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It was a fabulous evening of salsa dancing

REVIEW By Sam Strangeways

I'll come clean right off the bat and admit I've never reviewed a dance performance more. Nor can I pretend to know the first thing about Latin moves — though God knows I've taken my two left feet along to Sabor Dance School's excellent salsa classes enough times that I ought to. But I do know what constitutes a fabulous evening out — and SalsaMania Productions' August Mambo Nights had all the essential ingredients.

The annual show — now in its sixth year — aims to bring a taste of Latin America to Bermuda, mixing performances from local and overseas dancers with a little live music and a touch of illusion, courtesy of magician Marshall Weller and his lovely assistant Laura Smith.

The two-and-a-half hour show featured professional and amateur dancers — a combination I worried might not entirely work, imagining that the pros would outshine the part-timers. How wrong I was. Although acts such as New Jersey's Cultural Explosion and Montreal's Saltimambo (love that name!) were breathtaking in their excellence, some of the finest movers and shakers of the night were those dancing purely for pleasure.

I missed the first few acts thanks to my late-arriving date (great dancer, shame about the timekeeping) but it was clear they'd gone down a storm with those watching. From the moment we walked into the auditorium, the atmosphere was one of an audience entirely on side and wanting to be bowled over — and they were.

The show for the most part was sliced up into short, fast-paced set pieces and it's a method that really worked. No one got to hog the limelight for too long, each segment was very different and it never got boring.

One minute, we were being dazzled by the smiling girls from the Sabor, whipping off their skirts Bucks Fizz style (I can't help but always associate skirt-whipping-off with the 1981 Eurovision Song Contest winners); the next, we were whooping and cheering the Sea Breeze Salsa troupe from back-of-town, dressed for the boudoir in black, red and white and dancing with bags of sass and style.

My big excitement of the night was discovering that I adore the tango. I knew salsa could be sexy but the tango — done right — takes sexy, multiplies it by a hundred and douses it in baby oil. I swear the temperature in the theatre rose significantly when Angel and Beverly from Dance New York — he, dashing in a dark suit; she, wearing a burgundy velvet dress split to the thigh — did their sensational staccato strut around the stage. A collective and audible "wow" from the audience marked the end of their performance.

Another couple who captivated — but with a very different style — were Ryan Hayward and Gabriella Lupi, again from Sabor. Their salsa steps to the song "Johnny's Mambo" looked near-perfect and totally fresh to me and Gabriella, aged just 16, was incredibly poised and graceful.

There were plenty of "wow" moments in the second half of the show too — including what I can only describe as a tango foursome (two men and two women from Dance New York, moving together at one point as if they were one couple) set to an opera-style reworking of the Police's song about a prostitute, Roxanne. It sounds slightly mad — but worked brilliantly.

Another crowd-pleaser was a Michael Jackson tribute from Toronto's City Dance Corps, who did a slick fusion of hustle, modern and salsa to Smooth Criminal.

My favourite was a contemporary rumba by Gordon Neil and Julissa Cruz, from the US. They danced barefoot and wearing the simplest of costumes to what sounded (to my untrained ear) like an Afro-Cuban beat. Their



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bodies moved seamlessly together and I loved the way they repeatedly spun towards each other, pausing to tenderly hold the other's face. Theirs wasn't the glitziest performance of the night, but it was certainly the most intimate.

The show ended very stylishly: instead of taking countless curtain calls (as the thunderous applause might have warranted), all the performers simply came down from the stage and began to dance among the audience, with an invitation from master of ceremonies Travis Gilbert for everyone to join in.

It was a fitting end to an evening which proved that having a passion for Latin dance is worth a million perfect steps.

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