

Mad hot Ballroom Marylin Agrelo, 2005

Of all the critical acclaim that *Mad Hot Ballroom* has received, very little avoided the comparison with the 2003 movie *Spellbound*. And indeed the similarities seem obvious : in both movies, the focus is put on ten-year old kids competing for a contest that encompasses all social groups, that is met with support and training from adults, and that shows how those contestants find some form of confidence through this ordeal. In this case, kids from various public schools from Manhattan are put through a ballroom dancing program that leads them to a city-wide contest.

However, where *Spellbound* was centered around stress, competition, and the different ways people from various backgrounds react to it, here, *Mad Hot Ballroom* means to be more than a thriller. Being more uplifting, it also deals with the touching issues of youngsters dealing with members of the other sex, with physical contact, and with their posture and gait, in both the physical and social sense. Where *Spellbound* focuses on close shots of kids struggling with one particular task of their nerve-wrecking hurdle race, here, *Mad Hot Ballroom* takes the time to simply show kids dancing with each other, catching some glimpse of freshness in their unexperienced, yet graceful moves.

And while a spelling contest is, essentially, about one mind facing a mental task, here, the accent is put on the collective team-

work that can spontaneously sprout among our kids, such as when a group of girls decides to deal with one dance partner that bails out of the program early, or on the insecurities and doubts that they can encounter in the simple fact of making eye contact with their partners. It is really a teaching and learning experience that this uplifting documentary tries to grasp, with one exemplary scene to prove it : after a reunion between teachers about the organizational details of the contest, all the adults in the room decide to dance together. One might wonder, knowing all the bugetarial difficulties that the editors of the movie had to face, why such a scene mad it to the final cut, if not for the sheer joy and energy that seeps out of the much easier, experienced and graceful movements of the teachers. The real essence of this activity is, contrarily to *Spellbound*, not in the contest. It is about teaching a discipline that turns out to be an enjoyable and fun activity.

Now, the emotional and proud comments teachers make on "their" kids, occurring repeatedly during the movie, may appear a little too naive and optimistic, concluding hastily on the positive influence that an activity such as dancing will have on their future. But with such a celebration of dancing and of the energy of youth, who wouldn't give a pass to some hopeful thinking ?