

STEPPING OUT



THE SAME-SEX
DANCE SCENE

This month, **Marianka Swain** reports on the Blackpool Same-Sex Dance Festival, which took place on October 18–20

“**W**e believe that if you invite people to Blackpool, you should show them as much of it as possible!” explain Sören and Bradley Stauffer-Kruse AKA the Sugar Dandies, organisers of this landmark event. In just two years, it's grown from a competition into a fully-fledged festival, “so we've added lots of other aspects, like entertaining, inclusive socials.

“There was a welcome party at Funny Girls, with a sneak preview – some of our Latin couples did a demonstration for the general public, which was great advertising and really set the mood. On Sunday, we finished off with a tea dance at the Tower Ballroom, where we took over a whole long side of the floor, and we even had a surprise marriage proposal! When the lady proposing got down on one knee on the Tower stage, the whole room rang out in cheers.”

It was the perfect climax for a festival that balanced an impressive competitive level with a sense of fun throughout. “We introduced more line dances to the programme, as we love seeing spectators and competitors having a good time together,” adds Sören. “Part of the joy of same-sex events is people getting on the floor and having a whirl with someone they've never met before.”

However, dancing at Blackpool is also a

privilege, notes Bradley: “Dancers dream of coming here – we're sitting alongside some of the greatest dance festivals in the world. It's fantastic that we've put same-sex dance on the Blackpool map, although we'd still like to make the dot larger! Changing the landscape takes time, but one of the benefits of being at the Winter Gardens is they put up our banners and flyers all year. That visibility helps tremendously.”

The event also enjoyed a reciprocal entry policy with the overlapping Blackpool Sequence Dance Festival. “It was great to see so many sequence

dancers popping into the Spanish Hall – they were really interested in what we were doing,” recalls Sören. “And we had a celebrity supporter, too: Will Young, who was starring in *Cabaret* at the Opera House, came in to watch. He was very impressed, and tweeted about it to all his followers!”

There was certainly much to impress, with an exceptionally high standard – “Blackpool seems to attract the best,” observes Bradley. The men

fought a close battle in the A Standard, with France's Axel Zischka and Stefan Lehner seeing off Hungary's Csaba Csetneki and Balázs Gáti and the UK's John Church and Alex Lewalle.

It was a great year for British results, with Lemington Ridley and Nejc Jus coming second in the men's A Latin and Heather Devine and Chrisi Lyons fourth in women's A Standard. Spain's Santiago Granizal and Antonio Castillo took the men's Latin title, while Finland's Santra Rinne and Piia Korpi triumphed

in the women's Latin and Germany's Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman remain unassailable in the Standard.

Caroline and Petra had another reason to celebrate: Supadance announced that, in addition to their general support of same-sex dance and sponsorship of the Sugar Dandies, they'd selected the female ballroom champs as their new sponsored couple. Not to be outdone, Ballroom Bling chose Lemington and Nejc as the delighted recipients of a year's worth of bespoke crystal accessories.

“We're so grateful for our sponsors – it's not just essential to putting on the event, it gives same-sex dance that all-important brand-name endorsement,” explains Sören. “We're indebted to Marketing Blackpool for their backing, and the crowd was so impressed that Supadance CEO Barry Free and *Dance Today* editor Nicola Rayner were there to hand out prizes. It was also an honour to have the mayor and mayoress of Blackpool opening the finals and *Strictly Come Dancing's* queen of ballroom Erin Boag on the judging panel.”

“I'm astonished by the standard that I've seen,” reports Erin. “I might steal one or two of the boys and replace Anton!” Equally impressed was renowned compère Margaret Redmond, a fixture on the mainstream circuit, who “enjoyed every minute” of her first same-sex dance experience.

Several nations also made their festival debut, including Finland, Italy, Ireland, Bulgaria, and Belarus, “and we had a large group of new entrants from Norwich, who brought a wonderful energy,” notes Bradley.

Norwich's Katie Lord and Natalie Crowe were thrilled to come third in

the C Latin and win the D Standard. “We loved dancing at Blackpool, and the medals made it even better!” says Katie. Natalie adds: “As well as celebrating our success, we got to watch the friends we've made through these hugely supportive same-sex competitions do brilliantly as well – there's no better feeling than that.”

As further proof of success, the Blackpool festival has been selected to host the 2014 ESSDA European Championships next June – the first time the championships have been held in the UK. “We're so proud of the rising standards and rapid expansion of same-sex dance,” says Bradley. “We definitely feel it now belongs on the great stage that is Blackpool, and we look forward to many more wonderful events in future.” ●



Blackpool Same-Sex Dance Festival organisers Sören and Bradley Stauffer-Kruse with celebrity adjudicator Erin Boag



France's Axel Zischka and Stefan Lehner triumphed in the men's A Standard

Visit www.same-sexdancefestival.com for more information, and you can watch Supadance's film about the Blackpool competition on YouTube (<http://youtu.be/gWWTirXYwtQ>).