



STEPPING OUT

This month, another couple shares their mainstream competition experiences with **Marianka Swain**

“**W**e weighed up all the pros and cons before embarking on this new part of our dance voyage,” explains John Church, who, with partner Alex Lewalle, has recently become a same-sex Senior Pre-Champ mainstream competition winner. “There are great international same-sex contests all year round, but we wanted to exploit opportunities closer to home as well.”

“We weren’t sure what to enter – in same-sex, you compete in qualification rounds and judges place you in certain categories,” notes Alex. “But we eventually decided on Senior 1 Championship and Senior Pre-champ events, plus Adult Pre-Champ and Open dance events on an ad hoc basis.”

John admits to some initial trepidation, but was delighted by the response: “Branching out into these competitions allowed us to meet some very friendly people and we had great audience support. Our overall scores are very fair, although a small minority of adjudicators are reluctant to



Alex Lewalle (left) and John Church

judge us; one explained it wasn’t homophobia, but concerns about the inevitably different dynamic. We respect professional opinions, but we hope that, with time, they may evolve.”

The issue of whether same-sex couples can be judged alongside male/female competitors remains hotly debated, but Alex believes it’s possible: “We want to play by the same rules as other couples, not change ballroom as an art form. So many elements can give one couple, same-sex or mixed, an advantage over another: height, strength, power and so on. We just hope judges can base their scores on the same criteria of good dancing.”

Arguably there are certain differences that could make

marking challenging, such as the propensity of many same-sex partnerships to switch lead, “which some find an attractive choreographic element that illustrates the spirit of same-sex: pushing the boundaries of convention,” notes John.

However, when he and Alex started dancing together two years ago, they decided not to change roles, “as it’s hard to do really well and we thought we could progress further this way”. Nevertheless, follower Alex has experienced both, having done the medal syllabus as a leader, and feels there are definite rewards from “seeing both sides of the coin”.

The pair plan to enter the British National Dance Championships

for the first time in November but will also keep participating in same-sex events, which “have wonderful camaraderie and audience participation,” observes John. “It’s also a community: at international events, dancers often house visiting competitors to help keep costs down.”

However, Alex recommends other same-sex couples try mainstream competitions too: “It helps facilitate the process of normalisation so that, regardless of who dances with who and where, it’s the dancing that’s judged – and that in turn will further promote ballroom to a wider community, which can only be a positive thing for us all. The thread that holds all dancers together, same-sex or mixed, is the joy of dancing.” ●