

WOMEN

EDITED BY DIANNE ROBINSON



■ TARA MORICE and PAUL MERCURIO in Strictly Ballroom

● Strictly Ballroom is the hit film which gave ballroom dancing a new smouldering, sexy look instead of its traditional naff image.

TANYA REED stepped across the floor with the man who put the passion in the paso doble on the big screen.

'I've had three wives and 2,000 affairs'

Takes two to tango

AT five foot four and a half inches tall, eyes burning into you, body arched like a cat's, Antonio Vargas couldn't appear less of a ballroom dancing influence if he tried.

But Britain's sequin and froth brigade, beware. The diminutive yet entrancing Vargas, who has already captivated audiences in the film Strictly Ballroom — Australia's look at the world of the foxtrot and the tango — is back in Britain after 20 years. And he is coming to Manchester later this week.

"Ballroom is as popular as ice skating in the USA," he says, kneeling at my feet like an earnest child. "It's about well-dressed grace, movement and choreography — you don't need to be a mime artist or an actor."

Vargas himself learned it all in his early days at dance school. In Strictly Ballroom, playing the part of the heroine Tara Morice's father, he teaches her and Paul Mercurio the secrets of the fast, furious and beguiling flamenco.

"The latin style mambo, cha-cha-cha and paso doble are here to stay. You hear the music, and bang!" — he clicks his fingers — "the whole bloody room comes alive."

"My role was invented. It wasn't actually in the story at first, but when I show Paul the steps and he's bewildered by the technique which inspires him to be champion, people have said it's their favourite part."

"The relationship between the three of us was perfect. Originally I was just supposed to train them. I said I wasn't an actor, I speak with my feet and my face. If I was asked to do Shakespeare I'd be completely useless."

"But I was given a pivotal role, and one I could certainly relate to."

Originally from Casablanca, Antonio learned ballet before moving into traditional Spanish dancing and training under Spain's foremost teacher, Antonio Martin.

Training

By the age of 22, he had become the first male dancer in the history of flamenco to have his own company. Now based in Madrid, he remembers visiting Manchester in December 1964. "I appeared on Johnny Hamp's Lennon and McCartney special, made by Granada. My dance company did a Spanish version of She Loves You," he says.

He has also choreographed and danced in a Peter Sellars special, a Tommy Steele film, and the London production of Fiddler On The Roof, as well as adapting operas for the BBC and Spanish national television. The last time he was in Britain, during the early seventies, he appeared at the Cambridge Theatre and staged a Flamenco Mass at the Festival Hall, London, before touring England and Europe.

In 1988 he opened his flamenco dance studios in Sydney, Australia — all Spanish tiles and mirrors. "I live my art form and have seen so much of the world," he announces.

But is his personal life as flamboyant?

"I've had three wives and 2,000 affairs — all genuine," he says, matter-of-factly. He was once married to a Spanish rock star, then a French actress. "Religious people may call me immoral, but I've always given of myself. I don't like hiding behind the hypocrisies of laws. A lot of married people are very miserable."



■ TANYA meets the tempter — Antonio Vargas

A taste of temptation

THOSE who attend Antonio's three-day workshop at Altrincham dance centre, Woodfield Road, this week, starting on Thursday, could be given a new lease of life. Would-be temptresses usually dress in heeled black shoes, leotards and full skirts. Men wear Cuban heels.

Classes are no quiet affair. Flamenco was designed to be noisy. At one workshop (in Liverpool) last week, a board meeting below asked if we could dispense with the stamping while an important decision was being made.

We concentrated on wrist action, steps and attitude, accompanied by the classical guitar of Tito Heredia. "Don't look at your feet, or the sky," comes the order. "The audience will look there too and you'll break the connection."

Antonio's connection with an audience is trance-like. Claiming to be one of the fittest 50-year-olds around and weighing just 8st 3lb, he performs Spain's most seductive dance in a lan-

guage beyond words, wearing shoes which don't last beyond three months.

"Shoes for classes are very old — they usually last six months. I wear suede boots with a wooden heel filled with nails, then filed down — the tip also has nails ground down, as I do some pounding. Between heel and toe there is a metal instep so the leather doesn't snap. I get through 24 pairs a year, each pair costing £160. A Madrid cobbler has a plaster cast of my feet and airmails the boots to me."

Currently negotiating the production of a documentary about dance, a feature film and a theatre tour of England, he has also been invited to appear at the Manchester Festival.

"People can't grasp what it is I do, the essence of flamenco, the passion and fire. The emotion behind it all is very personal," he says. His workshops sculpt bodies into positions which their owners never thought imaginable, transforming shy wallflowers into brazen Carmens. Go — and be tempted.

Val's summit of achievement

AS the first British woman reached the summit of Everest, Val Williamson's own climb to the top was being celebrated, as the first North West Woman of Achievement. The 43-year-old, who has cared for her handicapped son as well as forging ahead in her career, picked up a well-deserved award at a celebrity-packed lunch yesterday in Manchester's Victoria and Albert Hotel.

After bringing up her daughter singlehanded, Val, from Sale, went on to marry and have two sons, one of them, Ben, suffering mental and physical disabilities. She was told Ben would never walk. They had reckoned without Val. She devoted vast amounts of time to him, and now he can not only walk but run too.

After he started school, she took a part-time clerical job with Norweb. She began to work her way up, taking courses along the way to the point where she is now supervisor of a personnel section.

The lunch, which was in aid of Tommy, the charity for research into birth defects, raised more than £2,000. Dianne Robinson



■ VAL WILLIAMSON