

# STEPPING OFF THE SCREEN

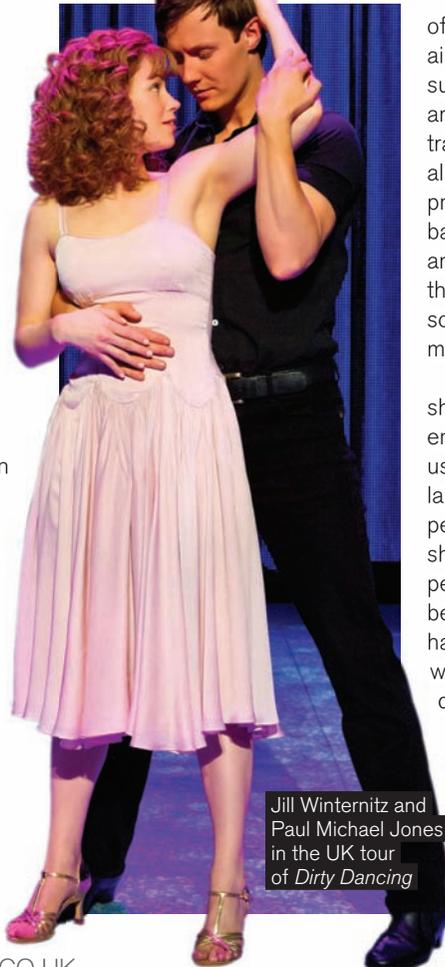
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With the Sydney stage premiere of *Strictly Ballroom*, based on the film classic, on the horizon, **Marianka Swain** asks which medium is the true home of dance

**B**efore February this year, I had never seen *A Chorus Line* on stage. My only experience of the show considered “the dancers’ musical” was Richard Attenborough’s subpar celluloid reinterpretation that stretches the limits of irony by taking a drama which shifts focus from the star to the lamentably overlooked dance ensemble and shifting focus from the ensemble back to the star.

Still, with no theatrical version available, the film was at least an opportunity to see dynamic, creative dancing, and, in the era before wall-to-wall reality shows, I was transfixed by close-ups of these hopefuls’ faces as they poured all their passion and commitment into creating extraordinary movement, fighting against injury, nerves, exhaustion and self-doubt.

When I finally got to see the show on stage, this time armed with the knowledge



Jill Winternitz and Paul Michael Jones in the UK tour of *Dirty Dancing*

of its development and core aims, I understood the furore surrounding the film adaptation and what had been lost in translation. The stripped-back, almost claustrophobically intimate production tears down the barriers between the audience and the performers who bare their souls through speech, song and startlingly immediate, memorably expressive movement.

However, not every stage show has the ability to forge that emotional bond, particularly when using dance as a primary dramatic language. Understandable, perhaps, given that true eight-shows-a-week triple-threat performers are few and far between, meaning we often have to suffer through actors who can hold a tune, but whose dancing would struggle to win a Len “seh-verrrn”, or conversely dancers who struggle to communicate emotion to the back of the balcony.

One of the advantages of dance dramas on screen is that you can mix and

match: actress Jennifer Beals is a sympathetic lead in *Flashdance* and carries an accessible storyline, while dancers and gymnasts produce the fabulous supporting routines; in contrast, the hypnotic Cyd Charisse quietly steals *Singin’ in the Rain* without speaking or singing a word. That separation can risk reducing the emotional drive of dance, but if it’s judged correctly, there’s zero compromise in quality: only the very best performance, including dancing, is immortalised.

In addition, by preserving those performances, we ensure anyone and everyone can access great dance. Fred and Ginger will be with us forever, ready to inspire the next generation, and you can find them not just on the big screen, but on TV, DVD and YouTube. Film and, more recently, small-screen shows like *Strictly* bring dance into people’s homes, and the camera doesn’t just capture every technical element in minute detail for further study – it also zooms



It’s now possible to watch Fred and Ginger on TV, DVD and YouTube

in on the dancers’ humanity.

And yet it cannot be denied that live dance performance is a special experience. This is, after all, a physical mode of expression, and it’s awe-inspiring to witness

the miracle of movement occur three feet away from you, with no tricks, no second takes, purely skill, training and visible athleticism and artistry.

**T**he CGI revolution means we’re less trusting of such brilliance on screen, and the odd error or variation on stage is reassuring. When perfection is truly earned, even anomalous, it makes it all the more thrilling, particularly when you consider that only you were present for this exact performance.

Live dance is also becoming more accessible, with recent national tours of hit shows like *Billy Elliot* and *Top Hat*. Both matched screen triumph with stage success, something the current run of *West Side Story*, a veteran medium-hopper, and, early next year, *Strictly Ballroom* will hope to repeat.

However, not every transfer is quite so dazzling. *Dirty Dancing*’s stage adaptation is a fan letter, a faithful re-creation in another medium, and the *Chorus Line* team admittedly faced difficulties in bringing an intrinsically theatrical dance drama to film.

If dancing isn’t a vital language on screen, it can look artificial, which, rather than converting a ➤

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The cast of *A Chorus Line*



wider audience, fuels the charge of it seeming elitist or outmoded. Equally, the increased number of dance stage shows is a fantastic sign of growing public interest, so we must be careful not to

squander that opportunity by settling for uneven dance quality or by pairing great movement with dubious storytelling.

Whether on stage or on screen, the best dance shows don't

require specialist knowledge to entertain, thrill and even move an audience, on the first viewing or the 100th. Let us hope *Strictly Ballroom's* theatrical incarnation can join their ranks. ●

### Strictly speaking

Craig Revel Horwood and Natalie Lowe return to our screens after touring with stage show *Strictly Confidential*. So which medium do they prefer?

**Natalie:** "As a performer, I found a live theatre audience really exciting – you feed off their energy. *Strictly Come Dancing* is a good compromise, because you do have a studio audience and you get that adrenaline rush of nailing your routine live, but you also learn about camera angles and personality to make it engaging for millions of TV viewers.

"When I'm watching dance, I appreciate it more on stage; TV filters out about 30 per

cent of the emotion, and it can muddy lines and connections. I also love the endless possibilities of live performance. It's like surfing – you never get the same wave twice!"

**Craig:** "Theatre can be prohibitively expensive, whereas TV and film takes dancing to the masses and makes it part of the norm, which is how we grow our world. Dance should develop all the time, so we need to encourage new voices. But for me, there's nothing like watching or performing live. There's no hiding, no excuses, and you develop a real connection. The best dancers express ideas and emotions with every movement, and the most direct way to people's minds and hearts is to do something inspiring right in front of them. That makes it unforgettable."