



ASHLEY FRASER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Citizen reporter Shannon Proudfoot, in centre of photo, was at a disadvantage at this rehearsal at Fred Astaire dance studio. It was her first lesson, and the third for the other debutantes.

# The Debutante Diaries

For several weeks, reporter **SHANNON PROUDFOOT** trained, twirled and transformed herself for the Viennese Ball.

**F**rom the start, I was excited about attending the Viennese Winter Ball as a debutante, but also confused: Debutantes in Ottawa? In 2006?

Now in its 10th year, Ottawa's Viennese Ball is inspired by the hundreds of balls held in Austria during the carnival season, and many of those traditions have been imported. Authentic Viennese Balls see several hundred young ladies and gentlemen make their formal entrances to society, like Southern cotillions set to the music of Strauss, but Ottawa's young dancers have a lot more to think about.

The debutantes and cavaliers at the Viennese Winter Ball (there are usually about 15 couples) must perform two court dances to open the evening, and then play host to 400 guests at the National Gallery.

They are expected to dance with foreign dignitaries, elected officials and socialites who have paid \$350 to be there, and they must maintain charming conversation during quick-stepping waltzes — all while wearing tuxes, or heels and white gowns.

"For an evening, everything seems possible," says Austrian Ambassador Otto Ditz. "You have Viennese music at the National Gallery of Canada, and what more could you ask for?"

The ball — which donates ticket revenue to charity — has rapidly become the most prestigious social event in Ottawa, and Mr. Ditz says the debutantes and cavaliers are always "the highlight."

But first, we must learn to dance.

I somehow convince the orga-

## OTTAWA CITIZEN

More glitter, more glamour, more jitters: See more photos of Shannon and the other debutantes getting ready for the big night.  
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nizers (and myself) that, even teetering on the edge of my 26th birthday, I can blend in with their young dancers. I arrive at the Fred Astaire Dance Studios in the Glebe just as the third Sunday-afternoon rehearsal is getting underway.

I am mildly horrified to walk in the door and find a pack of outrageously tall and good-looking teenagers lined up at the edge of the dance floor, ready to perform the dances they've already learned.

Melissa Krulick, 31, who choreographs the young dancers and co-owns the studio, has already told them that a reporter will be joining them as a faux-debutante. They are all grinning nervously at me.

I introduce myself to Peter Zachar, who is assigned to be my partner, wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans, and follow him onto the dance floor for the Polonaise, an old court dance performed in 3/4 time. It involves a lot of simple, unified movements among the rows of couples, so it's easy to spot the reporter-turned-debutante who has no idea what she's doing.

I find out later that several of the girls were worried about some decrepit reporter of indeterminate age crashing their Cinderella night (fair enough), and they were relieved when I turned out to be a somewhat plausible debutante. That's what they kindly told me, anyway.

Mr. Zachar is a 22-year-old University of Ottawa student and a Viennese Ball veteran. Following three appearances as a cavalier, he became the liaison who helps Ms. Krulick select the young dancers and co-ordinate their rehearsals. He moves smoothly and decisively across the dance floor, even wearing running shoes at rehearsals, and his skilful dancing repeatedly saves me from looking completely inept.

Mr. Zachar is a classically trained pianist, but it was a girl and not music that attracted him to the Viennese Ball in the first place. She was a debutante and he was intrigued, so he joined and ended up as her partner and later, her boyfriend.

"At the time, what it meant for me was there was a pretty girl I wanted to dance with," he says. "That's a pretty good first date."

I finally get the hang of the Polonaise, just in time to stumble blindly through the Landler, which



KIER GILMOUR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Shannon has an experienced dance partner in Peter Zachar, a Viennese Ball veteran who also helps select the dancers.

includes more complex steps and a tempo-shifting waltz segment. When the waltz was introduced to the English court in the early 19th century, *The Times of London* scorned it as an "obscene display" of "voluptuous intertwining of the limbs" because of the close proximity necessary to keep partners together through the rapidly spinning dance.

Today, the waltz is hardly considered dirty dancing, but Sarah Buchan, 17, concedes that when you're assigned to dance with a stranger, "You get comfortable really fast."

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Originally, the debutantes and cavaliers came from Ashbury College and Elmwood School, but they now represent a variety of public and private schools. Anyone between 16 and 18 is welcome, but the reality is that they (or their parents) must be able to pay for the evening's finery, and only a select group is even aware of the event. Mr. Zachar contacts all the school councils, but there is no advertising, so there tends to be a legacy of applicants from the same schools, who know someone who "danced it last year."

It is a perpetual challenge to find enough young men, but there

were 50 girls clamouring for their Cinderella turn this year.

With the guys, Mr. Zachar says, "If they show up in the first place, they probably have what we're looking for," and this year's cavaliers are every bit as charming on the dance floor as the debutantes.

Paul Brikis, 17, joined after he got an e-mail from a friend saying, "We need more dudes."

He attends Nepean High School, Mr. Zachar's alma mater, and there are three other students from that school among the dancers.

"I think the girls take it more seriously than the guys do," Mr. Brikis says.

"I would be more nervous if I was a girl because I could trip on my dress," Oliver Truesdale-Jutras, 17, adds.

Laurence Dales, 18, was accidentally included on the list of potential cavaliers when she applied, because the organizers mistook her first name — a popular one for Québécois girls — for a guy. As an Ashbury student (there are seven others this year), she heard about the ball through school and the newspaper, and she knew, "It's supposed to be a really magical night."

"I was so nervous because you really want to do it and you're so afraid they're going to ask you a question you don't have an answer to," Ms. Dales says of the selection process, which involves two interviews and a dance audition.

Because of the dearth of guys, the organizers allow cavaliers to make repeat appearances at the ball, but they stopped allowing debutantes to do so because there are so many who want to participate. They look for applicants who are outgoing, confident and a good representation of Ottawa's youth. One of the interview questions Mr. Zachar likes to ask is what topics of conversation should be avoided when waltzing with a stranger.

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WAYNE CUDDINGTON, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Shannon searched through dozens of white ball gowns before finding the right dress at the Cedar Closet, a bridal and consignment store.