



Mad Hot Ballroom

MARILYN AGRELO PARAMOUNT CLASSICS. MAY 13.

In this entrancing, funny, and moving documentary, contemporary kids of many social and ethnic backgrounds shimmy their self-conscious hips to the merengue, swing music, the rumba, the tango, and the fox-trot. *Ballroom* follows a New York City public-school-system program that teaches fifth-grade students ballroom dancing, and the film climaxes with a citywide competition that'll have you rising from your seat to root for your favorites. First-time director Marilyn Agrelo leads us like a good dance partner: Her cameras capture the drama of rehearsals, her subjects' alternately hilarious and heartbreaking after-school chatter about their ambitions, dreams, and everyday frustrations; she even sketches vivid portraits of the students' dance teachers (memo to Hollywood producers: Suave, witty Rodney Lopez at P.S. 115 in Washington Heights is already a more magnetic screen presence than two-thirds of the current male movie stars we're subjected to). The winning school is never in doubt, but it doesn't lessen the pleasurable tension and suspense—you'll waltz out of *Mad Hot Ballroom* not merely exhilarated but with renewed respect for after-school programs and the work that teachers can do in children's lives.

K.T.