

# same difference



Same-sex dancers might challenge ballroom's traditional gender values, but they are wonderful advocates for its skill, passion and ability to bring people together, reports **Marianka Swain**. Photographs by **Alec Myers**

It's 10am on a chilly Saturday in February, and already there's a long queue stretching from the doors of the Rivoli Ballroom down the unprepossessing south-east London street. "It's rather different from the average competition," remarks Vernon Kemp. "I'm always amazed by how many people are here before 10am and stay till after 10pm, just to support the competitors."

The Pink Jukebox Trophy ([www.pinkjukebox.co.uk](http://www.pinkjukebox.co.uk)), which

"The competition is for same-sex couples, but they don't have to be gay," explains Vernon, who is a respected coach and judge and is also on the committee for the UK Same Sex Dance Council (UKSSDC; [www.ukssdc.co.uk](http://www.ukssdc.co.uk)). "The Pink Jukebox Trophy is reflective of our modern dance culture, which encourages anyone to have a go. There's no discrimination of any kind – age, sex, religion, nationality, experience. Everything must

ballroom, make a sly joke at the expense of those traditional gender values, with the follower dressed in tails and the leader in a flowing dress. However, most couples are dressed alike, rather than differentiating between leader and follower, and many do indeed swap lead – a feat that is both exciting and technically very impressive.

What is also apparent is the level of support that these dancers have, with a vociferous

“Judges at the Pink Jukebox Trophy are over the moon at the quality of dance and commitment”

has been running at the Rivoli since 1999, is one of the flagship same-sex ballroom competitions, showcasing home-grown talent and also attracting competitors from all over the world; this year, dancers flew in from Germany, the Czech Republic, Uruguay and the US, to name but a few. Unusually for a ballroom competition, there is a wide range of levels, from beginner rounds, including first-time competitors and older couples, through to a fierce battle between extremely serious dancers.

**Above left, Niels Hartvigsen and Holger Wenzel. Below left, left to right: Lori Altendorff and Christa Pearce Lewis; Csaba Csetneki and Balazs Gati; Reka Füleki and Beatrix Rencsisovszki. Right, Dianne Wilmott and Sarah Hughes. Photographs by Alec Myers/[www.danceportraits.co.uk](http://www.danceportraits.co.uk)**

adapt to survive, and the same is true of ballroom. We have to embrace 21st-century values."

Jacky Logan, who runs Jacky's Jukebox, a monthly social night at the Rivoli that welcomes all dancers, both gay and straight, agrees: "What's interesting about same-sex ballroom is that it's challenging the traditional roles of a dominant male and a submissive female. Our gender values are far more complicated than that these days. Lots of same-sex couples swap lead, allowing them to explore both leader and follower elements of themselves."

That exploration is apparent in many of the couples at the Pink Jukebox Trophy. Hungarian couple Reka Füleki and Beatrix Rencsisovszki, who are narrowly beaten to the top spot in the women's





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crowd cheering on not just British competitors, but everyone who braves the floor. A couple who are new to the competition – “and our first couple from Finland”, announces organiser Ralf Schiller – receive a particularly warm welcome. There is also a great social aspect to the evening, with everyone, competitors and spectators alike, getting on the floor at the end of the night to join in Jacky’s line dances, from “Saturday Night Fever” to the “Wild Wild West”.

“We’re very grateful for the same-sex ballroom scene in London – I can’t believe how much it’s grown over the past decade – but there’s a long way to go,” notes Jacky. “It would be naïve to suggest that we’d be accepted everywhere. Only

five years ago, someone had to be removed from the Royal Festival Hall because he had such an extreme homophobic reaction when he saw same-sex couples at a social.

“My [dance and life] partner, Mary, and I have been to tea dances in places like Devon, and people are generally fascinated more than anything, but perhaps that’s because we think about two women dancing together when there aren’t enough men, such as during World War II.

“If it had been two men dancing together, the reaction might not have been as positive. We had a group of Scottish guys at Pink Jukebox who had learned to dance from a video – there wasn’t anywhere for them to learn up there.”

This issue of geography was one of the reasons for the formation of the UKSSDC in 2006. “A big aim is to provide opportunities for people to get into dancing, wherever they are,” explains Vernon. “We’re trying to build up competitions in other parts of the UK, so people don’t have to travel so far to compete.” In addition, the UKSSDC’s elected board, which has a good cross-section of teachers, competitors, judges and promoters, has formulated clear competition rules – “unlike lots of dancesport contests, we have classification rounds, so everyone, no matter what standard they are, gets the chance to dance a few times,” Vernon adds.

The UKSSDC has also worked hard to foster a team

spirit among the British dancers who travel abroad for big competitions: "We've had t-shirts and hoodies made, so that we're not representing different studios or cities, but all part of the UK team," says Vernon. "It can be very intimidating going to, say, the Out Games or the Gay Games, which use Olympic facilities and are on a huge scale.

"Also, same-sex dancers are more visible than other sports – you can't spot a gay marathon runner very easily, but the media jump on an image of two men dancing together as a prime photo opportunity. However, once people realise that all these athletes are as committed as any others – like Johan Kenkhuis, the swimmer who won an Olympic silver medal and also competed in the Out Games – they tend to change their views."

"We can forget that in other countries competing in these competitions is a massive risk," observes Jacky. "One of the most moving moments for me was at the Gay Games in Copenhagen, seeing fantastic performances from same-sex ballroom couples who could face a horrifying fate back home if they were found out: life imprisonment, stoning, even hanging. And there's some suspicion from locals at competitions when they first come across gay dancers. However, lots of people can really surprise themselves with their reactions to same-sex ballroom. Once they witness firsthand the joy and passion these dancers have, it doesn't matter what sex they are."

Vernon agrees: "I've been enjoying Brian Fortuna's



Photographs by Alec Myers/[www.danceportraits.co.uk](http://www.danceportraits.co.uk)

**Left, Sue Davies and Vivianne O'Brien from London. Above, Josh Kelly (London) dances with Stephan Galichet (France). Right, Piia Korpi from Finland**

television show 'Dancing on Wheels' because he isn't overly compassionate. At the end of the day, they're dancers, whether it's a couple in wheelchairs or two men together. They should be taught, judged and treated as dancers. It would be great to see a same-sex couple on 'Strictly', so that it's accepted as part of the mainstream.

Experienced judges at the →



Pink Jukebox Trophy are over the moon at the quality of dance and commitment, and by discovering a whole new form of ballroom that they never knew about."

Vernon and Jacky are both delighted that shows such as "Strictly" have brought more people to ballroom, as dancing "can be life-changing", as Jacky says. "I met Mary at a fun competition, and we've been competing together for 12 years now. Dancing has an incredible power to bring people together."

Vernon believes that dancing is also the perfect solution to problems such as obesity and anti-social behaviour: "It's good for your health, it's creative, you learn something new, and you meet people doing it, rather than having the illusion of social interaction through Facebook or twitter. It would be great to see dance in more schools, as it teaches you key life skills. Many people – gay and straight – don't enjoy sport at school and don't think they can excel at something

physical, but then, later in life, they discover that they really love dancing and can be good at it. Some people started out having a go in my fun competition ([www.funcompetition.com](http://www.funcompetition.com)) and are now representing their country at international events."

Watching a closely fought women's quickstep round (who said ballroom wasn't a contact sport?) and a cheering crowd, completely engaged by the athleticism and skill on display, a misty-eyed Vernon remarks: "So many people have told me that dancing has truly altered their whole life, that they would never have believed they could do what they're doing now. I can only hope that, over the next 10 years, more and more people decide to get on the floor." ●



**Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman from Cologne, Germany won the Women's Ballroom Level A competition. Photograph by Alec Myers/[www.danceportraits.co.uk](http://www.danceportraits.co.uk)**