daily Mail*, 18/05/1935, p. 6.

29 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 01/10/1927, p. 5; Anonym, "Dancing and the ballroom", *Rand Daily Mail*, 19/11/1927, p. 3; "T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by 'Treble Violl'", *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/05/1930, p. 5; T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 13/06/1931, p. 12.

30 Lancer, "In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.'s annual election of officials", *Rand Daily Mail*, 17/02/1934, p. 6.

31 According to the S.A.D.T.A. an amateur dancer was: "...one who has never been employed as a dancer, a teacher of dancing or assistant to a teacher of dancing for money or other reimbursement. Also one who has not been employed as a dancer, teacher or assistant without payment since November 1, 1933"; Lancer, "In the dancing world: Record entries for the Easter festival", *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/03/1934, p. 6.

tuning their dancing technique.<sup>32</sup> At first the A.D.A. was run as a separate organisation, but because of the increased desire for competitive dances, plans were made in the middle of the 1930s to incorporate the A.D.A. into the S.A.D.T.A. The subsequent incorporation of the A.D.A. increased the amateur association's status by enabling it to be part of the national dancing body.<sup>33</sup> Both the S.A.D.T.A. and A.D.A. held regular meetings to elect officials and advise organisers of the respective associations on how to operate and get the best out of their dancers.<sup>34</sup> Concerns, new decisions and complaints regarding the rules and conduct of competitions were also discussed at general meetings and were open to the public to attend.<sup>35</sup> Like the S.A.D.T.A., the A.D.A. further committed itself to financially assist a South African couple to dance in the world championship.<sup>36</sup> Newspaper reports indicate that A.D.A. functions were as popular as those organized by the S.A.D.T.A., and had equally large attendance.<sup>37</sup> Within less than a year of being formed, the A.D.A. was, along with the S.A.D.T.A., beginning to "...assume national importance in the dancing world...".<sup>38</sup> and by 1934 competition events were overtaking social dancing functions in popularity and number.<sup>39</sup>

The growing importance that competitive ballroom dancing had on the community was evident in the industries that directly benefited from it. Competitive ballroom dancing became so popular amongst young and old

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32 Lancer, "In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.'s first elementary ballroom test", *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6; Lancer, "In the dancing world: Encouragement for Rand dancers", 08/12/1934, p. 8.

33 Lancer, "In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.'s first elementary ballroom test", *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6.

34 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 16/01/1932, p. 5; Lancer, "In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.'s first elementary ballroom test", *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6; Lancer, "In the dancing world: Royal visit causes a rush to studios", *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/02/1934, p. 6; Lancer, "In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.'s annual election of officials", *Rand Daily Mail*, 17/02/1934, p. 6; Lancer, "In the dancing world: success of the Amateur Dancers' Association", *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/03/1934, p. 6.

35 Anonym, "S.A.D.T.A: Special general meeting to discuss questions re dual partnership in championship last night", *Rand Daily Mail*, 05/02/1925, p. 6; Anonym, "S.A.D.T.A. extra preliminary dance", *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/02/1925, p. 6; Lancer, "In the dancing world: Preparing for the carnival season", *Rand Daily Mail*, 15/12/1934, p. 8.

36 Lancer, "In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.'s first elementary ballroom test", *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6.

37 Lancer, "Amateur dancers association: crowded ballroom at the Criterion", *Rand Daily Mail*, 01/03/1934, p. 14; Lancer, "In the dancing world: success of the Amateur Dancers' Association", *Rand Daily Mail* 03/03/1934, p. 6.

38 Lancer, "In the dancing world: success of the Amateur Dancers' Association", *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/03/1934, p. 6.

39 It is evident that before 1925 dancing related articles in the *Rand Daily Mail* were focused on advertising dance venues and social events that included dancing and published in between news or in social columns. From 1927 to the mid-1930s weekly detailed reports appeared in this paper on the state of competitive dancing and general advertisements focused on which venues were allocated for competitive practice sessions.

in the Transvaal province that various venues and organisations opened their doors to ballroom couples, both to practise their routines and to compete against one another. Hotels, restaurants and entrepreneurs profited from this lucrative market by offering opportunities and venues to dance. This included *inter alia* weekday lunch hour dancing; eating at a variety of restaurants and bioscope cafes to dance for a minimal charge of 2s;<sup>40</sup> a dance and dance lesson at a “moderate price” in specific halls on Thursday evenings.<sup>41</sup> During the late 1920s and early 1930s Johannesburg was in particular regarded as “South Africa’s premier dancing centre”.<sup>42</sup> The *Astoria Palais de danse* in Noord Street, Johannesburg, was not only one of the popular social dance venues, but in 1934 also became a venue where competition heats were danced every month.<sup>43</sup> The competitions were usually held on week nights.<sup>44</sup> Holidays further appeared to be an exceptionally popular time to conduct ballroom competitions. These competitions often lasted several days and attracted the “best that the country had to offer”.<sup>45</sup> Final and National competitions usually took place at prominent venues like city halls and were accompanied by live bands.<sup>46</sup> Smaller regional competitions were often held at private studios or restaurants with entrance fees ranging from 2s to 5s per couple depending on the venue and the provincial or national status of the competition.<sup>47</sup>

### **Passionate competitors**

During February 1934 the first ballroom examinations and grades were introduced by the S.A.D.T.A.<sup>48</sup> Dancers older than 16 were allowed to dance the examinations and were graded by S.A.D.T.A. approved examiners.<sup>49</sup> This not only increased the standard of dancing, but also forced dancers to dance a nationally accepted syllabus which consequently raised the level of competition.<sup>50</sup>

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40 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 21/03/1931, p. 16.

41 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 14/02/1931, p. 12.

42 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: How they dance on the continent-A film of Madame Pavlova-The rhythm step”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/12/1927, p. 7; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/05/1930, p. 12.

43 Lancer, “In the dancing world: Record entries for the Easter festival”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/03/1934, p. 6.

44 Lancer, “Astoria Palais de danse”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/02/1934, p. 8.

45 E.M.B, “In the dance world: Success of the Pretoria festival”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 11/04/1936, p. 5.

46 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 19/03/1932, p. 3.

47 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 07/03/1931, p. 12; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 21/03/1931, p. 16.

48 Lancer, “In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.’s first elementary ballroom test”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6.

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By the end of the 1920s the S.A.D.T.A. was credited with creating a successful “South African Ballroom Championship”. It had also succeeded in firmly establishing ballroom dancing in the big cities (Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban) in South Africa.<sup>51</sup> The significance of this was that ballroom dancing now took on a different dimension. With competition came various constraints which ultimately had ramifications in all areas relating to the ballroom. During this time ballroom dancing changed from a mere recreational event, to a competitive sport with a set of predetermined rules dictating the nature, style and growth of ballroom dancing. This was especially evident in the fanatical precision that was used to implement competition rules regarding dancing steps, dress and performing ability. The next few years would be spent trying to create the best dancers at any cost and strengthening the S.A.D.T.A.’s allegiance with British ballroom.<sup>52</sup>

Competitive couples were required to dance the Foxtrot, Quick step, Waltz and Tango, generally competing in one dance per heat (unlike competitions in the twenty-first century where all five ballroom dances are danced per heat).<sup>53</sup> The regional and national dancing heats were judged by renowned and experienced local and international dancers on an internationally approved dancing syllabus.<sup>54</sup> Local adjudicators were handpicked and trained by international experts and, although they were allowed a certain amount of artistic freedom in the placing of dancers at competitions, their decisions were closely monitored by the ballroom dancing community.<sup>55</sup> To improve the standard and popularity of dances, special dance competitions were organised.<sup>56</sup> That there was an improvement in the quality of South African dancing is evident in critics

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49 Lancer, “In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.’s first elementary ballroom test”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6.

50 Lancer, “In the dancing world: Royal visit causes a rush to studios”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/02/1934, p. 6

51 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 16/05/1931, p. 7.

52 L. Smith an S.A.D.T.A. official clearly stated during the 1930 that the S.A.D.T.A. “...intends building ballroom dance championships in the near future”. T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom by “Treble Violl””, *Rand Daily Mail*, 15/03/1930, p. 5

53 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 23/01/1932, p. 6; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 16/08/1930, p. 12; Lancer, “In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.’s first elementary ballroom test”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6; Lancer, “Astoria Palais de danse”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/02/1934, p. 8 were dancers are informed that in the second heat of the *Palais Championship* they will be dancing the Quick step; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 23/01/1932, p. 6; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 16/08/1930, p. 12; Lancer, “In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.’s first elementary ballroom test”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6.

54 Lancer, “In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.’s annual election of officials”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 17/02/1934, p. 6; E.M.B., “In the dance world: Operatic championships”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 09/05/1936, p. 5; E.M.B., “In the dance world: Ballroom Festival dates”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 15/02/1936, p. 6.

pronouncing in 1930 that by and large local dancers excelled in ballroom dancing with a “sweep and elegance”.<sup>57</sup> Also dancing standards had been raised to such an extent that it was comparable with that of the British ballrooms.<sup>58</sup>

The media placed particular emphasise on the “merriment” and “carnival” like atmosphere at competitions.<sup>59</sup> However, the highly competitive nature and strict implementation of rules that were laid down by the S.A.D.T.A., as well as the increasing rift between social and competitive dancing, was progressively more evident from the 1930s onwards. “Average” couples were harshly criticised and penalised for not knowing the “basic steps”, and were described as being an “inconvenience” on the competition floor.<sup>60</sup> Teachers who were members of the S.A.D.T.A. were also advised to concentrate on the “refinement of ballroom dances” and attended demonstration sessions that lasted for hours to reacquaint themselves repeatedly with the basic steps required of the competition dances.<sup>61</sup> In addition, detailed explanations of steps also became an integral part of the dancing media. Articles often included photographs of champion dancers or renowned teachers meticulously performing dancing steps.<sup>62</sup> Often more attention was given to condemning, what the 1930s competitive ballroom dancing officials regarded as, “errors” made by dancers, than promoting the dance competitions themselves.<sup>63</sup>

Especially after the S.A.D.T.A. had firmly established itself as the main organising body behind ballroom dancing competitions articles tended to increase this type of instructional tone.<sup>64</sup> Dancers were advised to

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55 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/04/1932, p. 3.

56 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 16/08/1930, p. 12.

57 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 13/12/1930, p. 6.

58 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 16/05/1931, p. 7.

59 Lancer, “In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.’s first elementary ballroom test”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6; Lancer, “In the dancing world: Winners of last night’s championship”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 13/10/1934, p. 6; Lancer, “In the dancing world: Dancing extremes in Transvaal ballrooms”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 20/10/1934, p. 8.

60 Lancer, “In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.’s first elementary ballroom test”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6; Lancer, “In the dancing world: Winners of last night’s championship”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 13/10/1934, p. 6; Lancer, “In the dancing world: Dancing extremes in Transvaal ballrooms”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 20/10/1934, p. 8.

61 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 19/11/1927, p. 3.

62 Anonym, “Ballroom dancing”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 14/05/1924, p. 11.

63 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 29/08/1931, p. 16; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/06/1930, p. 7.

constantly better themselves by adhering to the guidance given by the S.A.D.T.A., practicing more and studying other art forms, like music, to improve their understanding of rhythm and movement.<sup>65</sup> Ladies especially were instructed not to “move about like a sack of potatoes”<sup>66</sup> in the man’s arms, but to have the “ambition to follow her partner”<sup>67</sup> effortlessly. In this regard specialist information relating to ballroom dancing became an important part of the dancers training as it informed dancers’ on developments in the competitive field.

Towards the end of the 1930s competitive ballroom dancing had such an influence on the dancing fraternity that even contemporary popular magazines occasionally reported on the state of ballroom dancing in South Africa and the achievements of these competitive dancers. *Pleasure* magazine, for example, placed an article featuring the brilliant dance talent at an S.A.D.T.A. competition in Johannesburg during 1938.<sup>68</sup> The number of dance teachers listed for the Johannesburg and Pretoria area in the article alone bears testimony to the growing need for formal training in competitive ballroom dancing.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the restrictions placed on dancers by the official bodies there are no doubt that, the controlling structures and rules did serve to raise the level of ballroom dancing in South Africa and introduce a high standard of ballroom to younger members of society. By the beginning of 1930 it was clear that as the years progressed the S.A.D.T.A.’s largest support base would come from “exceptionally talented” children between 5 and 17 years of age.<sup>70</sup> A substantial amount of time was therefore put into organising children’s balls and appointing judges for the events that ran more or less simultaneously with the provincial adult dancing heats.<sup>71</sup>

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64 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 24/05/1930, p. 5; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 07/06/1930, p. 12; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 19/07/1930, p. 2; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 31/05/1930, p. 10.

65 E.M.B., “In the dance world: Dancing in Greece”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1936, p. 5; E.M.B., “In the dance world: Ballroom Festival dates”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 15/02/1936, p. 6.

66 T.Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 29/08/1931, p. 16.

67 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 29/08/1931, p. 16; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/06/1930, p. 7.

68 Anonym, “‘Quickstep’, The Dancing World: Beginner’s Chance”, *Pleasure*, May 1938, pp. 46-47.

69 Anonym, “‘Quickstep’, The Dancing World: Beginner’s Chance”, *Pleasure*, May 1938, pp. 46-47; According to this article noteworthy dancers in South Africa during that time were the 1937-1938 South African and Transvaal Professional Champions Mr & Mrs. Jack Calder, as well as dance teachers Pat Tufnell, Barbara Reeves, Elwyn Williams, Signor Canale, Molly Hayward (Afrikaans speaking), Tommy Williams and Marjorie Fowles.

The children's ballroom dance competition required them to dance the Polka, Waltz and Quickstep.<sup>72</sup> During the introduction of these children's dances, a lot of emphasis was placed on the dresses that were worn and "special prizes" were awarded to the "most original" dress.<sup>73</sup> Public requests were even made that the Children's Fancy dress competition should be an annual ballroom dance event.<sup>74</sup> Christmas holiday seasons saw various functions and shows where children performed "...it is pre-eminently", noted the *Rand Daily Mail*, "their dancing time".<sup>75</sup> Reports of the time furthermore found the continued practice of ballroom dancing to be beneficial to the physical development of young girls as it taught them poise, grace and elegance.<sup>76</sup>

While competitive ballroom dancing was clearly supported by a large number of mothers with children, the highly competitive nature of the children ballroom competitions stood in direct contrast to the supposed health benefits, and "pleaseable" social evenings of fund-raising and other social dance events. Furthermore, white high middle class families that were able to afford the best dance teachers and clothes obviously drew more attention to themselves, often making children's dance competitions more a venue to show-off status than to develop dancing talent. Although the media praised the well organised functions and talent during various children competitions and Eisteddfods, complaints from mothers overwhelmed newspapers after each competition.<sup>77</sup> "Interested mother[s]" questioned *inter alia* the capability of the judges, comments made during the competitions, artistic nature of other competitors and the clothes worn at these functions.<sup>78</sup>

By the mid 1930s plans were further made to incorporate smaller individual ballroom branches, like the *South African Members of the Imperial Society* into the S.A.D.T.A., to ensure that these dancers had the support

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70 Lancer, "In the dancing world: Brilliant success of the children's night", *Rand Daily Mail*, 24/02/1934, p. 6.

71 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 09/04/1932, p. 3; Lancer, "In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.'s annual election of officials", *Rand Daily Mail*, 17/02/1934, p. 3.

72 Lancer, "In the dancing world: Royal visit causes a rush to studios", *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/02/1934, p. 6; Lancer, "In the dancing world: Success of Amateur Dancers Association", *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/03/1934, p. 6.

73 Lancer, "In the dancing world: Royal visit causes a rush to studios", *Rand Daily Mail*, 10/02/1934, p. 6; Lancer, "In the dancing world: Success of Amateur Dancers Association", *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/03/1934, p. 6.

74 Lancer, "In the dancing world: Success of Amateur Dancers Association", *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/03/1934, p. 6.

75 A. Grant-Smith, "Dancing notes", *Rand Daily Mail*, 18/03/1924, p. 9.

76 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: The 'pets' come to life-Children dancing-'Puss in boots'- The 'Come as somebody' dance by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 17/12/1927, p. 3.

77 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 09/05/1931, p. 7.

78 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 09/05/1931, p. 7.

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of the largest dancing organisation when competing internationally. The incorporation of the various smaller dancing societies consequently gave the S.A.D.T.A. almost all of the power in choosing national representation at international ballroom events.<sup>79</sup>

During March 1936 a new dance association was officially registered under the Company's Act in Pretoria.<sup>80</sup> The *National Association of Teachers of Dancing (S.A.)* (N.A.T.D.A. (S.A.)) was a company based in Pretoria which comprised four dancing subdivisions including an "...Operatic Section, General Section, Greek Section and Ballroom Section...".<sup>81</sup> The main aim of this association, formed by the council of the S.A.D.T.A, was to "gain government recognition for the art of dancing" which, it was hoped, would recognize dancing as a subject in the school curriculum. It thus planned to "...promote and foster the Art of Dancing ..."<sup>82</sup> as well as standardize dancing in all branches and associations of dancing across South Africa.<sup>83</sup> The N.A.T.D.A. (S.A.) recognised the efforts made by other associations since 1924 to "raise the standard of teaching in South Africa"<sup>84</sup> and to protect the public from bad tuition.<sup>85</sup> This new association requested that all the various dance societies in South Africa support the national dancing body. The N.A.T.D.A. (S.A.) further proposed to educate dancers and teachers by facilitating dance examinations, providing training and funds, as well as creating a library that was devoted to dancing with its headquarters at the *South African Academy of Dancing*, with studios, a hall and stage in Pretoria.<sup>86</sup>

### **Almost British**

Although it was felt that "...rules and regulations are necessary concerning competitors in the various dance festivals", some dance critics became aware of the fact that a "broader outlook [was] required if dancing [was] to be further popularised both as a profession and a recreation".<sup>87</sup> From the 1930s onwards the S.A.D.T.A. focussed on expanding its position (or focussing on this "broader outlook") both in South Africa and the rest of the world by enlarging its support base and

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79 E.M.B., "In the dance world: Folk dance festival", *Rand Daily Mail*, 29/02/1936, p. 18.

80 KAB, Kaapstad: LC 1028: Activities of Association: National Association Teachers of Dancing (S.A.). p. 1.

81 KAB, Kaapstad: LC 1028: Activities of Association: National Association Teachers of Dancing (S.A.). p. 1.

82 KAB, Kaapstad: LC 1028: Memorandum of Association: National Association Teachers of Dancing (S.A.). p. 1.

83 KAB, Kaapstad: LC 1028: Memorandum of Association: National Association Teachers of Dancing (S.A.). p. 1; E.M.B., "In the dance world: National dance association", *Rand Daily Mail*, 25/04/1936, p. 5.

84 E.M.B., "In the dance world: National dance association", *Rand Daily Mail*, 25/04/1936, p. 5.

85 E.M.B., "In the dance world: National dance association", *Rand Daily Mail*, 25/04/1936, p. 5.

86 KAB, Kaapstad: LC 1028: Memorandum of Association: National Association Teachers of Dancing (S.A.). p. 1; E.M.B., "In the dance world: National dance association", *Rand Daily Mail*, 25/04/1936, p. 5.

increasing its contact with ballroom dancers in other countries.

Various publications emphasised the important role that international dancers, from the East, but especially those in West, had on South African ballroom.<sup>88</sup> Articles on biography, training, achievements and locations of prominent international ballroom dancers as well as obituaries appeared regularly in the media.<sup>89</sup> As proposed in some of the first meetings held during the 1920s<sup>90</sup> and the official registration document of 1936, the national ballroom dancing body did not only publish information regarding the international development of ballroom dancing. The S.A.D.T.A. also "...engage[d] visiting professionals from overseas or elsewhere to demonstrate new developments in dancing".<sup>91</sup> Although there was initially a considerable amount of doubt if the "heavy expenses" to sponsor overseas experts was worthwhile, a media report stated that the international experts that were brought to South Africa greatly benefited the South African ballroom dancing scene.<sup>92</sup>

Since London was generally regarded as the "centre of the [dancing] world"<sup>93</sup> and because South Africa already had such close ties with Britain, dancing organisations invited mostly British ballroom dance competitors and teachers as often as possible.<sup>94</sup> Accomplished international dancers like Leslie Murray and Barbara Miles<sup>95</sup> not only judged South African ballroom competitions, but also danced at numerous functions and did dance exhibitions that drew large numbers of spectators.<sup>96</sup> British teachers and prominent dancers like Josephine Bradley, (the vice president for the London branch of the Imperial Society of Dance)

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87 Lancer, "In the dancing world: Why not a National Board of Control?", *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/03/1935, p. 6.

88 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 15/12/1928, p. 5.

89 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 05/09/1932, p. 6. The *Rand Daily Mail* commented extensively on the death of prominent British dancer Wellesley Smith in October 1931 and found it to be a "great tragedy" both for the international dancing world and South Africa. T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 31/10/1931, p. 14.

90 Already in 1927 it was decided that in order to "... bring out the proficiency of its members..." the best coaching talent in London should be brought to South Africa. Lancer, "In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.'s annual election of officials", *Rand Daily Mail*, 17/02/1934, p. 6.

91 KAB, Kaapstad: LC 1028: Memorandum of Association: National Association Teachers of Dancing (S.A.). p. 2.

92 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 16/05/1931, p. 7.

93 Lancer, "In the dancing world: Why not a National Board of Control?", *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/03/1935, p. 6.

94 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 09/08/1930, p. 12; T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 30/07/1927, p. 7.

95 Barbara Miles along with her partner Maxwell Stewart won the second world ballroom dance championship in 1924 and also won the world championship in 1925. For more information on Miles see T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 07/11/1931, p. 16

continued to tour through South Africa throughout the second half of the 1930s to demonstrate ballroom dances and styles from England and, like Murray and Miles, judge competitions.<sup>97</sup> These foreign ballroom dancers brought enthusiasm to the local dance floors as well as a high standard of dancing to the Union.

To further increase the standard of dancing in South Africa, programs were created where South African and British teachers exchanged places in their relevant British or South African studios to teach and study for a few months abroad.<sup>98</sup> The international visits subsequently made the incorporation of new steps easier and more uniform as the standardisation of the technique enabled ballroom dance teachers to prepare dancers from a recognised syllabus for a local or international competition floor.<sup>99</sup> The introduction of English dance masters further spurred interest in British ballroom competitions and the media now and again published competition programs of British championships.<sup>100</sup>

While this unremitting focus on Britain did manage to establish an organised and highly competitive ballroom dancing community in South Africa, it also made competitive ballroom dancing completely reliant on British approval. Consequently, instead of South African ballroom dancing being developed and adapted to South African circumstances South Africa ballroom dancing technique and rules were based on the British system and were executed as in Britain. By 1931 Johannesburg was as close to the formal British ballrooms as dancers could be, considering the distance. It was said that the city closely “...follows the fashion in England” regarding ballroom dancing where the “...waltz, foxtrot and quick step reign supreme, with occasional branchings [sic.] off into some new dance which offers the temptation of novelty.”<sup>101</sup>

Although most of the serious Transvaal competitors were, thanks to frequent publicity in the 1930s, well aware of the most fashionable

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- 96 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 05/09/1931, p. 6; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 29/08/1931, p. 16. T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 19/09/1931, p. 6; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 31/10/1931, p. 14
- 97 E.M.B., “In the dance world: Dancers teach the army how to march”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/05/1936, p. 5; E.M.B., “In the dance world: South African Operatic championships”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 16/05/1936, p. 5; Anonym, “In the dance world: S.A. ballroom championships at Exhibition”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 23/05/1936, p. 5; E.M.B., “In the dance world: Ballroom Festival dates”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 15/02/1936, p. 6.
- 98 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 19/12/1931, p. 13; “Dancing”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 20/11/1934, p. 2; Lancer, “In the dancing world: Encouragement for Rand dancers”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 08/12/1934, p. 8.
- 99 Lancer, “In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.’s annual election of officials”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 17/02/1934, p. 6.
- 100 E.M.B., “In the dance world: Origin of the Rumba”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 22/02/1936, p. 7.
- 101 Anonym, “Controlling dancing affairs: S.A. Dancing Teachers’ Association”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/10/1931, p. 14.

international dance crazes, such as the American *Jitterbug*, few of these “spasmodic bursts” of new dances managed to find their way into the formal, white, South African ballroom.<sup>102</sup> There was a “general apathy” from the dancing officials to embrace new dances in the South African ballroom mainly because they were regarded as too complex for the “average dancer”.<sup>103</sup> The S.A.D.T.A.’s initial aim was to implement a status quo for each dancing tempo as well as its variations. The standardisation of tempos remained at the center of its objectives. However, in order for the S.A.D.T.A.’s members to be “ballroom dance champions” the organisation had to some degree incorporate these “crazes” on the dancing floor to ensure South African dancers stayed competitive in the international dancing arena.<sup>104</sup> Consequently any new dances or variations of the standard dances were critically assessed, scrutinised and often discredited, before they were hesitantly incorporated in to the syllabus. The organisation attained this by continually controlling the level and manner in which the recurrent influx of different “craze dances” would be incorporated into the competition floor.<sup>105</sup>

Elements of the Blues and Jazz dance craze that swept over metropolises like London, New York and social Johannesburg in the late 1920s and 1930s were only gradually incorporated into the South African competition floor. Although sometimes toning it down slightly to make it more adaptable for the formal ballroom, the sliding beat of the 1920s Foxtrot was adjusted to a more moderate tempo in most of the international and South African ballrooms.<sup>106</sup> Interestingly, although black dancers were excluded from the white dance competitions and formal associations, the “African elite” adhered to the white example of not incorporating these crazes.<sup>107</sup> These did however become an integral part of many of the shebeens and township dance venues of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>108</sup>

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102 Lancer, “In the dancing world: Two famous dancers”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 29/12/1934, p. 6.

103 Lancer, “In the dancing world: S.A.D.T.A.’s first elementary ballroom test”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 03/02/1934, p. 6; Lancer, “In the dancing world: A great revival of interest in ballet”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 22/12/1934, p. 5

104 KAB, Kaapstad: LC 1028: Memorandum of Association: National Association Teachers of Dancing (S.A.). p. 2; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 01/10/1927, p. 5; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 19/11/1927, p. 5.

105 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 15/03/1930, p. 5.

106 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 13/09/1930, p. 12.

107 Coplan and others differentiates between groups of black people based on their leisure choices: the mission educated African middle class “who worked in Johannesburg as clerks, teachers, preachers and tradesmen” and regarded themselves as “...an elite cultural vanguard of African society”, and the “...unskilled domestic, commercial, and industrial workers...with little regard for moral admonitions”. D. B. Coplan, “The African musician and the development of the Johannesburg entertainment industry, 1900-1960”, *Journal of southern African studies*, 5(2), April 1979, p. 136; D. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre*, p. 128; Scipio Africanus, “A new development of dance styles takes place among the Reef Bantu”, *The Bantu World*, 28/05/1932, p. 9.



The years leading up to the Second World War subsequently saw the strengthening of the S.A.D.T.A. along the lines of the British standard ballroom dance example, the widening of its local support bases, record numbers of entrances and public attendance at competitions.<sup>109</sup>

### **Missing the beat**

It was however, the problems that the S.A.D.T.A. experienced amongst themselves administratively speaking, as well as in getting the most basic dancing amenities in order, that increasingly alienated ballroom dancing from the general public. By the mid 1930s it was clear that South African ballroom dancing truly needed a “unified basis” from which the tempo, interpretation and standard of dances could be monitored and refined if competitive dancing was to maintain its interest within society.<sup>110</sup> During this time the South African competitive dancing organisations put much of their efforts into taking control of the basic dancing amenities and changing the local infrastructure to suit competitive ballroom. The strong emphasise that was placed on restructuring the South African ballroom however important it was in sustaining an official dancing body, often separated these organisations from itself and its members.<sup>111</sup>

There was considerable rivalry, especially during the late 1920s and early 1930s, between the different provincial dancing talents and ballroom dancing branches in South Africa. As much time went into comparing the dancing standards of different branches, as in to promoting competitions and provincial championship couples. Dance critics noted in 1931 that the standard of the Transvaal couples was “excellent” and far ahead of Natal where the dancing among the general public was “poor” and the interest in dancing “lukewarm”.<sup>112</sup> In order to sustain their “honor”, a special effort was made by the members of the Transvaal branch of the S.A.D.T.A. to raise funds for the Transvaal leading couple (Jack Strydom and Mildred McLaren) to dance at the South African championships in Cape Town and “wrest” the trophy from the previous

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108 C. Ballantine, *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville* (Johannesburg, 1993); “Charity dance held at Bloemfontein to help poor children”, *The Bantu World*, 17/03/1934, p. 16; “Bantu keenly enjoy modern life they develop social activities”, *The Bantu World*, 17/09/1932, p. 9; “Who’s who in the news this week”, *The Bantu World*, 05/01/1934, p. 15

109 Lancer, “In the dancing world: Why not a National Board of Control?”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/03/1935, p.6; Lancer, “In the dancing world: Brilliant success of the dance festival”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 23/03/1935, p. 6.

110 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 19/11/1927, p. 3; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 31/12/1927, p. 5.

111 The *Rand Daily Mail* commented with disillusion on the general lack of “inspiration” and “skill” in 1936. E.M.B., “In the dance world: National dance association”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 25/04/1936, p. 5.

112 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 12/09/1931, p. 14; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 30/01/1932, p. 3; Lancer, “In the dancing world: Encouragement for Rand dancers”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 08/12/1934, p. 8.

winner's hands.<sup>113</sup> This apparent lack of talent in the Natal and Cape Town branches could however have been attributed more to a lack of funds to sustain a high standard of ballroom dancing teachers and less to a lack of talent or willpower as the Transvaal branch insinuated.<sup>114</sup> During the 1930 "South African Amateur Ballroom Championships" it was clear to the dancers and adjudicators present, that, although "Johannesburg dance bands [and schools] are bigger and better than the Capetown [sic.] bands" the standard of dancing in Capetown [sic.] is the highest in South Africa".<sup>115</sup> While another examiner stated that although the steps in the competitive ballroom dancing were "admirable", Johannesburg's dancers are far better concerning their style and finishing.<sup>116</sup> The Johannesburg male dancers were found to be especially good partners because they were "men who zig-zag, curve and slide, who do accomplished variations and fully sustain the honour of the ballroom".<sup>117</sup> The passion that each ballroom branch in South Africa had for their dancers and ballroom dancing was admirable. Judging by the views held by international dancers on the quality of dancing in South Africa it appears as if no section or region was significantly worse or better than any other, but that the best dancing schools, and consequently the best dancers, were located in the bigger metropolises.<sup>118</sup>

Soon after the founding of the various dancing organisations in South Africa tension arose concerning the participation of a dancer in more than one organisation. The S.A.D.T.A. indicated very early on in its existence that it would not lend support towards ballroom dancers that were not members of its organisation and forbade its members to participate in any competition that was not approved by the S.A.D.T.A. before hand. Any other organisation that consequently tried to organise a ballroom dancing competition had to first get the "approval" of the S.A.D.T.A. before its members were allowed to attend the event. It is evident from, for example, the 1931 and 1932 rivalry between the S.A.D.T.A. and the National Eisteddfod Organising Committee that, this tension between different dancing organisations often alienated some from the competitive dancing world.<sup>119</sup>

Dance teachers from different branches of the S.A.D.T.A. frequently went to the competitions of other dance regions to adjudicate as professional

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- 113 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 12/09/1931, p. 14.
- 114 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22/08/1931, p. 7.
- 115 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 27/12/1930, p. 6.
- 116 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 05/03/1932, p. 3.
- 117 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/04/1932, p. 3.
- 118 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 13/12/1930, p. 6.
- 119 T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 06/02/1932, p. 12; T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 05/12/1931, p. 14; T. Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl", *Rand Daily Mail*, 06/02/1932, p. 12.

and “impartial” observers.<sup>120</sup> The adjudication of dancers was however another sensitive issue that sparked much debate and strain in dancing circles. While the greater majority of competitive dancers in South Africa supported the idea of adjudicators, they could not agree on who the adjudicators should be and how they should judge the competitions. While some sectors decided by a public vote, where the public would indicate who the “best dancers” were and thus judged on the artistic or performance quality of the dancers, other sectors were adjudicated by dance teachers and consequently judged on the technical correctness of the dance.<sup>121</sup>

Although a great concern for the professional dancers, it was nevertheless not the infighting between the ballroom branches, but also the problems in finding bands that would play up-to-date dance music, which caused much tension among the dancers. It was reported that during the mid 1930s: “...the various professional associations dictate their own terms, the orchestras play to their own time, and the enthusiastic dancer pays but cannot call the tune!”<sup>122</sup> Since the new syncopated dances raised questions concerning what was “acceptable dancing” in the ballroom, it was important for the S.A.D.T.A. and other dancing organisations in South Africa to find ballroom dance bands that could play to their prescribed beat.<sup>123</sup> Yet, both local and international ballroom dance experts found that, although South Africa had excellent ballroom teachers that created students with an exceptional knowledge and technique of ballroom dancing, the few *Palais de Danse* and limited number of “first-class” bands restricted the potential development of dancing in South Africa.<sup>124</sup>

According to British experts, it was the “band that made the dancer” and thus it became essential that South African musicians adjusted their performances in order to make it more suitable for the formal white ballroom.<sup>125</sup> Dance band competitions were proposed as the only way to establish a “marked improvement” in the dance music.<sup>126</sup> Dance band competitions had already been introduced in the early twentieth century in Cape Town whereby bands were judged on their ability and variety of dance music they were able to play. Plans to launch these dance band

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120 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 14/07/1930, p. 7; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 16/08/1930, p. 12.

121 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 29/08/1931, p. 16; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 17/05/1931, p. 5

122 Lancer, “In the dancing world: Why not a National Board of Control?”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 02/03/1935, p. 6.

123 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 19/11/1927, p. 3; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 31/12/1927, p. 5.

124 Lancer, “In the dancing world: Encouragement for Rand dancers”, 08/12/1934, p. 8; T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 31/12/1927, p. 5.

125 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 29/10/1927, p. 6.

126 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by ‘Treble Violl’”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 28/06/1930, p. 12.

competitions in the Transvaal were only introduced in 1932.<sup>127</sup> Informal dance band competitions were already a regular event in some of the townships, but it appears as if this never gained significant favour among white dance bands in the Transvaal. According to the South African dance public, dance bands and orchestras had no excuse for their poor performances and that they just had to listen to the “new dance records, which reflected very accurately what is going on” in the dancing world.<sup>128</sup> Complaints about the quality of dance bands however continued throughout the 1930s and this along with the problems within the S.A.D.T.A. caused the white South African ballroom dance standard to fall.<sup>129</sup>

### **Conclusion: Stepping beyond the war**

The Second World War, along with the new political dispensation, completely changed the economic, social and political situation in South Africa. Both the consequences of the Second War and the reality of Apartheid intensified the division that existed within the ballroom dance fraternity. Despite the social, cultural and economic restrictions placed on dancing during the war years, ballroom dancing appeared to remain a popular leisure and competitive activity among the urban white residents.<sup>130</sup>

However, apart from its social appeal, it was both the long involvement that ballroom dancing had within South African society at large, as well as the practicing of ballroom dancing on a competitive level from the 1920s and 1930s, that appears to have sustained its presence in South African communities up to the present day. The 1980s was a turning point in South Africa’s competitive ballroom dance history. During this time the South African Dance Sport Federation (SADSF) that consisted of the Transvaal Amateur Dance Association (TADA) the Cape Amateur Dance Association (CADA) and the Natal Amateur Dance Association (NADA) was formed to control white dancing competitive events. The beginning of the 1990s saw the creation of the South African National Council for Amateur Dancers (SANCAD), a national organisation for black dancers. In 1994 the black and white dancing bodies finally amalgamated to form the Federation of Dance Sport South Africa (FEDANSA). In 2006 the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee (SASCOC) recognized FEDANSA as the “sole representative for Dance Sport in South Africa”.<sup>131</sup>

The progress and popularity in ballroom dancing during the 1920s and

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127 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 27/02/1932, p. 14.

128 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 09/07/1927, p. 7.

129 E.M.B., “In the dance world: National dance association”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 25/04/1936, p. 5.

130 National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria: Marabastad exhibition, visited 1 August 2007. WITS, Johannesburg: A 410, B 2.8.13, M Ballinger, Correspondence: individuals: E. Louw 1943-1960; Anonym, “Fine effort for medical aid for Russia”, *Guardian*, 4 March 1943, p. 7.

1930s were, according to the media, due to the “courageous work” done by the S.A.D.T.A.<sup>132</sup> However, although the national dance organisation committed itself to “...co-operate with dance bands, dance organisers and members of the dancing public in an effort to improve the standard of dancing and increase its enjoyment...”, only a relatively small and exclusive portion of white society were allowed to dance the competitions and thereby benefited.<sup>133</sup> The need to structure the dancing arena along strict rules in the late 1920s enabled the S.A.D.T.A. and A.D.A. to create national dancing bodies, introduce dance to children and organise competitions of a high standard. However, it also inevitably meant excluding those that did not have money for lessons to learn the “right” steps or buy appropriate clothes to look like a ballroom dancer or have access to transport to attend competitions and practise sessions. Furthermore, despite its promise to regularly introduce professionals from the international dance floor to judge and teach local talent, by 1939 the competition dances still consisted of the Waltz, Quick Step, Foxtrot and Tango with little contemporary figures or variations. While the blacks in the townships were dancing dances like the *Jitterbug* to international records, the white competitive dancers failed or refused to incorporate the new dance beat into their routines.

By the end of the 1930s the rift between the social and the competitive dancing worlds had become almost unbridgeable. In the 1920s and the 1930s social dancing became synonymous with an occasional evening out at a club or civic ball dressed in fashionable finery and dancing to popular music. Competitive ballroom dancing which dominated the white ballroom dancing scene, on the other hand, was focused on perfecting the steps of the internationally recognized ballroom dancing syllabus, hard hours of practise at any one of the various professional dancing schools and competing in ballroom gowns that were specifically designed to complement the various dances. Ballroom dancing was, after almost two decades since its inception in South Africa, standardised and accepted not only as a social activity but also as a competitive art form in South African society.

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131 FEDANSA.org, <<http://www.fedansa.org/history.php>>, 2006. Access: 25/02/2008.

132 T. Violl, “Dancing and the ballroom: notes and comments by Treble Violl”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 16/05/1931, p. 7.

133 KAB, Kaapstad: LC 1028: Memorandum of Association: National Association Teachers of Dancing (S.A.). p. 2.