

Citywide kids dance contest captured in dazzling documentary



Just One Productions

Tiny DANCERS

By MERCEDES SANCHEZ

CUBAN-AMERICAN director Marilyn Agrelo is rooting for the underdogs.

Although her new documentary, "Mad Hot Ballroom" (Paramount Classics), focuses on dance, its stars aren't Joaquin Cortes and Pablo Verón. Instead, they're fifth- and sixth-graders from New York City's public schools who learn to foxtrot, rumba, tango and merengue, all in hopes of winning Rainbow Team Matches, a citywide dance competition.

Agrelo trailed students from three schools involved with the non-profit organization American Ballroom Theater's Dancing Classrooms, which provides ballroom lessons to children in over 60 city public schools. The three schools profiled are Tribeca's P.S. 150, Bensonhurst's P.S. 112 and Washington Heights' P.S. 115.

And although Agrelo grew fond of all the children in the film, it's clear that it was P.S. 115's Dominican kids that really touched her heart.

"The kids in Tribeca are going to college," she says. "The kids in Brooklyn are from working-class families, but they're going to be okay. The Washington Heights students seem a little more at risk."

Then, beaming with pride and satisfaction, she adds, "They had a feeling of success in winning the competition, and it wasn't a competition they won in their home

but downtown, where mostly white people live. They conquered there — not on their turf, but on other people's turf. It really meant a lot to me that they had that moment of success."

Audiences will marvel at the natural ease with which the P.S. 115 students shake their hips while doing the merengue, the first dance taught in the American Ballroom Theater 10-week program. And although all the children dazzle, it's Dominican-born Wilson Castillo, a timid boy with disarming green eyes and a delicate but precise dance style, who really wows viewers with his charisma.

But don't think dance is the only topic explored in "Mad Hot Ballroom" — Agrelo uses the topic to spark a larger discussion on the importance of providing positive recreational opportunities to city children.

Yomaira Reynoso, the physical education and dance teacher of the P.S. 115 team, thinks the ballroom dance program helps her students learn the rewards of hard work and dedication. In fact, she makes the latter a part of her own mission.

"I don't just teach them dance," Reynoso says. "I also give words of wisdom by instilling values that they can use, not only in the dance program, but also in life."

"Mad Hot Ballroom" opens in New York May 13th and in select cities May 20th.



Local fifth- and sixth-graders dance their little hearts out in the brand new documentary "Mad Hot Ballroom."

Christine Johnson