

Analytical exposition – strictly ballroom



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In the film *Strictly Ballroom*, Baz Luhrmann has re-worked a play from his drama college days into a romantic musical comedy with a satirical twist and a fairytale ending. The tale, a classic love story, parodies the Australian ballroom dancing scene to develop the message “A life lived in fear is a life half lived”. Luhrmann uses the “red curtain” cinematic form to elicit a response from his audience.

The film is set in the highly theatrical, almost fantasy world of competition dancing and portrays an individual (Scott) overcoming the conformity of a large hierarchical organisation (Australian Dance Federation) by allowing creativity to triumph over convention. It follows the structure of a fairytale where the ugly-duckling outsider (Fran) wins through with courage and grace. The audience is left in no doubt that they are participating in a film through Luhrmann’s use of the production elements of sound, light, costume, choreography and camera work.

This essay will demonstrate how the film supports the value of individualism through character construction and camera work. *Strictly Ballroom* focuses on characters, beginning by satirizing dancers whose lives are dominated by the strict regulations of the Federation. Luhrmann uses mock interviews cut into the dancing scenes to introduce the main characters, and their reactions to Scott breaking the rules of competition dance. Shirley’s (Scott’s mother) loud, dramatic and gaudy characterization personifies ballroom dancing.

Les Kendall and head of the organization, Barry Fife, epitomize the rigidity, conformity and power of the status quo. Through their words and actions this becomes a recurring theme in the film, with Fife in particular, portrayed as

the antagonist as he tries to manipulate people, rules and competitions.

Scott is introduced in a scene showing him breaking the rules and acting as an individual – instantly setting him up as the protagonist in the film. His verbal clashes with Barry, his mother and fellow dancers and his break-up with long-time dance partner, Liz, highlight this role.

His drive for creativity in dance and an individual style is further emphasized when he teams up with Fran, whose appearance, attitude and approach are totally opposite to that of the Dance Federation. Fran's individuality of character is accentuated with the introduction of her multi-cultural and extended family. The relationship which develops between Scott and Fran is used to illustrate the depth of life beyond dancing. Underpinning all stories is the strength of character of Scott's father, Doug.

Portrayed throughout the film as a cowardly and tragic soul whose life has been dominated by the power of the Dance Federation, he emerges with strength and regained conviction; his slow handclap portraying the power of the individual to overcome the group. Camera work is used powerfully to influence the audience and promote the value of individualism over conformity. To enhance the parody, Luhrmann uses freeze-frames, slow motion shots, wide-angled shots and split second zooms, particularly in the beginning "mockumentary" scenes.

The artificiality of the competition dancers is illustrated by unflattering and often extreme camera angles. Luhrmann follows a pattern in his camera angles – in the beginning, Barry Fife (the status quo) is often shown with the camera angle looking up at him, stressing his power. His frequent angry

outbursts are illustrated with extreme close-ups of his red face. Scott, on the other hand, is filmed with close ups of his feet and his face, emphasizing his creative ability, his emotions and his attractiveness.

During dance routines, the camera follows him, cutting quickly from one move to another, stressing speed, skill and passion. The camera provides a marked contrast between the two characters, culminating in the end when Scott is filmed from below and Fife from above. Alternatively, camera work draws a comparison between Doug (father) and Scott. At various times throughout the film, it cuts to Doug, quietly practising his own moves in secret places. Through the use of a high-angled shot in one scene, Doug watches a home movie of Scott dancing his own way, conveying secrecy and sadness.

Paralleling Doug and Scott, in another scene, the camera switches from one to another – Scott dancing with Fran, Doug dancing on the roof, a smooth and clever transition which is later reversed. In *Strictly Ballroom*, Baz Luhrmann has used images in many ways, to guide and influence how the audience views the film and therefore to achieve a particular effect. Character construction ranges from a satiric beginning where the film makes fun of the conforming members of the Dance Federation to a romantic ending where creativity and passion win through.

Innovative use of the camera in an energetic and complex style promotes the value of dancing to the music inside. In Luhrmann's own words, " so the world I chose... was the world I knew... which at the time was my mother judging dance competitions... It could easily be Hollywood, you know, the all-

powerful regime... politics in Washington... Star Wars repressive regime, a creative young person who believes there isn't any one way to cha cha cha, who defies the all-powerful Federation and... turns a popular revolution at the end. “