

Looking the part



Photograph © adisa - Fotolia.com

Do long lashes, sparkle, slicked-back hair and fake tan really make a difference on the competition floor? **Marianka Swain** asks dancers, judges and designers whether styling is the key to success

Despite the rebranding of ballroom in recent years, many people still associate it with the over-the-top style lampooned in *Strictly Ballroom*: heavy eyeshadow, Bambi lashes, sequins galore and, of course, caked-on fake tan.

"The film is pretty accurate in capturing the ballroom look of the 1980s," admits "Strictly Come Dancing" professional Kristina Rihanoff. "Flamboyant costumes and strong hair colour, like bleach blonde or jet black, were the norm when I started."

British Professional Latin Champion Rachael Heron believes ballroom will always retain its glamour, but more restraint is possible in today's competitive world: "I use a certain amount of make-up to highlight my best features and hide my flaws, and my dresses don't look right when I'm my pasty self, but overly heavy make-up or tan that looks like mud can be off-putting."

Lorna Lee, chair of the Latin American faculty of the ISTD, claims judges aren't swayed by styling: "If someone's dancing isn't up to scratch, it doesn't make any difference if they have a perfect tan – nor do judges detract marks for lack of styling. However, having a great overall appearance can get you noticed, which is key when you only have a short time to make an impression and you're competing for attention with other dancers.

Photograph courtesy of Kristina Rihanoff



Above, Kristina Rihanoff. Left, her book *The Art of Dancesport Make-up*

"Plus, judges look at the couples from the second they come onto the floor, before they even start moving, and make a decision then whether the picture that couple creates is pleasing or not."

Kristina acknowledges the competition world can be a shock initially: "If it's your first time watching, you might think it's a bit of a freak show! But competitors must have the complete package of great hair, make-up and costume in order to present themselves well to the judges. Ballroom is its own culture, with its own rules, so you can't



think of it in terms of what's appropriate for a night out."

The context of the ballroom look is significant, agrees Rachelle Stretch, press and publicity officer for EADA: "The dances tell a story, and the image of the partnership is a critical part of that. Some competitors go to image consultants and many practise their hair and make-up beforehand to create the best possible look."

Rachael notes that each level of competition, from Youth through to Professional, brings greater understanding of what works for those individuals: "Top Professional couples are comfortable in their own skin and clear about what they're producing. You have to find what makes you feel confident."

There's also a practical element, explains Kristina: "You don't want judges to be distracted from your dancing by hair in your face or bits of costume flying around." Rachelle adds: "You're under strong lights, so you need make-up to counteract them, as you would on stage."

Part of the reason *Strictly Ballroom* (left) looks comical is that the dancers' competition make-up is shown on screen, in close-up – something "Strictly Come Dancing" stylists were keen to avoid, says Rachelle: "The make-up artists

"If it's your first time watching, you might think it's a bit of a freak show!"
Kristina Rihanoff

were inspired by dance competitions, but toned it down to create a natural look that works on TV."

Kristina borrows screen-industry tricks when choosing make-up: "You need water-resistant brands, as you're sweating for hours under hot lights during a long competition day. You can buy the most expensive Chanel powder, but it won't work for dancers, as it's not designed to resist our strenuous movement. Twenty years ago, it was difficult to find affordable brands, but there's more choice now."

Rachelle agrees: "There are lots available on the high street. However, you can splash out more on rhinestoned accessories or professional hairstyling – stoning and intricate hairpieces are very popular at the moment, as dancers try new ways to outdo each other. Plus, if you've paid for the dress and shoes, you might as well invest a bit more in finishing the look off."

Dancewear designer Desiree Edwards (www.desiredesignsdesiree.co.uk) uses tricks to suit dancers' budgets: "A little creativity can make a big difference. Swarovski



Photograph © Ron Seif

Above, British Professional Latin Champion Rachael Heron, with her partner Gregor Rebula

crystals are very effective, but so too are individually applied sequins, especially if you use them to highlight certain areas, like the back of a ballroom dress or on wrist bangles to enhance the arm line in Latin. The most important thing is to choose colours and designs that complement your complexion, personal style and choreography – make-up and accessories should enhance your performance, not detract from it."

Lorna fears focus on appearance can be detrimental to ballroom: "Excessive styling leaves the industry open to

media ridicule. It's not such a problem now, with 'Strictly' playing a positive role in our image, but it can distract from the skill level of our competitors. It's a shame when the hard work, creativity and difficulty is overlooked, or we're seen as less artistic than other dance forms, because of the perception of ballroom as style over substance."

However, apart from at the Juvenile level, when parents are advised to choose hairstyles and make-up "appropriate to the age group", there's very little guidance on how to strike the

balance between too plain and overkill. Kristina's experience on the competition circuit, where many beginners "look a bit weird, as they don't know how to use make-up and tan properly", inspired her to write a book, *The Art of Dancesport Make-up* (available from www.officialkristinarihanoff.com/shop).

"My top tip is to decide on the look you want to achieve and build it up, step by step," she says. "First, choose a dress that works for your body type. If it's more revealing, use more tan. Then match make-up, hair and accessories to it, keeping in mind your style of dance and image as a partnership. The ballroom look is as cyclical as high fashion, so you can try different styles over your career, but don't fall victim to trends and lose your identity. The key is to establish who you are as a dancer and use styling to broadcast that to the judges." ●

"If someone's dancing isn't up to scratch, it doesn't make any difference if they have a perfect tan – nor do judges detract marks for lack of styling"