

## dance

## Strictly GLBT Ballr○○m

Dance troupe brings **ballroom dance** to the GLBT community

by Rachel Ralston

**O**ut Dancing Ballroom is a nonprofit dance troupe whose goal is to bring the joy of ballroom dance to the GLBT community. The troupe performs in same-sex couples and is, as far as they know, the only same-sex ballroom dance troupe in the world. Their repertoire consists of west coast swing, waltz, cha-cha, tango, hustle and east coast swing. Out Dancing Ballroom performs an average of 15 shows a year, including Pride parades in Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Diego and Palm Springs, the San Diego and Los Angeles Gay Rodeos, and various pride events in Southern California.

"I think that the thing I like most about what we do is that we are same-sex couples dancing together," said Chuck Stewart, director of Out Dancing Ballroom. "If you watch cloggers or line dancers — there are a couple of groups out there, like The Rawhide Wranglers and The Country Night Cloggers — you really can't tell that they're gay, because all they're doing is standing side by side, dancing. But we're actually in dance position, so it's man on man and woman on woman."

Stewart started the group in January 2001. "I was in ballet for twenty-five years, then I retired and, you know, got old, got fat, but I

ous dance classes suggested that he form a GLBT ballroom dance performance troupe. As the former director of two ballet companies and an ex-performer, Stewart was familiar with how to launch such a group. He sent out a press release, and in January 2001 held his first meeting, which fifteen men attended. They started rehearsing and performed three numbers in an area Pride parade four months later. Slowly, they began to attract more people, including several women.

"There are about twelve of us right now," Stewart said. "What we do is we perform choreographed ballroom dance. In other words, we don't just get up there and dance, we actually have it totally choreographed, fully costumed, and we have now a nice half-hour show with six different numbers, so we can give a wide range of what ballroom is like, from

in joining the troupe need to have a background in ballroom dance but do not need to be experts. Besides dancers, the group is looking for choreographers, costume designers and people with media and bookkeeping skills.

Out Ballroom Dancing is nonprofit, and consists entirely of volunteers who pay a \$25 monthly membership fee to help pay for costumes and the hall rental where they hold weekly rehearsals. Each dance number has different costuming, and performers are responsible for the cost of their costumes. "We do have a costume committee that does great sewing jobs," Stewart said. "People do pay to participate, but it's absolutely minimal to pay for everything."

With half of the group living in Long Beach and half in Los Angeles, weekly rehearsals are bifurcated. Twice a month, the entire group

cruise didn't seem to bat an eye — or else they were too intimidated and knew better," Stewart said.

A talent show was held on the last night of the cruise, which the group participated in. "That was quite an experience," Stewart said. "We happened to come with costumes and music, and we thought, 'Why not?' The theater held about a thousand people, and we did our west-coast swing number. We closed the show, which was a logical place for us because we were performing a big-hit number. I mean, it was just rousing: massive applause and screaming, and there were a couple of 'oohs' and 'aahs' over numbers I hadn't really thought about being slightly suggestive — not really that suggestive, but to straight people it probably was. It was a knock-over number."

Out Ballroom Dancing is in the middle of planning its 2004 season, which will feature a



still loved dancing," Stewart said. "I did country western for a number of years, started ballroom dancing — there are gay ballroom dance classes here in Los Angeles — and I went to that for about two years. Then I realized that I really enjoyed this type of dancing."

Several people that he knew from his vari-

waltz to cha-cha to tango to east coast swing and so on. It's a nice show — fast-paced, and then some slow pieces — it's a well-paced show."

No performance number has more than six couples onstage at any given time, and the dance troupe usually consists of about 16 people, including alternates. Those interested

gets together at various dance studios in the area for joint rehearsals.

"It takes a lot of effort to get a number up and running," Stewart said. "We do all this rehearsal for those twelve to fifteen shows that we can do a year, and the rodeos and gay Prides."

Preparations for each number include three months of rehearsal before it is ready to be performed. Stewart has choreographed about half of the shows, but with many members of the group having at one time or another performed professionally or taught dance, there are many opportunities for others to choreograph. "We do have one person, Jeremy, who did international ballroom dance for years and years, and he's choreographed about the other half of the numbers that we have," Stewart said.

Out Dancing Ballroom also performed spontaneously on the cruise ship *Ecstasy* in 2002. A member of the group, who was a travel agent, found a group deal on a five-day cruise to Catalina and Ensenada, for \$100 each. There were a total of 24 members, and many members brought their significant others.

"We were a very open group, and I was just amazed how many of us walked around hand in hand, and the straight people on the

new merenge number, and sending out applications for performance spots. Their schedule will include their regular Pride gigs, and hopefully Las Vegas Pride, which bowed out at the last minute last year. "It's a wide range," Stewart said. "It varies from year to year because there are always personnel changes with these organizations, and it's hard to keep track — it's a process."

Stewart would also like to get the group onto one of the late-night talk shows, such as Jay Leno or David Letterman. He said they are looking for somebody who knows how to connect them with a late-night television or talk show audition, or a volunteer agent.

"I know that many years ago, a dance group called The Midnight Cowboys from Los Angeles were on one of the late-night shows," he said. "The major problem I have is that you must have an agent in order to be able to knock on the door. I don't see the purpose of an agent for us since we're just a small little volunteer group of hard-working dancers. I had an agent when I was ballet dancing, but this is different. There aren't really agents for nonprofit volunteer groups."

To contact Out Ballroom Dancing, call (310) 838-6247, or visit [www.gaylesbianimes.com](http://www.gaylesbianimes.com) and click on this article for a link to their website. ●