

WOULD YOU CARE TO DANCE?

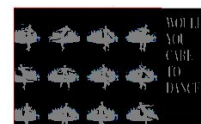
Ballroom novice Steve King accepts an invitation to sort his discofox from his cha-cha-cha at a cultural retreat in a Bavarian schloss

Mikhail Baryshnikov claimed that, on his way to becoming one of the greatest dancers of the 20th century, he never tried to dance better than anyone else, only better than himself. Ah, Mikhail. I know the feeling, dear fellow. Although in *my* case the feeling is based on a cast-iron certainty – which surely *you* never felt, not for a nanosecond – that everyone else *does* dance better than me.

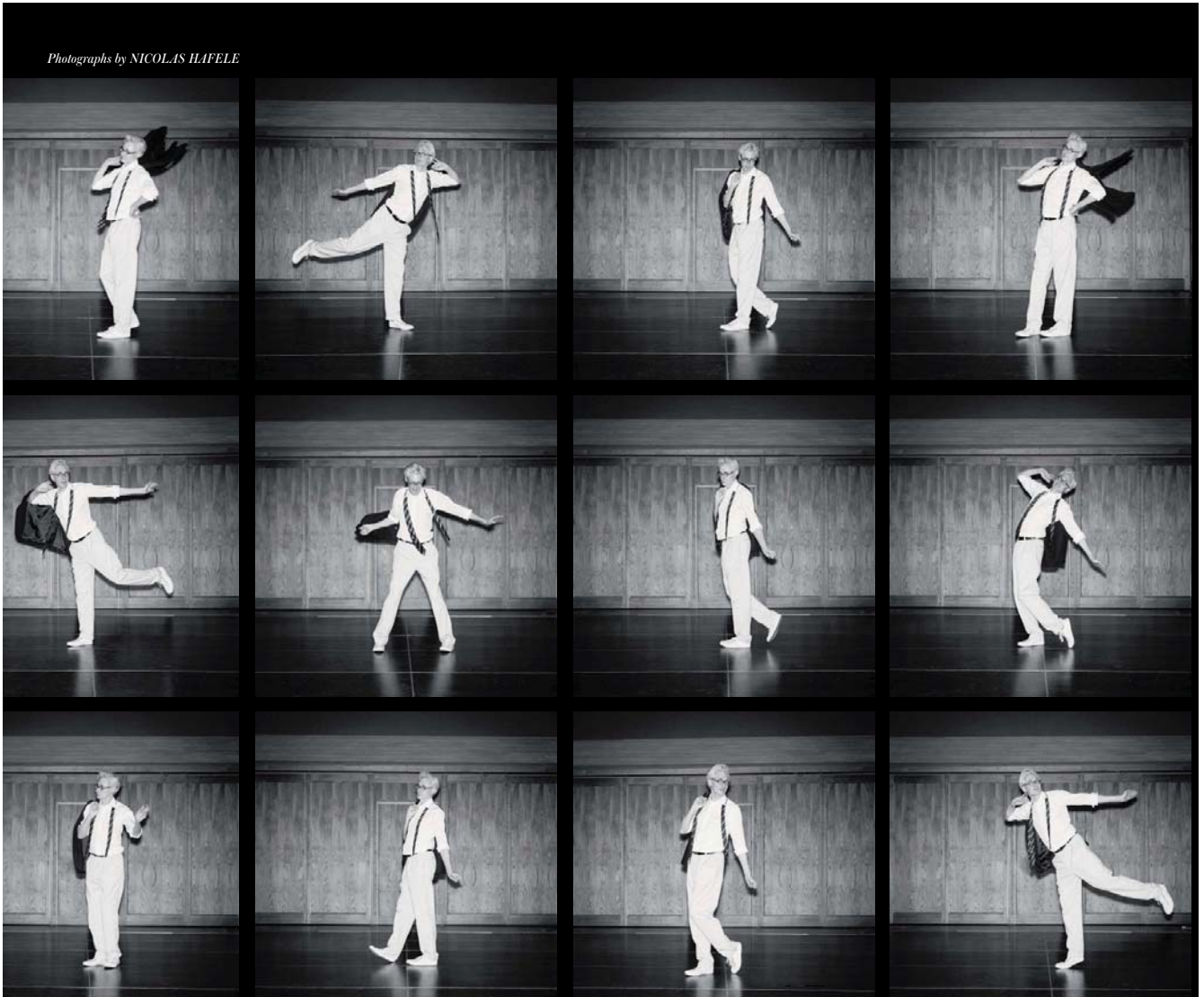
I learnt to dance as a child, happily enough, but the

waltz and the foxtrot were of less urgent interest to me than my cricket bat, and quickly forgotten. Fast-forward the best part of four decades, and my growing admiration for those who dance well, combined with an excruciating sense of my own goofiness on the tiles, got me thinking. Time to do something about it.

So when I was invited to join a five-day ‘dance retreat’ last month, I – well, I was about to say I leapt at the opportunity, but that would give the wrong impression. I did nothing as fleet or as nimble as that. I lurched, I tottered, I veered, I stumbled; in any case, I accepted the invitation and made my way to Schloss Elmau. Here



Photographs by NICOLAS HAFELE



amid the lakes and hummocky meadows of the Bavarian Alps, near the southernmost tip of Germany, the dance retreat would take place.

These days Schloss Elmau is best known for having hosted not one but two G7 summits, in 2015 and 2022, and for its expansive, world-class, state-of-the-art wellness offering (half a dozen spas plus what is supposedly the largest hammam west of Istanbul). But these are relatively recent additions, and there's more to Schloss Elmau than that.

It was created in 1916 by Dr Johannes Müller, a theologian and philosopher, as a venue where like-minded people could go to thrash out the issues of the day – and to dance. Today it's owned and managed by Müller's grandson, Dietmar Müller-Elmau, who has sought to extend and enrich its intellectual tradition, in particular the emphasis on music and literature. Müller-Elmau was excited about the new dance retreats. 'I want dance to become as integral to what we do here as yoga, though in a different way from the way it was in the past,' he told me. 'Some years ago I spoke at a wellness summit in Bali. "Never mind your expensive creams and lotions and all that other stuff," I said. "There is only one treatment that has been scientifically proven to have a regenerative effect on the human brain. And that is dance." Plenty of hotels host musical or literary events. But I can't think of anywhere else that does so in such a thoroughgoing and committed fashion. And the point about dance's remarkable health benefits, particularly its positive impact on neuroplasticity, or the brain's ability to change, adapt and make new connections, is corroborated by a growing body of research. As Müller-Elmau, who has a knack for tidy soundbites, put it, 'It's the most hedonistic monastery in the world.'

The main building was badly damaged by fire in 2005, but the famous concert hall on its first floor was spared. It's a gorgeous space – vast, airy, uncluttered, radiant in the daytime with natural light beaming in through arched windows. The most elegant barn in Bavaria. This is where the dancing lessons I'd signed up for were held.

There were 28 of us, 14 couples, almost all German, plus our instructor, Pia David, an eminent professional dancer from Hamburg, and her partner, Thomas Kobjolke. Arriving for the first lesson, I spotted David immediately. She had 'five-time national ballroom and Latin champion' written all over her. Posture like an

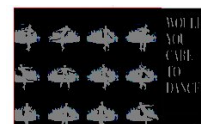
exclamation mark. Hair that might have been spun from surplus gold medals. 'I apologise in advance,' I said when we were introduced. 'I don't speak German and I'm a dancing idiot.' 'No problem,' came the reply. 'I speak English and dancing idiots are my specialty.'

By an exceptional stroke of good luck, I was partnered with another woman for whom neither a foreign language nor native incompetence was an obstacle, Katja von Armansperg. In the days that followed, I came to realise that von Armansperg was precisely the sort of person for whom Schloss Elmau was intended – a deep thinker with a love of music and books, along with an ability not only to talk to but also to dance with whomsoever she happens to find herself thrown into contact.

David started us off with the waltz. I thought that with this one at least I should be OK. It would all come flooding back, as easy as one-two-three, one-two-three. And to a certain extent it did. The only issue was that, in Germany, a gentleman leads with the right foot, not, as I had previously been taught, the left. This small but significant difference was too much for my brain to compute. My coordination went flying out of one of those big, beautiful windows high over the Wetterstein Mountains. Poor Katja. I owe her a new pair of shoes for all the stomping I did on the ones she was wearing that day.

We danced for 90 minutes each afternoon in the concert hall, then for as long as we liked after dinner in one of the bars downstairs, with David and Kobjolke on hand to offer further tips and moral support. There are scheduled events of various kinds most evenings. Schloss Elmau hosts about 220 concerts a year. Musicians play to stay – that is, they're not paid for their performances but they don't receive a bill when they check out. The arrangement appears to suit all parties well. Marquee names are practically queuing up for a gig at Schloss Elmau. 'Forget Tripadvisor,' Müller-Elmau said. 'The calibre of the musicians who are willing to play to stay is the measure of our success.'

On my second morning I walked to a nearby lake, Ferchensee. The day was bright and clear. Although snow was thick on the ground and the way icy in parts, I was soon warm enough to remove my gloves. It was just the walk I needed after my wobble with the waltz. Navigating was easy – I simply followed a stream – so my mind was free to wander. In two and a half hours I saw



no more than half a dozen other walkers. From my rucksack I unpacked a picnic lunch of fruit, nuts, cheese and chocolate, which I ate with my back resting against a pile of neatly chopped wood.

Always a bit slow to perceive patterns emerging, I had assumed that day two's dance, something called the discofox, would be an updated version of the foxtrot, and that, once again, muscle memory would see me through without disgrace. Once again I was wrong. The discofox has nothing to do with the foxtrot. It was inspired by some of the steps in *Saturday Night Fever*. Despite my own disappointment, my sense was that most of the group loved the discofox and found it easy to get the hang of. Towards the end of the lesson, several couples were experimenting with turns and dips and other embellishments. 'Ja, ja!' David enthused. 'Die Sau rauslassen!' This caused my partner to hoot with laughter. 'What's she saying?' I asked. 'Literally, it means, "Let the sow out." She's telling us to cut loose, go crazy.'

The dance that did more than any other to bring out the inner swine in our herd, however, was the cha-cha-cha, on day three. That was when we reached peak pig. One of David's themes throughout the lessons was the primary importance of togetherness, of connection between partners, and the pleasure that this can bring. I asked her whether, despite her years of success at the highest level, this was something that could get lost in the constant whirl of the professional scene, with its inevitable strains and stresses and rivalries. 'Oooof! Hallo-o-o-o!' she cried.

I would guess that, proud as she is – and should be – of her achievements in competitions, she is equally proud of her ability to persuade novices that the poise and confidence she displays are within their reach. She was not always, she confided, the unflappable figure with all the moves that we saw before us. 'When I was a girl, dancing taught me that I could sparkle also. That I was not just a little grey mouse.'

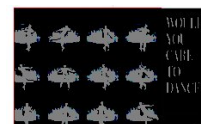
For me, it all came together on day four. The tango. For reasons that make no sense whatsoever to me now, I had slightly dreaded it. In fact those 90 minutes passed like a sunbeam. My partner could scarcely conceal her amazement as we lunged and glided and kicked. I felt we could have tangoed till kingdom come.

Instead, we had to vacate the concert hall on time so that another highlight of the week's cultural programme, a talk between the novelists Ian McEwan and

Daniel Kehlmann, could go ahead. Funnily enough, it was only when they took to the stage that I realised one of them, Kehlmann, had been attending the dance retreat too, accompanied by his corkscrew-curved wife. On stage with McEwan, Kehlmann navigated the conversation with complete control, the two of them exchanging *recherché* quotes, witty anecdotes and clever perceptions with the effortless grace of Fred and Ginger. Afterwards, in the bar where the dancing group reconvened, Kehlmann plodded around on two left feet, as merry and as awkward as the rest of us. I recalled one of the many lovely things David had said: 'I'm happy if people leave my classes and say, "I forgot all the steps but I learnt how to dance."' ●

The next Dance Retreat at Schloss Elmau is 17-22 March. From €2,320, including dance lessons, dance parties, spa access, yoga and fitness classes, talks and concerts (schloss-elmau.de)

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PREVIOUS SPREAD Steve King cutting a caper or two at a wintry Schloss Elmau (above), and with dance teacher Pia David (top)

