

# A lesson in chemistry

Marianka Swain discovers the formula for a great partnership

"We're always striving for complete harmony – two people merging into one," explains choreographer and teacher Kele Baker. "But there are different routes to that destination. Some couples have natural chemistry, either romantic or platonic; others have to work to create or project it."

"If you can develop a strong connection, it makes everything else easier – learning, developing, performing, competing," adds coach Sheila Williams. "Otherwise it's a Catch-22: because you're not on the same page emotionally, it makes the physical side more challenging, and then, because you're struggling dance-wise, it's harder to connect as people because you're frustrated with one another."

"It's vital that you align your goals, so this becomes a shared passion," agrees Kele. "Whether you're dancing socially, working towards exams, competing or doing shows, you have to know what you both want to get out of this process. Dance partnerships don't survive without communication."

"You shouldn't feel pressured to emulate someone else or put on a certain type of persona," advises Sheila. "There are different kinds

of chemistry, from romantic or flirtatious to simmering drama or joyful, so it's a question of figuring out what's appropriate for a particular dance, occasion and partnership. For example, if I'm coaching Juvenile dancers, I tell them to think about being 'happy' rather than 'flirtatious' or 'cross' rather than 'sexy'!

"Couples working on their wedding dance have an immediate connection, but need to decide whether to bring something private into a public sphere, as opposed to professionals, who have to project a performance. If they have an easy natural chemistry in rehearsal, they still need to exaggerate it to reach the judges or an audience, and if theirs is a fun connection, that works for cha cha but not paso, so they'll need to find different shades."

Kele thinks variety is one of the benefits of ballroom: "The dancefloor can become a safe space where you're allowed to

experiment and show all kinds of emotions, without consequences off the floor. Sometimes a 'character' helps – that mask gives you permission to explore – and different partners bring out different sides of you, making you more ebullient, or aggressive, or sensual. You're free to experience the dynamics of those relationships and how they affect your movement.

"Of course, that does sometimes contribute to a 'real' relationship or perhaps create the illusion of it. If you're passionate about dancing, you're likely to create a bond with someone with shares that passion, plus by making yourself open to the experience, someone may well push your buttons or vice versa. Ballroom is a contact sport in more ways than one!"

Sheila thinks that blurring of boundaries can be positive and negative: "The best chemistry comes from a real place, whether ▶

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In a class of their own:  
Gene Kelly and  
Cyd Charisse, pictured  
here in *Singin' in the Rain*



Photograph from the Dancing Times archive

## Top of the class

**“Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse** are magnetic – they make even the tiniest movement powerful.” – Kele Baker

**“Christopher Hawkins and Hazel Newberry** were outstanding because theirs was a totally balanced partnership – you saw them equally.” – KB

**“Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey** allowed themselves to be so grounded and raw. I love their courage.” – Sheila Williams

**“Louis van Amstel and Julie Fryer** understood that less is more. They danced for each other and drew you into their world.” – KB

**“Fred and Ginger** were an unlikely pairing in some ways, but when we embrace those differences, we create magic.” – SW

you build on a friendship or draw on emotions from other relationships, as an actor might – that’s ultimately more compelling than an artificial performance. However, if your dance chemistry is completely tied up in romance with your partner and then something goes awry in your relationship, you’re in trouble!”

At the other end of the spectrum, some couples have

trouble making any connection at all. “If that happens, I use acting awareness exercises, asking each dancer questions like ‘How does your partner’s hand feel in yours?’ or ‘How does the shape of your partner’s back feel when you support it?’, or working on them breathing together,” says Kele.

“Once they’re physically aware of each other’s needs, they often become emotionally supportive as well and then they can show a

‘true’ connection, built up through layers of trust and understanding. That draws the observer into the reality of their experience.

“I saw a couple at a wheelchair dancesport competition recently who had such a strong connection through their constant eye contact that I couldn’t stop watching them. Even in a stressful environment like a competition, it’s electrifying to see those moments of real, human emotion.” ●