

'Ballroom' is graceful, and oh so sweet

Mad Hot Ballroom is a delightful documentary that got audiences talking — and a bidding war going among distributors — at the Slamdance Film Festival this year in Park City, Utah.

The film is described as *Spellbound* meets *Strictly Ballroom*. Though Hollywood loves to define movies in terms of other movies, this label doesn't do the new film justice.

Documentarians Marilyn Agrelo (who directed) and Amy Sewell (who wrote and produced) introduce viewers to three classrooms of irrepressible New York

Review

By Claudia Puig

City fifth-graders as they reluctantly learn to ballroom dance, resolved to compete in a district-wide competition. As the film progresses, you will find yourself rooting for particular children as they master the tango, merengue, fox trot and swing dancing.

One of the highlights is the candid, often funny comments of the young hoofers as they weigh in on dancing, their partners and their goals. But the best part is watching the kids' innate grace and exuberance as they learn these classic dances.

The teachers make a point of telling us that the children are transformed by the experience. One teacher describes her students as having become "ladies and gentlemen." That's harder to determine from our vantage point, though we do see manners improve as moves are perfected.

But this is no cotillion for inner-city kids. The lessons offer a diverse collection of youths — many of them the children of immigrants — a much-needed opportunity to gain self-confidence and a sense of mastery and purpose. In one segment, a couple of eager Muslim boys whose religion forbids them to dance uncomplainingly take on the roles of deejays and cheer on their high-stepping classmates.

The filmmakers could have done one thing to heighten the experience for audiences: follow a few of the kids more closely, giving us a peek into their families, cultures and lives off the dance floor. That was artfully done in *Spellbound*, a documentary about kids who compete in a national spelling bee.

Mad Hot Ballroom is charming and inspiring, nonetheless. The kids are at an interesting age: They're trading in some of their innocence for knowledge of how the world works. It's fascinating to watch those who initially slouched and dragged their feet grow into nimble and determined competitive dancers.

Mad Hot Ballroom

★★★

Stars: Fifth-graders in New York City's public schools

Director: Marilyn Agrelo

Rating: PG for some thematic elements

Distributor: Paramount Classics

Opens today in New York



By Claudia Raschke-Robinson, Paramount Classics

Documentary: New York City fifth-graders Wilson and Jatna are in fine form in *Mad Hot Ballroom*.