

“WE’RE ALL STRONGER THAN WE THINK”

Despite ‘retiring’ nearly 10 years ago, Darcey Bussell reveals just how much a career in ballet continues to shape her

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It’s nice to learn that retired ballerina Darcey Bussell and I have something in common.

Early on in our interview, she admits – with genuine indignation – ‘Oh God, there’s one thing I hate saying, and that’s “My mother was right!”’ But few could fault the decision of Darcey’s mother Andrea Williams, a former model, to steer her young daughter towards a career in dance. ‘I didn’t know what my real interests were, so my mum decided I should go to stage school. I’m grateful to her for putting me on the right path.’

Promoted to principal dancer at the Royal Ballet by age 20, Darcey performed in more than 80 different roles before she retired from ballet in 2007. However, ‘retirement’ is a relative term for her. From penning a series of children’s books, *Magic Ballerina* (Harper Collins, £6.99), despite being dyslexic – to being a judge on *Strictly*, Darcey has been busier than ever over the past decade.

Perhaps this eclectic list of achievements has more to do with her former ballet career than it

would seem. ‘The discipline I learnt from training – repetitiveness, sticking with something and not giving up – has carried me through everything I’ve done since I stopped dancing. I have the willpower, strength of mind and confidence to step into things I wouldn’t have dreamt of doing when I was younger.’

Darcey’s dance background influences her judging style of *Strictly*, too. ‘As a professional, I have empathy. I know how difficult dancing is – and can you imagine how much more difficult it is for somebody who has never experienced that amount of training and concentration?’

Darcey admires all of her contestants, but she does have favourites. Last series, it was *Birds Of A Feather* actress Lesley Joseph, who turned 71 during the competition and was the oldest contestant yet. ‘She was extraordinary! I’ve always been a big fan, but I think the joy that she got from it was wonderful.’

Although Darcey is quick to sentimentalise former *Strictly* contestants, she reflects on her own professional dance career with pragmatism. ‘People

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Darcey in a 1998 Royal Ballet of *Raymonda* Act III. Right: With fellow *Strictly* judges in 2016



look at classical ballet and say, “Oh, it’s so romantic”. But as a dancer you have to be realistic in assessing your strengths and weaknesses, to see what you need to work on. If you can recognise those things, and improve, then it helps to give your career longevity.’

While blessed with height (tipping 5ft 7in), an athletic physique and – courtesy of her mother – timeless good looks, Darcey stresses that hard work, rather than genetic endowments, formed the basis for her professional success. ‘I looked at my company of talented dancers, and thought, “How am I going to get noticed?” The answer was to get up earlier, to study more and to spend more time at rehearsals than the average person.’

Nowadays, Darcey’s fitness is less to do with following a strict regime, and more about ‘having a positive outlook for my family [husband Angus Forbes, a hedge fund manager, and their two teenage daughters, Phoebe and Zoe]. If I’m full of energy and endorphins, I can do more for them.’ This hasn’t been without its hurdles: last year, she had a hip resurfacing operation after damaging the joint cartilage during a performance at the 2012 Olympics. ‘I feel like the bionic woman now – but the difference is amazing. I was in pain for two years.’

Despite her ‘bionic’ enhancements, Darcey still maintains a fitness regime that would put most of us to shame, walking her dogs Lolli and Pop for 40 minutes daily and teaching twice-weekly dance fitness classes as part of her workout programme, Diverse Dance Mix. ‘I love teaching,’ she says, ‘It motivates me to help people learn a new skill and keep fit.’

Yet it is motherhood, rather than dance, that has taught Darcey the most in the last 15 years. ‘You learn patience, understanding and being a good listener.’ Will Darcey be encouraging her daughters to follow in her twinkle-toed footsteps? Not necessarily, she says. ‘They’re two very different individuals with different strengths.’ But whatever the girls do, one thing’s for sure: they have an excellent role model in Darcey, who says, ‘Everyone is stronger than they believe. That’s important to know in life. It’s all about your mental resilience.’

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