

Mad Hot Ballroom

“Mad Hot Ballroom” is a heartening, even inspirational, film about a citywide ballroom dancing competition during 2004 among fifth-graders in the New York City public schools. Not surprisingly, the girls are uniformly sweet and eager to learn and compete, while the boys appear somewhat embarrassed and reluctant to participate in the enterprise. It is their teachers and professional instructors that prove to be their inspiration—patiently guiding their novice charges into learning, over 10 weeks, the five principal dances in the competition: tango, rumba, foxtrot, merengue, and swing.

Ten weeks of determined practice by the kids from nine schools thorough the city’s boroughs lead up to the big finale dance-off in the Winter Garden Atrium in south Manhattan. Tentative first steps have been replaced by practiced, confident moves. As the movie’s tagline has it: “Anyone can make it if they know how to shake it.” This is a performance in which you end up rooting for everybody!

“Mad Hot Ballroom” features three schools of the 60 that participated in the 2004 competition: PS 150 from the affluent Tribeca area in lower Manhattan, PS 112 from the primarily Italian and Asian section of Benson Hurst in Brooklyn, and PS 115 from Washington Heights, a Dominican neighborhood bordering Harlem where over 97 percent of the residents live below the poverty line. Can any of them defeat the reigning champion from Forest Hills in Queens?

Director Marilyn Agrelo is a New-York-based filmmaker and documentarist. The film’s idea stemmed from an article that producer/screenwriter Ann Sewell had written about the competition for a New York City newspaper. Agrelo has said about her film: “The thing that I noticed is that the music they (the children in “Mad Hot Ballroom”) listen to is predominantly hip hop, where the women are all bitches and whatever. They come from families where there might not be a mother and a father. But in the dance class, it’s all about taking care of the lady, looking after your partner, making her happy, treating her with respect. You sort of hope that maybe a little bit of that will stay with them.”

In a sweet concession to the kid’s point of view, director Agrelo and her cinematographer Claudia Raschke have consistently placed their hand-held cameras at waist level, the better to catch the priceless expressions of the kids as they move about the floor, in practice and during the finales.

It all works beautifully, making for a soulful and hilarious movie anyone can enjoy. (*The film runs 105 minutes and is rated “PG” for all the charming kids it features.*)

(June 2005)