

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: AP

My Drama with Dance Competitions

by Kilian Kröll

I sat transfixed in front of the brand-new color TV for Germany's first broadcast of [Dirty Dancing](#). The bowl of popcorn had given up competing for my attention. The year was 1988, the place was my mother's living room in Kiel, and I had never seen dancing like that before.

My opera singer mom had until then shielded me from Janet Jackson and Paula Abdul's synchronized pop moves. So when Patrick Swayze, surrounded by well-rehearsed backup dancers, swan-lifted Jennifer Grey above the crowd, I jumped up from the sofa and mirrored their jazzy head rolls and kick steps. I hummed along to "The Time of My Life." I didn't know the lyrics yet. (I do now.) My senses were on overdrive. Mom smiled on. (The years she'd have to endure of New Kids on the Block and Madonna blasting on my boom box were yet to come.)

When last year's American run of [Dancing with the Stars](#) featured Jennifer Grey, 25 years post-Swayze, as the top-billed contender, the whole country was watching—and so was I. Trophy-winning ballroom partner, Derek Hough, pushed Grey to her limits. He made Baby shine again. We saw it all: grace, rhythm, extensions, fake smiles, missteps, tears of pain, tears of joy. The competitors sparkled: German pop-idol David Hasselhoff, "fag hag" comedienne Margaret Cho, my R'n'B soul-sistah Brandy and Palin-daughter Bristol all added to the drama that is competition dance.

Dancing with the Stars, ABC's top-rated show for years, regularly draws upward of 30 million viewers. It is safe to say that it currently serves as the nation's main reference for what we call "dance." And it's addictive: week by week, the tense execution thrills as much as the catty adjudication, talented beginners markedly improve their confidence and technique, and uninformed viewers vote on a fickle understanding of choreographic merits. The "Stars"—like Hasselhoff and Grey—are merely the bait.

After 12 seasons on air, *DWTS*'s "Professionals" are the real stars – immaculately trained, award-winning ballroom luminaries who offer consistency on a show with weekly rounds of eliminations. The Professionals charm by their ability to mold and instruct, deflect attention to their prominent partners, and save face for future seasons with new Stars. Viewers tweeted about Hough's leadership and choreography as much as they did about Grey's technique. Forget Graham, Ailey and Balanchine – America's new ambassadors of dance are Derek Hough, Maksim Chmerkovskiy and Karina Smirnoff.

By no coincidence, Anna Trebunskaya and Jonathan Roberts—two other *DWTS* Professionals—are headlining "Champions of Dance" at the Annenberg Center this December. The fact that these household names are featured during the bustling holiday season at one of Philadelphia's most prominent performing arts series got me thinking. Ballroom competition—not unlike my first viewing of *Dirty Dancing*—draws people in, gets them invested in the art form, and informs in big and small ways how we make, see, market and consume concert dance. In fact, many of our city's contemporary performers began their careers competing in jazz, hip hop and Latin styles. The audience gets hooked on drama and passion; the artists give their all and win a prize.

I clapped and shed a tear when Jennifer Grey won the 11th *DWTS* title. After weeks of combating her bionic spine pain and Bristol Palin's middle-American fans, her victory was supremely gratifying. She and Hough did, in fact, dance beautifully.

Not a month later, [Miro Dance Theatre](#)'s artistic director Amanda Miller phoned me out of the blue. She invited me to be a part of the company's annual ballroom competition fundraiser. They paired each of five professional dancers with one of their philanthropic constituents—in my case with Priscilla Rosenwald, Miro's former board chair. To buy her way onto the dance floor, Priscilla pledged to raise \$1,000 for Miro. Each couple got professional ballroom training (whee!). Like in *DWTS*, a jury and the audience picked the winners. I was nervous about leading our fox trot, secretly wishing I was [Brandy](#) in the safety of Chmerkovskiy's arms.

Our Elvis routine didn't win the competition. But Priscilla and I had so much fun. I got to be Patrick Swayze for a moment, challenging my partner to come out of her shell and be the best she can be. And I realized that dancing is social, it's about growing, showing off, and creating drama: the essential elements of life.

And that is why—say what you will—you'll see me in the front row at the Annenberg in two weeks.

Champions of Dance, Annenberg Center, Thursday, December 15 at 7:30 pm; Friday, December 16 at 8 pm; Saturday, December 17 at 2 pm & 8 pm; and Sunday, December 18 at 2 pm & 7 pm. <http://www.pennpresents.org/tickets/?id=191>

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