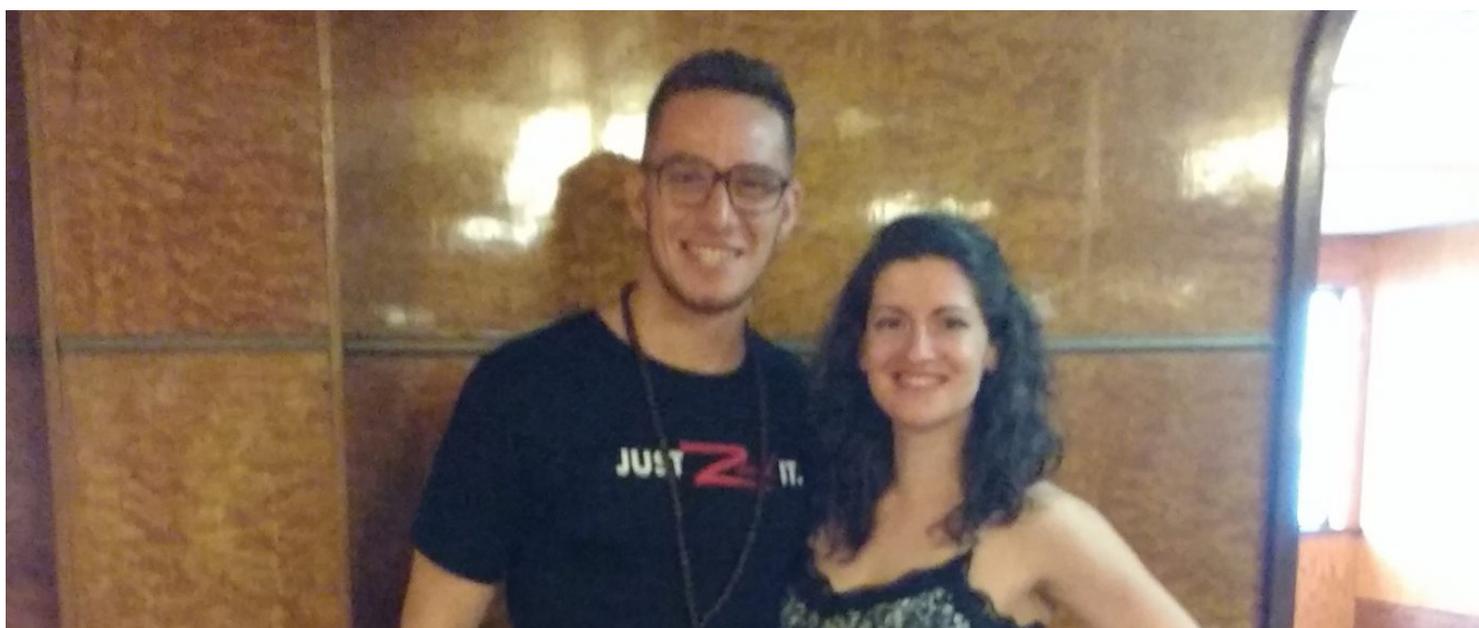


GENDERED ROLES IN BRAZILIAN ZOUK: AN INTERVIEW WITH BRUNO GALHARDO



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Bruno Galhardo is an internationally renowned and beloved Brazilian zouk dance instructor and performer. When I went to my first real zouk event, the 2017 Dutch International Zouk Congress, his classes were all packed full. But it wasn't until I attended one of his classes at LA Zouk Festival 2018 that the moment came when I knew I would have to interview him.

It came right after the warm-up: "All right, let's have ladies on this side, guys on the other. No, sorry! Followers behind Shani, leaders behind me."

Then he actually took a few minutes to state clearly that he believed everyone should be allowed to dance the role(s) of their choice, regardless of gender. Something like: "OK, in the past it needed to be the man as the leader and the woman

as the follower. But we are moving forward. We are here to dance and have fun, it doesn't matter if you are a guy or a girl or neither."

So after class I asked Bruno if he would be willing to do an interview sometime about the changing gender roles in the zouk dance community. I wasn't prepared for him to say, "Sure, let's do it after my private lessons this afternoon."

I had nothing with me – not my usual laptop, not even a paper and pencil. And I was definitely staying too far away to go get my computer and come back in time.

When I arrived for the interview, Bruno was showing a few people his latest video – on his own laptop. I joined in the appreciative audience.

Luckily for me, Bruno graciously agreed to let me borrow that laptop to type my notes. The document he e-mailed me afterward clearly showed the battle I'd waged against the Portuguese auto-correct, but still captured his sincere and perceptive words on gender norms in his chosen dance scene.

What follows is an adaptation of our interview. My questions are in bold and Bruno's responses follow in my best reconstruction of his own words. Any errors are my own.

When you were first learning to dance zouk in Brazil, how did you come to understand gender expectations? Was it explicitly taught or something you just understood from observation?

As I was developing in the dance, it was clear. I've always seen people saying what each side should do, men as leaders, women as followers. Most teachers would say exactly how it should be. They were really demanding with the gender roles. And that is actually something that we would expect in our culture.

Yet even dance is not something so common for the society. Myself, I started dancing because I wanted to feel part of something. When I was a teenager, I didn't feel like I was part of anything. I wasn't good at playing sport, so I found something that could make me feel that I am good at something.

But as a teenager, telling my friends that I was dancing was not a good experience. Sure, I cannot say it was all bad: no other man my age would dance with the girls, and girls like to dance at this age. Still, my guy friends made all the jokes you can imagine.

My answer was always trying to calm them down. "I'm doing what I want with freedom! There is no classification for that."

So why did you decide to learn to follow zouk?

At some point when you want to grow more in the dance, you have to learn the other side. Some teachers would tell you to learn the other side also: If you want to be good, you need to know both.”

But you wouldn't actually see this in their attitude. They gave a nice speech but didn't put it in effect.

I started to learn both sides because I'm a nerd! I want to find systems and explain everything. So I wanted to experience what I am causing when I am leading.

Plus I was always up to challenges. I really like to challenge myself to do something, and after that choose what I want to continue. Usually what is new comes hard; it's out of the comfort zone.

Why do you think there is there such resistance to people dancing either role? And why is it that when guys do follow, they so often make it like a joke, with exaggerated femininity?

I know for a lot of people, they come to the dance floor looking for something beyond the dance, maybe something potentially sexual. But I really see social dance as a nonsexual. It is neutral, you decide if you make it sexual. When I'm traveling to different events, guys ask to dance with me and I say yes.

But no matter what sexual orientation a person has, there are so many blocks in our society. People bring preconceptions to the dance. Even if I'm only thinking about dancing, maybe the guy that asked me to dance is overly worried about respect and is therefore not being present – because of these blocks.

Also, when you are in a video, you know that people will judge it. So guys want to do something to show that they are in control, so they make something funny, or they do something to show the sexual side. They are trying to show “this isn't my normal.”

Kuna doesn't care about judgment, he was present and not worrying about people.

[This last comment was a reference to the [viral video](https://youtu.be/cxNaHxv9koc) below of Kuna Malik Hamad and Bruno Galhardo dancing together.]

What do you think it will it take for attitudes to change in the zouk scene?

I think learning how to lead or how to follow is not really what's going to open up the scene. What we need is just people respecting each others' options.

The thing is, if we stop judging people's decisions, they will have more freedom to take those decisions – it won't be something abnormal.

For both sides we need to be more in the moment. Dance, just dance!

For me, I don't feel as good when I'm following. I learned, but it's not what gives me joy, so I prefer to lead. But I'm always happy to lead a man.

I would say, don't go to the social dance floor with the intention of something else, trying to seduce someone or to date them. Just be there and enjoy the moment. If you think about what will happen after, you are not really absorbed in it.

I loved hearing you say in class that for the three minutes the song lasts, your partner is the most important person in the world to you.

Yeah. It kills me when some lady comes and already gives her phone to her friend to video us. I know she doesn't mean anything bad, but she is not there – she is thinking about how it looks for the camera.

If you want to look nice, you should go to the stage!

Some people say that regardless of your gender, you need to lead with a masculine energy and follow with a feminine energy. What's your take on that idea?

You can classify the leading energy in your body in many ways. We all have both male and female energy. I don't think the roles can be summed up like this. I think that's too shallow. It's much deeper than this – and it's relative.

Taking decisions doesn't mean that you are using your leader energy. In fact, the one that accepts the decisions is the one that is in control – in a way, leading.

Being flexible doesn't mean that you are passive. The follower for me is the one who leads much more. I can propose many many things to the follower, but I will never cross the limits that he or she is giving to me.

Intention is something where only the person who has it will know what it is. It's so relative.

When you judge, you see that person's behavior, but they may have a completely different intention and not know how to express it.

I felt like my heart was overflowing by the end of the interview. What a message to carry out into the world of zouk dancing! Let's be willing to consider the depth and

nance of the roles we take on. Let's respect everyone's right to make decisions about what brings them joy in the dance. And above all, let's focus on our partners and revel in the few minutes we spend together moving to the music.

What are the expectations set by your dance scene? How do you define leading and following? What does it mean to be present when you dance? Share your views in the comments!

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