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Text



You Won't Feel The Same After You See These Dancers

September 21, 2014 | Bruce Trachtenberg

I recently asked my filmmaker friend [Gail Freedman](#) whether the motivation for her latest project is to make what she hopes will be a well-viewed and well-received documentary or to raise public awareness and advance change by shining the spotlight on a fascinating but little known aspect of LGBT—and international—culture that merits more attention.

Her response to both questions: *the same*.



Gail Freedman

Her answer was not surprising considering her film goes inside the world of *same-sex* ballroom dancing, where — as she puts it — personal passion meets political muscle. Called “Hot to Trot,” the film is meant to introduce—even those of who of us who think we’re fully up to speed on cultural trends—to a growing phenomenon probably few really know about or will have examined as deeply she intends to do with her documentary.

According to Freedman, ballroom dance is enjoying a renaissance here in America, as well as abroad, embraced by everyone from grandparents to grad students. “But there’s one form of this storytelling-in-motion,” says Freedman, “that is not seen in mainstream venues: same-sex couple dancing. Yet it too is surging in popularity, remaking lives and bodies, along with popular culture and gender politics.”

Over the course of the film, “Hot to Trot” follows the overlapping personal narratives of several talented same-sex dancers as their complex lives unfold, on and off the dance floor, including competing at the 2014 Gay Games, the international Olympics-like competition of the LGBT community (with all the attendant dramatic tension about winning or losing this ultimate prize). At the same time the film tells these resonant personal stories, it effortlessly explores larger social and cultural themes. It’s a captivating combination.

Hot to Trot Teaser Trailer 2014

“Because the entry point for this film is dance,” Freedman says, “it has appeal to a wide audience. The beauty and the unalloyed joy are what originally attracted me to this — and then, the more I dug in, the richer it got, and I saw clearly what a good, and even important, film this could be: great characters, terrific subject, a lot of layers. And a real unexpected dimension that set it apart: it is political, but these dancers are living the issues, rather than working them. And the power and the traction of that captured me. We know that culture makes change. Because this

film sits at the intersection of art, politics, and passion, it can entertain people and equally be a catalyst for new understanding, attitudes, and action.”

While Freedman’s film is not yet completed—75 percent of it has been shot—she’s already doing what she can to foster a conversation about how our world can only be a better place when people are allowed to pursue their passions free of stigma or the need to justify their choices.

We’re at a real inflection point as a society...It’s a time of unprecedented change. I think this film can be part of that.

Along with a number of speaking appearances and presentations about the project, other pre-release activities include a [website](#) that features a teaser-trailer from the film culled from early footage, which she plans to keep updating as the project moves forward, as well as profiles of some of the dancers featured in the film, for each of whom a small backstory is presented.

Among the featured characters is [Emily Coles](#), pictured wearing a tuxedo, who started her dance career at age 5 prancing on stage with nine other little girls in tutus and slippers. She loved the stage, but the tutu was not a fit. Emily has severe, lifelong Type 1 diabetes, which was diagnosed at age 3, and remains a daily, significant struggle.

Another star of the film is [Ernesto Palma](#), who started life as a poor, bullied youth in Costa Rica, and has done some hard living in his 33 years (he’s a former meth addict). He’s known since boyhood that he was gay and has always been determined “to live the life I was born to live.” By contrast, his dance partner, [Nikolai Shpakov](#), grew up in Russia, the only child of an architect and an attorney. Although he started dancing “before I learned how to walk,” his early path was more conventional, until he decided to follow his muse, emigrated to New York, and found enormous success on the Latin ballroom circuit. He has only come out in the last few years and is still coming to terms with that public identity. His new dance partnership with Ernesto is his first with a man.

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It’s the dancers and their spirit and fervor that sparked Freedman’s initial interest in this film, and it’s also a topic that stands apart from other subjects—9/11, cancer, poverty—that she’s tackled over the past 20 years.

Ultimately, what she wants people to take away from the film is the idea that by “transforming yourself you can rock the world.” Adds Freedman, “We’re at a real inflection point as a society. It’s a time of unprecedented change. I think this film can be part of that.”

**Bruce Trachtenberg**

Bruce Trachtenberg is executive producer and editor for The Atlantic Philanthropies. He previously served as executive editor for frank and before that as executive director of the Communications Network.

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