

The ballroom is mad and hot — but too many missteps for those who take the lead.

In the past few years, two films about the same subject—one a documentary featuring the true-life participants, and the other, a Hollywood clichéd vision of the same—hit theater screens, and with markedly different results:

Mad Hot Ballroom, Marilyn Agrelo's delightful documentary set in the public school system of New York City, chronicles the lives of a dozen or so sixth-graders as they participate in a 10-week ballroom dance course. Introduced to the school system in 1994 by ballroom dancer Pierre Dulaine, today more than 6,000 students participate, culminating in a citywide competition.

Take the Lead, on the other hand, helmed by hot video director and first-time feature filmmaker Liz Friedlander is an extremely loose adaptation of the work of Mr. Dulaine, now the central character of the film. And why wouldn't he be front and center, considering he is being played the dashing Antonio Banderas. Unlike its documentary counterpart, *Take the Lead* is set in a much grittier, stereotypical inner-city environment, where drive-bys, gang turf wars and felony burglaries are considered just part of the growing up process.

Where *Mad Hot Ballroom* celebrates the sweetness, awkwardness and eventual graceful awakenings of its juvenile dance contenders, *Take the Lead's* students are hardened, formulaic urbanized high schoolers forced into this dance program as a form of punishment for various acts of delinquency. Right away, both the innocence and humor that is key to the true-life story, is lost. What we are left with are a bunch of 22-year-old actors trying to portray 17-year-olds with a couth and likeness more akin to inmates at a criminal detention center than any genuine high schoolers. The tough veneers make for a lack of tenderness between the fictional characters, which is exactly what makes their 12-year-old counterparts in the documentary so irresistible and easy to root for. It is a shame that the professional screenwriters of *Take the Lead* could not match the completely unscripted, witty and intelligent remarks made by the children of *Mad Hot Ballroom*, some of whom are growing up in actual, rather than Hollywood's version of, poverty. Can you believe there wasn't a single drive-by during the entire year it took to shoot the documentary?

The only plot similarity between the films is the climax, as both pictures lead up to the inevitable dance competition finals. For the contenders of *Mad Hot Ballroom*, the suspense builds slowly, as the students must endure the semi-finals, then the finals, where the competition is narrowed to a small field and we are left biting our nails for the winning team to be announced.

Far less magic and tension is found at the conclusion of *Take the Lead*. This film has little patience for all that serious semi-finals stuff and, through the magic of Hollywood, plunges the under-equipped dancing delinquents smack dab in the

middle of a very fancy and elegant *professional* ballroom dancers competition! Preceding this scene, one of the tough street-wise hoods-turned-dancer wrestles with his conscience: should he stay with his friends who, with him, are planning a major burglary, or leave them to rob the warehouse on their own so he can attend the big dance competition, where his dancing partner (an equally hardened but beautiful street girl whom he has a crush on) awaits him? Decisions, decisions... Well, it probably comes as no surprise that his heart wins out, and he shows up in the nick of time to take the floor with her. Of course, neither they nor the other students can compete at the level of the pros, so they do what any other inner-city kids would do suffering the same predicament—throw those ballroom dancing lessons out the window and switch to hip-hop! Needless to say, *Take the Lead* proposes that the conservative ballroom dance audience is amazed and energized, and the kids are a hit. Please.

If you're looking for a charming, sometimes hilarious, always captivating celebration of childhood, community, music and movement as seen through the eyes of today's kids, *Mad Hot Ballroom* is for you.

If you're looking for a poor man's musicalized version of *Dangerous Minds*, or want to watch Antonio Banderas for a while, give *Take the Lead* a spin. More than likely, you'll find an ample supply of its unrented DVD's at your local video store.

Mad Hot Ballroom

United States, 2005

U.S. Release Date: 5/13/05

Released By: Paramount Classics

U.S. Release Date: 05/13/2005

DVD Release Date: 10/18/2005

Running Length: 110 min.

Genre: Documentary

MPAA rating: PG (for some thematic elements)

Director: Marilyn Agrelo

Writer: Amy Sewell

Producers: Marilyn Agrelo, Brian David Cange and Amy Sewell

Cinematographer: Claudia Raschke-Robinson

Editor: Sabine Krayenbuehl

Composer: Steven Lutvak

Cast: Staff and students from New York City's P.S. 112 Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, P.S. 150 Tribeca, and P.S. 115 Washington Heights.

Take the Lead

United States, 2006

U.S. Release Date: 4/7/06

U.S. Distributor: New Line Cinema

Running Length: 108 min.

MPAA Classification: PG-13 (Profanity, violence, implied sexual content)

Theatrical Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1

Cast: Antonio Banderas, Rob Brown, Yaya DaCosta, Alfre Woodard, Lauren Collins

Director: Liz Friedlander

Screenplay: Dianne Houston

Cinematography: Alex Nepomniaschy

Music: Swizz Beatz, Aaron Zigman