

The Star-Ledger

Babes in 'Ballroom' learn valuable lessons

Lovely little film tracks teams of N.Y. 10-year-olds in dance contest

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Mad Hot Ballroom

(PG) Paramount Classics (105 min.)

Directed by Marilyn Agrelo and Amy Sewell. Opens Friday at theaters in New York.

Stars: 3 1/2

They pivot and parade through a merengue, their upper bodies staid and stiff, their hips and feet flashing. They glide imperiously through the tango, as sleek as silent-movie stars. They swing out to Glenn Miller, grinning and wagging their fingers in the air.

And they are all 10 years old.

They're also the stars of "Mad Hot Ballroom," a new documentary and a sunny "Spellbound" with a beat. Public-school students from Manhattan and Brooklyn, they've all signed up for a class in ballroom dancing. And now, as the year is drawing to a close, it's time for the city-wide competition. Who will come home with this year's trophy? And who will come home in tears?

First-time filmmakers Marilyn Agrelo and Amy Sewell wisely limit their focus to three carefully chosen schools. There's P.S. 150 in trendy Tribeca, where the children tend to be poised and worldly. There's P.S. 112 in working-class Bensonhurst, where the old Italian neighborhood has slowly given way to new Asian strivers. And there's P.S. 115 in Washington Heights, where 97 percent of the study body is at or below the poverty level.

It is no secret, of course, who we're expected to root for (especially when a school from an even richer neighborhood, in Forest Hills, shows up at the end to cockily defend the trophy). But there are still some surprises here, and a great deal of sweet and genuine observation.

There are the glimpses of universal problems the girl whose partner is more than a foot shorter, the boy who worries no one will want to dance with him, the fight to find clothes that pass the "appropriate" test. And then there are the more specific worries. How do you make ballroom dancing relevant to inner-city kids? (Emphasize the Latin-American cultures much of it sprang from.) What do you do when your Muslim students explain their religion forbids them from dancing with the opposite sex? (Give them jobs as classroom deejays.)

Occasionally, Agrelo and Sewell's inexperience shows. The film jumps about a little too much, organized only by thematic conversations among the children themselves. There's no hard information on the instructors, or how the program is funded. In a push to protect the children's privacy, some details are obscured.

But this is still a lovely movie, full of real-life drama (you can almost see it being turned into an off-Broadway musical) and not without its own lessons. Teachers talk about how the class has given their students confidence. Students begin to talk about their own, expanded dreams.

There are a few disagreements, chiefly about the competition itself. At the more comfortable Tribeca school, for example, soft-hearted educators debate the whole idea. Should they really be picking students to represent the school, when not being picked will only damage other children's self-esteem? Why do there even have to be losers? (And sure enough, when one child isn't picked, he tells his teacher "I'm indignant.")

Yet the wise, tough-love teacher at the Washington Heights school has no such qualms. She pushes her kids to compete. She snaps at them when they're not trying. She prods them to do better. Because she knows that, for the rest of their lives, every day is going to be a competition for these kids. And that not one of them will ever be a winner unless they've at least been prepared to try.

Ratings note: The film includes some "thematic elements" mostly kids talking calmly about street crime and family troubles.