

# STEPPING OUT

THE SAME-SEX DANCE SCENE



**Marianka Swain** looks back over a contentious competitive year and previews the top events for 2015

In a year that saw global conflict, political turmoil and an ebola epidemic, who would have thought ballroom dancing could dominate national headlines? And yet 2014 saw a storm of protest erupt over the British Dance Council's (BDC) proposed rule change that would define a competitive partnership as "one man and one lady" – a controversy explored in my September 2014 column.

Given that there's been no formal announcement to the contrary, we assume the proposal has, for now at least, been shelved, although the wider point here is that change in the ballroom world is a complex process – something everyone, not just same-sex dancers, can appreciate. Whatever

the BDC decides and/or eventually communicates, this is an incremental movement occurring on the floor, not just in the rulebook, and we're far from a consensus on how change should be implemented.

Long before the BDC sought to exclude same-sex couples from certain events, some judges have been doing so simply by refusing to mark them. The increased visibility of same-sex dance, through high-profile shows like *Britain's Got Talent*, a growing media presence and the day-by-day outreach work of organisations like the UK Same Sex Dance Council, has aided its presence in both public and mainstream dance realms, but there's a wide gulf between awareness and acceptance.



Heather Devine (leading Chris Lyons) corresponded with the BDC over the proposed rule change

That's particularly true in competitions that – rightly – pride themselves on their heritage, maintaining the grand tradition of British ballroom for the next generation. How we maintain that tradition while also accepting new elements is something everyone needs to consider, from judges and organisers to dancers and audiences. Integration of same-sex competitors will not happen overnight, and there are issues to be addressed to ensure a fair, transparent and pleasant experience for everyone.

However, the international response to our

debate reminds us that we have – and should work to maintain – a level of tolerance in this country, and on our dancefloors, that many others do not enjoy. Indomitable ballroom champions Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman remain undefeated on the same-sex floor, but have no opportunity to test their skills against the top German mixed-sex couples, as a rule similar to the BDC's proposal is in force in their country. More poignantly, last year saw the Vienna Dance Contest debut of a courageous Russian couple, forced to practise



Dancers on the floor at the Pink Jukebox Trophy

in secret and enter anonymously to ensure their safety.

The Russian dancers were able to compete with the (emotional and financial) support of the same-sex community, which is why, even if same-sex dancers are fully accepted into mainstream events, these dedicated, generous-spirited and increasingly high-level events will doubtless continue to thrive. The **Pink Jukebox Trophy**, which takes place at London's Rivoli Ballroom next month, is notable not just for the competition itself, but for the coming together of dancers usually scattered across the globe. It's a celebration of achievement, taking stock,

addressing concerns, and planning for the future.

The same-sex competitions are particularly beneficial for continued efforts to encourage participation beyond metropolitan centres. The Rivoli's **UK Fun Competition**, which had its tenth instalment last October, bridges the gap between keen social and competitive dancer – many have come through its welcoming rounds on their way to Pink Jukebox Trophy and international triumph. Recent years have seen an influx of dancers from around the country, many with their own dedicated cheering sections.

Looking further afield, the thriving

German same-sex scene continues to yield multiple competitions, including May's **Berlin Open and German Open Championships**.

It's another tenth anniversary in September, this time for the **Vienna Dance Contest**, which combines fiercely fought A-class rounds with encouraging newcomers and local clubs to take to the floor. Other European highlights include the December **Nordic Open** and biennial **Budapest Same-Sex Open**.

Arguably the year's biggest event is the

**ESSDA European Championships**, which takes place this summer as part of EuroGames Stockholm. The landmark Blackpool competition in 2014, which combined the European Championships with the newly established Blackpool Same Sex Dance Festival – and also coincided with Blackpool Pride – has set the bar high, but Stockholm is committed to creating a memorable international occasion. Check back in September for a full report.

Whatever the future holds for same-sex dancers, either in mainstream or dedicated events, *Dance Today* is proud to bring you all the action. If there's a same-sex competition, festival, club or issue you'd like to see featured in the magazine, do let me know (marianka@elginmedia.com). In the meantime... keep reading! ●



Ballroom champions Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman have had another good year