



The Chicago International Film Festival

Cinema/Chicago and the Chicago International Film Festival
Education Outreach Program Screening: *Strictly Ballroom*
Director: Baz Luhrmann
94 minutes, in English

Please use the below synopsis and film information, study ideas/questions and helpful websites to lead your students in preparation and post-screening discussion. Following the film, students are required to respond to the screening with a one-page essay. Essays (either all or select) must be sent to Cinema/Chicago.*

Synopsis and film information:

Competitive ballroom dancer Scott Hastings has been groomed his entire life by his dance-teacher mother and reclusive father to win the coveted Pan-Pacific title. However, he has grown bored performing classic dances and starts dancing unconventional steps, thus disqualifying himself from the winner's circle. Quiet beginning dancer Fran, however, encourages Scott to dance his own steps, and she becomes his secret partner. Chaos breaks out at the championships as Scott is torn between dancing with established winner Tina Sparkle or taking a chance on Fran, though it is sure to cost him the win. Meanwhile, a cast of wacky characters grows out of control while trying to maintain tradition in this romantic comedy/mockumentary about competitive ballroom dancing in Australia.

Recommended for: cultural studies, dance/music students, film and video students

Appropriate for: 6 - 12 grade

Ballroom dancing: a brief history

Ballroom dancing is thought to have started around the end of the 1500s, but the Waltz as we know it today did not become popular until the 1800s. People initially found the Waltz controversial, because it was thought improper for men and women to dance so closely to one another. Privileged classes of people ballroom danced during this time, while lower classes engaged in folk dancing; thus, like in *Strictly Ballroom*, dance was used to differentiate types of people—their histories and lifestyles—from one another.

Ballroom dancing has continued to evolve ever since, as dancers adapted to changes in popular music and people traveled from country to country, or culture to culture, and brought new musical influences and traditional dances with them. The popularization of jazz music in the United States in the early 20th century, followed by the creation of rock-n-roll, further pushed the evolution of ballroom dance and encouraged numerous other dance crazes. In ballroom dancing, one key change was that couples began to have more freedom from each other rather than engaging in “sequence dances,” or dances with specific steps and patterns, often performed to predetermined music.

The dance that Scott and Fran spend most of their time performing is the Paso Doble. Although “paso doble” means “double-step” in Spanish, the dance’s country of origin, the dance itself is meant to mimic a bullfight and is traditionally danced to music used during bullfights. If you look at Scott’s stance during these dances, you can imagine how he might look if he were fighting a bull in a ring, while Fran dances around him, to some extent representing the graceful and powerful animal. The history of this dance is reinforced in Scott and Fran’s costumes in the final scene: he wears a jacket reminiscent of a matador, and she wears a flamenco dress.

Several other dances are mentioned in the film as well, including the Samba, Tango, Rumba, and Waltz. The Waltz and Tango are two of the five dances currently recognized as International Standard dances, according to the World Dance Council. The other three are the Foxtrot, Quickstep, and Viennese Waltz. The Samba, Rumba, and Paso Doble are three of the five International Latin dances, which also include the Cha Cha and Jive. The United States has its own standard classifications—American Smooth and American Rhythm, which include the Waltz, Tango, Viennese Waltz, and Foxtrot and the Cha Cha, Rumba, Bolero, Mambo, and East Coast Swing, respectively. Of all of these dances, the Paso Doble is the fastest.

- Do you think different types of people dance differently from each other now? How does dance segregate people from one another, perhaps putting up boundaries instead of bringing people together?
- Why do you think the filmmakers wanted to associate Scott and Fran with the Paso Doble instead of a dance like the Waltz?
- Research another kind of dance to see if it has a special meaning, like the Paso Doble relates to bullfighting, or if it grew out of a specific musical style or time period. Present your findings to your class using photographs, videos, or other visual elements to give your classmates a sense of what the dance looks like and means.
- Find a piece of music closely associated with a certain type of dance and play it for your class. If you are feeling ambitious, learn a few steps to demonstrate or teach your classmates.

Study Ideas/Questions:

1. Family plays an important role in both Scott’s life and Fran’s life in this movie. What is the relationship between dancing and family for each person? How are the two families’ relationships to dancing different from each other?
2. Many dance movies include stories about dancers breaking with tradition (*Step Up*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Footloose*, *Shall we Dance*). Think of another dance movie you have seen (or cheerleading movie—*Bring it On*) and write down the similarities and differences you see between that film and *Strictly Ballroom*. What do you make of these similarities and differences?
3. Scott loves dancing but wants to break with tradition and dance his own steps. Are there any traditions in your life that you enjoy but would like to change? Why do you want to make these changes? How might these changes affect others involved with the tradition?

4. This film uses numerous close-ups of faces. Close-ups in film are thought to reveal a character's emotions most effectively. However, close-ups in *Strictly Ballroom* also are used for comedy and to call attention to how a character looks or behaves. Think of a moment when the film focuses on a character's face. How did he or she look? Silly? Serious? Outrageous or out of control? Why do you think the film uses so many close-ups, or what effect do they create?

5. The film starts as a "mockumentary," but it quite quickly veers away from that style and becomes a more straightforward fictional narrative. What elements of the film's opening recalled documentary films? What is the effect of beginning the film this way? Do you have any ideas about why the film did not stick with this style?

6. Director Baz Luhrmann says he drew inspiration from *The Ugly Duckling* when writing this film. How does that classic story play out here, and what is its message?

7. Peer pressure plays an important part in *Strictly Ballroom*. Can you think of a time when peer pressure caused you to act in a way that did not feel natural to you, or a time when you fought against peer pressure to be yourself?

8. *Strictly Ballroom* began as a stage musical and is currently being made into one again (it is set to premiere in March). What changes do you think might need to be made for the film to work as a musical? Which sets do you think they will keep? Do you think any scenes might need to be cut or changed?

Useful Links and Resources:

Official website for the film (including featured clips): <http://www.miramax.com/movie/strictly-ballroom>

Official website for Baz Luhrmann's Production Company: <http://www.bazmark.com>

Official website for *Strictly Ballroom* The Musical:
<http://www.strictlyballroomthemusical.com>

Interview with Baz Luhrmann about *Strictly Ballroom* in Entertainment Weekly (2010):
<http://insidemovies.ew.com/2010/12/08/baz-luhrmann-strictly-ballroom-glee/>

Film Review by Roger Ebert (1993):
<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/strictly-ballroom-1993>

Film Review in *The New York Times* by Janet Maslin (1992):
<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E0CE5D81739F935A1575AC0A964958260>

Information about Cinema/Chicago's Education Outreach Program:
http://cinemachicago.org/education/study_guides/

*Schools who do not send in essay requirement will not be allowed to attend future Education Outreach Screenings.