

MAD HOT BALLROOM
Directed by Marilyn Agrelo
Paramount Classics, opens May 13

Kiddie-contest doc dances around class, gender issues

Like *Spellbound's* glimpse of the darker side of childhood competition, *Mad Hot Ballroom*—a look at New York City schools' fifth-grade ballroom dance program—is best when exploring issues of class and gender and definitions of success. Director Marilyn Agrelo picks three fascinating schools—in Tribeca, Bensonhurst, and Washington Heights—and documents the 10 weeks from introduction to all-city finals.

While the kiddie rumbas and swing-outs can be adorable, aside from some Washington Heights students who dance regularly at home, none of the participants are prodigies. A bigger blast is the interview footage, especially of the girls, more poignantly self-possessed than the boys. The more cosmopolitan Tribeca group is blissfully able to enjoy boy-girl friendships, while the Dominican girls of upper Manhattan deal with harsher sexual circumstances, at one point discussing fears about walking past groups of drunk, leering men. In the Brooklyn group, amid giggles over crushes, one pensive Asian girl blurts, "The strange thing about being a girl is, you have to be pregnant." In the dance classes, roles are similarly certain. Teachers adhere to a strict boy-girl policy. When kids are absent, stragglers hold on to air—boys leading imaginary girls, girls following ghostly



Photograph by Claudia Raschke-Robinson

Strictly Ballroom

partners. Frequent calls to be "ladies and gentlemen" exist in friction with other messages about gender and the body—e.g., it's OK for boys to dance; it's OK to be friends with girls; anyone can enjoy the pleasure of creative movement. Notably, when the instructors dance together after an administrative meeting, this male-female policy goes out the window.

As gender-specific school sports encroach, the dance program feels like a small reprieve—but one incident foreshadows coming rifts: A fine dancer, after calling a talented Spanish-speaking teammate "gay," ditches ballroom for basketball. Though one Washington Heights teacher pushes her team with vicarious zeal, the 10-week period doesn't produce *Spellbound*-like stage parents. That said, it would have been great to have more sequences of the kids at home—one foosball game in an American-flag-bedecked Bensonhurst basement leaves us yearning for more intimate por-

traits. And where *Spellbound's* academic component produced a suspect but palpable thrill around the complicated promise of upward mobility, this dance contest, despite its undeniable merits, can't help but seem the more tenuous triumph. LAURA SINAGRA

FIRST NATIONS/FIRST FEATURES
May 12 through 23, MOMA

Nations, building: Indigenous fest offers hope

Terra incognita for most Americans, indigenous filmmaking remains fraught with possibility for the adventurous moviegoer. Beyond the self-evident anthropological appeal lingers the hope, however faint, of a return to some prelapsarian age devoid of Hollywood formula, the dream of what J. Hoberman, reviewing 2002's Inuit epic *The Fast Runner (Atanarjuat)* in these pages, called "the rebirth of cinema." MOMA's "First Nations/First Features" brings back that landmark, showing here alongside 24 other features and shorts produced by indigenous peoples from the Arctic Circle to the South Pacific.

A decidedly mixed bag, the series does offer one neglected gem—Tracey Moffatt's cinematically adventurous *Bedevel* (1993) is a triptych of ghost stories rendered as oblique horror comedy. All three episodes build to a steady simmer as Moffatt, an Australian aboriginal woman, ratchets up the tension with disorienting temporal jumps and unsettling off-screen