

Strictly ballroom



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Synopsis

At the Waratah Championships ballroom dancer Scott Hastings goes against Federation rules and impulsively dances his own steps, causing partner Liz Holt to dump him. Then Fran, ugly duckling of the beginners' class, offers to be Scott's new partner. Initially sceptical, he is persuaded by her ideas, and together they plan to dance their own steps at the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix Championships. But Scott's rebelliousness does not go unchallenged. His mother Shirley and coach Les Kendall try various ways to prevent Scott from dancing with Fran, while corrupt President Barry Fife plots Scott's downfall by concocting a story about his parents' dancing career that will convince him to compete at the Pan-Pacifics without Fran. All seems lost until Scott's father Doug reveals the truth. With Barry Fife's desperate attempts at sabotage having little effect, Scott and Fran complete their spectacular dance to rapturous applause from the crowd. Everyone takes to the dance floor in celebration.

Introduction

Australian director Baz Luhrmann's flamboyant and colourful debut feature *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) opens with a theatrical swish of red velvet curtains and leads us into the larger-than-life world of competitive ballroom dancing. It tells the story of Scott and Fran, who rebel against Dance Federation rules in order to dance their own steps. The film is the first in Baz Luhrmann's 'red curtain' film trilogy, and can also be described as a combination of the following: a fairy tale, a romantic comedy, a dance musical, even a satire.

This study guide is aimed at teachers who are teaching the film as a comparative text in the Leaving Certificate English syllabus. As well as <https://assignbuster.com/strictly-ballroom/>

sections relevant to modes of comparison such as The World of the Film, (for Cultural Context/Social Setting) and Hero, Heroine, Villain, a central feature of the study guide is our exclusive interview with director Baz Luhrmann. He discusses his artistic vision and defines red curtain cinema, the concept central to his trilogy of films Strictly Ballroom (1992), Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet (1996) and Moulin Rouge (2001).

We are also very pleased to include an interview with Strictly Ballroom producer Tristram Miall in which he discusses his involvement in the making of Strictly Ballroom, and also provides insights into his role as a film producer in the Australian film industry. Both interviews will provide invaluable background material for both teachers and students. Strictly Ballroom is an excellent choice for comparative study as it is accessible, fun and fast-paced, but it also has serious themes and ultimately celebrates Australia's multicultural society, a view that has strong resonance for contemporary Ireland.

I hope you will find this guide an interesting, useful and enjoyable resource in your teaching of Strictly Ballroom. Grateful thanks to my colleagues Alicia McGivern, Grainne Humphreys and Liz Fehilly for their valuable suggestions and editorial contributions. Ann Ryan Schools Officer fieducation The Film Institute of Ireland “ You will find a warm welcome waiting for you in Australia, one of the most fascinating and spectacular places on earth. A land of contrasts, at once a youthful, vital nation and the home of the planet’s oldest continuous culture. ”

A Spectacular Holiday Destination a Successful Migrant Nation

Just as the Irish Tourist Board represents Ireland in a certain way to attract tourists, the Australian Tourist Commission promotes travel to Australia by highlighting its bright, colourful aspects. Famous landmarks such as the Sydney Opera House, Uluru (Ayers Rock) and the Great Barrier Reef are featured as well as Australia's indigenous people, the aborigines. Ever since Australia was first colonised by British settlers more than two hundred years ago, there have been successive waves of migration to its shores. The majority of migrants came from Britain, Ireland and northern Europe until after the Second World War, when Australia welcomed refugees from war-torn Europe and also began to accept thousands of migrants from southern European countries such as Italy and Greece. (Melbourne for instance has the largest Greek population of any city in the world outside Greece).

Stereotypical Images

What expectations do we have of Australia and its people? There are several familiar Australian stereotypes, including the enduring image of Aussie bushman hero seen in Paul Hogan's Crocodile Dundee. This is continued in recent film release Crocodile Hunter: Collision Course (2002) tarring TV naturalist Steve Irwin. A more negative stereotype is that of a Today, Australians whose ancestors hail from Britain or Ireland² still form a majority of Australia's population but the country has also become one of the most successful migrant nations in the world, welcoming people from all corners of the globe to its shores. Notwithstanding the typical Australian male being depicted as beer-swilling, loud-mouthed and uncultured, like Barry Humphries' comic creation Sir Les Patterson, ' Australia's 2002 government's

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controversial stance on illegal immigrants, contemporary Australia is a diverse and vibrant multicultural society. Cultural attaché. ' Characters and settings in Australian TV soaps such as Home & Away and Neighbours conform to stereotypical views of Australia, such as the mistaken

Australian Cinema

During the 1970s the Australian film belief that it is permanently sunny there, or that people are always tanned, goodlooking, athletic ' surfer' types. Perhaps the soaps' appeal lies in their representation of industry experienced a revival of its fortunes. The development of a government-assisted film industry reflected a desire to develop and nurture Australia as a sunny suburban paradise, a far cry from the more downbeat settings of

Eastenders or Fair City. a national cinema. Films made during the 1970s and since reflect Australia's increasing cultural diversity. The Dish, Australia's biggest ever box office success Peter Weir is an important figure in the Australian film renaissance. His haunting success. This gentle comedy is set in July 1969 in a small rural town in New South 1 Australian Tourist Commission Traveller's Guide 2002, p3 and atmospheric Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975) was a success both in Australia and Wales. Australian scientists become unlikely heroes because of the part they play in 3 Adrian Martin, More than Muriel, Sight and Sound nternationally. Adapted from the novel by Joan Lindsey, the film is set in 1900 on Valentine's Day, when a group of schoolgirls on a picnic at Hanging Rock in Victoria disappear without trace. broadcasting the first TV pictures of the Apollo moon landing. In the 1980s the phenomenally successful Crocodile Dundee (1987) relied on the bushman stereotype for its comedy. In 3 addition to 1990s ' kitsch comedy'

successes like *Strictly Ballroom*, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1993) and *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), other comedies also proved popular. *The Dish* (2000) emerged as Australia's biggest ever box office. Another box office success is Phillip Noyce's film *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), which explores a significant and tragic part of Australian history: 'The Stolen Generations.' From 1905 to 1970 part-Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in institutions. Set in the 1930s and starring Kenneth Branagh, the film tells the story of three Aboriginal girls who escape from the institution they have been placed in and walk 1500 kilometres across the continent to find their way home.

Student Explorations

Strictly Ballroom also won several other awards. Ballroom dancing is hugely popular in several countries around the world. With a successful season at the Wharf Theatre in Sydney before touring to the World Expo awards, including eight Australian Film Institute Awards, three British Academy Awards, its garish costumes, obsession with detail and rigorous rules, it has evolved into a dance sport and has recently been introduced to the Olympics. There are clubs and societies in countries around the world devoted to the promotion of ballroom dancing. Baz Luhrmann was introduced to the world of competitive ballroom dancing as a child growing up in Australia. His mother was a dancing teacher, and he took lessons, danced competitively and became a champion ballroom dancer himself. *Strictly Ballroom* was released in Brisbane, Queensland in 1988. It won several awards and a Golden Globe nomination.

From Play to Film Vision & Passion

The next phase in Strictly Ballroom's development, however, was more challenging. Adapting the successful stage play into a film became what the filmmakers describe as a "David and Goliath journey". Producers Tristram Miall and Ted Albert had approached Baz Luhrmann with a view to buying the film rights. They agreed that he would write the script and direct the film. In 1991 Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce wrote the final screenplay for Strictly Ballroom, but the Australian Film Finance Corporation were cautious about financing a first time director, producer and a largely unknown team. Few films were being made in Australia in the early 1990s, as it was in the midst of an economic recession. In many ways the 'David and Goliath' struggle to get the film made reflects Scott's struggle to dance his own steps in the film. His creativity and vision eventually win out despite the obstacles in his way. Similarly Baz Luhrmann's team overcame what seemed to be impossible odds to triumph. Their vision and passion, combined with tenacity, hard work and determination helped them succeed in getting Strictly Ballroom made. Given the economic circumstances in Australia at the time, and the fact that Baz Luhrmann had never directed a feature film before, this was indeed a substantial achievement.

At Drama School

By 1985 Luhrmann was studying drama at the prestigious National Institute of Dramatic Art¹ (NIDA) in Sydney, where he felt that its traditional teaching methods and strict rules were oppressive, stifling students' creativity. Inspired by this experience, the original premise for Strictly Ballroom was based on overcoming oppression. Luhrmann chose the world of ballroom dancing because of his own experiences in that world.

A Devised Play Student Explorations

Despite several setbacks, including the 1 Baz Luhrmann and the producers have described the experience of making Strictly Ballroom into a film as a ‘David & Goliath’ struggle. Find out about the sudden death of producer Ted Albert, the money was eventually raised to make the film, with the Australian Film Finance Corporation as main investor. But there story of ‘David & Goliath’, and discuss how it has parallels with Scott’s story. 2 The theme of overcoming oppression was the premise for Baz Luhrmann and SETBACKS The first version of Strictly Ballroom was a thirty minute devised play, created by Luhrmann and fellow students (including long time friend and co-writer Craig were other difficulties along the way, including Paul Mercurio (Scott) injuring his ankle just before the start of filming, and he Film Finance Corporation allegedly Pearce). Luhrmann then directed the first ever stage production of Strictly Ballroom at NIDA. The play’s success led to its selection for the 1986 World Youth ‘hating’ the film after viewing a rough-cut. (See Interview with Tristram Miall). Despite all these difficulties, Strictly Ballroom became a huge hit in Australia and Theatre Festival in Czechoslovakia, where it received awards for best production and best director. Luhrmann’s theatre overseas. Made for \$3.5 million Australian dollars, it screened at the prestigious international film festival at Cannes, where fellow NIDA students when they revised the play version of Strictly Ballroom. The students felt oppressed by the strict regime at their drama school.

Red Curtain Cinema

Shakespearean language, and Moulin Rouge is a musical. Once the audience Baz Luhrmann describes his trilogy of films as examples of red curtain

cinema. accepts that they are always watching a movie and are not seduced into believing This concept, which he defines as a theatricalised, participatory cinema form set in a heightened world, is central to our understanding of his work. Strictly Ballroom, the first film in the red curtain trilogy was released in 1992, followed by Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet (1996) and finally Moulin Rouge (2001). that it is real, Luhrmann believes that they will be able to participate actively in the viewing experience. According to Baz Luhrmann, there are rules and conventions in red curtain cinema just as in other film genres. The first rule is that the story needs to be set in a heightened creative world. Strictly Ballroom opens with a theatrical swish of red velvet curtains. The opening image leads us into the world of competitive ballroom dancing, peopled by larger-than-life characters obsessed with winning. The second rule is that the story should be based on a recognisable story shape. In Strictly Ballroom, the David & Goliath myth can be seen quite clearly in Scott's Romeo & Juliet (1996) struggle against the mighty Dance Federation. Similarly, the fairy tale about the ugly duckling being transformed into a swan is mirrored in the character of Fran. Baz Luhrmann for a detailed account of his artistic vision & (Appendix B) Interview with producer Tristram Miall for details of his involvement in Strictly Ballroom. Thirdly, and finally, red curtain cinema is also audience participation cinema. For Luhrmann, the audience needs to be aware that what they are watching is not meant to be real. Unlike other films which give the illusion of reality, red curtain films use ' devices' to keep the audience aware that the film is heightened and stylised. In Strictly Ballroom the central device is dancing; in Romeo & Juliet it is See (Appendix A).

Interview with director discussion from his review of Moulin Rouge reveals: “ The director clearly exults in the thrilling films like Top Hat (1935), the all-powerful Dance Federation is represented as the Luhrmann is influenced by radical theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht, who was theatricality of the genre, which he communicates so infectiously to the enemy in Strictly Ballroom. ‘ Mockumentary’ interviews in the opening interested in creating ‘ active spectators’ in theatre audiences. To achieve this he employed distancing techniques to ensure that the spectator stands outside the experience. Brecht’s aim was to keep the audience intellectually involved, but emotionally detached. Baz Luhrmann wants the audience to be active participants, aware that they are watching a film. He describes red curtain cinema as being like ‘ Brecht with heart’ because he also welcomes their emotional involvement. audience in this exuberant, intoxicating spectacle, a blissfully romantic paean to the power of love. ” 3 sequence provide another example of the film’s parodying of conventions. So does red curtain cinema work, and are we convinced by it as a new cinema form? The world created in Strictly Ballroom is indeed larger-than-life, lamboyant and stylised. And in Shakespeare’s Romeo & Juliet and Moulin Rouge Luhrmann continues the concept of red curtain cinema in ever more fantastical ways. The Verona in Shakespeare’s Romeo & Juliet is hot, sexy and violent, a created world comprising of twentieth century icons.

Student Explorations

There is no doubt that Baz Luhrmann’s red curtain films offer audiences larger-thanlife fantastical created worlds, stunning visual spectacle and stories based on recognisable myths. But perhaps the audience participation

element of red curtain cinema works more convincingly in *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo & Juliet* than in *Moulin Rouge* because in the final film of the trilogy the pace is just too frenetic and rushed. Those who love watching MTV may disagree, but in my view the audience simply does not have time to absorb the myriad images, sounds, sweeping camera angles and special effects. Far from encouraging our emotional involvement with the characters and storyline, these distancing techniques in fact have the opposite effect.

A Combination of Genres

Luhrmann's red curtain films have been box office successes and are hugely popular with audiences. This is clear *commedia dell'arte*; even 'mockumentary'. It can be described as a combination of the following genres: a romantic comedy, a fairy tale, a dance musical, a satire, and evidence that many people enjoy the experience of watching his films, and are willing, either consciously or unconsciously, to accept the conventions finally an example of 'kitsch comedy.' Baz Luhrmann uses these conventions in *Strictly Ballroom*, but he also parodies them. The film self-consciously subverts loosely in English as distance alienation or the 'A' of red curtain cinema. Film critic Michael Dwyer is an enthusiastic admirer of Baz Luhrmann's work, as the following extract outlines our expectations of the backstage musical, so that far from being a celebration of the show business dance community as in narration, mask, song, and actors playing a variety 1

The National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) is one of Australia's best-known drama schools. Graduates include Mel Gibson, Cate Blanchett and Toni Collette.

The World of The Film

As we have seen in the discussion on red curtain cinema, one of its conventions is that the story takes place in a heightened, fantastical world. There are two contrasting worlds in Strictly Ballroom. Both are located physically in the suburbs of Sydney, but they are distinct and separate, reflecting the film's collision of wills and cultures.

The Ballroom Dancing World

The first world we enter is the competitive world of ballroom dancing. Locations in this world are always interior. It is represented as being fiercely conservative, with rigid rules that must be obeyed. Characters are Anglo-Australian comic stereotypes, whose costumes are garish and glitzy. They wear heavy make up, have elaborate, cartoon-like hairdos, and are overly concerned with outward appearances. Obsessed with winning ballroom dancing competitions, they are unable to talk about anything else. They have created an insular, claustrophobic world where outsiders are not welcome and innovation is seen as a threat. The heightened and stylised ballroom dancing world satirises aspects of Australian society. It serves as a metaphor

Scott: I'm just asking you what you think of the steps. Liz: I don't think. I don't give a shit about them. We lost. (New Partners: Sequence 2) FRAN'S WORLD

The second world is the Toledo Milk Bar, where Fran's Spanish family lives. As recent migrants to Australia they are shown as living on the fringes of mainstream society, literally beside the railway tracks.

Providing a stark contrast to the artificiality of the ballroom dancing world, their world is shown as more real. The exterior location suggests space and freedom. Characters are portrayed as more passionate and authentic than

the winning-obsessed AngloAustralians because they dance from the heart rather than from a desire to win competitions. Baz Luhrmann explains: for a particular Anglo-Australian attitude, shown here as hierarchical and conservative. The Dance Federation's obsession with rules and conformity "The Anglo world took the Paso Doble, which is a dance of expression, and put a whole lot of rules on it, and made it about winning. Whereas in Fran's family, dancing is could also be said to represent a fear of change in a part of Australian society that discourages spontaneity and creativity. a tradition, it comes from life, it is an expression of life." Scott's crowd-pleasing steps are seen as pointless compared to the obsession with winning competitions. After Scott and Liz lose the Waratah Championships Liz is inherent in dance before it became restrained and stifled. When Ya Ya encourages Scott to "listen to the rhythm" (Paso Doble: Sequence 5), the film furious. Scott tries to persuade her to listen to his ideas but she is only interested in winning: suggests that expression in dance should be lived and enjoyed, rather than made into a competitive sport. The film tries to capture the original passion STRICTLY BALLROOM 10 FAMILY ultimate patriarchal, authoritarian figure, treats women as decorative objects. His forced me into it - where the man goes the lady must follow - I had no choice." Although they appear conventional enough, with a mother, father and two scenes with 'loyal companion' Charm Leachman (No New Steps: Sequence 6) (Waratah Championships: Sequence 1) Liz's words are ironic, especially when we children, the Anglo-Australian Hastings family is shown as dysfunctional. The film subverts our expectations of the 'average' family. Shirley, like the other characters from the ballroom dancing world is onedimensional. She is depicted as a stereotypical domineering wife, browbeating mild-mannered

husband Doug. She is also a stage mother who lives vicariously through her children's successes. Shirley is ambitious for her son Scott to win the Pan Pacific Dance Championships, but only if he dances the Federation way, and when he demonstrates the Bogie Pogo dance step to Wayne and Vanessa (The Pan-Pacifics: Sequence 7) reveal his sleazy side. Consider that she is the one who refuses to dance with Scott after he dances his own steps, and throws a temper tantrum when she does not get her own way (New Partners: Sequence 2). Similarly, Shirley bursts into tears at the dance studio when the efforts to get Scott and Liz back together fail. Fran's Spanish family is portrayed more sympathetically, but also somewhat stereotypically. Like Cinderella, her real mother has died. Her father Rico is shown as swarthy, unshaven and ultra-strict. Fran's body language and actions suggest that she is afraid of him and when we first meet Rico after Scott walks Fran home (Sequence 3) his words to Fran are harsh.

Fran's grandmother Ya Ya, dressed in black with a crucifix around her neck, grey hair. But elsewhere there are men who do not have such authority. The 'camp' representation of Les Kendall throughout the film indicates that he is homosexual. The fact that he is different, the film suggests, has not been to his advantage. Barry Fife calls him "a pathetic fag," at the Pan-Pacifics (Sequence 8) when Les discovers the truth about the 1967 Championships. Doug Hastings is also different. Far from being the conventional male head of the family, he is bullied by his wife Shirley and seems to have no authority at home.

Whenever he tries to talk to Scott he is ignored, until the Pan-Pacifics (Sequence 7) when he is finally able to make Scott listen. Their portrayal is in

marked contrast to the way Fran is depicted. Shown very much as a fairy tale heroine, Fran is shown more positively. Her shyness and lack of self-confidence give way to her blossoming courage and independence. Her natural appearance contrasts with the heavily made-up ballroom dancers, again reinforcing the idea that Fran is genuine and has more depth than the superficial female characters of the ballroom dancing world. Doug's role as father is in marked contrast

Children There are two children in the film, Kylie, Scott's younger sister, and Luke, her dance partner. Both are aged ten, and are tied back in a bun at first looks like a stereotypical 'ethnic' grandmother, but her appearance is deceptive. She is in fact Fran's ally, covering for her when she goes to the way Rico is depicted. As a strict, authoritarian father, he is also portrayed as strong and masculine, his dance prowess seen as a macho attribute. He dressed as miniature ballroom dancers, complete with elaborate costumes and hairdos. Their function is to comment honestly and insightfully on the action, ut, and revealing a playful sense of humour at Scott's expense during the Paso Doble scene (Sequence 5) when she speaks in Spanish about Scott's becomes a mentor, even a father figure to Scott when he teaches him about the real meaning of dance. (Practising for the Pan-Pacifics: Sequence 6). and they also provide comic asides, for example when Kylie says: " It's the inconceivable sight of Scott dancing with Fran," as she watches them dance ROLES OF MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN Women The film satirises Anglo-Australian women by depicting them as hysterical, bitchy and backstage at the State Championships (Sequence 4). Kylie and Luke also act uring the Pan-Pacifics (Sequence 8) to help Fran and Scott. Realising that

Barry Men In the ballroom dancing world, the men appear to be in control. Barry Fife, the manipulative. The following melodramatic comments by Liz Holt suggest that men lead, at least on the dancefloor: “ He Fife plans to cut the music, they lock themselves into the sound booth so that his plans are thwarted. Their heroic “ nice body”. STRICTLY BALLROOM 11 actions at the end and the way they cheer for Scott and Fran suggest that they European migrants started arriving in Australia. It is clear that Fran’s family is not represent a brighter future for dance. s financially well off as the AngloAustralians. But the fiesta that takes place WORK at the back of the house (Paso Doble: Sequence 5) conveys that there is life and soul here. Although dancing is an amateur pastime for most of the characters in the ballroom dancing world, they are so obsessed that it dominates their lives. For some of the characters, ballroom dancing also provides their livelihoods. Les Kendall and Shirley run Kendall’s Dance Studio together. Shirley’s explanation of why she dumped Doug at the Pan-Pacifcs in 1967 reveals her fear of insecurity. It also suggests that in this world people feel hey have to sacrifice theirdreamsto obtain job security: “ There was too much at stake. Our dancing career was on the line. I couldn’t throw all that away on a dream. We had to survive. We would never have been able to teach. ” (The Pan-Pacifcs: Sequence 7) Barry Fife displays quite a different attitude to work. He uses his position as Federation President to further his own business interests, notably the way he POWER The Anglo-Australian characters are those who are depicted as having power in the film. But Barry Fife’s power is represented as hierarchical and corrupt. During the Waratah Championships (Sequence 1) the

Dance Federation judging panel is framed with a low angle shot, showing Barry and his fellow officials placed on a stage above the audience, reflecting their superior status. Barry is willing to fix the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix Dance Championships, so that Scott doesn't win, as his words to a drunk Ken Railings reveal: "Your year, Ken. Just get on the floor, go through the motions and it's in the bag." (Scott & Fran's Big Moment: Sequence 8)

Throughout the film, his unscrupulous places his video, Dance to Win, on display at every opportunity, and gives a copy to Wayne as a sweetener to get him on his side against Scott (The State methods reveal that he is willing to do anything to hang onto power. He is portrayed much like a corrupt politician or businessman who will do favours for Championships: Sequence 4). certain people in order to gain personal advantages. By contrast, Fran's family business is the Toledo Milk Bar. Business does not seem In contrast, Fran's family, who live on the to be booming, as the milk bar looks shabby and rundown. Its paintwork is dingy and worn and there are bins full of rubbish in front. In some ways the Toledo edges of society, are depicted as less powerful because they are not part of the established, dominant Anglo-Australian culture. However, their sympathetic Milk Bar suggests an earlier era, the 1950s, when such places were first popular, and also when southern portrayal in the film suggests that despite their marginal status, they are culturally richer than their Anglo counterparts. CLASS others. (The Try-Outs: Sequence 3). It is as if Fran's ethnicity marks her as different, STUDENT EXPLORATIONS Although the film shows two cultures in opposition, it is more difficult to position and is considered a drawback to her integration and acceptance into the 1 Baz Luhrmann's describes the world of Strictly Ballroom as 'heightened and them in terms of class.

The AngloAustralians can be described as white working-class or lower middle-class. They have more money and status in society than the characters in the Spanish world, which places them in a higher position. Yet their values and attitudes are satirised in the film, so that the Anglo-Australian world is presented as tacky and artificial, lacking depth. The Spanish characters, living on the margins of an urban society can also be described as working-class. However, their values are celebrated in the film, placing them above the Anglo-Australians. Anglo-Australian world. At the Pan-Pacifc Fran tells Scott how difficult it has been for her:

RACE In the film the Anglo-Australian world is shown as dominant, and ‘normal’, with Fran’s Spanish world represented as the ethnic ‘other’. This could be said to mirror the migrant experience in Australia, where Anglo-Australians form a majority of the population and have lived there longer than more recent arrivals. Fran’s “ Frangipannidelasqueegymop. Wash the coffee cups Fran. How’s your skin Fran? ” (At the Pan-Pacifc: Sequence 7). When Scott is introduced to the Spanish world, he is at first treated with suspicion by Rico (Paso Doble: Sequence 5). At first characters speak in Spanish in front of Scott, often at his expense, and as a way of excluding him from their conversation. For the first time Scott experiences what it is like to be an outsider. But after initial suspicion he is accepted. Scott is willing to learn from Rico and Ya Ya, and realises that the experience is enriching. It is interesting that as Rico and Ya Ya help Scott and Fran practice for the Pan-Pacifc (Sequence 6) they begin to speak both Spanish and English, indicating their growing acceptance of him and their openness to the Anglo world. 2 3 4 5 fantastical’. How does the film language used illustrate this?

See Appendix E: Film Language. (Comment on costume, lighting, characters, camerawork, colour, music in each of the contrasting settings). How does the film depict the Anglo Australian characters? How does this compare with the film's portrayal of Fran's Spanish family? Who is portrayed more sympathetically, do you think? Many of the characters in Strictly Ballroom are cartoon-like and one dimensional. What advantages are there in creating characters that are stereotypes? Can you see any disadvantages? " No new steps! " Why do you think some of the characters were so frightened of new dance steps? Discuss the relevant characters/key moments. Do you sympathise with any of them? Why/why not?

Do you agree with Baz Luhrmann that dance should be ' an expression of life' rather than a competitive sport? Do you experience at Kendall's Dance Studio reflects this marginal status. She is known as ' just Fran' rather than by her full name Francisca. She is reluctant to say her The film's triumphant finale, which shows the two cultures uniting on the dance floor, offers a celebration of Australia's multicultural society. As characters from have any personal experience of dancing competitively? (Irish dancing, for example) What is your opinion on such competitions? Spanish name because it reinforces her outsider status, making her a potential target for name-calling by Liz and Vanessa. Fran's appearance is also the ballroom dancing world and Fran's Spanish world dance together, Rico with Liz Holt, Ya Ya with Les, the film offers an optimistic ending. From being two 6 How does the world of Strictly Ballroom differ from the cultural contexts/social settings of other comparative texts you have studied? Are there any similarities? different. Her dark hair and natural skin provide a contrast to the artificial

glamour of the other ballroom dancers. Shirley, in her role as cosmetician, is always separate, distinct cultures, the finale ensures that they intermingle, each enriched by the other. Only Barry Fife seems not to fit into this new, inclusive encouraging Fran to use apricot scrub or Buf Puf to improve her skin, and tries making her up so that she looks like the world, suggesting that he really does belong to a bygone era. STRICTLY BALLROOM 13 HERO, HEROINE, VILLAIN Mainstream Hollywood cinema draws from principles and structures established in Greek mythology. Stories are driven by the struggle between a central hero and another, usually darker force. The conventional cinematic hero is strong and virile, who proves himself by overcoming obstacles set out for him by the narrative.

The hero always achieves his goal and wins the love of a woman through combat or physical confrontation with another male. HERO Scott is the central character in the film. Positioned as the hero, he is a passionate, ambitious ballroom dancer who also wants to dance his own steps. Scott has to balance his desire to win with a need for individuality and creativity. As he progresses through the film, he overcomes pressures and obstacles in his way and finds the courage to dance his own steps with Fran at the Pan-Pacific. How film language* positions Scott as the Hero We know that Scott is the hero because he is central to the plot.

The action he takes at the Waratah Championships when he dances his own steps is the catalyst for the story. But the way the story is told through film language also shows us that he is the a desire to win marks him as unconventional. He is also put under pressure to conform at different times during the film from Shirley, Les and Barry Fife, and he gives into the

pressure more than once. The hero's qualities of physical strength and virility are shown through ballroom dancing, an activity not normally associated with macho cinematic heroes. Scott's Journey Scott also has to change his own attitudes to fully understand the true meaning of dance. There are several key moments in the film that illustrate Scott's emotional journey: New Partners (Sequence 2) Fran approaches Scott When Fran asks to try out as Scott's new hero. The camera frames Scott in particular ways to emphasise this. The following elements in camerawork illustrate how a film can position the hero: Scott: You've come up to me who's been dancing since I was six years old... and

- Framing of shots – the camera stays with the character as much as possible
- Close-ups of the character's face reveal you want to dance non-Federation, and convince the judges at the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix with 3 weeks to train?

Fran: Yeah. how the character is feeling

- Point-of-view shots make the audience see things from his perspective *See also Appendix E: Film Language

STRICTLY BALLROOM 14 An Untypical Hero? Scott is an untypical cinematic hero. His interest in artistic self-expression more than partner, he is dismissive of her ability: Scott: I don't think so. Scott only listens to Fran after she loses her temper and tells him he's a "gutless wonder" for not having the courage to give her a chance. Even after Scott accepts Fran as his new partner, he holds onto the attitudes and beliefs of the ballroom dancing world. As they dance the ne last look at Liz, Shirley and the other competitors before jumping offstage to An Untypical Heroine? But if Fran fulfils many of the rumba, he instructs Fran to "look at me like you're in love," emphasising the artificiality find Fran. requirements of a fairy tale

heroine, she is also untypical. Although Fran appears to of the ballroom dancing style. STUDENT EXPLORATIONS State Championships (Sequence 4) Scott and Fran dance together backstage Scott is caught between wanting to win the competition and his desire to dance new steps with Fran. The opportunity to dance with Tina Sparkle is tempting, and he is esitant when Fran asks him directly what he intends to do: 1 What are the qualities of a typical Hollywood hero? 2 Give examples of 2 other films in which the central character can be described as heroic, and give reasons for your choices. 3 How does the film position Scott as the hero? 4 Give examples of key moments that show Scott as the hero, and explain how film language conveys this to the audience. be a passive and shy individual at the beginning, at important moments she shows determination and defiance. But she also falters under pressure at times, particularly when faced with Scott's indecision, or when bullied by Shirley

Hastings. Fran: Are you going to dance with Tina? Scott: I... she's a champion. But as Fran watches Tina Sparkle and Nathan perform, Scott follows her gaze. The close-up shot of his reaction indicates that he is beginning to realise what he wants to do. As he dances with Fran backstage the lyrics to the song ' Perhaps' - " If you can't make your mind up, we'll never get started," fit the scene perfectly. HEROINE Fran's Journey Unlike the journey Scott makes to change his attitude towards dance, Fran already knows that she wants to dance ' from the heart'. The Spanish proverb, ' Vivir con miedo, es como vivir a medias/A life lived n fear is a life half-lived' is one of the main messages of the film, and is closely associated with Fran. Her journey is about overcoming her fear so that she can reach her potential and

live life to the full. Paso Doble (Sequence 5) Rico and Ya Ya dance the Paso Doble Rico and Ya Ya, having laughed at Scott and Fran Fran is positioned as the heroine in the film. Like Scott, she is a complex character who has to overcome obstacles to achieve her goals. In many ways she fulfils the requirements of a fairy tale heroine, with clear similarities between her character and Cinderella or The Ugly Duckling. At first she is portrayed as a shy, awkward Fran's ballroom dancing version of the Paso Doble, teach Scott their way. As Ya Ya encourages him to "listen to the rhythm," Scott is transformed by the experience and becomes a beginner dancer. Wearing glasses, no make-up and a baggy T-shirt, her plainness provides a contrast to the glitz and glamour of the other ballroom rejects her shows her strength of feeling: learns that dancing from the heart makes it more meaningful and real. dancers. you're just really scared, you're really scared to give someone new a go because you think, you know, they might just be better than you are.

Well, you're just There are several key moments that illustrate Fran's journey: New Partners (Sequence 2) Fran approaches Scott Fran's angry response to Scott when he "You're just like the rest of them. You think you're different but you're not because The Pan-Pacific Grand Prix Dance The film shows Fran's journey towards confidence and fulfilment through the Championship (Sequence 7) Doug reveals the truth When Doug catches up with Scott and tells him the truth about the 1967 changes in her costume and appearance. From the opening sequence which features a close-up shot of an ordinary looking Fran speaking to camera about athletic and you're gutless. You're a gutless wonder. Vivir con miedo, es como vivir a medias! " Championships, Scott realises that he can dance with Fran at last. The film

moves into slow motion as he spins around to have Scott and Liz's 'wonderful steps', she undergoes a transformation, blossoming into a beautiful, confident dancer. Fran is then positioned in the centre of the frame, standing in the spotlight, just as Scott had been earlier. This indicates STRICTLY BALLROOM 15 that she too wants to dance her own steps, and suggests that she and Scott go home rather than spoil Scott's chances. The use of low angle close-ups of Shirley, re more closely linked than we have previously realised. Vanessa and Liz, seen from Fran's point of view, represent them as villains and Fran as a victim of bullying. The Try-Outs (Sequence 3) This montage sequence shows several aspects of the story that happen over the same period of time. Scott's try-outs with prospective new partners are juxtaposed with Scott and Fran continuing to practice together. The camera also cuts to dates being crossed off the calendar, indicating that time has passed, and the soundtrack, appropriately, is the song Time After Time. The montage also shows how Fran's transformation is taking place. Gradually her appearance begins to change, her hair becomes darker and more attractive and she wears skirts rather than leggings. The use of colour is also significant, and by the end of the sequence she is shown wearing stronger colours (black and red), reflecting her growing confidence. The State Championships (Sequence 4) Fran and Scott dance together backstage After the revelation that Tina is to be Scott's new partner, Fran retreats backstage where Scott finds her. But the spell is broken when Liz Holt scathingly comments: " You're kidding! " when she sees Fran and Scott dancing together. Fran becomes self-conscious again, and falls over, injuring her ankle. Practising for the Pan-Pacifcs (Sequence 6) Fran and Scott practice for the Pan-Pacifcs with the guidance and support of Rico and Ya Ya.

When Fran dances complicated steps with confidence and poise during a practice with her father, the reaction shot of Rico shows his surprise and pride. It is as if he is seeing his daughter in a new light. Like Ya Ya, he accepts that Fran has overcome her shyness and is ready to dance at the Pan-Pacifcs. STUDENT EXPLORATIONS 1 Fran can be described as being like a fairytale heroine. Choose 3 key moments from the film that show parallels between Fran and a fairytale heroine. How does the film reveal Fran's transformation? Give some examples of key moments where Fran's image changes, referring to costume, facial expression, movement, camerawork etc. Is the transformation more than just her appearance, do you think? VILLAIN Barry Fife There is one obvious villain in the film - Shirley, Liz and Vanessa persuade Fran to go home This scene in the dressing room is Barry Fife, President of the Australian Dance Federation. Symbolising a bygone patriarchal, authoritarian era Barry is portrayed as being shifty and corrupt. Like reminiscent of Cinderella, when Shirley (like the wicked stepmother), Vanessa and

Liz (as the ugly sisters) persuade Fran to many of the characters in the ballroom dancing world, Barry is depicted as a cartoon-like stereotype. He is often filmed STRICTLY BALLROOM 16 in low angle close-ups, which make his face look grotesque, and his shiny blue speech about heroes to Les, which is both comic and satirical, bearing similarities to table and is shown on the floor looking dishevelled and defeated. The high angle suits, red face and false hairpiece convey to the audience that he is not to be the kind of speeches we are accustomed to hearing from certain politicians: camera shot used here makes him appear vulnerable for the first time. To symbolise

trusted. Barry's fear of change, combined with his desperation to remain the allpowerful President by ruthless and corrupt means, results in his loss of power and authority at the end of the film. Barry fulfils the role of a typical cinematic villain, being the darker force that tries to prevent Scott from dancing his own steps. Despite his villainous ways, he is also responsible for many of the film's funniest moments, particularly when he confuses proverbs and sayings like: ' Let's not chuck the baby out with the bathtub,' and ' One bad egg can rot the whole barrel. ' Several key moments reveal Barry Fife as a villain: Waratah Championships (Sequence 1) Barry's office Barry is sitting in his office behind his desk, a position that emphasises his authority. Speaking directly to camera, Barry's statement hints strongly that he is more than an impartial judge at the dance competition: " You can dance any steps you like, but that doesn't mean you'll... win. " " Let's not forget, Les, that a Pan-Pacific Champion becomes a hero, a guiding light to all dancers. Someone who'll set the right example... I love dancing, Les, and I won't let what we've fought for all these years be destroyed. "

The film then cuts to an obviously drunk Ken Railings dancing with Liz, providing an ironic comment on what exactly Barry Fife has fought for all these years. Practising for the Pan-Pacifics (Sequence 6) Barry's version of Doug's downfall When Barry tells Scott that Doug's crazy steps lost the 1967 Pan-Pacifics for Shirley and Doug, the audience does not yet know the truth. Barry's fake version of events is conveyed to us through a flashback sequence, which he narrates. The past is depicted as a drama, a play-within-a-play in which Barry, naturally is represented positively. His version of the past is designed to create a rosy nostalgia, but his words sound unconvincing

and false: The film language used during this scene conveys Barry's untrustworthy nature. The ADDITIONAL EXPLORATIONS 1 The final sequence at the Pan-Pacifc reveals acts of heroism by other characters in the film. Name the characters involved, and describe the actions they take that might be considered heroic. 2 From your study of Strictly Ballroom as well as other comparative texts, compare the heroic qualities of each of the main protagonists. In what ways are they similar/different? The Pan-Pacific Grand Prix Dance Championships (Sequence 7) Barry falls and knocks over the trophies

Les that he wants Scott to dance with Tina Sparkle. To the tune of Danny Boy in the background, Barry makes a sentimental 1 How does the film communicate that Barry Fife is a villain? Comment on the film language used and refer to selected key moments in your response. 2 Is Barry Fife more than just a villain? Are there any reasons why we might feel sympathy for him in the film? we used to scruff it together... Lessie'd come along of course. The three of us together, the old gang. We were a bunch of old funsters. " State Championships (Sequence 4) Barry talks to Les Barry's motives become clearer as he tells STUDENT EXPLORATIONS I was your dad's best mate in those days, lighting is shadowy and the camera zooms in to a close-up of his mouth when he says the word " win," which echoes ominously. Barry's sudden and dramatic fall from power, his hairpiece has fallen off and the trophies are scattered around him. After Barry's schemes have been foiled, one of the last images we see of him is when he literally topples over the trophy STRICTLY BALLROOM 17 APPENDIX A BAZ LUHRMANN INTERVIEW Fil: When did you first see cinematic overcoming

seemingly impossible odds, on the culture of Australia. But beyond that, possibilities for Strictly Ballroom?

BL: Well, what happened was I did it as a and it's finally about the fact that the young David with the belief, comes up because it is David and Goliath, and because there was an election campaign at play and then I met this producer and he said, look I'd like to buy the rights, and I with the solution... No one wanted to finance the film, I was a first-time director, the time about republicanism it had political implications too. The all-powerful said, well I'd like to make a film of it and they agreed to let me do the film. But I you know what I mean, there were lots of no's. I went to Cannes the year before and

Federation, they have a very particular Australian attitude, which is an old guy always thought it would be a film and I always thought it would be a musical as doors were slammed in my face. Not twelve months later the same people that going, " There's only one way to cha cha cha mate, and you've got to do it that way or well. I mean all our films we make have this cinema form which we call had said, " What a waste of time... " were like crying with tears going, " Remember else. " It started to smash away at that.

FI: What films have influenced you? I theatricalised cinema, red curtain cinema Strictly Ballroom, Romeo and Juliet and