

Below the Beltway

BYLINE: Gene Weingarten

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I enjoy the performing arts as much as the next guy. Which, of course, doesn't say much. Look at him over there, picking his nose with his thumb.

In fact, I do like Theater and Music. Alas, I haven't had many opportunities to experience La Danse, other than the time my wife and daughter got us all tickets to the ballet, an event I could not attend because of a prior commitment I frantically arranged.

A recent item in the paper caught my eye, however, and it occurred to me that this was a chance, at last, to silence those who contend that guys don't have the sophistication to appreciate the subtle terpsichorean arts. I would not only attend a dance event, I would participate.

"Teach Your Dog to Dance" was a one-day workshop conducted by the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, a . . .

Tom: Stop.

Gene: What?

Tom: I can't let you write a column about how you went dancing with your dog. There are limits to inanity, even for you. The Washington Post Magazine has quality controls, and as your editor it's my job to exercise them.

Gene: Look at the calendar. What day is this column going to appear?

Tom: September 1.

Gene: The day before Labor Day. Everyone is away on vacation. No one is reading this. I could be writing advertising copy for a stool softener here, and no one would know.

Tom: But . . .

Gene: This is a matter of principle. It is called prudent resource allocation. It's very Washington. You will prove yourself an excellent manager if at the end of the year you can establish that my stupidest column coincided with the day of least readership. You will look like a genius.

Tom: But . . .

Gene: You'll get a bonus.

Tom: I will?

Gene: Trust me.

Tom: Okay, but push it too far and I pull the plug, and the column goes dark.

Anyway, I had serious doubts about my Labrador retriever's potential as a dancer because, at 10, Harry has become a little grumpy and eccentric. In the middle of crossing a busy street, for example, he will sometimes, with no warning, thud down on his behind and begin to scratch his ear with his hind leg, as cars screech to a halt.

So, to be safe, I asked my neighbor B.J. to join us with her dog, Bartleby. Bartleby is smart and energetic, one of those magnificent mongrels that look like purebreds Except for One Odd Thing. In Bartleby's case, it is his shape. He is handsomely spotted and powerfully built, but is somewhat alarmingly low to the ground. Bartleby looks like a cross between a Dalmatian and an armadillo.

Unlike me, B.J. had no worries about her dog's enthusiasm, but she was a little concerned about his aggression.

"He'll be fine if the other males are altered," she told me.

"Bartleby isn't altered?" I asked.

"Yes, he is," B.J. said. "But it was relatively recent, and I think he's still ticked off."

So I and my yellow retriever, and B.J. and her Dalmadillo, arrived at the outdoor dance workshop. The promotional material took great pains to explain that this was a serious affair featuring serious dance principles and whatnot, but I suspect trained observers might have noted some anomalies:

(1) The professional dancer who led the event was 8 1/2 months pregnant;

(2) The dance music consisted entirely of a recording of Ethel Merman yowling out "Together," from "Gypsy"; and,

(3) It was 95 degrees under the blazing sun, and many of the dancers kept walking off to drink from a big inflatable pool, then widdling all over the place or attempting to procreate with the other dancers.

It turned out that teaching your dog to dance pretty much involved striding briskly forward while schlepping your dog, attempting to keep up with Ethel as she blasted out her lyrics like an ack-ack gun.

At one point the owners were to perform a spontaneous "cute thing" with their dog, something natural that represented their normal relationship. Some people bent to pet their dogs, for example. One man's "cute thing" involved lifting his terrier by the neck and rump, holding it at arm's length, and rotating it. Apparently, he is accustomed to using his dog to squeegee his windshield.

Harry lasted 30 seconds in the heat and then refused to move. Bartleby and B.J. did better, though all four of us left early, inasmuch as I knew, deep in my heart, that I didn't need an end to this column, since no one would read it.

As you age, do you sometimes find yourself feeling a little irregular? Well, with new Colon Grout all-natural fiber-enriched...(remaining column is blacked out).

Gene Weingarten's e-mail address is weingarten@washpost.com.

Chat with him online Tuesdays at noon at www.washingtonpost.com.