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Wasylycia-Leis ready to tango, no waltz to finish line for Katz

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It was about six o'clock Saturday evening and I was on the mezzanine floor of the Fairmont Winnipeg, casually sipping wine with my old pal, Marv Terhoch, and waiting for Dancing With Celebrities to begin, when one of the contestants ambled by.

It was Dancing Gabe Langlois.

"Are you ready?" Marv asked the local legend.

"I was born ready," replied Dancing Gabe.

And off he glided, leaving us both slack-jawed and laughing.

As it happened, that little episode set the tone for the gala evening in support of the Society for Manitobans With Disabilities because it was an event punctuated with memorable one-liners that just happened to turn into "get ready" time for Sam Katz and Judy Wasylycia-Leis.

The political odd couple, if ever there was one, is destined for a dance-date with the polls that won't end until one of them is elected mayor on Oct. 27.

But what made the four-course night so politically delicious was that Wasylycia-Leis was there as a judge, which meant she had a microphone, and Katz, who has the overall advantage of regular access to the media as the incumbent, was a mute spectator.

It could have been different. The mayor was invited to be a celebrity dancer, but chose to send deputy mayor Justin "swivel hips" Swandel in his place. So, while the mayor might be ahead in the early public opinion poll, on this night Judge Judy had the floor and the advantage on Suddenly Silenced Sam.

As it happened, Saturday was officially the first day of the campaign period for mayor. Even though she didn't declare until Monday, by the end of the evening it was clear Judge Judy had used her monopoly with the microphone to unofficially launch her campaign and serve notice she plans to take the lead in this marathon dance to election night.

By my watch, the campaign symbolically started at 9:18 p.m., which is when Judy sashayed over to Sam

Katz's table and they shook hands. They likely felt like a couple of boxers touching gloves than a couple who wanted to audition for next year's Dancing With Celebrities.

By that time, Judge Judy was already well on her way to drawing the people in the big ballroom close with her wit, warmth and obvious knowledge of her community. At one point, she briefly alluded to her now-adult son being disabled, which is probably why she was asked to help with the event.

That segued naturally into her thanking the evening's first celebrity dancer, quick-stepping children's entertainer Fred Penner.

"If it hadn't been for you," Wasylycia-Leis remarked, "I wouldn't have been able to survive."

Penner and partner Jennifer West's performance was followed by a jive routine at the end, of which Judge Judy surprised the audience by telling talented young dance contestant Jedi Baker he had come a long way from Luxton School. The recently resigned NDP member of Parliament for Winnipeg North recognized Baker because he had gone to school with one of her sons.

Wasylycia-Leis followed that by telling Baker's celebrity partner, Fairmont general manager Indu Brar, her dancing performance was reminiscent of being a woman in politics.

"But you have to do it backwards with heels."

Wasylycia-Leis wasn't always so embracing.

The veteran of the Parliament Hill snake pit known as question period bared her fangs when the deputy mayor finished his Latin routine. Leaning ever-so-slightly forward, her delivery now more deliberate and cool, Judge Judy told "swivel hips" Swandel he looked very "flexible."

Then, she let Suddenly Silenced Sam's designated cha-cha dancer have it, right on the chin-chin.

"I just wonder if that flexibility extends to other areas of your life?"

Dancing Gabe and his partners, Anahid Babaian and Stephanie Blandford, ended up winning Dancing With Celebrities, but clearly the other big winner was Judge Judy herself.

That little left-right combination of jabs at Swandel were also meant for the mayor and they reinforced what Katz already knows.

There will be no waltz to the finish line this time for Sam Katz.

It's tango on.

And they both better be wearing their best steel-toed dancing slippers.

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