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Marchant & Davina



Marchant & Davina Birch

If you run into good British dancers and ask them where they learned to dance, you always get the same answer: "Marchant and Davina! They're the best teachers ever!" The Brits are more than willing to travel long distances to take lessons with these two. Irish, Scottish, English and meanwhile dancers from other European countries all swear by the "smooth", "soft" and elegant style of the South African and his beautiful wife and partner Davina. At the MamboCity 5 Star Congress near London Heathrow last May, we saw just how popular these two really are. With the array of big international stars present, the organisers had given the two more regionally known dancers a somewhat smaller room for their workshop. They simply didn't expect the storm of people that we witnessed there. We took a peek into the room towards the end of the workshop and couldn't even spot the teachers at first. They moved so effortlessly through the tightly packed crowd, giving advice here and there, answering questions and demonstrating again and again how the enthusiastic pupils could execute the figures they were being taught in a smooth and precise manner. The atmosphere felt like one big family, even though there were countless participants. So many in fact that they not only completely filled the dance floor at the centre of the room but also the carpeted areas around the edge. Marchant and Davina managed to put a smile on the frustrated faces and helped awkward turns and figures to become noticeably more fluid. At the end of the one-hour module nearly everyone was dancing the steps they'd learned together in perfect synchrony. There

was joy, glowing faces and applause, but there was also some frustration and annoyance: why on earth was the room so small? You just can't give Marchant and Davina such a small space!

We arranged to meet with the couple for an interview during the congress. We wanted to know more about the two of them, not only about their recipe for success and special approach, but also how they discovered salsa in the first place. We discovered that they are two very friendly people who are unbelievably different, but nevertheless harmonise with each other perfectly. Without having to even touch on the subject, it soon became obvious why they are



so incredibly popular: it is their absolute dedication. It is so obvious that they both love the dance and they love the music. But the pair of them also love the teaching process. They love to find out how people learn to lead and to be led. They love to experiment and to tweak. They are fascinated by the idea of bringing people closer to the feeling of salsa, explaining it as a type language for communicating with your partner, a language which is not just about speaking, but more importantly about understanding. How can you communicate such subtle feelings and such individual and subjective perceptions? How can you teach someone to become a single unit with another dancer? In Marchant and Davina we saw two stories that at some point had merged to become one. Two very different dancers who enhance each other perfectly, somehow melting into one. They are also two teachers who are able to continually learn from their students.



Marchant, tell us, how did you become the dancer you are now? When did you start dancing and why?

MARCHANT: I started dancing when I was a kid, because in South Africa that's something your mum does with you. You don't do formal classes, you just dance at home. And then when I turned seven years old, I saw a ballroom demonstration at our primary school.

It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life. It was so graceful. I grew up in the township and it was very rough. It was just such a graceful, beautiful dance – such a contrast to what I was normally used to! I just saw the people floating and when I went home I said to my mum: "I want to dance ballroom!"

She was like, "Really?!" Well, it wasn't normal for a boy to want to do that. But I persisted and she put me in a ballroom school. I just loved it so much. I won a lot of competitions in ballroom.

At that time my brother started getting into street dance. He was older than me and so I started tagging along with him and he would teach me street dance stuff.

I began dancing in his dance group as well. He was a fantastic choreographer. It was with his choreography that I won the championships in South Africa.

And how come you live in England now?

MARCHANT: I won our national championships in jazz. Jazz in South Africa is what you call Saba here in Europe because it is danced to jazz music – African and American jazz music. They dance to the snare drum which happens on counts three and seven. They can cross-phrase the timing as well. So it's basically salsa, but they think they are the only ones doing it. When I

came to England I realised "Oh my god, it's the same dance!" But it's more like Cuban.

It's circular, more circular. So yes, I won our national championships. That was in 1999. The prize was a lot of money at that time in South Africa. I saw this as a chance to get away and see a bit of Europe.

I first went to England and wanted to use that as my base. My plan was to backpack through Europe. But on the flight to England a stewardess recognised me from dancing and she told me: "They've got the same dance in England." "Really?" I asked rather sceptically. So she told me where to go. I walked in the club and thought: "Oh my god, it's the same thing!"

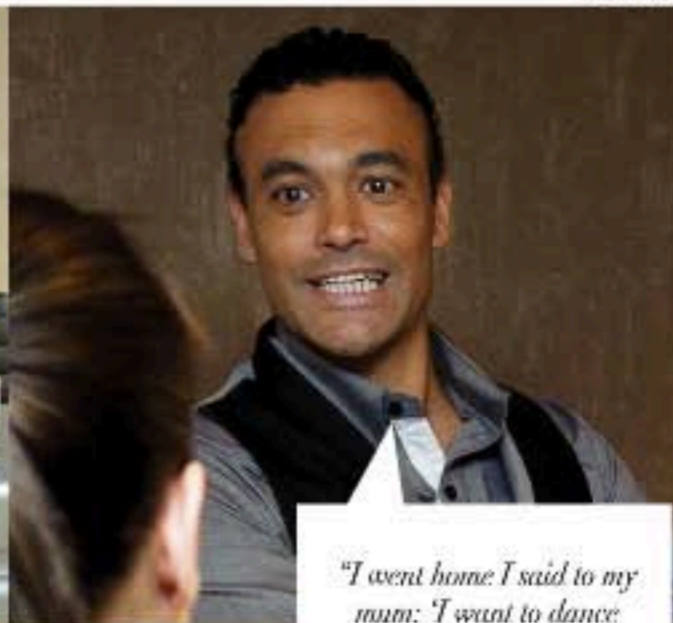
So I started dancing here in England. Later on, Paul Young, who did the Salsa UK Congress before, asked me to come and teach. "I'll pay you", he said. In Africa we are not used to getting paid for that. No one would take a class or pay a teacher because everybody knows how to dance!

But he invited me to come and teach a class for him. And that was the start.

Davina, what did you do before you met Marchant? How did you become the salsa you are now?

DAVINA: I trained in ballet, tap, jazz – jazz dance as we in Europe understand it – as a child. Then I took a break from dancing because I went to do a degree in drama and theatre studies. I wanted to be a stage manager or something like that. But I just missed dancing so much while I was study-

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ing. When I finished university I decided that I wanted to get back into dancing again. So I went back and studied to teach modern theatre dance and tap. I used to teach freestyle jazz – jazz as we know it. I freelanced for several years. One of my friends did a beginners salsa course. And I really love latin music, it sounds really good. But I used to work evenings all the time and I just didn't have the time to learn anything. Once I went with her to a club which was quite famous back in the day in London – "the Frica". It was one of the first latin clubs in London... Most people were dancing Cuban, so for me as a dancer, I could just go in and follow, it was quite simple. Then one day we saw a promotion for a salsa weekend and we thought: "Oh that sounds like a lot of fun!" So the two of us went to what turned out to be the UK Salsa Congress, and I walked in and... my jaw just dropped to the floor!!! Because everything I had done before was in that one tiny little club. There were 2,000 people there and I had never seen "cross body", and I didn't know what salsa was. I just flipped out! "I've got to learn this... I have to learn this!" It just happened to line up with the career break I was having for a few months. I had re-located and was looking for new jobs so I had a bit of time on my hands. I thought why not go to class and learn how to do this cross-body thing. I didn't even know what cross-body-lead was at the time. I just kind of picked it up. (Laughs) This is going to sound awful, but at the congress I went to the beginners class and found that they weren't teaching the women back then –



"I was probably one of those really annoying women at the congress, you know, just that kind of 'in the wrong class' women. I didn't know what to do! I didn't know what anything meant."

It was all for the men, nothing for the women. I kind of zoomed up through the levels (laughs) to the intermediate level. I was probably one of those really annoying women at the congress, you know, just that kind of "in the wrong class" women. I didn't know what to do! I didn't know what anything meant. They started changing partners and I was so confused. I didn't know what was going on! So I came back and I thought I've got to learn this now. I really wanted to learn how to follow.

The Frica had a class on Thursday evenings which was free and they had an intermediate to advanced class. I thought well that's the class I ended up in at the congress where I felt I was actually learning something. It just so happened to be Marchant's class. It was really good and I thought he was a good teacher.

Marchant, when you noticed her for the first time, what did you think?

MARCHANT: First of all you could see that she was a trained dancer, but she didn't understand salsa. She was the nightmare-woman in my class, you know, the kind of woman that just goes up the levels without staying in beginners long enough. (Laughs)

DAVINA: It took me about two months before I knew what cross-body-lead was. All the guys I danced with would say "Oh, you dance kind of Cuban." This was because I'd only really free-



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styled cuban, so I was going around in circles. Eventually I asked them to explain what they meant. And they said: "because you are moving in circles, and we try to dance in a line." And I was like: "Oh!" And they explained: "That is the cross-body-lead." And I thought "Oh!" That's when I went to Marchant and asked "Can you please give me some private lessons here, give me a foundation."

MARCHANT: Because she was very good in freestyle dancing, she is trained to dance on her own. But she had never done partner dancing. She had never trained in that.

No following was the main problem...

DAVINA: Yeah. I didn't understand it. And that's a bit of a problem in quite a few areas where you don't have a female teacher in class to explain to the women what you should be feeling. If you have a female, they might give you styling, they may say "step here" "step there", but you don't know why. You know, you quite often don't get that explained. And that to me is really important. First and foremost, that's my job, my job is to teach following. And that's what he taught me. That's the first thing. You can do styling classes, but don't interfere, learn to follow.

MARCHANT: We work with the philosophy of following. Leading is primary and styling is secondary. When I saw Davina, I thought she had amazing potential to be a performer but she didn't understand the fundamentals of partner dancing, so that's what we needed to focus on. It's basically through Davina's development that Alchemy Dance Company was started.

I was dancing with different partners, but I wanted to do something creative with her. I thought it would be good to start a dance team so I brought in a few friends that I had worked with before in other areas.

We completed the team and I asked Davina to choreograph something from her background to Tito Puente's song "Timbalito". She did that beautifully. And the intro we choreographed together. That was the start of Alchemy Dance Company. If you see that choreography, it's basically Davina's work. I was really surprised what came out. It was really nice. I liked it. I wouldn't have expected that...

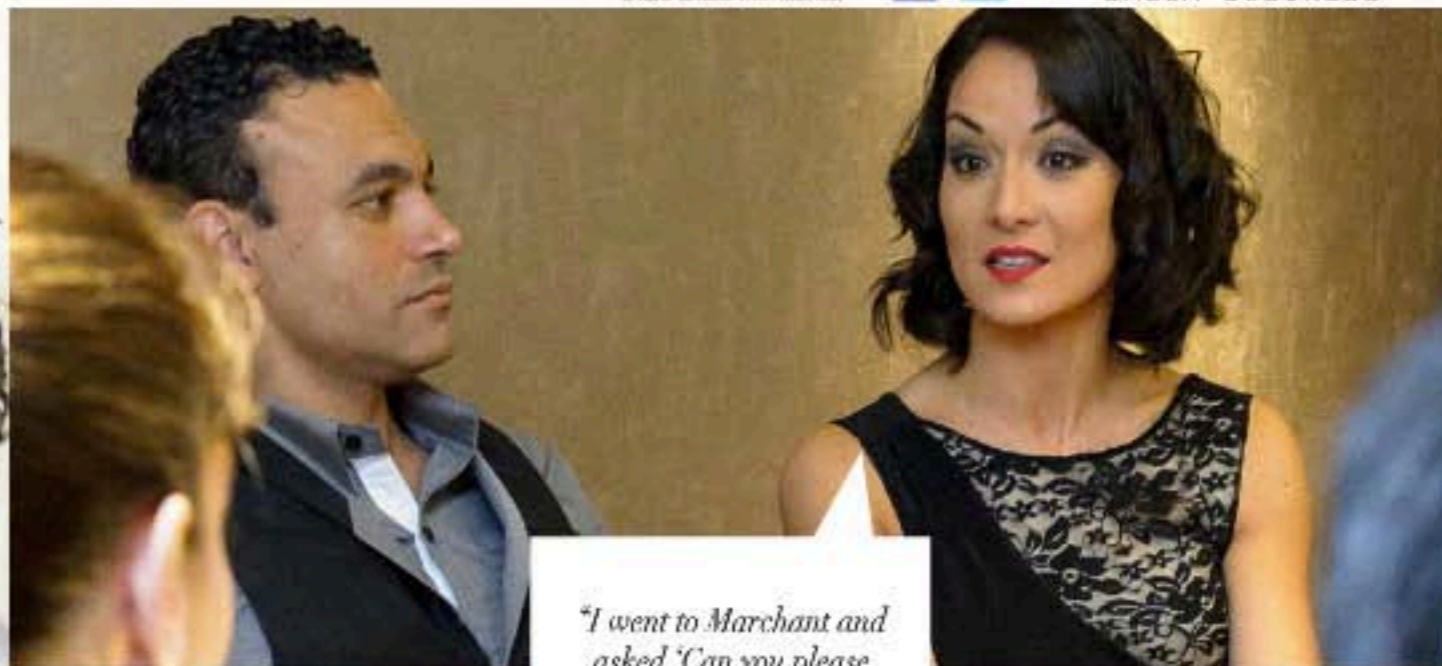
We noticed that you tend to use the music of Tito Puente for your choreographies. Are you kind of a fan?

DAVINA: YEAH, a big fan.

MARCHANT: YEAH!!! A big, big, big... BIG fan. Tito was very ahead of his time in what he was doing back then. He was going to the jazz clubs in New York - black jazz clubs - and he was not black, he was latino. I grew up with live jazz music in South Africa, so I love that kind of music. Tito's music, his smooth jazz is so beautiful... Tito is by far our favourite musician.

The smooth jazz music you choose for your choreographies fits very well with your unique style. Your dancing style is so very smooth and elegant. How did you develop that?

MARCHANT: It comes from my love of smooth jazz music and from my ballroom training. What I borrow from the ballroom is the facility in foxtrot. Slow... slow... that kind of smooth foxtrot, the smooth feeling of foxtrot. I wanted to incorpo-



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rate that into salsa. We like to do creative choreographies. We love jazz music, and I love to incorporate things from contemporary dancing, as does Davina in her dance. There are some things I like from jazz. If I see something contemporary, I ask Davina "How do you do that?" She shows me the correct technique and I say I want to have that kind of look or that kind of feel of a particular step from contemporary or jazz. Davina will then show me.

You founded your own salsa academy. Your weekend bootcamps are very popular - people travel far to participate. Tell us the secrets of your success.

DAVINA: It's been years of experimenting really, isn't it? Everything we do... We love teaching. One of the things we love is what we get back from our students. We've learned a lot from them, you know. When we want to get something across to them that they don't understand, we find another way to explain it. Different exercises that are going to help them develop those techniques. It's been years of experimenting. From my perspective, the female perspective - like I said earlier - I couldn't follow when I came into salsa. Well, some girls are very natural, it just comes easily to them. It didn't come easily to me at all, but we just experimented, didn't we? For hours it was "Try this", "Try that", you know, and that's how we developed a technique, a philosophy and the methods.

MARCHANT: Scientific methods to develop the feeling of following. It really is a feeling, and feelings are not normally scientific, but we took up the challenge of trying to find a scientific approach to finding the feeling. We have 5 levels

in our. When someone comes from a different school we don't want them to feel bad. You know, if they were advanced somewhere else and we turn around and say "No, you're not advanced in

our school." That's why we work with a number system. We have something called an assessment dance. If you're new to our school, you come beforehand for an assessment. If you are male, you dance with Davina and I watch. She will give you feedback from the feeling perspective. I will give you feedback from an aesthetic perspective. What you feel you could work on, what is good, your strengths and your weaknesses. They will be in the right level. We know what each of our students need to focus on next. We tell them, okay, you've mastered that now, the next thing you need to work on is that. It's that kind of approach, it's like a school. There are lots of places or salsa clubs where students go and chose what level of class they do. But it doesn't work like that at our school. We allocate the correct level for our students.

On your website I read that people can only attend levels 4 and 5 by personal invitation. What are the special criteria?

MARCHANT: Well the thing is... Hmm. Well, each teacher has a different style, right? Even though we all teach cross body style, we all interpret this so differently.

In level 3 we get the students used to our style, to the smoothness, smoothing out everything instead of being sharp about things. We just smooth them out, give them the correct technique for the fundamental turns - inside turn, outside turn, single turn - in our approach. Once they get used to that feeling, then we say okay, now we will move you to level 4. And level 5 is on 2.



"yes, I have feelings for her, but this is dangerous. You know, it can spoil everything. So do I start talking to her? Tell her or keep it to myself?"

Why that? I mean, when I see you dancing, it's always on2. Why do you teach all the levels on 1 and only in the highest level do you start teaching them on2?

MARCHANT LOOKS AT DAVINA, SEARCHING FOR HELP... SHE JUST LAUGHS...

MARCHANT: Am I doing all the talking???

Hmmm. Okay... The saba culture in England, what we call the "language", is on1.

DAVINA: The common language...

MARCHANT: Yes, the common language, that's what the majority of English dancers speak, what they dance. When we teach people from the beginning, our aim is that they can go anywhere in the country and dance with anybody. We don't want to isolate them from the rest of the community. So that's the first thing. When they get to about level 3, we say to them "there is an alternative language" which is called on2, which we feel you should also learn. Because once you understand both, as a male you can offer the lady the choice of "would you like to dance on1 or on2". For us a good lead and a good follower can do both. It's just a different rhythm, basically. So that's what we try to develop – multilingual dances instead of just one. We also do bootcamps and weekends where we convert people to on2.

DAVINA: We started these weekends because we had taught a lot of weekenders before. We found that there were so many different classes at congresses and weekenders, and the teachers were all contradicting each other. It's not that anybody is right or wrong. It's just that it is all so different. Students get frustrated and confused, their heads get filled up with all

those different ideas, especially in the lower levels. They want more – more progression, they want to get better. They might not have a teacher in their local area. We have people travelling from all over the place so they can immerse themselves in one methodology for the whole weekend. The difference

we see in people between Friday and Sunday is like another person! Especially when you convert people to on2, because we ban on1. We say: "there is no on1 for the whole weekend". People just immerse themselves. They walk in and have never danced on2 in their life, they walk out and they can dance on2.

MARCHANT: It feels really rewarding.

DAVINA: It is, yeah, we love it.

MARCHANT: It's our favourite way of teaching.

So you spend almost every minute with salsa, creating choreographies for your shows, teaching in your academy, teaching at congresses, organizing your weekenders – do you ever have any spare time? Are you able to go on vacation?

MARCHANT: Well... YES. We both went to Cape Town in January for carnival. The carnival is just crazy – it's just drums and drums and drums...

DAVINA: But funky drums!

MARCHANT: Funky drums! From congas and claves to snare drums and base drums. All types of drums and rhythms. It's the celebration of freedom from slavery on January 2 every year. And it carries on until February.

DAVINA: A lot of people haven't heard of it, because actually it only goes through Cape Town city centre on one day



"Davina is not just my wife, she is my best friend, too."

and that's January 2, which is when the slaves used to have their only day off. It's the only day they do the parade in the city centre. The rest of the time they stay in the townships. So on that one day we're talking about 25,000 people... it's massive. We joined a team last year and there were 1,000 people in our team. There are some bigger and some smaller teams, but it's just the most amazing experience...

MARCHANT: There are about 70 teams, so it's crazy!

DAVINA: Yeah, we like that. Going to Cape Town is just amazing! You're surrounded by all these drums and this craziness, and you come back like: "Yeah! Come on, let's choreograph something!" And you've got all the live jazz bands out there. The music...

MARCHANT: Everyone is a musician... or a dancer... (laughs) And that's why I never thought I would be a dance instructor. In Africa, if you say you want to teach dance, everyone will laugh at you because everybody can dance. They won't pay you to learn to dance!!! "I'm African, man, I've got rhythm! I don't do classes! Are you mad?"

But they still don't know about salsa and keep calling it jazz?

MARCHANT: Salsa is travelling over there and salsa music, too. So they know it. And there are also some separate salsa clubs. There are people fighting about what is jazz, what is salsa, who is the better dancer.

They make a big difference. But I say to them "it's the same!". It's all the same. There's just a different feeling about it

DAVINA: Like Marchant said before, people there have never actually been to class. They feel the rhythm and they are SO



groovy! You dance with them and you can actually feel the music through them. They don't lead complicated patterns, they just do lots of cross overs. I really enjoy dancing there. The musicality is just amazing.

You don't just work together, you're also married as well. We'd love to know more about you two falling in love and becoming married. Tell us, tell us...

MARCHANT: Well, we have been friends for some years... And when you work with somebody and you enjoy working together, you realize that what you like is the same, what type of music you like is the same, what you like doing in your spare time is the same, and you just grow closer and closer together. You become best friends and you become just so attached and you fall in love... And yes, Davina is my wife, my best friend and my dance partner.

DAVINA: We worked together three years before we actually became a proper couple.

MARCHANT: Yeah. But before we went into that relationship, I thought to myself: yes, I have feelings for her, but this is dangerous. You know, it can spoil everything. So do I start talking to her? Tell her or keep it to myself? And we talked... We spend almost every minute together, and a lot of people say that's unhealthy. But you know, at the moment it works for us.

DAVINA: Yeah, and I think it works so well because we worked together a long time before we started our relationship. We knew each other, we were good friends. The relationship had time to grow deeper.

MARCHANT: Yeah. As I said, she is not just my wife, she is my best friend, too.