

Cracking the craft

Are we losing the art of floor craft?

Marianka Swain investigates

With this year's International Ballroom Championships around the corner, dancers are putting the finishing touches to their routines, perfecting technique, inspecting costumes and getting into the competition mindset. However, one important element isn't getting the attention it deserves, believes former champion and top coach Shirley Ballas: "Floorcraft today is the worst it has ever been in the history of ballroom dancing."

Shirley isn't alone in that opinion. "It's definitely becoming a forgotten skill," believes another champion turned coach David Sycamore. "I think the problem is the influx of dancers from countries where it's not taught as a priority. Too many coaches are putting all their energy into tricks and razzmatazz, losing sight of the fundamentals. You won't impress on a competition floor unless you can adapt your movement to the space and present yourselves to the judges."

"At a basic level, you have to respect the roots of the style," explains teacher Richard Miller. "Ballroom is a social partner dance with a wonderful tradition

of etiquette, communication and courtesy, to your partner and to others on the floor. Of course there's a difference between a tea dance and a major competition, but you don't have to sacrifice the values of the industry in order to shine on the floor. In fact, you're more likely to annoy

the judges and lose marks!"

"It's a real challenge to judge some dancers," agrees Shirley. "In Latin, there's a culture now of couples learning a routine straight forward into a mirror, not thinking about rotating the work and bringing it in and out of the centre – it's like they're stuck to the edge of a tablecloth, practically dancing into the laps of the spectators.

"If you don't turn, judges can't get the full effect of your work; in some cases, they can't even see your number! They'll give you a couple of chances, and then they'll move on to another couple. I want dancers to get their faces out of the mirror and think about rotating their figures and zigzagging in and out of the centre – and

