

In sync



From “Strictly” stars to ballroom beginners, **Marianka Swain** finds out what makes a dance troupe successful

Melina Hamilton’s Stardust Formation Team.
Photograph © Steve Stephens

With the eighth series of “Strictly Come Dancing” showcasing the new professional dance troupe and groups such as Diversity and Flawless dominating last year’s “Britain’s Got Talent”, it seems that teamwork really can pay off – but success doesn’t always come easily.

“The main challenge is often controlling the group!”

observes Darren Bennett, who has choreographed many of “Strictly”’s group numbers, as well as working with large casts in stage shows *Latin Fever* and *Strictly Gershwin*. “When you have a room full of experienced dancers, everyone wants to contribute. However, when I’m creating a number, I see that as an asset: if I’m open-minded and willing to adapt, someone else

might spot something I’ve missed or build on my ideas. The key is to be authoritative but flexible – and leave your ego at the door.”

Monika Molnar uses the disciplined approach that she employs for her professional DanceMyWay company during her Latin jazz performing courses, and she notes that not all students can learn in this environment. “Some dancers are just ‘me,



Above, *Flawless*. Photograph © Steve Ullathorne

Top right, *Guyz in Sync*. Photograph © www.sports-picture.net



Melina Hamilton had ambitious plans when she began choreographing for her Stardust Formation Team, but she readjusted her vision to suit her mixed-ability ballroom group. "I didn't want some to be struggling, as they wouldn't enjoy it and it wouldn't look good," she says. She's enjoyed the challenge of instilling confidence into social dancers, who might not have thought they were capable of performing.

"Our rehearsals are split 50-50, technique and choreography, so it's a learning process. It's great to see them become cohesive as a team, but I don't mind if the end product isn't spotless. The main thing is that they enjoy performing together and put their personalities across, because that's what the audience takes from it."

Darren agrees that you don't have to sacrifice individualism. "I don't want *Stepford* dancers. I like showcasing different approaches, but you have to tie everything together at key moments. That doesn't mean necessarily having everything in strict lines, in terms of hand placement and so on, but getting timing, symmetry and dynamics in sync. ▶

me, me', and I'd rather get rid of them than have them poison the whole group," she explains.

"I need to see the team as a whole, so you can't worry about whether you're dancing in the front. I position people in the best interests of the group – the shape of it, which moves dancers do best, their expressions, their lines, the overall effect for the audience."

However, like Darren, Monika can be flexible. "I have an idea of what I want my dancers to be, but then someone can walk in and bring something new, which leads me to change my whole concept. For example, one of my students has a hip hop background, so I put in a solo spot for him, showcasing his talent and adding to the fusion of the piece."



“For example, if I dance in a group with Ian Waite, it doesn’t matter that we’re different heights and have our own styles, because the audience responds to us as individuals, but we can still complement one another and contribute to an attractive overall picture.”

Same-sex formation team, the Pink Dancers, has had a variety of dancers in its line-up over the past ten years, but it’s crucial that people fit in, explains long-time member Tori Leach. “We all have a say on who joins. It’s nice having changing members, as we don’t get stale, but we have to work hard to maintain our connection.”

That connection is extremely important, as choreographer Ralf Schiller focuses more on the emotional bond than on show-stopping lifts, believes Tori. “Besides, we’re all getting older, so that limits us when it comes to tricks! But I like that Ralf responds to the music, rather than just sticking figures together.”

Darren’s work is also dictated by music: “I do what it tells me to do, whether it says jump, lift, do something on the floor, moment of humour, linger on an emotional part. And I love telling a story. One of my favourite group numbers is



Above, teamwork at a DanceMyWay gala and, above left, at an East London Dance event at Stratford Circus. Photographs © Carole Edrich

our swing section in *Latin Fever*. It wasn’t just a quick soundbite, as you have to do with a 90-second “Strictly” routine. It had great variety – different songs, highs and lows, boy meets girl, character interaction, a boys’ number, a girls’ number, stand-out solos – all driven by a clear narrative.

“Lilia and I actually reworked *Latin Fever* and put more into that swing number, and took out a few other routines that

were too soundbite-y. We felt that if we were going to do a stage show with a close-knit cast, rather than a competitive routine, it should be more than just dancing. An audience member who knows nothing about ballroom technique should still get something out of it.”

As well as developing the performance side of a group number, it’s important to plot out the overall patterns precisely,



from the top of the O2 – you'd see clear shapes, not detailed footwork, but in 'Strictly' itself, there are more close-ups, and I have to think about how it's shot – in one number, we had a camera reveal for each couple.

"For *Latin Fever*, we had a flat stage, so we did lots of really strong synchronised work. In a 3D space, in contrast, the flowing styles of ballroom work particularly well, and I learned a lot from collaborating on *Strictly Gershwin* with English National Ballet's Derek Deane, who created the wonderful *Swan Lake* in-the-round."

Heather believes that fusing styles is a key attraction of group numbers, so she brought in *Chicago*'s choreographer to help with Guyz in Sync's latest routine, which fuses ballroom with Fosse. "Lots of the boys compete on the ballroom circuit, and they love that the team allows them to take a risk and try something new."

Darren believes that such collaborations are to ballroom's advantage: "There's still a prejudice from some members of the dance community, who consider the form limited or emotionally void... *Strictly Gershwin* placed ballroom in a theatrical context alongside work from leading ballet dancers, and showed that it can be just as dynamic, strong, skilful and captivating." ➤

notes Heather Gladding, co-choreographer of showdance formation team Guyz in Sync. "I draw pictures of what I want to create – a circle, a diagonal line and so on – and then work out which dance forms work best in moving from one to the other to complete the routine. The boys might then find that something doesn't feel quite right when they're doing it, so we have to adjust,

but it helps to have a definite framework for them to work in."

Darren also sketches out patterns, and he factors in the venue very carefully. "With the 'Strictly' tour, I considered the view

"Some dancers are just 'me, me, me,' and I'd rather get rid of them than have them poison the whole group!"



Above, "Shall we Dance," from *Strictly Gershwin*.

Photographs © Laurent Liotardo

However, it isn't always easy putting competitive ballroom behind you, admits Tori. "It's taken me about five years to accept that not everyone in the group has the same goals as me. Now, I realise we may not be the best troupe in

the world, but we are an important part of the dance community."

Monika believes competitive spirit can be positive, so she likes seeing students push themselves. "They also take pride in how well they're doing

as a team, pulling each other up to a certain standard."

Melina agrees that the group dynamic can be a great motivator: "The stronger students help the others, so they've learned patience and how to communicate their dance knowledge, and the weaker students have improved in performance and ability, and also in confidence, which is great to see." Heather thinks that the best troupes have the same ethos as the top ballroom couples: "In a winning partnership, the dancers challenge each other, but you can also see and feel their rapport, and it's the same with my group – they've got to a point where they know what each other is thinking."

***Strictly Gershwin* returns to the Royal Albert Hall in June 2011 (www.ballet.org.uk).** ●

"If I dance in a group with Ian Waité, it doesn't matter that we're different heights and have our own styles, because the audience responds to us as individuals, but we can still complement one another and contribute to an attractive overall picture!" – Darren Bennett