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Hot Dame! Tango wins title



By Nancy Acton

When it comes to Dancing with the Stars, there's nothing like a Dame. One of two finalists competing for the winning title at the National Dance Foundation of Bermuda (NDFB) gala dinner on Saturday evening, former Premier Dame Jennifer Smith's seductive performance of the Argentine tango was the unanimous People's Choice.

Clad in a sassy, short green dress with full skirt and strappy, diamante back detail, and partnered by Sabor Latin Dance School owner Travis Gilbert, Dame Jennifer nailed the sexy moves, including the classic lay-back and raised leg routines, with sure-footed style, to roars of approval from the capacity crowd.

Her prize was an all-expense paid trip to New York with theatre tickets, generously donated by NDFB chairman Don Kramer.

Well known for her love of swing, Dame Jennifer told the audience in a pre-recorded interview that because she had studied and performed modern, interpretive and African dancing before retiring in 1976, this should not be held against her.

Like her fellow contestants, the deputy speaker of the House of Assembly had spent many hours perfecting her routine with Mr. Gilbert in preparation for her debut as a Latin dancer, and proved she had the winning form in a genre that was alien to her.

"I do swing, and while the rhythm is similar, the Argentinian tango is different, and I had never done it before, so to control and learn something which is opposite to what I was used to doing was very difficult," she said.

Despite her success, however, Dame Jennifer, a keen supporter of the arts and NDFB board member, has no plans to further her tango dancing.

"I liked it, and I liked looking at it, but it is not free enough for me," she said.

She will not, however, be hanging up her Latin dancing shoes any time soon. Instead, she

is signing up for salsa lessons at Sabor immediately.

"I love to dance, and doing the tango demonstrated to me how important it is for those of us who are busy with heavy things, stress and cares to take some time out to dance. It gives you some balance and relaxation in your life, and I will continue to dance," she said.

Mr. Gilbert, whose fellow instructors at Sabor trained all of the contestants in their Latin American routines, described his star student as "wonderful to work with", and said that he was filled with "love and respect" for his director, Angela Hayward, who was responsible for designing all of the choreography and putting the show together.

Other 'celebrity' contestants were: Ralph Richardson (waltz), Teresa Perozzi (cha cha cha), Mark Pettingill (rhumba), Pamela Barit Nolan (merengue), and Karl Outerbridge (pasa doble).

Nearly 400 guests attended the glittering evening, including Hollywood actress, Bermuda resident and NDFB board member Catherine Zeta-Jones who presented her eponymous award for excellence in dance to internationally renowned Broadway star, actress and singer Chita Rivera.

Describing Ms Rivera as a "legend" and "friend", Miss Zeta-Jones said she could not imagine life in Bermuda without her — apparently a reference to the great times they had been enjoying together on the Island.

"She is never going to go away," the actress joked.

But the joke was on Miss Zeta-Jones — at least for a moment. Having been suitably eulogised and feted, Miss Rivera unexpectedly turned to her fellow dancer and Oscar-winning host, and in a surprise act of recycling, said, "Catherine, you are the most amazing, generous person I know to unselfishly give my Oscar to," and handed her what turned out to be a phony 'gold' statuette she had once been given by some children.

"Yes, I am a jokester," the effervescent Miss Rivera laughed.

On a more serious note, the dance legend thanked Miss Zeta-Jones for honouring her with the 2008 award; paid tribute to her hard work, determination and respect for her craft; and commended the NDFB for giving young dancers the opportunity "to explore the thrill of movement, expression and dance" with its various programmes designed to raise the level of dance in Bermuda.

"Wonderful things can and should happen. It is up to us to open the door for them, and I commend the NDFB and others," Miss Rivera said.

In turn, the dedicated NDFB board member, and unstinting supporter of its mission, Miss Zeta-Jones said she was "so proud" to be a part of the gala, and "the beginning of brilliant things here in Bermuda".

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart," she concluded.

Excellent performances by dancers from American Ballet Theatre II, and Bermudians Sierra-Renae Robinson, the 2007 winner of the Patricia Calnan Commemorative Award, and Eric Bean Jr. rounded out the full entertainment programme.

Net proceeds from the gala, which ended with dancing to the Tom Ray Band, netted \$230,000 for the NDFB's upcoming DanceBermuda summer intensive.
