

DANCE ON THE SILVER SCREEN



Marianka Swain reflects on the allure of dance films and reveals the results of our reader survey

"Sacrilege!" "Don't touch it!" "You'll never re-create the magic!"

These were a few of the less hysterical – and profane – responses to news that Kenny Ortega is remaking classic film *Dirty Dancing*. With the remake of its 1980s cousin, *Footloose*, opening in cinemas on October 14 and *Dirty Dancing*, *Billy Elliot* and *Flashdance* inspiring West End shows, it's clear dance films have an iron grip on the public's imagination, but what is it we love so much?

Even the most ardent dance-movie watcher has to admit that, as cinematic works, they vary dramatically in quality, from the postmodern masterpiece *Singin' in the Rain* to the predictable plotting and cringeworthy script of... well, most of the others.

In fact, many dance films – especially more recent offerings and sequels – slot neatly into three set templates:

1. CINDERELLA

An underdog/outsider/person suffering from PTSD (accident, death in the family, disastrous audition) has to overcome obstacles (finance, prejudice, self-doubt, 1980s hair) in order to fulfil their dream of getting into dance school/giving an amazing performance/winning a big competition whose prize is the exact amount needed to save the local studio/pay tuition fees/go to Disneyland. Life lessons and/or romance with impossibly good-looking partner optional bonus.

See: *Flashdance*, *Strictly Ballroom*, *Billy Elliot*, *Center Stage*, *Dirty Dancing*

2. SAME DIFFERENCE

"Yeah, but we're, like, an awesome hip hop crew, so there's, like, no way we'd ever hang with those, like, totally lame ballet/ballroom/jazz dancers." "Gosh no, we couldn't possibly train with those uncouth yobbos. How terribly frightful!" Oh. What do you know? These two apparently opposing styles actually work well together AND WE ALL LEARNED SOMETHING ABOUT OURSELVES IN THE PROCESS.

See: *Take the Lead*, *Step Up 1, 2 and 3D*, *Save the Last Dance*, *StreetDance 3D*

3. DANCE TILL YOU DROP

"Oh, you mean it's really dangerous? Like, 99 per cent chance of fatal accident, self-mutilation and/or irreversible psychological damage? Well, I hear you, but I can't help it, mister, I just gotta DANCE!" Don't try this at home, kids.

See: *The Red Shoes*, *Black Swan*, *Wishing Stairs*

The truth is that the most discerning viewer finds their standards slipping when confronted with the sheer escapist joy of a transformation tale (or, to borrow from "Strictly", "the J word") – and a few sensational dance sequences seal the deal.

Such is the emotional impact of dance that it can provide standout moments in films that aren't even about dancing – for example, the memorable tango in *Scent of a Woman*. So, without further ado or "Coming soon" trailers, here is the definitive guide to the best dance films, based on the views of *Dance Today* readers. ➤



TOP TEN DANCE FILMS

10. Mad Hot Ballroom (2005)

Audience warning: you will weep. Every single time. This feature documentary about ballroom-champion-turned-pioneer-teacher Pierre Dulaine bringing dance to inner-city New York kids is both moving and hysterically funny.

9. Footloose (1984)

Will the remake match the camp joy of the original, with Kevin Bacon leading a dance crusade in the tragedy-struck small town? Read my review in the next issue...

8. The Red Shoes (1948)

The original behind-the-scenes ballet film, blending backstage drama and thrilling performance, captured with an advanced editing technique.

7. Billy Elliot (2000)

A moving story with a powerful social backdrop that contributed greatly to the legitimisation of boys dancing.

6. Top Hat (1935)

So many to choose from, but this is arguably the crowning achievement of Fred and Ginger's perfect partnership.

5. The Tango Lesson (1997)

Breathtaking visuals, raw intimacy and the best cure for writer's block EVER.

Reader comment: "The scene where she dances with three men to 'Libertango' is incredible." **We Love Tango Music**

4. Strictly Ballroom (1992)

Baz Luhrman's satirical sensation often feels like pure documentary in its depiction of ballroom politics.

Reader comment: "My favourite scene is the romantic rumba on the rooftop." **Sarah Burns**

3. Shall We Dance? (2004)

Based on a touching Japanese film, this is a beautiful illustration of how dancing can change your life.

Reader comment: "Romantic and funny throughout, with amazing dance sequences." **K Jefferson**

2. Singin' in the Rain (1952)

A riotous Hollywood in-joke, with seemingly effortless, virtuoso dancing transcending the comedy.

Reader comment: "You know they can really dance, because there are no cuts, just glorious long shots."

William addictedtotango

1. Dirty Dancing (1987)

The unappreciated heroine. The hunky teacher with a heart of gold. The social and sexual liberation. The defining soundtrack. And, of course, that lift.

Reader comment: "What's not to like?!" **Gemma Gordon**

Honourable mentions

Saturday Night Fever, *A Chorus Line*, *All That Jazz*, *West Side Story*, *Hairspray*, *Center Stage*, *Fame*, *Flashdance* (admirably covered by Robert Webb in "Let's Dance for Comic Relief"), *Black Swan*, *Grease*, *Step Up*, *Save the Last Dance*, *You Got Served*

"YOU KNOW THEY REALLY CAN DANCE, BECAUSE THERE ARE NO CUTS, JUST GLORIOUS LONG SHOTS"

TOP FIVE SCENES

1. "Moses Supposes" in *Singin' in the Rain*
2. Gene Kelly singin' and dancin' in the rain
3. That lift in *Dirty Dancing*
4. "Feel the rhythm": paso a cappella in *Strictly Ballroom*
5. The after-hours tango in *Shall We Dance?*

"THAT LIFT IN DIRTY DANCING"

"'EL TANGO DE ROXANNE', THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION OF JEALOUSY"

TOP FIVE SCENE-STEALERS IN NON-DANCE FILMS

1. Don't mess with the "Cell Block Tango" girls in *Chicago* (2002)
2. "El Tango de Roxanne", the ultimate expression of jealousy, in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001)
3. Al Pacino's surprising tango in *Scent of a Woman* (1992)
4. All of Chicago twists and shouts in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986)
5. John Travolta and Uma Thurman smoulder in *Pulp Fiction* (1994)

TOP FIVE COVETED OUTFITS

1. Cyd Charisse's green flapper dress and heels (and legs) in *Singin' in the Rain*
2. Fran's transformative red paso dress in *Strictly Ballroom*
3. Rudolph Valentino's macho tango look, complete with spurs and whip, in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921)
4. Ginger Rogers' glamorous feathered gown in *Top Hat*
5. Morgan's ("Strictly"'s Katya Virshilas) sexy black tango dress in *Take the Lead* (2006)

TOP FIVE CORNY LINES

1. "Nobody puts Baby in a corner." *Dirty Dancing*
2. "I have to help Wayne with his bogo pogo." *Strictly Ballroom*
3. "Why do you want to dance?" "Why do you want to live?" *The Red Shoes*
4. "I carried a watermelon." *Dirty Dancing*
5. "How did you choose the tango?" "I didn't. The tango chose me." *The Tango Lesson*

"I HAVE TO HELP WAYNE WITH HIS BOGO POGO"

CONGRATULATIONS

to readers **S Burns** and **K Jefferson** who have both won *Dance Today* goody bags for their contributions to this feature. Your goodies will be on their way shortly!