MOVIES

Hard to resist fancy footwork, spicy music in 'Dance'

By Jon Katz
Special Writer

"La Fiebre del Sábado en la Noche." That's "Saturday Night Fever" in Spanish. And so is "Dance With Me," two hours of hot salsa wrapped around a too-predictable plot and served up raw.

No, "Dance With Me" isn't a foreign film. In fact, there's not much about it that is foreign, with snippets of "Singing in the Rain," "Dirty Dancing," "Flashdance," the aforementioned "Saturday Night Fever," even "Rocky" and "The Wizard of Oz" among the familiar elements.

But dance is certainly the thing here, and boy, those Latinos do know how to have fun. We begin in Cuba, as engaging Rafael Infante (Latin American music idol Chayanne) places a flower at his mother's grave. He later writes a letter to an American in Houston, one John Burnett (Kris Kristofferson), and before you can say "hasta la vista," all of Santiago turns out to musically send him off.

He arrives in Texas to work as handyman at Burnett's fading Excelsior Dance Studio, and only the old movie-deprived among us will ponder the connection between the two.

Rafael's natural charm energizes the few remaining students and instructors, all but Ruby (Vanessa L. Williams), the tough cookie who's on a quest to recapture her standing as a top Professional International Latin Ballroom competitor. It seems that her idea of Latin dancing and his are a world apart. Frustrated at being unable to duplicate her disciplined, rehearsed moves on the dance floor, Rafael explains, "I don't know what 'change ball' means; the music makes me dance."

And dance he does, teaching the teacher how to feel the music, and in so doing allowing her own submerged feelings to resurface...just in time to rhumba off with all the marbles at the big Las Vegas championships.

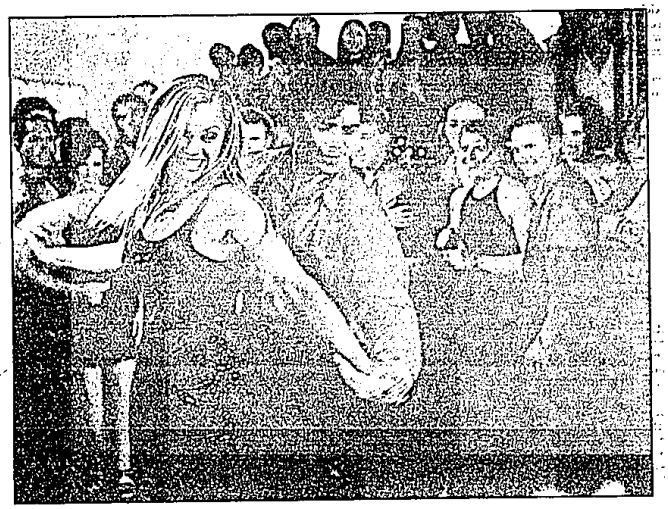
■ Vanessa L. Williams sizzles as Ruby, the single mom hardened by her former sleazebucket partner. She used no dancing double and is just as engaging in her close-ups.

Yes, you've seen it all in different forms before, but the rhythm here is hard to resist. With a joyous soundtrack of Latin and Afro-Cuban music that includes performances by the Gipsy Kings, Jon Secada, Gloria Estefan, Sergio Mendes and Cuban star Cachao, "Dance With Me" had a preview audience ball-changing its black-and-white swing shoes off.

Vanessa L. Williams sizzles as Ruby, the single mom hardened by her former sleazebucket partner. She used no dancing double, and is just as engaging in her close-ups. A dancer most of her life, she nevertheless adds a surprising new dimension to an already well-rounded list of abilities. Puerto Rican-born Chayanne is a top star of Hispanic TV and recordings, and is an irresistible rascal as Rafael, breathing new life into old people and old pickup trucks. Whether he'll be a one-hit wonder on the American entertainment scene remains to be seen.

Kris Kristofferson was already grizzly in "A Star is Born," and has added twenty more years of wrinkles to his well-worn Texas personna. One of the most genuine sparkles is provided by wonderful British actress Joan Plowright as young-at-heart dance student Bea, after her one last fling at something to look back on.

Director Randa Haines (Children of a Lesser God") has her heart and camera in all the right places, capturing the sensuous, swirling world of tango, merengue and paso doble. "Dance With Me" was written by former professional salsa and ballroom dancer Daryl Matthews, and choreographed by seven-time U.S. Professional Latin Dance Champion Liz Curtis. Appearing on-screen are many international dance stars, as well as Latin music's Albita, DLG (Dark Latin Groove) and the popular band *Makina Loca.*



Zade Rosenthal/Columbia Pictures

Dancing: *Ruby Sinclair (Vanessa L. Williams) and Rafael Infante (Chayanne) hit the floor at a Las Vegas salsa club in "Dance With Me."*

Observer & Eccentric GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

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RETURN TO PARADISE (R)
AIR BUD 2 (G)
SNAKE EYES (R)
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NP AIR BUD: GOLDEN RECEIVER (G)
NP RETURN TO PARADISE (R)
HALLOWEEN H20 (R)
SNAKE EYES (R)
THE NEGOTIATOR (R)
SAVING PRIVATE RYAN (R)
EVER AFTER (PG13)
PARENT TRAP (PG)
THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY (R)
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HALLOWEEN: H20 (R)
PARENT TRAP (PG)
SMALL SOLDIERS (PG13)
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LETHAL WEAPON 4 (R)

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MASK OF ZORRO (PG13)
THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY (R)
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DANCE WITH ME (PG) NV
WRONGFULLY ACCUSED (PG13) NV
HOW STELLA GOT HER GROOVE BACK (R) NV
THE AVENGERS (PG13) NV
SNAKE EYES (R) NV
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THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY (R)

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

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"54"
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"WHY DO FOOLS FALL IN LOVE"
Romantic drama about three women, each claiming to be the legal widow of singer/songwriter Frankie Lymon who was responsible for a number of hit records but whose self-destructive live ended tragically early. Stars Halle Berry.

"BILLY'S HOLLYWOOD SCREEN KISS"
Exclusively at the Main Art, a modern love story about a photographer who creates a series of photographic stills mimicking kisses from the movies. Stars Sean P. Hayes.

"SLUMS OF BEVERLY HILLS"
A coming of age comedy about a family out of its element and on the brink of disaster. Stars Alan Arkin, Marisa Tomei.

Scheduled to open Tuesday, Sept. 1

"GOODBYE LOVER"
A darkly satirical thriller about a group of people all scheming to inherit a $4 million insurance policy. Stars Patricia Arquette, Dermot Mulroney, Ellen DeGeneres.

Scheduled to open Friday, Sept. 4

"KNOCK OFF"
Against the backdrop of Hong Kong's transfer to China, a CIA agent must thwart a conspiracy that could incite a wave of worldwide terrorism. An action thriller starring Jean-Claude van Damme, Rob Schneider, Paul Sorvino and Lela Rochon.

Scheduled to open Friday, Sept. 11

"ROUNDERS"
Story of a master card player who trades the poker-playing rounds for law school and a shot at a new life. Stars Matt Damon.

"SIMON BIRCH"
Coming of age saga about two boys who together must learn what it takes to be friends and remain head strong in a sometimes cruel and changing world. Stars Ashley Judd, Oliver Platt, David Strathairn, Ian Michael Smith and Joseph Mazzello.

"TOUCH OF EVIL"
This classic 1958 film by Orson Wells tells of a corrupt cop who runs up against a Mexican official investigating drug trafficking.

Scheduled to open Friday, Sept. 25

"URBAN LEGEND"
Urban Legends – Modern folktales that seem to arise spontaneously and spread by word of mouth and range from the silly to the sinister. When a series of deaths occur on a college campus it appears that they are based on urban legends and lives hand in the balance. Stars Alicia Witt, directed by Jamie Blanks.

Miramax Films

Drama: *Jose Zuniga and Hope Davis star in "Next Stop Wonderland."*