

Making all the right moves in 'Ballroom'

By LOU LUMENICK

IT'S hard to resist "Mad Hot Ballroom," Marilyn Agrelo's sweet, feel-good documentary that follows 10- and 11-year-old students from three New York City schools in a citywide ballroom dancing competition.

At one, P.S. 115 up in Washington Heights, the students are largely children of poor Dominican immigrants — but they really know how to move and almost made it to the championship the year before.

It's quite a contrast with the upscale, multicultural P.S. 150 in TriBeCa, where the precocious team includes not a few who aspire to a career in the arts.

The third, most awkward team is from P.S. 112 in Bensonhurst, a Brooklyn Italian stronghold that has recently become half-Asian.

Each dance team is made up of five couples who perform the merengue, the



Students Wilson and Jatnna swing in the New York-set "Mad Hot Ballroom."

MOVIE REVIEW

MAD HOT BALLROOM



A winner.

Running time: 105 minutes. Rated PG (nothing offensive). At the Cinema 1 and the Sunshine.

rumba, the tango, the foxtrot and swing, as well as a backup couple who must be ready to step in for any of the five teams in the event of illness.

This documentary not only focuses on the charming and boisterous kids, but on their extremely dedicated and articulate teachers, including Yomaira Reynoso and Rodney Lopez (Washington Heights); Allison Sheniak and Alex Tchassov (TriBeCa); and Victoria Malvagno (Bensonhurst).

There are also telling glimpses of the kids' lives outside the classrooms — especially in tough Washington Heights, where both teachers and some parents view dancing as a way for students to avoid trouble.

Director Agrelo, cinematographer Claudia Rasche-Robinson (who shot on sharp-looking digital video) and editor Sabine Krayenbuhl do an excellent job of capturing quarterfinals, semis and the finals, which are held at the World Financial Center downtown before a panel of judges that includes Ann Reinking.

It's not a huge surprise which team makes it to the finals, but there is nail-biting suspense as they face off against the defending champions, a frighteningly disciplined team from Forest Hills, Queens.

Far less staged-looking than the similarly themed "Spellbound," "Mad Hot Ballroom" is a crowd-pleaser of the first order.