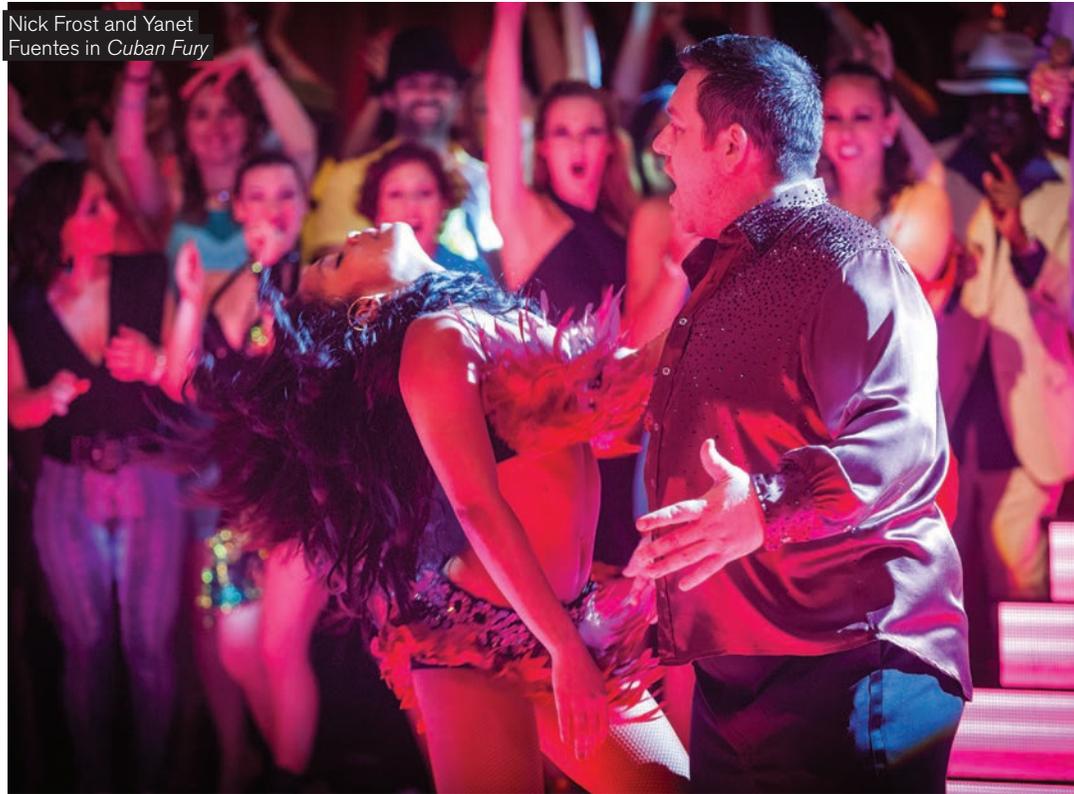


Nick Frost and Yanet Fuentes in *Cuban Fury*



## SUGAR AND SPICE

**Marianka Swain** sees potential in goofy salsa romcom *Cuban Fury*

**W**hat do you get if you cross *Rocky* and Richard Curtis with *Billy Elliot*? Well, if Nick Frost's new passion project is anything to go by, a likeably shambolic and oh-so-British dance underdog jamboree. It's not going to win prizes

for originality, or indeed coherence, but it's about as likely to put a smile on your face as a sequined, shimmying bear hug from Russell Grant.

Following fine dance film tradition, sad sack Bruce Garrett (Frost) has to overcome past trauma in order to win the big

salsa competition and prove his worth to shiny American love interest Julia (Rashida Jones, sadly underused). Cue training montage...

Bruce faces opposition from Chris O'Dowd's creatively loathsome colleague, gruff suspicion from the veteran coach (Ian McShane, barely visible under six coats of furniture polish), and warm support from barmaid sister (Olivia Colman, scene-stealing and underused), flamboyant new salsa

buddy (screamingly OTT Kayvan Novak) and stolid best mate (Rory Kinnear, sincere and – you guessed it! – underused).

It's a cast teeming with talent, but ill-served by Jon Brown's amiably insubstantial script. It doesn't help that the film isn't quite sure what it wants to be, short-changing the romance and switching between playing the dancing straight and indulging in broad comic fantasy. The latter often wins out, with doubles employed for unbelievable stunts

and performances switching from heartfelt to mugging.

That's a shame, as choreographer Richard Marcel provides strong dance elements: enjoyably convincing club sequences and a sincere understanding of the self-worth that comes with stepping outside your comfort zone and learning a

new skill in a supportive community. He also has a real dance star in the form of blistering Yanet Fuentes, who challenges Bruce to a cabaret-style battle of the sexes.

More of that conflict would do this saccharine tale the world of good. We do get glimpses, with a nod to the difficulties male dancers face and a "don't judge by

appearances" moral. Intelligent, nuanced exploration of those issues – and fewer lazy fat jokes – could have made this a strong entry in the dance canon, but it lacks the keen observation of something like *Strictly Ballroom*, which balances satire with moving truth.

Still, a toe-tapping soundtrack and

infectious joy make this cheery viewing. "I believe there's a direct correlation between happiness and dancing," stated Frost recently, and he's had a decent crack at translating that to screen. ●

*Cuban Fury* is in cinemas nationwide.

### CHOREOGRAPHY CORNER

"I wanted to showcase the full breadth of salsa," explains Richard Marcel, who choreographed everything from class scenes and club numbers to competitive showstoppers. "When Nick dances with Olivia, it's more cross-body LA style, and with Rashida it's laidback Cuban, plus every couple on the floor is doing a different variation. You rarely see all those styles come together – that's the beauty of this film."

Richard knew it would be a challenge working with actors who had no dance experience, "but we had the luxury of time – about eight months from first meeting to the end of shooting. Nick put in six hours a day, learning more than he actually danced on film, but that helped him hugely in feeling the music and convincing as someone who lives and breathes salsa. I was so impressed with his dedication."

Some routines did require doubling, "as there are things you can't do without years of training", and Richard brought in experienced dancers for the action-packed clubs scenes. "People turned up from all over the country for auditions, really enthusiastic about a movie representing their scene."

Heading the delegation was *So You Think You Can Dance* salsa goddess Yanet Fuentes, who has toured with big stars like Shakira. "She's such a unique character and dancer," observes Richard.

"I'm thrilled we got to showcase her talent."

Balancing dance and comedy is challenging, "but we knew this was a romcom, so dancing is really the backdrop – it's a film with dancing in it, not a dance film. However, I think the message is fantastic, that anyone can dance, irrespective of gender or look, and it gets that message out in a clever, humorous way.

"My big hope now is that a wide range of people see this and get inspired to go out and dance. I'm currently working with commercial dancers who say they'd love to learn salsa now." And might this be the start of a Hollywood career for Richard? Look closely and you'll spot his Hitchcock-esque cameo in the training montage. "Watch this space..."

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