



# Stepping Out

The same-sex ballroom and Latin dance scene

Pictured: Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmermann (right) competing in Women's Ballroom.

## Marianka Swain reports on an eventful World Outgames

**T**he 2017 Miami World Outgames didn't exactly go to plan. Despite organisers raising a reported \$1 million, thousands of athletes were informed on Saturday, May 26 – the opening day of the Games – that the vast majority of events were cancelled due to “financial burdens”. A full investigation is currently taking place.

Dancer Axel Zischka received a text with the news shortly after his flight landed. “I was shocked and sent a few messages to my friends from the US. They confirmed the cancellation and most decided not to come to Miami.”

For many attendees, it was too late. The event – which takes place every four years – is considered the world championships for same-sex dancing, and thus attracts people from far afield. “There was no time to react with all the prepaid things like flights and hotels,” explains competitor Caroline Privou. “We'd received virtually no detailed information beforehand, but as that's usually the case with competitions embedded in Gay-, Out- and Eurogames, we thought it was business as usual and were shocked at this debacle.”

However, “we were determined to make the best of a bad situation,” explains Axel. An urgent meeting of North American and European dance officials was called. “We



went through what was needed. Adjudicators? Five were still coming or already in Miami. Music? Tania Dimitrova, competing for Germany, volunteered to bring her laptop when flying in the next day. Michael Kongso, from Denmark, agreed to put together music for the A class finals and send it overnight.

“Sound system, floor and lights were more challenging, but following intense negotiations between various suppliers and the North American Same-Sex Partner Dance Association (NASSPDA), a deal was struck. Messages went out to all registered competitors immediately: there will be a competition. It will only be one day, just one open age group, and it won't be the world championships – but a competition nonetheless.”

The pop-up event took place on the Tuesday, and with couples from the US absent, the field wasn't dissimilar to major European competitions. The top podium places, accordingly, went to Germany's Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmermann, Axel and partner Thorsten Dreyer (France and the UK), Sergio Brillhante and Michael

Litke (UK), and Kelly Monshouwer and Liejette Spindler (the Netherlands), with Sören and Bradley Stauffer-Kruse (UK) winning the showdance.

**M**ore unusual – though in keeping with the community spirit of same-sex dancing – were the ad hoc contributions and shows of support. One of the few competitions that did go ahead as planned was country and western, but their dancers showed solidarity by volunteering at the same-sex event, notes Axel.

“Someone brought snacks for the competitors, and medals were replaced with flowers donated by one of the American dancers who was unable to compete.”

European officials and dancers deserve praise for making this pop-up competition happen, with the enormous helping hand of “our American friends – without them it probably would not have been possible,” says Axel.

He praises the experienced officials who stepped in to negotiate with subcontractors and the venue, including Davy Brocatus (European Same

Sex Dance Association), Benjamin Soenksen (NASSPDA), Lee Fox (Country Western), and representatives from the International Federation of Same-Sex Dance Associations. It did demonstrate “what a bit of determination and international co-operation can achieve”.

Caroline adds: “The good news is we have very capable organisations with dedicated people (including the dancers) who, even facing a crisis like never before, can organise and conduct a competition of this quality. Bravo!

“However, with the world championships being replaced by a ‘normal’ competition, this, of course, wasn't what athletes prepared and saved money for. The officials also prepaid flights and hotels and didn't get a refund! This must not happen again if we still want to have qualified people judging and conducting our competitions with skilled dancers coming to compete.

“It raises the question: shouldn't we let our own dance organisations organise such championships in future? Many do want it to be embedded in the Games, but that's resulted in relatively low numbers of couples and high travel and registration fees – we paid €450 just to compete. Plus, the organisation is often worse, so why not give our money to our federations and let them run a high-quality event instead?”

Whatever happens, notes Caroline, this will certainly be an historic competition – “in a positive and negative way!” ■