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Stage & Screen

## Stepping out

by [Jeremiah Horigan](#) / October 19, 2017 / 0 comments



Ernesto Palma and Nikolai Shpakov practicing for a same-sex ballroom dancing competition in *Hot to Trot* (photo by Curt Worden)

The idea came serendipitously, proposed by a friend-who-had-a-friend who knew something about competitive same-sex ballroom dancing in Philadelphia.

Filmmaker Gail Freedman had just put the finishing touches on a documentary about the making of the 9/11 Memorial for the History Channel, a film that she describes as being “rooted in tragedy.... I think I was searching for something that had a bit more lightness. What attracted me was mostly its beauty and joy. I have a background in music and dance. The more I dug in, the richer the story got.”

What she discovered when she checked out her friend’s suggestion was a subject that would consume the next five years of her life.

Freedman is a lifelong journalist and writer who made her bones working at CBS (*60 Minutes*) and ABC (*20/20*). In the early ’90s, she decided to go it alone as a freelance filmmaker. She has been at it ever since – ever since she realized that what she wanted to do with her life was tell stories. She struck out on her own even as the networks, fueled by endless studies, focus groups and diminishing profit margins, began turning their corporate backs on long-form television journalism.

While the networks adjusted their stories to fit what they believed to be their audience’s shrinking attention span, Freedman adjusted her focus in the opposite direction: “What really makes my heart go pitter-patter is the ability to go deep and long.”

She made her first documentary in 1990. Ever since, she has done a lot of PBS work, cable work, foundation and not-for-profit work. “It’s what you do as a working filmmaker; I’ve been able to make a life doing that.... I didn’t go to film school; I went to the film school of hard knocks.”

Freedman, who has lived in New Paltz since the late ’80s, says that it may sound corny, but when she went freelance, she wanted not only to tell stories in a fuller dimension, but also to tell stories that could make a difference – stories that reflected her passion for social, cultural and political issues. *Hot to Trot*, which will have its New York premiere at the end of October, is her latest effort to tell such a story – one that takes the viewer on the same journey of discovery that she herself experienced while making the film.

“When we began in 2012, my original conception was frankly more conventional than what eventually happened.” Freedman thought that following the fates and fortunes of four key dancers, two men and two women, would culminate in 2014 with a dramatic showdown at Philadelphia’s Gay Games dance competition. But things change, and Freedman knew that she had to go on the journey with her key players. “That’s part of doing this kind of filmmaking: What was going to happen was going to happen, and their narrative was going to inform my narrative.”



Emily Coles and Kieren Jameson dancing in *Hot to Trot* (photo by Chris Phan)

What happens – without revealing too much of the story’s twists and turns – includes health crises, relationship changes, familial struggles...and, of course, the dance competitions against which everyone’s struggles occur.

*Hot to Trot* is the intimate account of a little-seen world where personal passion meets political muscle. In addition to documenting the amazing gracefulness and hard work of the dance, the film focuses on the struggles and conflicts of its four principal dancers: the charismatic Ernesto, a Costa Rican former meth-head; Emily, a lifelong Type 1 diabetic, who wears an insulin pump 24/7, even while performing; Russian dance champ Nikolai, who came out only a few years ago and longs for family acceptance; and careerist Kieren, whose identity was forged in a strict New Zealand military environment. The film follows them over time, as their relationships with others, and themselves, develop and deepen.

Freedman witnessed – and was allowed to film – developments that were painful to see but that, in the end, contributed to the film’s story: “They gave me access and openness without knowing if or when I was ever going to bring [the film] to completion. But they let me be in their lives, through good times and bad. That’s a privilege, but also a responsibility that I took very seriously.”

When shooting began, Freedman said, she thought that they were “ahead of the curve” in dealing with the human and political dimensions of LGBTQ issues. Then, for a time, she felt that maybe the film had lost that edge. “But now, it seems more current than ever, in this political and cultural climate. We have a pretty internationally diverse group of dancers. And with all of the debates going on about immigration and diversity and tolerance, we’ve become very topical again.”

Her experience has also convinced her that LGBTQ rights are the civil rights issue of our time: “*Hot to Trot* is an idiosyncratic attack on bigotry; that’s really where it lives for me. We’ve made progress as a society, but we’ve also taken a bunch of steps backwards.”

For all its unexpected, newfound timeliness, Freedman said that she’s keenly aware of the pitfalls of political preachiness. “I don’t like to make films where you’re wagging your finger at people. But I think there are lots of ways to change hearts and minds, and I think – I hope – the film will appeal to a broad-based audience.”

*Hot to Trot* will get its New York City premiere at the Newfest film festival at 4 p.m. on Sunday, October 22 at Cinopolis Chelsea, located at 260 West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. For more information, visit <http://newfest.org/film/hot-to-trot> or [www.hottotrotfilm.com](http://www.hottotrotfilm.com).

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