



STEPPING OUT

This month, **Marianka Swain** canvasses opinions on the growing opportunities for same-sex couples

The key to expansion when you're involved in something new is getting people to discover it," observes judge and teacher Vernon Kemp. "Just as thousands of Brits don't know that, in May, Blackpool was home to one of the top ballroom competitions in the world, so lots of people, both within and outside of the ballroom community, have yet to discover same-sex dance. But visibility is incredibly powerful – before 'Strictly', when people found out I taught ballroom, they'd ask me what my day job was!"

Bradley and Sören Stauffer-Kruse have experienced first-hand the power of positive exposure after their triumphant progression to the live semi-finals of ITV's "Britain's Got Talent" and have also ventured into mainstream competitions, as well as competing in same-sex events like the Pink Jukebox Trophy (PJT).

"Doing a combination gives us the opportunity to dance

Michael Hall and George Tzoulas



more often and with a variety of dancers and to challenge ourselves in different ways," they explain. "It's been a kind of coming out – putting ourselves on the same competition floor as everyone else. We feel the same-sex dance world has so much to be proud of and to share with the wider dance community."

Adjudicator Monica Needham, who got her first taste of same-sex dance when she judged

this year's PJT, wholeheartedly supports this view: "The standard was surprisingly high, and it reminded me of competition dancing many years ago – the wonderfully friendly atmosphere and support from the first round onwards. Placing same-sex couples alongside male/female ones is slightly more complicated – it needs a larger conversation about judging criteria and ensuring fairness – but in the meantime, I would love to see more same-sex events. I'm thrilled to hear about the new Blackpool competition in October."

Dancer and DJ Jacky Logan agrees, adding: "We're so proud of our international same-sex family, but it's a big time and financial commitment going abroad several times a year, which is the only option for couples if they want to build up competitive experience; I can understand why some are branching out into the mainstream.

There is definitely something special about same-sex competitions, from the social aspect to the flexibility of lead and diverse approaches, but it would also be a big achievement for same-sex couples to compete on an equal basis in the mainstream."

Jonathan Morrison and Sergio Brillhante are trying both approaches, taking the PJT's Latin title again this year and challenging themselves in high-level mainstream competitions. "Doing the latter,

Jonathan Morrison and Sergio Brillhante



competing with world-class dancers, has made us aspire to a higher level," says Jonathan.

"If more same-sex couples did the same, we could hopefully raise the standard of same-sex dance, as well as our credibility in the eyes of other dancers, coaches and judges. Some judges still won't recognise our partnership, but we've had acceptance and support in every single competition – often from people who had no idea same-sex dance existed."

Competitor and dancewear designer George Tzoulas is encouraged by the UK Same Sex Dance Council's outreach work, "such as approaching the LGBT societies of various universities – that's an ongoing process, but it would be great to have more dialogue with other communities. Magazines like *Dance Today* have done the world of

good and I thank you for your support, but we do need more exposure – it would be great to have more dancers coming through, more competitions and more high-level judges."

Vernon believes it's a delicate balancing act: "We would love more competitions across the UK, but we need to be sure that there's demand first – get more teachers on the ground, build up the number of people who want to dance and then those who want to compete. Ballroom is a niche activity and same-sex dance even more so. It's great

to see more communication between mainstream and same-sex dancers, as well as growth in the international community, as dancers can discover more about their favourite pastime and come to view their world in a different way."

Jonathan believes dancers can learn from one another: "Mainstream dancers are generally more experienced and many have made ballroom a career, while we can show the rest of the dance world that you can choose who you want to dance with.

"We respect that some same-sex dancers compete for the community spirit, but if couples are interested in pursuing dance more seriously, we recommend investing as much as you can, as we're doing by competing at this level and running dance events as a same-sex couple. Hopefully, that investment will pay off in more and more acceptance by the general public."

George adds: "To change one's appearance takes seconds, but to change one's thinking can take centuries. One day, I would love to see inclusion for same-sex

dancers in competitions like the British Open, whether in the form of a dedicated event or category or all of us dancing together. We don't want to upset the mainstream world, but it would be wonderful to see it adapt and grow – it's the love for ballroom dancing that drives us all." ●



Michael Hall and George Tzoulas

Photographs courtesy of the dancers