

A photograph of Darcey Bussell in a dance studio. She is sitting on a dark, reflective floor, leaning forward with her hands clasped in front of her. She is wearing a black dress and a bright pink, sequined bolero jacket with a thick, feathery collar. Her hair is blonde and styled in a ponytail. The background shows a dance studio with wooden floors, a ballet barre, and large windows with a grid pattern. A yellow 'X' is visible on the wall behind her.

“I’m saner here in Sydney than I was in London”

For two decades Darcey Bussell was Britain’s greatest ballerina. So what’ll it be like for *Strictly Come Dancing*’s contestants when she becomes a judge next month? She talks about her new life in Australia, being an eco mum and the joy of bringing dance to the masses

Interview **Claire Scobie**
Photographs **Stephen Oxenbury**

“When I get over the ballet chip on my shoulder and say I am ready to come and dance again, I will”: Darcey Bussell stretches at the Sydney Dance Company. She’s wearing her mother’s dress and feathered bolero jacket



Walking on air: (from left) making her debut at 19 with Bruce Sansom in Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *The Prince of the Pagodas*; and Bussell's final curtain at the Royal Opera House in 2007

I

do a double-take when Darcey Bussell walks in. I was expecting the porcelain skin and sharp black bob which Britain's most feted ballerina sported in her later years, but her hair is now strawberry blonde and her face sun-kissed. It's been two years since Bussell gave up the limelight for a quiet life as a housewife in Australia. "I have relaxed," she says when we meet in Sydney. "My husband never thought it was possible. In London I would always get asked to do things, but here I can just be a mum – though I still can't say no to work."

The latest project Bussell failed to turn down is *Strictly Come Dancing*. She'll appear as a guest judge alongside the regular panel on the final three programmes of this year's series. She came to London to attend the show's first rounds back in September and watched the contestants going through their paces. "They were shaking so much on stage I tried to help them get over their nerves." She admits she's nervous at the thought of live TV herself, but isn't pleased by some of the other judges' suggestions that she'll be sweet to the contestants. "It's sooo irritating," she rolls her eyes. "I'm quite happy to be critical." In fact when she left the studios she made a list of who she thought would survive. "Things have been going the way I thought, although there are surprises. Phil Tufnell is something of a dark horse. I think he's suddenly realised he enjoys dancing. I really enjoy watching someone when they are a true performer. They don't have perfect technique, but they can sell it – it makes such a difference."

She also singles out *The Bill* actress Ali Bastian and athlete Jade Johnson for praise, though she isn't convinced about bookies' favourite Ricky Whittle. "He has a totally natural ability, is really musical and is a very confident guy. But I wouldn't say he's the best on the night. Maybe because he's a bit too good and you want to see improvement."

As Bussell is in Sydney, the BBC is sending her DVDs of the show so she can keep up with the weekly dramas. Her children are huge fans and she knows some of the contestants personally. Bussell even sheepishly admits to having taken the odd dance class recently so she still looks like a dancer when she appears on the show. She performed on *Strictly* in October 2008 with opera singer Katherine Jenkins when they were promoting their musical show *Viva la Diva*. Bussell sees her role on the show as "a natural transition from being a dancer to coaching and judging", though she's glad there'll only be a handful of celebrities left when she's on the panel. "It will be easier to be critical because they've

had time to work on things. In the first weeks, how can you criticise anyone? They've just stepped into those heels and, for the guys, it's so difficult to judge a partner."

Judge Craig Revel Horwood was beside himself when he discovered Bussell was going to join the panel as guest judge. He first met her last year at the Royal Festival Hall when he choreographed a tango for the Ballet Boyz. "Darcey came up after the performance and said she'd loved it. I nearly lost my legs, darling. I was quite starstruck." Aside from her rigorous training as a prima ballerina, Revel Horwood says Darcey will know all about rhythm and movement and bring the perspective of artistry to the panel. "She'll be able to talk about the choreography – whether that flows, whether that works. It's not as if she hasn't done a *pas de deux* in her life." He's also pleased she'll arrive with a fresh eye as the show's four-month run enters its final phase. "The other judges have been through the emotional journey with the contestants. It's lovely for Darcey to come in with an absolutely fresh approach and notice all the flaws we may have missed."

Bussell loves the *Strictly* phenomenon and the way it brings dance to the masses. "Viewers think, 'If you can do it, I can do it.' For the celebs it's amazing to come on a show, to get paid. OK, you're making a fool of yourself, but you're learning a craft. What a joy that is. It's so weird watching the dancing – I really want to join in."

Bussell's enthusiasm for dance and her efforts to bring it to a wider audience made her an enormously popular performer. Although she's enchanted ballet fans since the age of 19, when she starred in Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *The Prince of the Pagodas*, she has also reached audiences who wouldn't normally see classical dance, with appearances on TV shows such as *The Vicar of Dibley* and *French and Saunders*.

Her appeal was such that, when she announced her retirement, fans sent angry letters; even the Queen voiced disbelief that she was leaving the Royal Ballet when she presented Bussell with a CBE in 2006. Her swansong at the Royal Opera House saw Bussell surrounded by a sea of bouquets. The performance was televised on BBC2. "I can't watch it," she admits. "It felt like an out-of-body experience. Each wing was ▶

"It's so weird watching the dancing as a judge on Strictly. I really want to join in"

LESLEE SPATT/BOOSEY & AMP; HAWKES COLLECTION; GETTY

"I'm just trying to know who I am now I am not a dancer":
(clockwise from right) training the cast of *Strictly Come Dancing*; with her husband and two daughters, Phoebe and Zoe, in 2007; her parents, former model Andrea Williams and 60s "face" John Crittle

◀ full and that was extraordinary because everyone wanted to be there to support me. That was really touching and hard to take." As the standing ovations reached fever pitch, Bussell broke down in tears. She surprised herself – "horribly. I wasn't expecting that. I am usually quite cool."

It was her mother, Andrea, who also trained for a few years at the Royal Ballet School, who insisted her daughter go to ballet classes because of her "knock knees". At the relatively late age of 13, Bussell joined the Royal Ballet, going to White Lodge in Richmond Park. Her first year was excruciating. Far behind all the other girls, Bussell was humiliated in class. By the age of 15 she caught up – "I was very stubborn" – and then came to the attention of choreographer Sir Kenneth MacMillan, who wrote a number of parts for her. "He was the main source of why I made it. Kenneth gave me that courage from the beginning. He believed in me and a lot of people didn't." At 20, Bussell became the youngest principal dancer at the Royal Ballet, receiving an OBE six years later in 1995.

Bussell married in 1997 and returned to the barre after the birth of her children, but eventually found the pace too much. "I was always running out of the house, running to rehearsals, running home to see the girls before bedtime. My husband and I were desperate to slow down. I prefer this change of pace. I'm saner here than in London."

With her Australian husband Angus Forbes, and their two daughters, Phoebe, 8, and Zoe, 5, Bussell moved to Sydney in January 2008. Forbes, a banker, has since set up his own green investment company, and home is now in Vaulcuse, one of Sydney's most affluent suburbs. Despite claims before she left Britain that she would reduce the family's carbon footprint by 90%, adapting to her new Aussie eco-existence has been a steep learning curve. "We've had lots of good intentions, but they all seem to be falling down. We've kept trying to get solar panels on the roof, but it's facing the wrong way or the pitch is too steep," she sighs. "And the other day I realised we were growing a family of redbacks in the worm farm." (Redbacks are one of Australia's most dangerous spiders.) Her veggie patch has failed and her new trees keep dying. The latest idea is a chook pen. "Apparently, chickens attract rats," she looks downcast. "Do you know about that?"

Bussell has always had strong links to Australia. Not only did she live there for a time as a child but it's her husband's homeland and her stepfather and biological father's, too. She credits her upbringing for helping her keep life in perspective – her parents made sure she was very grounded. She grew up in London's Notting Hill Gate, and her mother, Andrea Williams, a former model and actress, has "always been a massive influence". She wears her mother's dress and feathered bolero jacket for our shoot. But she won't talk about her biological father, the late John Crittle, a charismatic Australian who was a fixture in boho London in the swinging 60s. He left the family when Darcey was three.

When I ask about him, Bussell clams up. "I never knew the guy. I have no recollections of him." Her mother re-married Philip Bussell, an Australian dentist living in London, when Darcey was six, and they had two more children, James and Zaylie. "I always call Philip my dad – he is my dad," she says. "I never refer to him as my stepfather."

In every way that Philip Bussell was loving and secure, John Crittle was reckless and unreliable. "He was a totally



irreverent character. Errol Flynnish in his behaviour. He never thought about tomorrow," says Phillip Donoghue, 67, an old friend of Crittle, who was with him in 1966 when John opened the über-cool Dandy Fashions boutique with Tara Browne, the Guinness heir, on the King's Road. John's designs were worn by the Beatles and the Stones, Princess Margaret and Zsa Zsa Gabor. John Lennon was a good friend. His older brother, Mark, recalls once coming to Dandy's to find the shop door open and a trail of clothes leading to the Chelsea churchyard. "There was all this moaning. John, Jimi Hendrix and Brian Jones were on acid up a tree, convinced that there were spiders everywhere. They had all stripped off to their underpants. That was the 60s."

Mark Crittle, now 69, was also there when John first met Andrea, and he remembers their relationship as being tumultuous. "In 1968 they broke up for six months and John met this girl and she fell pregnant," says Mark. "Andrea and John never talked about it, it was very difficult for her."

In 1968, the year that Andrea and John married in the Chelsea Register Office, things started to unravel and John had a nervous breakdown. A year later, Darcey was born as Marnie Mercedes Darcey Pemberton Crittle.

Unlike the press reports that claim John Crittle abandoned the family, Mark and his sister, Catherine, say John wanted Andrea and the baby to come back with him to Australia. She refused. "He wanted Andrea to be happy and thought Marnie – Darcey – would have a more stable upbringing with ▶

Bussell's father designed clothes for the Beatles and the Stones. Jimi Hendrix was a good friend. But he left for Australia when she was six

LESLEIE SPATTI/ARENAPAL; NUJ KIM/GETTY IMAGES; BBC/ED BOOTH; MARK STEWART/CAMERA PRESS; REX FEATURES

"I'm enjoying being a mum... so far": Bussell outside the Opera House in Sydney, where she lives with her husband Angus, a merchant banker, their daughters and their "spoodles"

her," says Catherine. "I think John was very sad about it. He had photos of Darcey until she was three and carried them around with him." In 1998, John Crittle, by now suffering from terminal emphysema, went with Phillip Donoghue to see Bussell perform at the Capitol Theatre in Sydney. "After the show, John sent a message to the dressing room saying he was there," Donoghue recalls. "He got a reply: 'Ms Bussell has left the premises.' I don't blame her." Bussell refused to make contact with Crittle, who died in 2000. I ask Bussell if John was like a myth to her. Irritation darkens her face. Her hurt is evident. "I suppose like a myth," she says flatly. "He was never part of my life. I don't want to talk about him."

Aside from missing Marks & Spencer's comfort food and underwear, Bussell isn't especially homesick. "I will always see England as home, I was born and bred there. I am enjoying life though. It's like an adventure." An average day sees her take her daughters to school and walk their two spoodles – a cross between a poodle and spaniel – on the blustery cliffs above Bondi Beach, before going home to be a housewife. "The only thing I'm learning are computer skills," she says, and there's something endearing about the thought of Darcey Bussell mastering the keyboard at the age of 40. She's also turned her hand to a series of children's books, *The Magic Ballerina*, which she has just completed with a professional writer. She was recently appointed to the board of the Sydney Dance Company – we've met to talk in the company's boardroom – though she admits she still finds meetings here "really scary". Sitting on the board is a great way of learning something new, says Bussell. "I don't get involved in the financial things, my priority is the dancers – I get involved with their productions." She was instrumental in selecting the artistic director, Rafael Bonachela.

I ask if she's bored. "At the moment I am not. For me, it's just trying to know who I am now that I am not a dancer, because I have only known myself as a dancer. So being a mum really isn't such a bad thing. Everybody puts it down, but I am enjoying it." She gives a nervous laugh. "So far."

There was no defining moment when Bussell knew she was going to retire from ballet. She just wanted to quit while she was ahead. "It's not an easy life, not a normal one," she says. "I've always gone through life knowing that when it's been good there will be something bad. There is always somebody there to jump in your shoes, and you're always replaceable." She half-grimaces. "And don't you hate that?"

Bussell never wanted to be an older dancer. She particularly remembers performing *A Month in the Country* with Rupert Pennefather, who was 24, when she was 38. "There's a moment with Rupert when we hold hands, I am supposed to play the older woman, that is my role..." She trails off, looking down at her hands. "I thought: I am too old for this."

Wasn't it a huge letdown when it was over?

"Oh yes, but I was used to those, that's like after every performance. You always have those amazing highs and those were the hardest things. It would take me two hours or more to calm down from the buzz of doing a three-hour performance." These days, she says, it's the "small details" that give her a thrill. "I am probably quite a simple girl when it comes down to it. So many people I have admired get taken in by the fame and the buzz. I just knew that that wasn't normal. I love the glamour, but I would hate to think that that would last." She catches herself, laughing delightedly. "I sound really boring, don't I?"



For the photo shoot we move outside to photograph Bussell in front of the Sydney Opera House. She wears a dress by Australian designer Collette Dinnigan and a pair of her own shoes: outrageously tall gold stilettos. As a ballerina she could never wear heels. They are still painful. Bussell endured years of agonising joint pain, and had two ankle operations for bone spurs. As she poses with the graceful arches of the Opera House behind and the sun illuminating her features, Bussell looks remarkably Australian. She is self-conscious about her square upturned nose, which crinkles when she laughs. During the shoot she is surprised that the photographer doesn't tell her to keep her chin down: "Everyone says that because of my nose."

I get a tap on my shoulder and a voice in a Sheffield twang asks: "Is that really Darcey Bussell?" Three young English women stand watching, mouths agape. They are the only passers-by to stop. "In London there would be proper crowds," says one, before shyly asking for an autograph.

Bussell mentions that she will be back the following week at Sydney Dance to watch a rehearsal. Despite requests from Rafael Bonachela, she refuses to dance. "When I get over the ballet chip on my shoulder and say I am ready to come and dance, I will." She adds with a touch of weary resignation. "I think I will never get over that. I keep thinking that I am going to be seen differently, but I suppose I am not. Once a dancer, always a dancer."★

Darcey Bussell appears on *Strictly Come Dancing* from 5 December

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