

# Amateur Dancers

The United States Amateur Ballroom Dancers Association, Inc.

November/December \$4.50

A man in a black tuxedo with a white shirt and bowtie is dancing with a woman in a bright orange, long-sleeved, sequined dress. They are in a ballroom setting with other dancers in the background. The man is looking towards the camera with a slight smile, while the woman is leaning back, smiling with her eyes closed.

**Why Men  
Should Dance**

**Crossing Borders**

**Teaching Great  
Group Classes**

**The Woman is the Painting:  
The Man is the Frame**

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Permit #111  
Little Rock, AR

by Michael Fitzmaurice

# Quick-Quick With A Heel-Ball-Toe

Female, Black, poet and ballroom dancer, this combination might be called the Grand Slam of minority experience encompassing gender, race, vocation, and avocation, two by nature, two by nurture, a veritable punishment stew with oddsmakers in Vegas handicapping a life destined for disappointment 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 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 person -- 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

*continued on page 35*

## Ed Notes

continued from page 3

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 sifting 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 clicks. 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 it became part of my reality."

In "American Smooth," Dove utilizes ballroom dance not just as a stepping-stone 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



Photograph by Fred Viebahn

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 McDaniels, 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." ■