

STEPPING OUT



THE SAME-SEX
DANCE SCENE

Marianka Swain looks forward to a packed year of international same-sex ballroom competitions

Blackpool Same-Sex Dance Festival ended 2013 on a high, attracting top competitors, fans, judges and sponsors, and paving the way for the first ever UK-hosted European Championships, coming to Blackpool in June. However, it's just one event in 2014's teeming international same-sex dance calendar, which includes the Gay Games in Ohio, Les Gais Musette's Paris tournament, the 12th Grand Prix in Düsseldorf, London's Pink Jukebox Trophy (PJT), the Nordic Open and the Vienna Dance Contest. Britain's Tori and Yvonne Settle compete in many international competitions, but they love coming home to the PJT. "It's the first one we did back in 2003 and we've supported it ever since," says Tori. "The atmosphere is wonderful, and the organisers make it very welcoming, sorting out housing for visiting competitors."

"Not only does that make it affordable for more people, it also means those of us who host get to know dancers from abroad – we've made some great friends," explains Yvonne. "Then when we compete in their countries, we get to stay with them!" This year, they're embracing the challenge of the highly competitive German Open, "generally dominated by amazing German dancers", and are thrilled the European Championships are coming to Blackpool – "it's such a special place to dance".

A big draw of these competitions is that they've grown enough to offer Senior events, explains Tori. "In the early days, most were just too small, but now, there are plenty catering to everyone – Germany's leading the pack, but there are lots cropping up across Europe, plus the Out Games and Gay Games, which move country each time.

"With that growth, plus new events in America,

Canada and Australia, we're getting the chance to compete around the world. The next Out Games is in Miami, which is a good excuse for a holiday in the sun!"

Not only are the opportunities increasing, the competition is getting fiercer, note Piia Korpi and Santra Rinne, a trailblazing couple from Finland. "We see the same-sex scene improving all the time in both quality of dance and performance, especially the leading couples,

which is great for all of us," observes Piia.

Their next big goal is the European Championships, adds Santra: "We're already working towards that, hoping to improve our dancing and our results. We expect it to be as well organised and fabulous as the Same-Sex Dance Festival, only bigger! We're also looking forward to competing in at least London, Paris, Berlin and Copenhagen."

Unlike the mainstream competition scene, in

which the international lifestyle tends to belong to top couples, same-sex competitors – of all stages – are a jet-setting bunch. The numerous contests around the world are generally open to all levels and include fantastic social elements, unlike the more steely mainstream events.

However, travelling is more necessity than choice for some couples, with same-sex dance opportunities practically non-existent in their countries. More than competitions, the international community offers vital support to courageous dancers for whom being open

about their sexuality is still a huge risk.

Organisations like the UK Same-Sex Dance Council, European Same-Sex Dance Association and North American Same-Sex Dancesport Association help enormously in co-ordinating that community, notes Yvonne. "It's the collaboration between these groups that led to the emergence of the World Federation of Same-Sex Dancing, which was responsible for the first World Championships in Antwerp last year. It's really exciting to experience the growth of the scene and see it connect worldwide."

Top couple Csaba Csetneki and Balázs Gáti from Hungary are delighted that the big international competitions are constantly developing and becoming more widely acknowledged. "We're so grateful to the people who devote themselves to making those improvements every year," says Balázs. "It's also fantastic to see the addition of smaller regional competitions, which are vital for encouraging new dancers and attracting more spectators."



Piia Korpi and Santra Rinne, from Finland

UK regional development is a work in progress, with efforts to start competitions in Brighton, Bournemouth and Manchester so far unsuccessful, "as they didn't have a strong enough same-sex dance community to provide the necessary organisational and financial commitment," explains Yvonne. Let's hope 2014 sees improvements in that area, giving more dancers the chance to experience competition at home as well as abroad.

However, Tori's delighted with the increased visibility of same-sex dance. "Now, many of us are training with great mainstream coaches, who might have been less welcoming in the past, and the standard of judges has improved as we become more established."

Yvonne would like to see more studios offering same-sex classes and social events, "or at least creating an inclusive space, so more people could share this wonderful experience of partner dancing. After all, if it weren't for same-sex competitions, Tori and I wouldn't have had so many lovely years dancing together, which led to us getting married in 2010!"

Similarly, Piia would love to see same-sex couples competing in the mainstream: "We really hope the gap between us narrows. It's all about dancing, isn't it?" Csaba also hopes new countries, like Italy, join the same-sex dance community, "but in general, with so many wonderful couples creating long-lasting dance partnerships and more international opportunities than ever, I think we're in a very good place." ●

Dancers on the floor at Blackpool Same-Sex Dance Festival

