Strictly starring

Karen Hardy

Ceryl Angear talks to Karen Hardy about her new role on "It Takes Two", "Strictly" and teaching

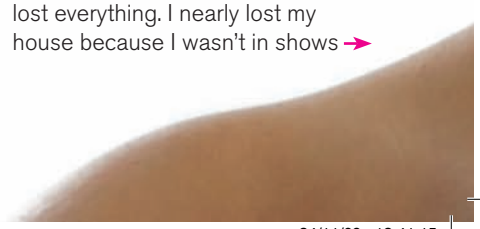
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No-one knows better than Karen Hardy just what it takes to become a "Strictly" champion. Since the age of five, when her Mum put her into dance classes so that she had the time for weekly shopping, Karen fell in love with winning medals and didn't mind the sheer hard work. Holding aloft the Strictly trophy with her celebrity partner Mark Ramprakash was the culmination of a massive psychological journey. "It's a really big thing that you've done because you've choreographed it yourself, designed all your own costumes, the whole look. You've literally done everything yourself as an individual".

This year the BBC asked her to take part in "Choreography Corner" on "Strictly - It Takes Two". Karen felt that talking about dance in layman's terms would help viewers relate to the technicalities of dance, "so if we were talking about a pivot, I'd explain that it's two steps that go around each other, or top line - we keep hearing about this top line - which means elbow to elbow, try and look for a straight line. I just naturally always wanted the general public to understand all about what they are voting for." Karen looks for exciting pieces, with strong technical points or those you would learn if you went to classes, "like fall away. So a fall away is something that people will be doing in their classes throughout England, so I said I must talk about it." Karen has been shocked by the wonderfully positive response, but says modestly "I just do my job. If I do it properly, people will love it. That's how I've always approached things."

Karen's glittering professional career ended in just one phone conversation with her dance partner Bryan Watson, bringing to a close the achievements that have helped shaped the way we now see dance. As Karen puts it, "Finished. So over 35 years of devotion to dance, my blood, my sweat, my life; it just stopped. I lost everything. I nearly lost my house because I wasn't in shows →

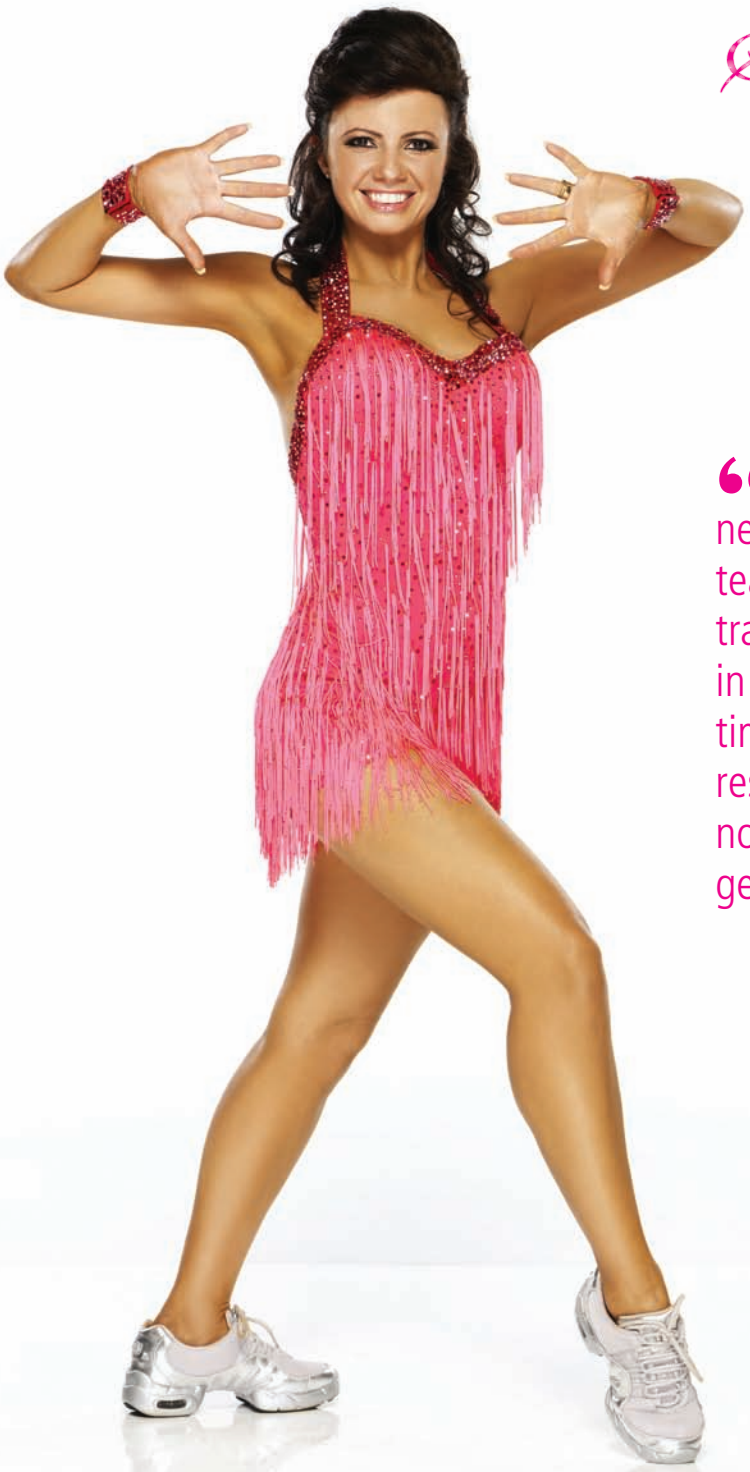
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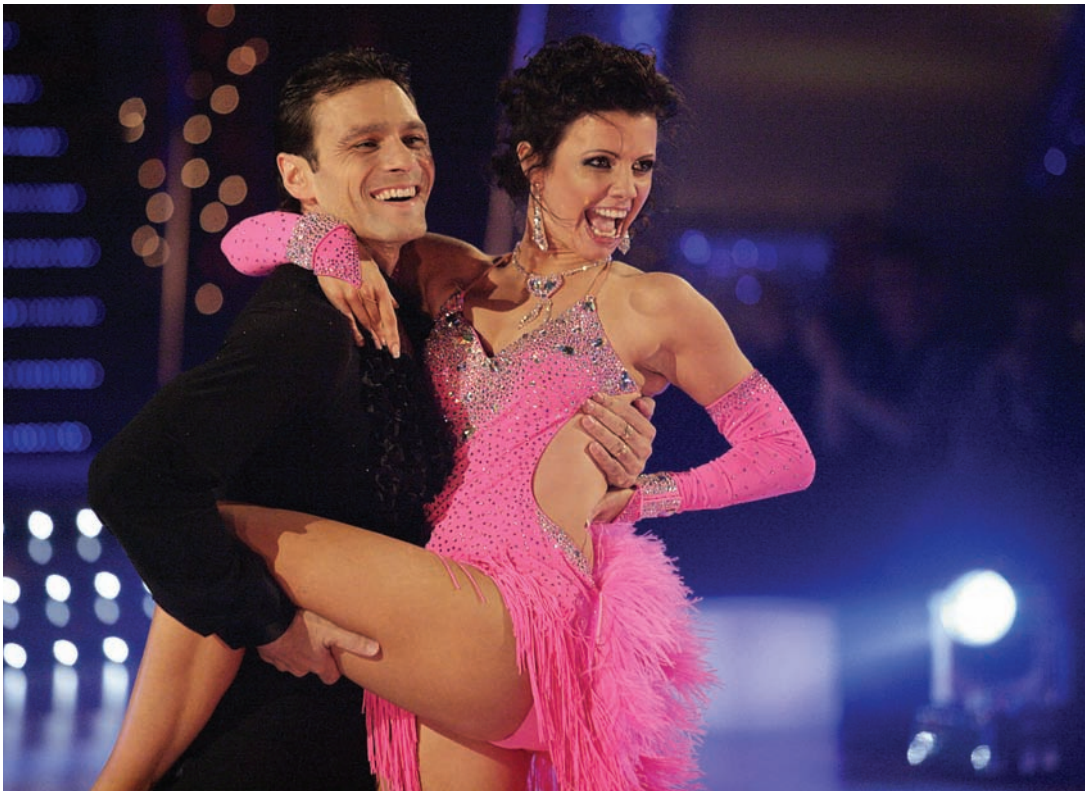


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Strictly
starring

“On ‘Strictly’ you need to be a great teacher. You have to transfer knowledge in a very short time and acquire results that are noticeable by the general public”



Strictly 2006 winners Karen Hardy and Mark Ramprakash. Photograph © BBC

anymore, I wasn't travelling, I wasn't working." Karen's husband saw how this trauma was affecting her, more than she ever did herself, and persuaded (or as Karen tells it, "near enough ordered me") to meet him in Peru, where they trekked the Inca Trail. Until this point, Karen's life was all about glamour and high heels; she had never slept in a tent or eaten out of a tin can. She was petrified. Two things dawned on her as they travelled; that a world outside dance did exist, and that she had chosen the journey. Despite her terror, Karen feels that "it's a time I will never, ever forget and probably the best thing I've ever done."

Back home, Karen began to teach dance. "I taught beginners, I taught everybody because I had to. My hand was forced, and I'm so glad I did. My whole look at dance is just so open and I'm aware and able to absorb everybody's feelings. Anything my students throw at me now, I've done it. From having no money, I've had to work for every penny." Setting up her own studio in Chelsea was a major step for Karen and it wasn't easy, but Karen's fighting spirit won the day and she took the plunge "because if I want people to learn I guess I've got to go and do it, it's not going to happen, just thinking about it, I've got to make it happen."

Dance in all its forms can be a welcome escape from day to day worries, as Karen discovered when the recession began to bite. "We had a lady, about 6 months ago, she came into the studio crying her eyes out. I said what's happened? She said, "I've just been made redundant". And the first place she came was to the studio. She didn't go home, she didn't come in to us a week later. She'd been made redundant, she walked out of work and came straight to the studio." Karen gave her a dance lesson, a cup of tea and said "we can't take away what's happened, but when you dance, and when →

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you come into the studio, I want you to forget what's outside". That's the power of dance.

Karen was already teaching beginners when she was invited to take part in "Strictly", and her approach was "these are celebrities, they're going to be really confident, they are going to be like my top couples, but they won't have the ability". The reality was somewhat different.



"I just got the biggest shock ever because what you realise is that it doesn't matter how famous you are, how powerful you are, what championship sports you've done, dance just exposes all your emotions, and you have to knuckle down and master it." Karen especially loves week two of the competition when the celebrities change from just wanting to have fun, to not wanting to lose. "Teaching and performing are two different things and on "Strictly" you need to be a great teacher. You have to be able to transfer knowledge in a very short time and you have to acquire results that are noticeable by the general public in every walk of life. It's not one style now, you have to appeal to the masses, everybody has something that they like, and your job as a teacher is that you've got to make sure that your celebrity appeals to everybody that's out there."

When "Strictly Come Dancing" was shown live from Blackpool on November 7th, Karen fulfilled another long held ambition; to give public master classes for beginners.

Among this year's celebrities Karen is fascinated by Ricky Whittle's talent. "He has not only got rhythm but he's got natural movement within his body and he feels what he's doing. These people come along very rarely. Very rarely."

Karen can teach rhythm to everybody, "we get so many people coming in to the studio who say 'I've got two left feet, I've got no rhythm, I can't do anything'; they've all been proven wrong in the first couple of weeks. It's just like maths, you know, in the beginning one plus one equals three, and then we're told it's two, and then we learn it don't we? And that's the same with music, you've just got to introduce the mathematics of it, but some people take longer than others."

Ali Bastian has also caught Karen's eye and she says "what I think she's struggling with is actually relaxing and getting into the whole style of dance." Another is Chris Hollins; "what you hope for on "Strictly" is that as the celebrities take the journey, they find themselves and work it out."

> "Dance just exposes all your emotions, and you have to knuckle down and master it"

So who does Karen think will lift the Strictly Glitterball? "At the current time it would have to be Ricky; but you know what, it's the nations show. They have such a strong say in who their winner is, you just never know. As long as you keep it from a dance point of view, there is no one to touch him, but we've seen in our own world of dancing, there are the natural ones who, through hard work, come up from behind, and I live believing that, because then anybody can have a chance at getting a title, anybody can have a chance." ●

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