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weekend

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TANGO FOR IT!

As Strictly goes live, Jonnie, Alexandra, Brian and Charlotte on fear, flirty frocks and fake tan

There's a certain terror that comes with stepping into the Strictly spotlight for the first time. It's OK for the contestants who know they can dance a bit, and perhaps have a proven sense of rhythm. It's also easier, surely, for the comedians, knowing their humour may at least win them a place in the next round.

What about those in the middle though? 'What are you saying?' says Good Morning Britain presenter and newsreader Charlotte Hawkins in mock horror. 'That I'm not funny and I can't dance, so I'll go out in week one?' Who knows, but if she does her fans will have been robbed because she has a spectacular ability to rock those Strictly frocks. Which, let's face it, is a necessary talent too. When she emerges from the dressing room for our photoshoot, a vision in scarlet with legs up to her armpits, all jaws drop. I joke that all she'll have to do to win over the public is offer a flash of thigh. It worked for Angela Rippon. 'Is that why people start asking for shorter dresses as the weeks go on?' she jokes.

We have to have a little sultriness served up on our Saturday night Strictly, but is it going to come from Charlotte, who's always seemed like a bit of an ice queen? Well, let's just say her professional partner Brendan Cole might have his work cut out as she's already struggling with the sensual side of things. 'I can't stop laughing,' she says. 'You have to look deep into your partner's eyes. It's the weirdest thing, because who does that with a stranger in everyday life? My default is to start giggling. It's like being at the school dance and being mortified when you come face to face with a boy. I hope I can get over that.'

'I'm thrilled to be partnered with Brendan though. He's a brilliant dancer and he's been on Strictly from the start, so I'm in safe hands. We had a twirl together live on Good Morning Britain recently when he was a guest, so he may have realised he's in for a tough time teaching me. The good thing is we're already friends, so I know we're going to have a laugh together as well as get the work done.'

She's certainly in line for some teasing from GMB co-host Piers Morgan, who reacted to her Strictly news with glee. 'He sent me a text saying, "Oh we'll have some fun with this", which sounded like a threat,' she says. Does she reckon Piers will ever do Strictly? She shakes her head. 'No, he only does things he knows he'd be good at.'

Charlotte does let slip that she's had dance lessons before – she and her husband Mark, a drinks company executive, took a few to prepare for

Ready, steady...

Strictly

Charlotte can't stop giggling, and Alexandra's lost without a microphone. Brian's got a secret backstage ally – while Jonnie's just plain terrified. But they're all doing it for touchingly personal reasons, they tell Fenny Johnston



the first dance at their wedding, which was a waltz to Michael Bublé. 'I can't say we were too expert though. We were basically trying to learn enough so we didn't step on each other's toes.' Does her husband mind the idea of her getting raunchy with another man? She laughs out loud at the idea that their marriage might fall foul of the Strictly 'curse', in which the stars leave their partners and waltz off with their pro dancers. 'I'm very happily married, thank you,' she says. 'Mark's not worried at all. Although maybe I should be concerned about what he thinks of me. He did ask me if I was going to be the Ed Balls character this year.'

It turns out she's not alone in her

horror of getting up close and intimate with the professionals. Singer Alexandra Burke, who's paired with Gorka Marquez – or Gorka the Corker, as his partner last year, EastEnders actress Tameka Empson, nicknamed him – has her own tale of woe. 'Before we were allocated our partners I went nose to nose with one of the professionals – I won't say who – and I pulled back so fast it was embarrassing. I was a big chicken. I was saying to myself, "Come on,

you're a 29-year-old woman, you can do this.'" But I couldn't'

The way Strictly works, though, these two will surely be throwing their legs around their partners' heads within weeks. 'We'll see,' says Alexandra. 'But I'm over the moon I got Gorka. He's one of the dancers I'd hoped to be paired with so I'm really pleased. I've got a lot to learn though, so it's work, work, work from now on.'

Perhaps the men in this year's line-

up are more immediately in tune with their sensual sides? The talk today is certainly of stripping off. First stop is the legendary Strictly sheep dip – aka the spray tan booth. Paralympian Jonnie Peacock tries to argue that he's been already ('can't you tell?') but with his blue-white hue there's no way anyone's buying that. Comedian Brian Conley is rather horrified to learn he'll be expected to have an all-over tan. 'Why? Surely they just need to do my face and hands. There's no way I'm stripping off on the dancefloor. Show my six-pack like Judge Rinder did last year? Are you having a laugh? I need a bra for my man boobs.'

Can Brian dance? Surely an old-school entertainer like him – old

**'It's like
being at the
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– mortifying'**
CHARLOTTE HAWKINS

TINY TREASURES During WWII, Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti's works became smaller and smaller as he sought to perfect



From left to right: Alexandra Burke, Brian Conley, Charlotte Hawkins and Jonnie Peacock

enough to have performed at a Royal Variety Performance hosted by the late Bruce Forsyth – can tap dance in his sleep? ‘I wish. I thought I could dance because I’ve done quite a bit of stage work, but now I realise that sort of dancing was more about me standing in the middle while other people danced around me.’ Then he remembers he was in the musical *Hairspray*. ‘But that was in a fat suit and heels. I’ve got a sneaking suspicion I can only move if I’m a fat woman in heels.’

The line-up this year is certainly a bit bonkers with an eclectic mix of stars including *The Saturdays* singer Mollie King, *EastEnders* actor David Ghadami, TV presenter Ruth Langsford and the actress Gemma

Atkinson. They’re joining many of the old favourites – and some shiny new faces. Obviously this is the first year without Len Goodman at the helm of the judging panel. Latin expert Shirley Ballas will be taking his place on the panel as head judge. There are some newbies too among the professional dancers after the departure of Joanne Clifton, Natalie Lowe and Oksana Platero. Step forward Dianne Buswell, 28, from Australia, Nadia

Bychkova, 28, from Ukraine and Amy Dowden, 26, from Wales.

At 56, Brian is one of the more ‘mature’ contestants (the oldest is actually 58-year-old Debbie McGee, the widow of magician Paul Daniels). He’s quick with the quips about his age, getting in there before anyone else can.

When I ask Brian whether his wife Anne-Marie worries about the *Strictly* curse and him running off with his professional partner, new girl Amy, he

‘I’ve got fillings older than my partner Amy’

BRIAN CONLEY

chortles. ‘I have underpants older than her,’ he says. ‘Come to think of it, I’ve got fillings older than her!’

‘Seriously though, I’m really pleased I’ve got the lovely Amy. My daughter’s also called Amy so it will save me having to learn a new name! The opportunity to be taught by such a brilliant dancer is unbelievable. It’s going to be tough but I’m being given the best possible chance to go as far as I can.’

It was Brian’s other daughter, 15-year-old Lucy, who persuaded him to sign up for the show (‘she said “Dad, if you loved me you’d do *Strictly*”’) but it turns out he’s not the first family member to be a *Strictly* star. His younger brother Alan is the show’s long-standing floor manager, the person who

makes it all run to plan. ‘I actually went along, as his guest, to watch filming last year, and I was blown away at what a great job Alan does. We’re all so proud of him. It’s the hardest job in telly, but seeing it all come together is a

joy.’ Alan joined the show on the second series. ‘He was standing in for someone but after that, Bruce said he wouldn’t work with anyone else but Al. That was lovely. He thought the world of Bruce. Because Bruce wouldn’t use an autotune, Alan would be responsible for giving him his cues – and he wore white gloves for that. When Bruce died, Alan put a picture of his white gloves on Twitter and said “Time to hang them up now”. It was a fitting tribute.’

Brian rubbed shoulders with Bruce himself during his years in the light entertainment business. ‘He was a huge influence. I was very much guided by what he did on *The Generation Game*. He was the master. It’s a huge loss.’

So what’s the attraction with *Strictly*? Brian has dabbled in other reality-type TV contests before, most memorably *I’m A Celebrity*. That one didn’t end happily. He was famously stretched out after having to withdraw on medical advice. He blames soap star Helen Flanagan. ‘She kept failing the challenges, so we didn’t get food. I didn’t eat properly for nine days. I collapsed. I woke up two days later. I was diagnosed with malnutrition and exhaustion. I was too weak to move. At least I’ll get some food on this one.’

Perhaps it will do more to polish his career too (which is, after all, why most celebrities do it). ‘It’s supposed to get you talked about but I came home from the jungle and no one had noticed I’d been in,’ he complains. ‘But *Strictly* is different. It’s proper old-school entertainment, a family show. How could you not want to be involved?’ Will anyone notice him on *Strictly* then? Yes, yes, and yes again if his matador impression today is as entertaining when it shifts to the *Strictly* dance floor. He has the photography crew in stitches as he larks about with a Spanish guitar and a sombrero.

This year’s show will be the first to include an amputee and Jonnie Peacock’s arrival today is interesting in that it’s much more low-key than you would expect. He slips into the photographic studio almost unnoticed. ‘I’m not recognised much when I’m out and about,’ he says. ‘Mostly people associate me with the blade.’ He’s referring, of course, to the rather futuristic looking prosthetic leg that helped him to podium glory, most famously at the 2012 Paralympics in the 100m. It’s become synonymous with his success (‘kids I meet want to know where they can get one. I have to say, “Er...”’). So will he be wearing it on the *Strictly*

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them. By the end of the war, he could carry his sculptures with him in matchboxes (*Fake Or Fortune*, tomorrow, 8pm, BBC1)

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floor? 'It's a possibility but we don't know yet. It depends on how I get along with my standard prosthetic leg in the first dances. The thing there might be an issue with is the waltz, where you have to rise and fall. I can't do that with my standard prosthetic.'

He's a sporting hero and an example of how the human body can do things no one imagined possible, but Jonnie – who lost the bottom half of his leg at the age of five after a bout of meningitis – is petrified about what's in store. Some of his nerves, obviously, are to do with his physical situation, and how he'll manage the unusual moves. He tells me that a dance expert who worked with amputees on the US version of the show, *Dancing With The Stars*, is helping him out.

'That's been really helpful in terms of flagging up some of the problems with certain dances, but to a large extent we're in uncharted waters,' he says. 'It's terrifying because on the track I know what I'm doing. Everything is precise – how much pressure you can put on the blade, what angles you can make as you move. The only way to see how it reacts to doing a rumba is to do it and see.'

Then again, he's also got more 'normal' worries too. 'I might be rubbish and it will have nothing to do with my leg,' he says. 'I might just not have any rhythm!' Whatever, it will be

'The judges can't treat me differently to anyone else'

JONNIE PEACOCK

interesting to see how the judges handle having to critique him, and he's already seeing the potential difficulties. 'They can't treat me any differently from anyone else. If I've messed it up then they have to tell me, but on the other hand if they say, "Well, you needed to point your toe more..."'

He says it was a 'happy fluke of timing' that led him to *Strictly*. Normally he'd be in training so taking part in a dance contest would be out of the question, but he always planned to take 2018 off 'so it left the diary quite open'. Why *Strictly*? 'Because it's such a departure from what I normally do. It's a challenge, something I'll have to work at.' He's partnered with Oti Mabuse, runner-up last year with former *Hollyoaks* actor Danny Mac, and says she's already working him hard. 'It's fantastic having Oti as she's an amazing dancer, but I've got my work cut out. Rehearsing our first group dance she told me off so much that I know I'm in for a tough ride. But we've also had lots of laughs – it's going to be so much fun.'

He says he's under no illusion that they'll make it through to the final stages and lift that coveted glitterball, but if he picks up a few dance steps it will have been worthwhile. 'At the

very least I'll be able to ballroom dance at my wedding,' he laughs, rather suggesting that his girlfriend, the 400m Paralympian Sally Brown needs to get in training too.

The challenges aren't just physical, though. For someone who has duetted with Beyoncé, Alexandra Burke's nervousness is striking. She laughs about meeting Claudia Winkleman, who co-hosts the series with Tess Daly, the day before and having her take her hand. 'It was mortifying,' she says. 'My legs were shaking and my palms were sweaty. I felt so sorry for her having to hold my hand. It was *The X Factor* all over again.' Except on that show, which Alexandra won in 2008, she didn't have to dance. 'I could stand there and let other people boogie around me. Now, I can't get my head around the fact that I have to keep moving. And I keep looking for a microphone. I've no idea what to do with my hands.'

All eyes may be on Alexandra's stunning outfits ('I love the dressing up. I'm in my element'), but what courage it must take for her to even be here. Just after she was announced as one of this year's contestants, Alexandra had to reveal that she'd lost

her mum. The former *Soul II Soul* singer Melissa Bell, her biggest influence and the woman who encouraged her into the music industry, passed away after a long battle with kidney disease.

She had been on dialysis even during her daughter's pivotal appearance on *The X Factor*, and Alexandra had offered to donate one of her own kidneys. Melissa had refused to allow this, insisting that her daughter's life – and the chance to have her own children (donating a kidney could have affected her ability to conceive) – should come first. She's since said she's determined to continue with *Strictly*, to make her mum proud. 'It all feels unreal but I'm trying my best to stay strong. I miss my mummy so much,' she told fans on Twitter.

Today Alexandra credits her mum with giving her the strength to carry on in the most difficult circumstances. 'I always give 100 per cent to anything I commit to,' she says. 'And that definitely comes from my family. The great thing about *Strictly* so far is that everyone has been so supportive, all the professionals, all the other contestants. People talk about it being so competitive but it hasn't seemed like that. I've just seen a family, with everyone helping everyone else.'

It's a rather timely reminder of how the show must go on, and with sequins on top too. ■

Strictly Come Dancing returns on Saturday 23 September on BBC1.

Sigourney Weaver's not the only A-list fan of Doc Martin. She enjoyed her cameo role as American tourist Beth Traywick two years ago so much that she pops up again in the new series, but might there be another Hollywood star heading for the Doc's home town of Portwenn? Tinseltown veteran Harvey Keitel – best known these days for playing a suave gangster in those TV insurance ads – is said to be itching for a part in the ninth and final series of the comedy drama that's due to be filmed next year.

'I was chatting to Sigourney when she was filming and she said Harvey's very keen to be involved,' says Ian McNeice, who plays handyman-turned-whisky maker Bert Large. 'Imagine that! Harvey in full gangster mode like in those TV ads, wandering through Portwenn. It's a hilarious idea.'

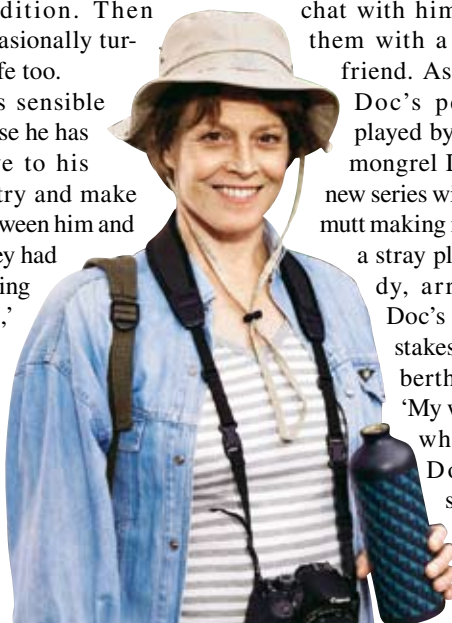
Art Malik and Caroline Quentin also guest in this eighth series of the show that's become a global hit since it began filming in the Cornish village of Port Isaac 13 years ago. Thousands of people from all over the world descend on the village to watch filming and discussion groups spring up across the globe, earnestly debating the latest storylines after an episode has aired. Fans of Martin Clunes, who plays the curmudgeonly Doc, call themselves Clunatics, while Ian McNeice has the Bert Large Lovers Group. They held a dinner at a Port Isaac restaurant in Ian's honour while this series was being filmed.

The Doc is in full-on work mode as the series begins. In the opening episode alone he has to deal with a

fisherman caught in a sticky situation on the beach, a highly infectious virus, policeman Joe Penhale in excruciating pain ahead of his wedding and a fresh-faced female curate with a potentially fatal medical condition. Then there's his occasionally turbulent home life too.

'The Doc is sensible enough to realise he has to be attentive to his marriage and try and make things work between him and Louisa after they had counselling during the last series,' says Martin. 'He also wants to be a good father to their

Sigourney as Beth and (above) Martin with Paddy and Dodger



Will Sigourney Weaver – and a new waggy tail in the house – cheer Doc Martin up?

HANG DOG!



young son James Henry, who says his first word in the new series.'

Martin, 55, is a well-known dog lover and often brings his three dogs to the set – in fact visitors to Port Isaac are pretty much guaranteed a chat with him if he spots them with a four-legged friend. Aside from the Doc's pet Buddy – played by ten-year-old mongrel Dodger – the new series will see another mutt making its mark. Bob, a stray played by Paddy, arrives on the Doc's doorstep and stakes a claim for a berth on his sofa. 'My wife Philippa, who produces Doc Martin, saw Paddy with the dog trainer Sonia when

she'd just got him two years ago and knew we had to find a role for him in this series,' says Martin. 'Sonia has such a lovely way with Dodger and Paddy. She trains them so kindly and they just love doing stuff on the show. You can see all this youth and exuberance in Paddy's eyes.'

It was an altogether more dangerous animal that almost did for the show's leading lady Caroline Catz during filming though. Taking a walk along the cliff path near Port Isaac, things almost went disastrously wrong. 'I rounded a corner and came face to face with five enormous bullocks that had escaped from a farmer's field,' she explains. 'They were coming towards me, it was terrifying. But I managed to crawl under a fence and through the field to safety before the farmer rescued the cattle. It was a very scary episode.' ■

Tim Oglethorpe
Doc Martin, Wednesday, 9pm, ITV.

NEW WORLD The Mayflower left Plymouth on this day in 1620, reaching Provincetown in Massachusetts 51 days later