

Popularity of TV dance shows inspires new interest in ballroom, salsa

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By Sara Bauknecht, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Ballroom and Latin dance have sashayed their way into living rooms across America with shows like ABC's "Dancing with the Stars" inspiring many to put down the remote control and put on their dancing shoes.

"I started watching 'Dancing with the Stars' when I was a [college] sophomore," said Chaya Hiruncharoenvate. "I watched the season with [Spice Girl] Mel B ... I saw her Viennese waltz and it looked fabulous and I got the inspiration, 'Wow, I want to do that someday.' "

Hiruncharoenvate, 22, of Bangkok, Thailand, joined Carnegie Mellon University's ballroom dance club his junior year at CMU. He has studied ballroom and Latin dance ever since and has participated in competitions in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland.



Barbara Johnson waltzes with Brandon Perpich, a dance instructor at Arthur Murray's, Downtown
John Heller/Post-Gazette

"I think 'Dancing with the Stars' has given more awareness of ballroom and Latin dancing to regular people," he said. The ABC show ends its ninth season tomorrow night.

The popularity of ballroom and Latin dance has been growing since about 2000, and television dance shows have boosted -- not created -- this popularity, said Angela Prince, director of public relations for USA Dance. The Florida-based organization is the nation's governing body for Dance-Sport, or competitive ballroom and Latin dance.

Television networks would not have taken a gamble on producing a reality show about ballroom dancing if it wasn't already growing in popularity, Prince said. "Dancing with the Stars" is based on the successful BBC series "Strictly Come Dancing."

These shows have "created the highest level of acceptance for ballroom dancing," she said. "There's no more grandmother exclusivity to ballroom."

Everyone from grandparents to graduate students is dancing the night away around Pittsburgh, said Joe Aiken. Since becoming president of Pittsburgh's USA Dance chapter four years ago, he has noticed an increase in the number of people attending the chapter's events.

People "come from all different backgrounds -- professional, blue collar, white collar, widows, widowers, married couples. We seem to be getting more college kids interested in ballroom."

The chapter's e-mail list has swelled the past couple years, quadrupling from 200 to 800 people. Roughly 200 locals have paid for USA Dance membership, which grants them discounts to USA Dance events and a subscription to American Dancer magazine and local chapter newsletters.

"A lot of it has to do with 'Dancing with the Stars,'" Aiken said about dance's rising popularity. "I think people are tired of dancing by themselves, doing freestyle. ... I think people are wanting to learn ... how to dance more so than just going out on the dance floor and doing their own thing."

Those looking to learn a few moves are turning to dance studios like Arthur Murray, an international dance franchise offering group and private lessons in ballroom and Latin dance. There are four Arthur Murray studios in the Pittsburgh area.

The "Dancing with the Stars" bug has bit many of S. Tony Cardinali's approximately 120 students enrolled at his Downtown franchise.

"Girls ask me sometimes, 17- and 18-year-olds, 'Can you make me a star?'" he said.

Others come to him later in their lives looking to try something new.

Bill Uhl, 67, of Murrysville, started studying ballroom at Cardinali's studio six years ago so he could dance at his eldest daughter's wedding. What started as a couple of classes spiraled into a serious hobby.

"Almost everything they have to offer, I'll take a lesson in," said Uhl, who takes five hours of dance classes a week.

Serene Mendicino, 58, of Downtown, turned to dancing after her husband died. She started taking Latin dance at Arthur Murray so she could dance during a cruise she planned to go on. She kept on dancing and now serves as secretary of Pittsburgh's USA Dance chapter.

Uhl and Mendicino also think "Dancing with the Stars" and shows such as Fox's "So You Think You Can Dance" have elevated people's exposure to dancing. But they aren't star struck by these shows' dazzling cha-chas and glitzy costumes.

"I'm not watching them," Mendicino said. "I'm out dancing."

There are a number of places locals can go when looking for a night out on the town.

"You can dance almost every single day of the week at some club or dance party [in Pittsburgh] where that wasn't the case four or five years ago," Aiken said.

One hot spot is Tusca, a Mediterranean-style tapas bar at SouthSide Works. The club has hosted a salsa class and dance event every Tuesday evening for two years and started holding late night salsa parties on Saturdays three months ago.

"We have probably 100 [people] on Tuesdays and about 150 on Saturdays," said owner Cheryl Primonato. "They go from club to club basically every day of the week."

The dance nights are "not just partying. It's actually an art," said Claudy Pierre, assistant general manager of Sevice, a tapas bar on Penn Avenue in the Cultural District that hosts salsa nights on Mondays.

Other dance spots are Bossa Nova on Ninth Street in the Cultural District, Cefalo's in Carnegie and the Wightman School Community Building in Squirrel Hill.

"Especially in this kind of economy where people used to take vacations, now they're just going out dancing," said Bobby D, a disc jockey and dance instructor who works at least five dance events each week.

While growing numbers are spending their nights dancing, a younger crowd is dancing the afternoon away at school.

Pittsburgh Public Schools launched with Mercy Behavioral Health this fall ballroom dancing classes for fifth graders in six schools. The program is based on internationally renowned dancer Pierre Dulaine's "Dancing Classrooms" program, which is the subject of the 2005 documentary "Mad Hot Ballroom" and the 2006 film "Take the Lead."

The students "definitely make a connection with ["Dancing with the Stars"], and I definitely feel that is a springboard for 'Dancing Classrooms,' " said Viola Burgess, principal at Pittsburgh Allegheny K-5, North Side. "It's more than just dancing for these children. ... They are learning the history and the culture and the art of ballroom dancing."

While pop culture has given people a hunger for dance, some think it has left them with a misconception of what it takes to be a dancer.

"Dancing with the Stars" celebrities "start from zero with training and in four or five weeks they become a dancer," Cardinali said. "You don't [become a dancer] overnight that way."

Others say the show inaccurately portrays ballroom competitions. A true ballroom competition consists of many couples simultaneously performing loosely choreographed routines for judges. The judges make note of the couples who excel and call them back to the dance floor to take part in the next round, said Jackie Zhang, co-president of CMU's ballroom dancing club.

The show also doesn't display the social side of partner dancing, she said. "You don't go onto the floor and dance socially with a routine. You just kind of freestyle it."

Low ratings also have cast a shadow over the show's dance floors the past couple seasons.

"I feel like it's getting lower ratings because it's been going for an awful long time, but I don't think it will drastically affect [dance's popularity]," Zhang said.

Prince, however, thinks ballroom and Latin dance's brightest days still are ahead.

"We're not near the peak of this," she said. "If anyone says we're on a roller coaster and we've hit the top, we've not hit the top."

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