





The judges wanted her off, and finally Britain agreed. Yet Strictly's most flamboyant star has always had her own definition of success. Nancy Dell'Olio tells Caroline Scott why the show is nothing without her. Photographs by Steve Schofield

# *Strictly speaking, I won*

**T**he truth is, Strictly is over now that I am gone. And I know that's what other people are thinking, too. The atmosphere on that Saturday, when I was voted off, was electric. Everybody was crying: the cameramen, the crew, the other dancers. Nobody could believe it. Princess Beatrice was in the audience — I know her well — and she was shocked. She came to me afterwards in tears. All my guests were in tears. There was so much emotion.

I don't know how many messages and texts I received that night. Nobody could understand why everyone's favourite contestant was going out. My supporters said to me: "How can this be happening?" I can't explain it. I don't think I danced any worse than anyone else. I was very happy with our Halloween number. Of course, I never watch my performance afterwards, but my dancer friends tell me I was

doing very well. I do know what good dancing is, and the judges were absolutely wrong. ["There were moments of Mills & Boon and moments of meals on wheels" — Len Goodman; "You both should have stayed in coffin" — Alesha Dixon]. Because I have a higher level of intelligence, I know this is a game and they have a script, but they crossed a line with their comments. Alesha, she's not even a dancer. Everybody, the whole country, was disgusted. The show has completely lost its elegance.

My life is to always be on stage. It's who I am. When I go to visit my parents in Puglia, my mother says: "Nancy, when you come, can you dress differently, because there's no-one here watching." And I say: "Mamma, this is me. I've been like this since I was little. Don't think I'm going to change my wardrobe because I come here." Every time I step out in public I want to make an impression.



## ANTON ON NANCY

*'I won't say she can't dance. She's not delusional. She's battered, she's bruised, she's been kneed and kicked. I don't think Nancy's used to this sort of thing, but she never complains'*

## NANCY ON ANTON

*'Anton pushes me hard. He knows I never say no. He's a professional; he can get a little frustrated. I feel disappointed when something goes wrong. I'm entertaining, but I will never be a performer like he is'*







**Belle of the ballroom**  
Left: Nancy struts her stuff. Below: with fellow contestant Jason Donovan

a box. I'm a Virgo; modest and shy, intelligent — very, very intelligent — and extremely feminine. Biologically, I'm in my thirties. All Virgos look much younger than they are; it's another gift I carry.

I had known Holly Valance's boyfriend, Nicky [the property developer Nick Candy], for more than 10 years, so we were all friends.

What shocked me was that when you enter this world, you can't do anything else. The BBC, they're really kidnapping you. "Oh, there are many things coming," they say. You open a door and there's another door, and another and another. You don't get a schedule — well, you do, but it's nonsense. They say they will need maximum three, four hours a day, but actually it's five, six hours; then there are TV recordings and VT and interviews... It's like a fever.

To be honest, not many people can do the things I've been doing. I'm very flexible, naturally, but it's not just the lifts; a lot of the time my partner, Anton du Beke, wanted to put me upside down completely. He's a very dramatic dancer and every week there was a bit more throwing. Some of the ideas were mine, of course. Anton asked me to suggest things because he knew I could do anything. Dancing is very sexy, obviously, but you can't tell how good a man is in bed by how he dances. English men are very reserved, so it's absolutely unrelated, and anyway, the best dancers are gay.

At first the training was a shock. But I'm fortunate my mind is stronger than my body. There's nothing better for your shape. I was perfect before, but now I'm even better. Everybody loses weight on the show. I lost an inch, maybe two, all over, and my waist, which has always been tiny, is now completely tiny.

I have never laughed so much as I have the past few months with Anton. My life is never calm, darling. The show is over and incredible

## JASON ON NANCY

*'Maybe she isn't insecure like the rest of us. We're all suffering from nervous anxiety. She doesn't care! She just gets on with it and has fun. You need subtitles to understand her, but she's the perfect vibe to have in this show'*

## NANCY ON JASON

*'I don't know why all the people from the entertainment world take themselves so seriously. I adore Jason, he makes me smile, but he takes everything very, very seriously'*



things are coming. I've always been very loved, as you know, but the message I was able to send across is that I'm not just glamorous, I'm funny too. The public can't quite understand where I'm coming from, but people have been trying to get to know me. I can feel it. In the bar after the second show, Bruce's housekeeper came to me and said: "Nancy, you're not going anywhere... I want to see you in the final." In some ways I haven't left. Anton and I, we are considering doing some other project together.

All the people looking after us, the crew, the make-up artists, everyone adored me. They know I'm genuine and didn't want to lose me. All the papers love me too, but most of the stories they print aren't true. I didn't lock myself in the loo because I was upset about my costume — I never lock the door when I go to the loo.

The conditions backstage were difficult for someone like me, used to luxury. The BBC give me this horrid velour dressing gown to wear between rehearsals. And slippers. From Marks & Spencer or something, It did not even enter my mind to wear them. I took my wonderful leopard-print kaftans and my Louboutin wedges.

Even what I call my tracksuit is really a long velvet Chanel dress. Everybody thinks it's an evening dress, but it's my housecoat. I kept champagne in my fridge, of course. Anton sent me the first bottle and I bought him a beautiful tie. I know his taste. It was Hermès, very elegant, and he loved it. And someone — an admirer — sent me a case of champagne. I won't say if it's a significant man. Every man can be significant, especially if he sends me cases of champagne.

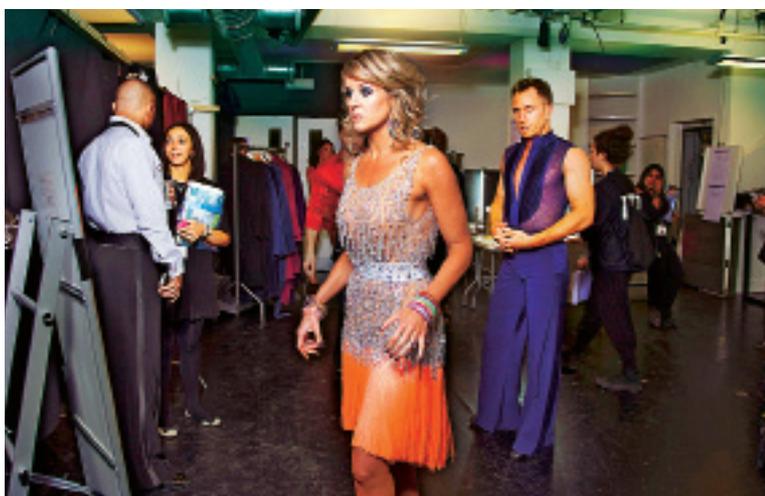
I'll admit I made a few mistakes. Sometimes I was a little out of time, but this happens to all of us. In some ways I was the best dancer in the show. To do that jump from the floor is really something, and I could have gone much higher.

To be honest, I wasn't totally surprised Edwina went out so early. She wasn't funny and she wasn't loved. No one turned on the television to see what Dan Lobb was doing, or Rory Bremner — they're boring dancers. They turned on to see what I was doing; ratings were never so high, and no-one had so much publicity, so already I'm a winner. Now I've gone, really, Strictly is finished and everybody knows it. I think there may not be another series. The show has lost its magic, it's just very sad. Like they had this beautiful party and suddenly, they switched out the lights ■

**Strictly velour**  
Clockwise: the stars' slippers; Nancy backstage; the professional dancers' rail; preparing for the live show



**KNOCKOUT  
NANCY**



# PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD

The nerves, the egos, the fluffy slippers... what really goes on backstage at Strictly? Caroline Scott finds out

Every Saturday afternoon, the foyer at BBC Television Centre is filled with Strictly fans who have travelled across the country by public transport in full evening dress as if it were the most natural thing in the world. They unwrap sandwiches brought from home and watch last year's show, slick and glossy, on a constant loop.

I head backstage. The pace is frantic. In a tiny side room, nine make-up artists operate in the glow of nine spray-tanned bodies. Strictly has its own tanning booth — and Chelsea Healey looks as though she's been dipped in Bisto. In the Star Bar — two changing areas, roughly divided by curtains — Holly Valance and Alex Jones sit about in maroon velour dressing gowns and slippers, troughing on boxes of salmon and salad. Others cling to their dressing rooms, trying to get in "the zone".

Later, the footballer Robbie Savage, teeth gleaming like piano keys, will dance beautifully on surprisingly tiny feet, but between rehearsals he is bent double with nerves at the side of the stage. Russell Grant, who woofs round the dance floor like a galleon in full sail, is struggling valiantly with a knee

injury. Russell's astrological chart told him he shouldn't do Strictly because his body would give up on him. "And it has!" he screeches. Nancy, he believes, is Strictly's Marlene Dietrich. "Ooh, she's very together, darling. She's kind, she's wise, I adore the woman. I'd sacrifice my place, to let her go on..." By 5.30pm, everyone is in their costumes,

## RORY ON NANCY

*'Nancy doesn't doubt herself for a second. She bathes in asses' milk, you know. She has gold-plated, diamond-encrusted self-confidence'*

## NANCY ON RORY

*'Poor Rory, he cared too much about the dancing. It's not about getting the steps right — I get them wrong most of the time, but that's not the point'*

the girls with eyelashes like escaped minibeasts. Anita Dobson, the most desperate of them all to *get it right*, scuttles down the corridor in skin-tight purple Lycra, hand in hand with her partner, Robin Windsor, her face pale with spent adrenalin. Lulu, her hair in curlers, charges through the double doors, snapping her knicker elastic. "These pants are too tight!..." she wails. The live production co-ordinator chivvies everyone along, a cross between a seaside landlady and a girls' school headmistress — strict, yet mindful that at any moment, any one of her charges, raddled with self-doubt, may come undone. "Come on darlings, chop, chop."

All around, the stars fall into each others arms, hands are stroked, egos massaged, nerves soothed. "There's no competition between us," wails Rory Bremner. "We're just trying to survive..!" Later, when he was eliminated, he cried. Out of exhaustion — he'd lost a stone in three weeks — and also, I suspect out of shock and genuine sadness to be leaving the close family that is Strictly ■  
*Strictly Come Dancing Series 9 is on BBC1, Saturday nights at 6.30pm*