

Belle of the Baile

An aspiring folk dancer gets an unexpected lesson in grace



BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE ■ ILLUSTRATION BY ANDY WARD

I arrived for my first class clutching an old pair of ballet shoes. Yolanda Sanchez, the director of Round Rock Ballet Folklórico, shot me a sympathetic smile. “Do you have any ... other type of shoes to wear?”

We stood inside a warehouse where a dozen people were gazing at me—mostly Latino parents waiting for their kids to wrap up a dance class. I imagined everyone wondering what this 37-year-old *gringa* with ballet shoes was doing here. I started to wonder that myself. I’d always been interested in Mexican culture, and I’d recently seen a dance troupe perform at a Day of the Dead festival and wanted to learn more. So here I was.

Yolanda rifled through a bin of folklórico shoes, each with dozens of tiny nails covering the heels and toes, and found a pair that fit me. When

we were finally alone, she taught me a simple dance called *La Bruja* and explained its cultural underpinnings. Despite its simplicity, the dance was elegant, and Yolanda was encouraging. I returned for more one-on-one classes.

I noticed that Yolanda’s lessons never started or ended on time. Instead, sauntering around the room in her sneakers and brick red lipstick, peering through dark-rimmed glasses, the 68-year-old instructor chatted with everyone, peppering in a few motivational words and drawing out goodbyes. At first, I found this disregard for punctuality frustrating. But with the additional time, I got to know some of the parents, and they began sharing memories of learning ballet folklórico when they were kids. Some wished they still danced. One day, a mom suddenly jumped up and joined me in *La Presumida*. “It was the

first dance I ever learned,” she said wistfully. “You never forget.”

According to Yolanda, who was born in Monterrey, Mexico, this is how classes are run south of the border. Folklórico isn’t just about learning the steps, she said. It’s also about community. One day, she invited me to join some experienced dancers as they prepared for a *Día de los Muertos* performance. She asked me to tell the group what Day of the Dead meant to me. Once again, I felt self-conscious—who was I to talk about Day of the Dead? I could hear my voice shaking. “I lost my mom in 2013,” I said. “When I attended my first *Día de los Muertos* celebration last year, I was moved by how death was something to celebrate instead of just feel sad about”—and how it was, in fact, one of the reasons why I wanted to learn ballet folklórico, as an outlet for my grief. Afterward, one of the dancers gave me a hug. I was touched.

A few months later, I got up the nerve to ask Yolanda something that had been in the back of my mind since I first stepped into her studio. “Would anyone be offended at the idea of a *gringa* performing Mexican dances?” Her answer was immediate and emphatic: “No. We’re all equal. And Mexican folklórico is actually about the world coming together.” In fact, there’s evidence that Mexican folk dancing has been influenced by Europeans and Africans—or as Yolanda calls the world’s people, “a beautiful bouquet of flowers.”

I still study with Yolanda. While I doubt I’ve become the best dancer, I’ve discovered something more meaningful to me than even the most graceful folklórico step: a sense of belonging in Yolanda’s community.

Austin-based travel writer Cynthia J. Drake is always one of the first people on the dance floor.