

RUMBA IN BLACKPOOL



Image: Facebook

What rugby is to Twickenham and tennis is to Wimbledon, ballroom dancing is to Blackpool. Every year the British Open is the top competitive event for the world's crème de la crème: the best professionals around. 'Strictly' descends on the town next week. Last weekend was the turn of the national championship for amateur dancers - like me.

When I emerged into a gloomy, foggy, night after a two-day orgy of dancing I was proudly clutching two cups, with all the pride of a schoolboy after sports day. To have been runner-up in the Rumba and 5th in the Tango in my - less than ferociously competitive - age group was a modest achievement but, to me, it meant a lot.

The action took place in the Empress Ballroom at the Winter Gardens. The Ballroom is one of the treasures of late Victorian Britain: a vast, tiered, theatre enveloping the biggest and best dance floor in the country, a Coliseum for competitive dancing.

Every year a small army descends on the place: dancers, teachers, judges, anxious parents and nervous spouses. In a reversal of the peacock universe, men are mostly dressed in dull black but women sport remarkable, inventive, technicolour plumage: flowing gowns for the ballroom and minimalist glitter, just short of nudity, for the Latin. There is enough bling to decorate a Buckingham Palace banquet several times over.

Vince Cable

As a first timer I am struck by the noise and intensity of hundreds of competitors and fans packed into the theatre, with hour after hour of dance music beating out strict tempo rhythms. There is also a remarkable warmth, classlessness and generosity of spirit. Winning may be a life or death matter but there is no aggression or bitchiness; seemingly everyone wants their rivals to do well. In hundreds of highly competitive events no-one quibbles with the judges.

There is no demand for TMO's, replays on Hawkeye or appeals to higher judges. If Jose Mourinho tires of baiting referees at Chelsea or Chelsea tires of him, I wouldn't recommend a career in competitive dancing.

And this is serious dancing. A rumba is a rumba. A foxtrot is a foxtrot. Technique matters. Competitive dancers show off but the fundamentals have to be right. As an avid watcher of Strictly I am often baffled by the confusing pastiche of styles; it is often not clear what the celebrities are trying to dance. Len has to point out to some baffled celeb that 'there are no heel leads in Latin'.

At the Championships such errors are a hanging offence. And to watch the Blackpool professionals – teachers who partner their amateur pupils - is to see great technique and style, rather than the gymnastics and pantomime skills required of the pros on Strictly.

Appetites are whetted, the evening before competition proper, with a display by the current world No 1 couple, flown in for the occasion from Moscow. They perform the ballroom dances - waltz, Viennese waltz, foxtrot, quickstep and tango- like angels, at a level most of us can barely comprehend, let alone emulate. It is striking that the top of the professional tree is increasingly populated by Russians and other East Europeans, Japanese and Chinese. I notice that at my dancing school in south-west London where the top pros come to practise and be coached before their major championships, Mandarin is the language of choice in the changing rooms.

Dancing is a mass participation hobby in China and I draw comfort from the fact that when China rules the world, probably later this century, dancing will certainly be encouraged, even if cricket and rugby struggle to survive.

After the stars, hundreds of competitors and bystanders descend on the floor for a social dance. My wife, Rachel, and I fight through the congestion trying to avoid 5 year old prodigies practising their rondee chassiss and the flailing arms of exhibitionists trying out their routine designed for an acre of space. This is the last opportunity to dance without the pressure of judges marking our performance.

Competition proper is a nerve-shredding affair as dancers compete, then wait to be called back, for a semi-final or final. Fortunately, there are many levels and age

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categories and I have been placed in a group of over-65's, which reflects our collective lack of flexible hips and physical endurance. My prizes are perhaps rather flattering as a result. But I feel the effort is worthwhile.

After dancing for a quarter of century, and having done many of the medal tests, I have been pushed by competition to move to a higher level of competence and performance.

I owe a lot to my teacher, Nick Kelly, and my partner - his professional partner - Cheyenne. They are brilliant young dancers trying to make their way in the difficult, cruel, world of international competition and are rising through the global rankings. Teaching is a way of earning a living in the meantime. Their other pupils, mostly teenage girls, also do well and for some of them the championship is the first step in a dancing career.

Rachel and I make time to sample the charms of Blackpool before we leave. It is easy, too easy, to scoff at Blackpool which is fighting a decline made inevitable by cheap package holidays to Benidorm and Magaluf and by jaded appetites which no longer see the Illuminations as one of the wonders of the modern world. Blackpool now has the unenviable status of one of Britain's poorest cities, with high levels of deprivation. And it shows. On one side of the Tower is a giant Poundland store and, lest we miss the point, there is a matching Poundsave store on the other.

Town planners haven't helped. The new Hilton looks to have emerged from the school of Soviet prison architecture. And the lift down to the beach looks like a watchtower. On the front is a giant casino, the product of an obscene Blairite experiment to make gambling the engine of urban regeneration. Of George Osborne's Northern Powerhouse there is little sign.

This said, Blackpool has some real strengths and plenty of resilience. The vast sandy, clean beaches are in a different league from Brighton shingle and it doesn't cost £100,000 to buy a beach hut as in Bournemouth. The trams are a great success, reflecting the wisdom of an earlier generation which defied fashion by not tearing up the tracks. That resistance to short term fashion now stands the city in good stead, making it the world capital of dancing.

Ballroom had its own near-death experience when disco removed the need for partners, physical contact and technique. Come Dancing on the BBC disappeared. No doubt purist principles have been sacrificed with the Strictly format, but thanks to Len, Craig and the rest this wonderful pastime is now enjoying a renaissance and Blackpool with it. ■