

Strictly speaking

Dance star Flavia Cacace has tangoed around the world and into our living rooms, but she'll always be a Guildford girl at heart. **Fiona Adams** gets in step



Love it or hate it, come autumn there's no escaping *Strictly Come Dancing*. Now in its eighth season, the show that pairs professionals with celebrities and unleashes them onto the dance floor – with varying degrees of success – has become synonymous with family Saturday night viewing.

The franchise has been sold to more than 30 countries around the world, and its dancers dominate our news and gossip pages as much as the celebrities. The show regularly pulls in viewing figures of ten million, and its new results format, allowing the public full eviction control, is igniting *Twitter* and *Strictly's* own blog page in fierce debate every Sunday night.

Subject of a particularly active blog page in November was one of the show's most popular professionals, Guildford resident Flavia Cacace, who was controversially voted off the show with her partner, film star Jimi Mistry, having lost out to Brendan Cole and former *Destiny's Child* star Michelle Williams.

When the *Strictly* pairings were put together in early September, Flavia and Jimi were tipped for finals success, and when we first spoke at the beginning of November, five weeks in, Flavia was quietly confident.

"Jimi has been improving every week," she said. "His body has changed so much. He can't believe the changes himself; he stands so upright and says 'oh I've got a chest now!' There was a lot of pressure and hype about us in the beginning, but we're getting there, slowly and steadily."

In two hours after the Sunday results show, more than 800 comments were posted on the BBC site, most decrying their eviction and the public's 'decision' to keep ex-politician Ann Widdecombe – by her own admission a "dancing dumbo".

The usually chirpy Flavia is now rather deflated but will not be drawn on the BBC's change of format, or whether Ann should have been voted off instead. Reading between the lines, she is clearly hugely frustrated by the result.

"We are both pretty upset," she confirms. "But I want to say a huge thanks to everyone who voted and supported us.

There was nothing we could have done more or differently. Jimi has been an inspiration to choreograph for and I really feel it is a loss to everyone who watches the show."

Flavia was born in Naples, the youngest of six children, to chef Roberto and housewife Rosaria. She moved to the UK permanently when she was four as her father was working here, but her Italian heritage is still a strong influence.

"My dad had been here for a couple of years, and we came over to join him. We came to Guildford and we've lived here ever since," she explains. "I did once spend three or four months dancing back in Italy but Guildford is very much my home. I still feel more Italian, though, but I think I've got the best of both worlds. I have a really nice mix and still speak Italian every day with my family."

Despite the attention brought by her international success and TV fame, Flavia has so far resisted the bright lights of central London living.

"All my family is here and I love it! It's not as busy as London but it's still close and there's plenty going on. It's a lovely, lovely area," she says.

Guildford is not only home but also where Flavia took her first tentative steps into the world of dance. Flavia's mother decreed that all her children should pursue an extra-curricular activity, so at the age of six she and older sister Marina joined *Hurleys Dance School*, in the centre of





Flavia with her professional partner of 14 years, Vincent Simone. Photos courtesy of Snootyfoximages.com

town, starting lessons on a Saturday. The shy and reserved Flavia cried all the way through her first lesson, but was soon attending extra classes and private lessons.

“Dancing kind of turned into an ambition without my knowing it at the time,” she comments.

Sister Marina still teaches salsa and latin, and is fiercely supportive of her baby sister.

“Marina always rings me after Strictly and tells me what she thinks and gives me advice!” laughs Flavia.

Her ambition was soon channeled in a more determined direction when Flavia was introduced to professional partner Vincent Simone, who was also dancing at

together, winning their first trophy at Birmingham’s Tower Ballroom. They turned professional in 2001 and within a few years they had won the *UK Professional Ten Dance Championships*, a title they held for four consecutive years. The pressure was on and they effectively kissed goodbye to their teenage years, though Flavia betrays no traces of regret.

“Dancing has completely dominated our lives since we were 16. We sacrificed our youth but it’s what our life is – our life is based on our career.”

Along the way, Flavia found time to learn the violin and take A-levels, while Vincent continued to teach in Italy, but holidays and other distractions have been few and far between.

“We are much better at finding free time than we used to be,” she affirms. *“Now we try to take time off, find a week to go on holiday, to recharge our batteries and one day we will do less and have a more normal life. But we love it and so we do it as much as we can.”*

Vincent and Flavia – as they became known professionally – are perhaps best known for the Argentine Tango. They won the first ever *British Argentine Tango Championship* in 2006 and became world champions in 2005/6. It is Flavia’s favourite and the dance that jettisoned them onto the *Strictly* radar.

“I love the music, the sensuality and the concentration required to perform well. The music speaks to you and tells you what to do. It’s simply beautiful.”

“After we won the world championships twice in a row the BBC approached us to perform as guests on the show. The year after we began training celebrities.”

Of course, for *Strictly* fans the show is not just about dancing. It’s about the voyeuristic emotional feast provided by the celebrities’ weekly rollercoaster of gruelling daily training and the judges’ grilling. Does the down-to-earth Flavia ever feel like throwing off her twinkly

this, but you carry on. The thing about Strictly is that you aren’t just a dance teacher; you’re also a bit of a therapist!”

I wonder if the fame garnered from performing live before millions of viewers is all it’s cracked up to be?

“At first the fame was very strange and seemed really intrusive as we were just not expecting it. Most of the time I love it, you get to meet lots of different people and they’re happy to speak to you. I’m really just making the most of it because you don’t know how long it will last.”

“I think because we’re dancers and teachers, we’re more approachable than the celebrities and people treat us more like normal people. It’s not such a big shock to meet us face-to-face as it is an actor or someone like that.”

Flavia does indeed seem normal. She may be an international dance star, twirling around our living rooms most Saturday nights, but the rest of time she’s happy doing everyday things that we all do.

“When I’m not performing,” she says, *“I like to get to the gym, go in the sauna or the steam room, and I like watching TV, especially DIY programmes!”*

I expect she’d cause a bit of stir in the Ladymeade branch of B&Q, but like everything else she’d probably take it in her stride.

■ Learn the Argentine Tango from Vincent and Flavia with Volumes 1-3 of their DVD tango collection. £29.99 available from www.vincentandflavia.com/dvd.html

Midnight Tango nationwide tour – Vincent and Flavia will be taking their live show, *Midnight Tango*, on tour for the first time in 2011, beginning on April 4 at the Mayflower Theatre, Southampton. They visit the New Victoria, Woking May 10-14. Visit www.vincentandflavia.com/bookings.html.

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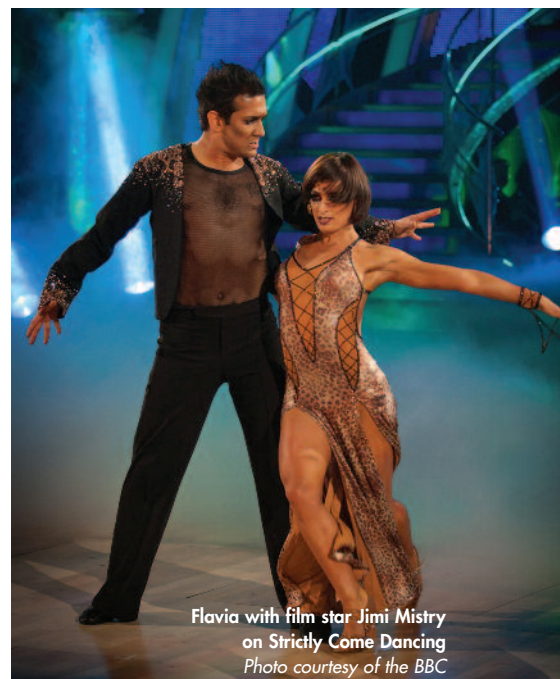
Hurleys in Guildford.

“Vincent and I have been dancing together for 14 years. We were both dancing at the same place, had the same dance teacher and we were both looking for a partner. It was purely coincidental that we were both Italian – but it was good for us both language-wise to be honest – my Italian got better, and so did Vincent’s English!”

The pair enjoyed almost instant success

heels and stropping off up the gilded staircase?

“Most of the time, I love what I do and as a dancer you are used to criticism. You are used to teachers and other judges telling you something isn’t good enough or it can be changed. You get used to it. You learn to take criticism, that’s normality for us. I am without doubt my biggest critic! But of course there are times when I think I’m not good enough and I just can’t do



Flavia with film star Jimi Mistry on *Strictly Come Dancing*. Photo courtesy of the BBC