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Nov 11, 2019 13:11 GMT

EXPERT COMMENT: Meet the raunchy dance teachers who helped shape the modern world

In an article written for The Conversation, Rachael Durkin and Katherine Butler, senior lecturers in Music at Northumbria University, discuss the history of dance masters and how this has impacted modern Britain.

Get ready for some romance on the dance floor as the second series of Flirty Dancing kicks off. For those that missed the previous outing, it's the UK dating show where singletons learn one half of a dance for a week and then perform it with a stranger without saying a word. Viewers are treated to "just a few intense minutes of beautiful choreography" to see if sparks fly.

Reassuming the role of dancing master is Ashley Banjo of Diversity, the dance troupe that won Britain's Got Talent in 2009. Flirty Dancing is also weeks away from launching a version in the US, so it looks set to become the latest major British TV export following other successes like Pop Idol and Love Island.

Modern viewers might think of Flirty Dancing as little more than a cross between Strictly Come Dancing and Blind Date. But as music historians, we know that the idea of dancing masters – instructors who prepared pupils to dance at balls to find the love of their life – dates back hundreds of years. It is rooted in the 17th- and 18th-century fashion for formal dances as a means to court and marry.

There is a fascinating history of colourful dancing masters, most of them working class, who knew a route up the social ladder when it was staring them in the face. These men endured ridicule from some who sought their

services, but they would shape the future in a way that is too often forgotten.

You shall go to the ball

Think of the 18th century and it likely conjures up images of BBC period dramas, of grand houses and gloved hands, of Mr Darcy and proper behaviour and peacocks on the lawn. At least for those with the means, it was a time when balls and dances became public events. They spawned the purpose-built assembly rooms that are still found in many of the UK's cities today. These were the most fashionable places to be seen in the era – often built at great expense to welcome local and visiting gentry.

Dances served as a form of speed dating. Just like in Flirty Dancing, many couples would meet on the dance floor for the first time. As one of few opportunities for the sexes to freely mix, it facilitated courting between unfamiliar families or across the class divide.

Dancing masters became the must-have tutors of the era – not only in Britain but across Europe. Dance lessons were mostly held at pupils' homes rather than dedicated schools, at least until later in the period. Musical accompanists were usually too costly, so dancing masters would often play simple popular tunes on small violins called kits or pochettes – so-called because they would stow the instrument in the long pockets of their coats.

Devil's grasshoppers

Yet if dancing masters were essential, they were not always held in high regard. They were disdained by genteel society for trying to emulate upper-class styles and mannerisms. They developed a reputation for seducing pupils, making many parents wary of inviting them into their homes, and there were many bastardy cases citing dancing masters as the presumed father.

The unease around these working-class men in close proximity to society women is famously documented in the diary of Samuel Pepys, where his suspicions of his wife's tutor creep to the fore. On Friday, May 15, 1663, just four weeks after lessons began, Pepys writes of returning home to find his "wife and the dancing master alone above, not dancing but talking". Pepys was "so deadly full of jealousy" that he checked to see if his wife "did wear drawers … as she used to do" – though found no evidence of foul play.

In the words of the satirist Thomas Brown, from 1707, the dancing masters of London were “held in very slight esteem, for the gentry call them leg-livers, and the mob from their mighty number, and their nimbleness, call them the devil’s grasshoppers”. Edward Ward, a close friend of Brown, went one better in 1722 when he likened them to “monkeys, baboons, and horrid grinning apes”, and “the dregs and scum of all the Earth”.

The engraving above, Grown Ladies Taught to Dance, shows a dancing master of slight build instructing an elderly and much taller woman, watched by two giggling young girls. In the background, on the wall, you can just make out a painting in which a monkey dancing master is tutoring a cat in a dress.

Dancing masters were still the butt of cruel jokes by the early 19th century. The 1803 cartoon opposite depicts a lesson being interrupted by the taxman, who was there to “collect duty on hops in which I’m told you deal very extensively”. To send up dancing masters’ fondness for faux-French mannerisms, this tutor is Frenchified with the replacement of “the” with “de”, as he threatens to make the taxman “hop to de Devils”.

Pride and prejudice

Despite their reputation, dancing masters were integral in constructing society as we know it today. They were essential employees of a household, and probably responsible for many marriages and business deals – some possibly highly influential.

One notable example was Abraham Mackintosh, born in Edinburgh in 1769, who made his name in Newcastle in the northeast of England. Mackintosh was particularly successful at schmoozing the well-heeled, shrewdly dedicating his compositions to notable members of society.

He specialised in bringing the latest fashionable dances to Newcastle from London, while taking advantage of the fashion for Scottishness at the turn of the 19th century by mainly publishing tunes in the style of strathspeys and reels. His work is the subject of an exhibition that we are holding as part of the national Being Human festival, which begins on November 14.

So when we watch Ashley Banjo in action on Flirty Dancing – or indeed the professional dancers that work with the celebrities on Strictly Come Dancing – it is fascinating to reflect on their lineage. The dancing masters who

prepared the heirs of the Renaissance for the mating rituals of society balls may not always have got the thanks they deserved, but modern Britain might have looked very different without them.

This article was originally published by The Conversation, click here to see the full article.

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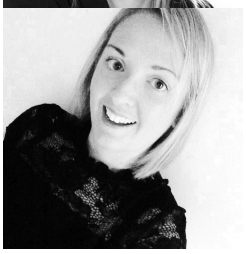

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