

Essay on Narrative Structure in *Strictly Ballroom*

Narrative structure plays an important role in engaging the audience in a film, while at the same time in promoting particular ways of thinking about the world. In *Strictly Ballroom*, narrative structure is especially important in conveying the idea that, through determination and dedication, it is possible to defeat the status quo and assert one's individuality.

One of the first ways *Strictly Ballroom* attempts to use narrative structure to engage its audience is by providing the audience with four plots: a major plot and three sub-plots. The major plot concerns Scott Hastings battle against the dance federation and its leader, Barry Fife, to dance his own steps rather than follow the traditional manner of dancing required by the dance federation. Here we see an archetypal story of a non-conformist battling to assert his individuality and freedom against the forces of the status quo, a genre which is especially popular with modern Western audiences. Two sub-plots concern the developing romance of Scott and Fran and, related to this, Fran's transformation from an 'ugly duckling' - 'frangipani de la squeegee mop' - to a proud and attractive flamenco dancer. The third sub-plot is about the redemption of Scott's father, Doug Hastings, and the reclamation of his sense of personal worth and dignity by correcting the mistakes of the past. Each of these plots is, like the major plot, based on an archetypal story - what director Baz Luhrmann calls a 'simple, identifiable myth' - which has stood the test of time in engaging audiences. Thus the narrative structure of *Strictly Ballroom* offers both variety and familiarity to audiences, allowing them easy access to and engagement in the world of the film.

As well as providing the audience with a variety of familiar plot lines, *Strictly Ballroom*, attempts to maintain audience engagement by having the major plot follow a traditional problem-resolution structure in order to create suspense. Suspense in *Strictly Ballroom* is created around the issues of how Scott will achieve his goal of dancing his own steps and how the conflict between him and Barry Fife will be resolved. It is the desire to discover answers to questions created early in a film which keeps an audience engaged. Now, it is true that Baz Luhrmann has stated that the audience is likely to know how the film will end within the first ten minutes. But what a first-time audience does not know is how the film will reach its end and it is partly the desire to learn this which keeps us engaged in the film.

Audience engagement in *Strictly Ballroom* is also created through the development of the protagonist, Scott. In order to achieve his goal Scott must overcome a series of increasingly challenging obstacles, such as finding a new partner, learning from a different dance tradition, being manipulated into accepting the 'winning is all mentality', to name a few. The film holds our attention as we watch and wonder how Scott will overcome each of these obstacles. At the same time we see Scott develop as a character, overcoming his arrogance, discovering that he can learn from other cultures and finally accepting the wisdom of the saying 'a life lived in fear is a life half-lived.'

Narrative structure does not simply act as a vehicle for engaging audience interest in *Strictly Ballroom*. It also provides us with reassuring ideologies about the world in which we live. Scott's success in defeating Barry Fife suggest to the audience that it is indeed possible for individuals to stand up and defeat the forces of conservatism and the status quo, not just in the world of dancing but more generally. It is this positive, uplifting ideology which probably accounts for the popularity of the original play of *Strictly Ballroom* in eastern Europe in the 1980s, a time when many countries were struggling to throw off the shackles of communism. However, through the struggles and development of the character of Scott, the film reminds us that such a victory will not necessarily come easily. Our struggle will incur the wrath of those in power and those who blindly follow them, and will require us to grow and develop.

It is partly because of its narrative structure, that, based on box office receipts, *Strictly Ballroom* is one of the top ten most popular Australian films of all time.