



STEPPING OUT

Marianka Swain talks to Lemington Ridley about crossing the pond and his innovative approach to the British dance scene

“P”eople get stuck in the idea that ballroom is the ‘fake’ form of dancing, following steps from a book, but you can break out of that,” explains teacher and competitor Lemington Ridley. “It’s a steep learning curve technically, but ultimately it’s about having fun and bringing something of yourself to the movement.”

New Jersey-born Lemington trained in several dance styles, working with Princeton Ballet and Alvin Ailey in New York, but it wasn’t until he discovered ballroom through the Arthur Murray teaching programme and subsequently toured internationally that he felt truly fulfilled: “Ballroom offers a connection between two people in a way that no other form can match. Once you’ve discovered it, you can’t go back.”

However, Lemington was reluctant to compete, finding the



scene “political and money-making”, until he discovered same-sex competitions, particularly London’s Pink Jukebox Trophy (PJT): “The atmosphere is electrifying, because it’s trailblazing, so everyone supports one

another in order to grow this idea of same-sex dancing.” Lemington has had great success as a Latin competitor, winning the PJT in 2007, and is now looking for a new partner, with whom he can “bring something different – more artistic and free-flowing”.

Lemington’s movement is based on physical awareness: “I do yoga and reiki, so I’m energy-based – understanding my body, then myself, as a dancer, and finally

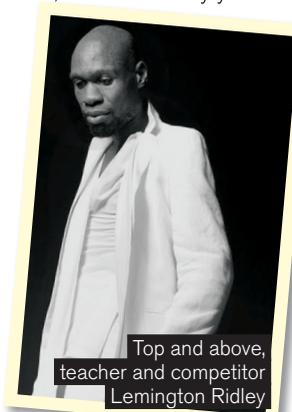
as a ballroom dancer; that’s what I teach students in my ‘Dance From Within’ workshops at Stardust Ballroom.

“When people start dancing, they’re very contained, wanting to copy the ‘right way’ of doing it. But dancing is all about the way you live, the way you naturally express yourself. I use it as a vehicle to open up – it’s helped me understand myself better, why I react to certain things, how I can tap into and harness emotions. I’m very vocal and very tactile – very New York! – so I’ve surprised some British students, but it helps me convey the passion.”

Lemington would like to see that emotional awareness coupled with technical ambition in same-sex dancers: “There’s no rule that says we can’t be as good. The same-sex dance community in New York is much smaller, but the level is higher because dancers go to top coaches.

“It would be great if same-sex dancers here did challenging workshops and focused on technique and musicality rather than just steps and medal tests; it’s not about the steps, it’s the way you dance them. I love that

Melina Hamilton brings top dancers in for showcases at Stardust, because it inspires everyone to aim for a higher level. Once we achieve that level as same-sex dancers, we’ll create an unbeatable argument for what we’re doing.” ●



Top and above, teacher and competitor Lemington Ridley