

## Strictly

*Noel Baker reveals a secret enthusiasm for bodies in motion*

With my 'serious' Quaker 'mind' I snobbishly thought *Strictly Come Dancing* was an inconsequential frivolity – irrelevant in a deadly serious world.

Three years ago, however, I encountered an episode of the programme and was utterly seduced. Since that first encounter I've thoroughly enjoyed the weekly viewing experience, though I was still slightly embarrassed at doing so.

In my Quaker Meeting, after a particularly memorable programme, I considered why I felt uneasy at thoroughly enjoying *Strictly* with all its glitz and glamour. In the silence of Meeting I reflected on the dynamics of the show and those who make it: the musicians, artists, engineers and technicians create the fleeting contexts in which each couple 'strut their stuff'. The music, lighting, scenery, special effects and costumes transport the audience with wonderfully crafted settings that are brought alive by the dancers.

The presenters are the 'face' of the audience in their immediate and personal reaction, whether it is sympathy or amazement, to what has been offered, and do this with great warmth. They also skilfully negotiate the unexpected, both turning disaster into fun and applauding the heights. The four judges use their knowledge, competence and experience to provide critical guidance to the performers with tact and encouragement. Aficionados will ask: 'What about Craig?' Craig Revel Horwood reminds us the competition is serious and neither sentimental nor indulgent. When Craig applauds a performance it is praise indeed. He keeps the show clearly rooted in the realm of serious competition.

Having been labelled 'celebrities', one assumes being in the public eye holds no fears for those who accept the invitation to take part. Nevertheless, each competitor is required to risk trying to master an unfamiliar skill; and, in doing so, to risk failure in front of millions. This requires courage, generosity of spirit and an investment of trust in those watching. The studio audience is invariably sympathetic and encouraging to the performers who struggle; the achievements of the dancers who 'pull it off' are cheered with enthusiasm. You'll never hear a dancer 'booed'. Week by week we see the competitors experience a range of emotions:

frustration, determination, commitment, relief, pride, happiness and even exultant joy. In their achievement each 'celebrity' seems to grow in stature before our eyes. Competitors occasionally become 'different' people, liberated from their old selves.

The backbone of the show is the team of professional dancers, who teach and encourage the competitors they are paired with. To create a dance routine tailored to an individual, to enthuse and train a novice to a high level of competence, and to give their partner the confidence to attempt the impossible, takes an exceptional level of skill, commitment and patience. The depth of friendship that develops between each competitor and their professional partner, and all those involved, is clear. It can be seen in the sadness and the occasional tear that is shed when couples are eliminated as the competition progresses.

The experience of personal growth has led to some competitors possibly outgrowing the settings they came from. Sadly, this dynamic causes some celebrities to abandon even their most intimate relationships: that more problematic dimension has been identified as 'The Curse of *Strictly*'. However, the 'Curse' isn't confined to *Strictly*. It is a not uncommon outcome of personal growth in many settings.

Dance has featured in possibly every culture since people came together to live in communities. *Strictly* is a development of that tradition, to which has been added the competitive element, enhancing the experience to a new level. I now understand *Strictly* to be a celebration of dance at its most creative, a means of human expression as old as time. I am grateful for every element of what is a pleasure, frequently a joyous experience, for me, and so many others.

Quiet exploration, during Meeting, of my relationship with *Strictly* has dispelled my residual embarrassment at enjoying it so much. My appreciation of the programme does not obscure my awareness of the dark side of human experience. By contrast, *Strictly* heightens my wish and hope that one day all will know a life in which celebratory dance has a place. So, I no longer assume implicit Quaker disapproval of my enjoyment of *Strictly*!

*Noel is from Cheltenham Meeting.*