



STEPPING OUT

This month, **Marianka Swain** looks back over an incredible year and talks to the founders of Studio La Danza

In the year since I began writing this column, we've seen remarkable progress in same-sex ballroom: an increase in regional clubs, greater global outreach, stronger leadership through the UK Same Sex Dance Council (UKSSDC; www.ukssdc.co.uk) and an ever-growing public profile.

As reported last month, Jonathan Morrison and Sergio Brilhante are championing same-sex ballroom in top mainstream competitions, and although the British "Strictly Come Dancing" hasn't yet followed Israel's version by casting a same-sex pair (surely Audley Harrison and Russell Grant were meant to be?), we have seen a same-sex dance troupe, Guyz In Sync, competing on Sky 1's "Got To Dance".

Guyz In Sync grew out of north London's Studio La Danza (www.studioladanza.co.uk), which combines support for competitive same-sex dancers with classes for all levels and a thriving social scene. Heather Gladding and Hadass Armon together founded West One Dance Club, which became Studio La Danza in 2000 when they found a new venue, "but



Above, Heather Gladding (left) and Hadass Armon. Below, Hadass (far left) and Heather (in white) with Guyz in Sync



our involvement with same-sex dancing began many years earlier", observes Hadass.

In fact, Heather was an early pioneer of same-sex ballroom studios, forming women-only *Waltzing With Hilda* (www.hildas.org.uk) in the early 1990s. "Our focus is the same-sex ballroom world," explains Hadass. "Both Heather and I sit on the UKSSDC board and I'm the female co-president of the European Same Sex Dance Association. We're also qualified BDC adjudicators, so we judge at national and international competitions, giving us a unique perspective when it comes to running a studio."

The pair pride themselves on being "fully engaged and up-to-date" with the development of same-sex dancing, "and we try to push the boundaries on the open circuit", notes Heather. "We were the first studio to bring a male couple to the ISTD Grand Final Medallist Competition in Blackpool two years ago, with Graham Ashwell and Toby Hine."

Studio La Danza now boasts 40–50 attendees every Wednesday at its LGBT night and its offering has grown. "We bring in a wide range of teachers and dancers come from other countries to train with us," says Heather. "Guyz In Sync's success at the OutGames and EuroGames and their

appearance on 'Got To Dance' really drew attention to the studio. It was an interesting challenge, preparing for

the latter, as we had to rework the choreography to make it suitable for a formation team but also for the cameras."

Both are thrilled by how far the studio has come and grateful for the support from the LGBT community. "When we first opened, we didn't even have a wooden dancefloor, but they kept us going," recalls Hadass. "We'd love to continue growing, see the level of same-sex dancing rise across the board and keep developing the eye of the general public to same-sex ballroom." ●