



Stepping Out

The same-sex ballroom and Latin dance scene

Marianka Swain speaks to Frank Röpke, pioneering competitor-turned-teacher and judge

When Frank Röpke began ballroom in 1990, what he terms “equality dancing” was unthinkable. His first sighting of it was at a gay and lesbian street festival in 1998. That led him to Tanzart, “still the only dance school for both same-sex and mixed couples in Hanover”. Before that, Frank had competed in Latin with female partners, but from 2000, he joined same-sex tournaments with Tim Grunwald.

“I had consistently positive reactions from friends and family, who were curious to see what it would look like when two men brought Latin dances to the floor. They were often surprised, as we put special emphasis on constant change of leader.” Not everyone was as accepting, however. The board of a local dance club had to discuss the situation before granting them permission to train there, and an internationally renowned coach wasn’t able to teach them at his school, “as they didn’t want a same-sex couple”.

Responses from audiences and organisers at balls, championships and other events varied too, “from complete enthusiasm – interestingly from the elderly – to complete refusal.” But, under the coaching of Ralf Lepehne, Frank and Tim persevered, eventually winning all the Latin A same-sex titles, including

at the 2003 Copenhagen EuroGames and 2002 Sydney Gay Games. The latter was a moment “I will never forget. The thought of that awards ceremony in front of around 1,500 spectators still gives me goosebumps.”

The pair retired in 2003 – “our goal was to stop dancing when it was most beautiful.” Frank then withdrew from the scene, but subsequently got his judging license, joined the German Dance Sport Association adjudication pool and came back to Tanzart in a new teaching role. “I’m so happy when I can teach people their first steps.”

This year, he returned to the Pink Jukebox Trophy (PJT) as a judge. “The Rivoli is a truly unique venue. It’s been many years since I danced there myself, and the atmosphere is so special. Whether it’s the

top couples or the starter level, everyone is loudly cheered and supported – it’s real sporting spirit.”

However, while the PJT is going strong, Frank is concerned that the number of same-sex competitors isn’t increasing, and that couples tend to favour big competitions, meaning some smaller ones have to be cancelled because of low entries. It’s a contrast to his experience as a competitor, “when we tried to dance every tournament – not just because it’s great training, but because it was like a family event and we looked forward to seeing the others again.”

He’s delighted same-sex dance is becoming more professional, with national and international associations being founded and competition procedures agreed upon, though does miss the unconventionality of the early days, “which made the whole thing so interesting and charming.” But the increased level of acceptance is hugely positive – “it’s the biggest and most important success

we could achieve.”

That, Frank believes, contributes to the success of so many German same-sex dancers. With the German Dance Sports Association’s support, couples have access to qualified coaches and can participate in “normal” competition training at most clubs. “Training with other high-class couples is an enormous support to your own dancing. And more people who already have competitive experience are daring to interpret the dances again in same-sex partnerships.”

He also points to the focus on technique, rather than overwhelming beginner couples with complex routines. “I would like coaches to make it clear to couples that choreography can only look good when the body knows how, when and why it works.”

As for the future, Frank would love to see “equality dancing” become a reality: same-sex dance afforded equal respect, but without sacrificing unique qualities like the change of lead. “I’ve seen more and more couples in both dancing and visuals reflect the classic images of the male/female ballroom couple. I find that unfortunate – for me, breaking up that image and seeing two women doing a wonderful rumba together is what our dancing is all about.

“And for the men, they don’t need to get closer to that classic picture through soft, traditionally feminine movement – I love seeing two men combining strength, athleticism, elegance and musicality.” However, Frank’s keen not to place anyone in “a corset – I respect everyone’s interpretation. My personal view is that equality is the absolute focus.” ■



Above: Frank Röpke. Right Frank Röpke dancing with partner Tim Grunwald.

