



Stepping Out

The same-sex ballroom and Latin dance scene

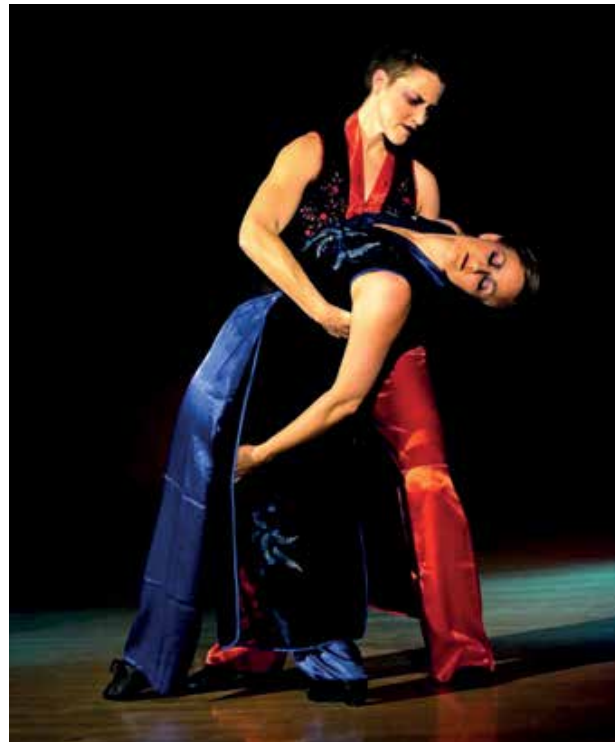
Marianka Swain speaks to the creator of a new film about same-sex dance

“I love verité: films that follow where people’s lives go, and build the narrative around them,” explains director/producer Gail Freedman. Her feature documentary film *Hot to Trot* does exactly that, forming a beautiful portrait of the American same-sex dance scene via a handful of passionate ballroom competitors.

Both ballroom and its same-sex variety were new to Gail, which she thinks is an advantage. “I have that outsider status, so I can frame it for a wide audience. I immediately loved the way same-sex dance takes gender norms and throws them up in the air, and the joy and lightness of it. My experience – initially surprise, but quickly growing accustomed to men and women dancing together – will I think be reflected by viewers, especially as they get to know these individuals.”

The dancers featured are a fascinating bunch: determined Type one diabetic Emily Coles; Kieren Jameson, who’s juggling career aspirations; the charming Costa Rican Ernesto Palma, who overcame addiction; and his temperamental opposite, Russian Nikolai Shpakov, who longs for acceptance. Gail gives space to detailed moments at home, in the rehearsal room, backstage, and on the competition floor.

She followed those two teams – which see partner changes along the way – for



Emily Coles and Kieren Jameson.

about four years. We see ups and downs, from tension within partnerships (inflected by particularly same-sex concerns, such as swapping leader/follower roles) to romance and challenges like health and social issues.

“I find the ballroom partnership fascinating – it’s so intense, intimate and complex. As well, I always knew this work was going to go beyond dance. In the current climate, it feels even more vital to spotlight things like immigration and LGBTQ representation. One distributor described the film as *Mad Hot Ballroom* meets *Paris Is Burning*.”

As for shooting dance, Gail took advice from those with experience, “but we wound up breaking rules. Rather than showing the whole body, we wanted to get those sweaty close-ups. We first experimented

at this competition in Philadelphia, getting a sense of when the camera should be still or follow the action when it’s multiple couples moving around. You want both your characters and the larger action.

“I’m a compulsive researcher, so I did my research, but I didn’t let that overtake my storytelling. I want viewers to experience and understand the dance world while not losing sight of everything else that’s going on. I love moments like Emily’s parents – who are amazing people on every level – reassuring her that it’s not about being on the podium. Same-sex dance has brought so much to her life, with or without winning.”

Gail hopes the film will have a wider impact. “Storytellers can change hearts and minds. There are so many gay men who find it remarkably liberating

to finally dance with the gender they prefer – though I know some also see it as performative, and are happy in mainstream competitions. But on some level Latin is about love and passion: you can see the difference between Emily dancing with Kieren and then dancing with her girlfriend Katrina. Even though Katrina’s less experienced, there’s this energy between them.”

Hot to Trot premiered in 2017, playing at numerous festivals, and Gail was thrilled by the response. “It’s been tremendously gratifying. When we screened at this wonderful movie theatre in the middle of Manhattan, we completely sold out – and it was a diverse audience in every way imaginable. The film ended and the dancers came on stage, and the room just erupted. It was so emotional. We then won the festival audience award, which was a complete shock!”

The hope now is to arrange wider distribution, and Gail has been working hard to secure funding to cover elements like music use. “It would be incredible to launch with a distributor in June for Pride Month, and we’d love to screen it at the Paris Gay Games. But I also think it’s a film with broad appeal – it could have a place everywhere from gay film festivals to schools and people’s homes. Through these same-sex dancers, we’re exploring ambition, inclusivity, gender, overcoming hardships, what it means to be a team, and how we define home, love and happiness. That’s universal.” ■

For information on future screenings or to contact Gail, visit hottotrotfilm.com