

## Dance with me REVIEW

Despite its many flaws, it's difficult not to like Randa Haines' latest film, the effervescent *Dance with Me*. As is true of most "performance" movies, the central attraction isn't the characters or the narrative. Instead, it's the look, the feel, and, most importantly, the music. *Dance with Me* isn't intended to be a deeply introspective look at the struggles of a man and woman to overcome their individual emotional troubles and find each other. Instead, it uses these familiar, lightweight plot elements as a foundation for the series of colorful, energetic dance sequences that represent the real reason to see this movie.

The stars of the film are Vanessa L. Williams and Chayanne. Williams, the former Miss America- turned singer-turned actress, plays Ruby, a by-the-book professional dancer who's looking to win a World Latin Dancing Championship before she hangs up her shoes and costumes. Chayanne, the Latino sensation who isn't as well-known north of the Border as he is south of it, is Rafael, a free- spirited Cuban who has come to Texas in search of the father he never knew. Like Ruby, he's an accomplished dancer, but he's strictly an amateur. For him, what he does on the dance floor isn't a matter of pre-arranged moves; it's what the music tells him to do. At one point, when he observes Ruby practicing her steps in a silent studio, he asks, "How can you dance without music? It comes *from* the music." Thus we have the introduction of the time-honored metaphor of how dancing represents life (see also such recent entries as [Strictly Ballroom](#) and [Shall we Dance?](#)).

Neither Williams nor Chayanne are especially memorable when it comes to the acting part of their job. Williams, who last appeared in [Soul Food](#), is adequate at conveying emotions; Chayanne's range appears limited, although there is a certain boyish charm to the way he plays the part. What both are superlative at, however, is the dancing, and, since *Dance with Me* is more about what happens on the floor than off of it, that makes them both nearly perfect for their respective roles. There are no dance doubles necessary. Williams and Chayanne have all the right moves, allowing them to more than hold their own, even when surrounded by dozens of top-level professionals.

It goes without saying that Ruby and Rafael fall in love. It's not an unpleasant romance, but, while the two stars strike a few sparks (as in the bathroom scene where Rafael is dressed only in a towel), theirs isn't a smoldering, hard-to-forget coupling. Both Williams and Chayanne are hot enough on their own, however, that the lack of palpable chemistry doesn't do irreparable harm. Nevertheless, anyone expecting to be swept away on the currents of a soaring love story may be a little disappointed.

In addition to the romance, which is alongside the dancing at the heart of *Dance with Me*, there are also a couple of important subplots. The first highlights Rafael's struggle to communicate with the man he came to Texas to meet. John Burnett (Kris Kristofferson, who gives a remarkably stiff and lifeless performance) is the father he never knew, but, while Rafael knows his sire's identity, John isn't even aware that he has a son. Meanwhile, Ruby is trying to get over the heartbreak caused by her breakup with her longtime partner, Julian (Rick Valenzuela, doing his best to outsneer Billy Zane's [Titanic](#) character), who also happens to be the father of her son.

The pedestrian narrative of *Dance with Me* is a necessary nuisance. One could argue that all it really succeeds in doing is taking away time from the dance sequences. The characters aren't well-developed and the drama, such as it is, is merely adequate. Fortunately, when it comes to choreography, Haines is aware of what the audience wants, and obliges with some breathtaking moments. The energy level is consistently high, and, even when we're forced to endure a painfully trite moment with John and Rafael bonding at the end of a fishing pier, we know that something delightful is just around the corner.

When I left *Dance with Me*, I was smiling. As far as feel-good movies go, this one works in spite of a bloated running length (over two hours) and a plot that could use an injection of originality. The dance sequences, which comprise roughly half of the screen time, have it all -- great music, wonderful choreography, and attractive participants -- and this makes up for many of the film's deficiencies. During the Dog Days of August, when good movies are few and far between, *Dance with Me* offers the opportunity for uncomplicated entertainment.