

From left to right: Natalie Lowe, Artem Chigvintsev, Lisa Riley and Ian Waite

STRICTLY UNCOVERED

A new stage show reveals the truth behind the sequins – for both celebrities and pros, discovers **Marianka Swain**. The creator and star of this autobiographical dance spectacular tell all...

"I've wanted to do this for two years," explains resident *Strictly Come Dancing* judge Craig Revel Horwood. "Rather than having an evening of demonstrations, dance after dance after dance, we've created an honest story with real heart. It's not all glamour in our business – there's hard work, sacrifice, disappointment, even heartbreak – so this is about showcasing the strength

and dedication of performers, as well as giving the audience a full-on variety show experience."

Strictly Confidential, written and directed by Craig, promises to do just that, pairing an impressive array of dance styles, drama and musical genres with confessional revelations from Lisa Riley, Artem Chigvintsev, Ian Waite and Natalie Lowe.

"The audience knows a certain amount about them,

but the *Strictly* 'journeys' are very edited down," notes Craig. "We can be more candid – we're not on teatime telly!

– and let people talk directly to an audience. It's not about competing or scoring marks, but what drives them to dance, their passions, their hopes, everything they've gone through in their lives to get to this point.

"Some of the stories are really emotional, like Artem going ►

to America and leaving behind his life in Russia. Even if you've never danced a step, you can understand what it's like to be away from home or take a leap of faith to pursue your dream."

"As an actor, you tend to be your 'persona', but in this show I'm completely myself," adds Lisa. "I'll slip into characters for some of the numbers, but otherwise this is just me. That's a bit scary, allowing yourself to be vulnerable, but it's also an amazing opportunity to say thank you in person to everyone who supported me and Robin [Windsor]."

Unlike the *Strictly* live tour, which sticks to large arenas, *Strictly Confidential* will reach a wider cross-section of people across the UK. "That's something we felt very strongly about," says Craig. "The arts should be accessible to everybody, and *Strictly* succeeds brilliantly in that regard. I went to a Saracens rugby match recently and I was like the Queen, darling – everyone knew who I was! You forget that an enormous range of people watch it."

"We wanted to build on that, so our show has huge variety. It's not just two hours of waltzing; there's sizzling-hot Latin, beautiful ballroom, Fosse-esque musical theatre, the glorious mad energy of *Hairspray*, Shakespeare, pas de deux and live music, plus this strong core of frank storytelling. It's all about bringing the brand to the stage in an exciting theatrical way – and giving people their money's worth!"

For Lisa, it's a dream come true: "I've done loads of live theatre, and I loved my *Strictly*



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experience, so this is the best of both worlds. During the arena show, Craig and I got together in our breaks and started piecing stories together, and I got so excited about the possibilities.

"I'm a big fan of comedy as well – Morecambe and Wise are my idols – so we'll try to add in some of those funny moments when we're in the rehearsal room. I'm thinking Artem could be a great stooge..."

Lisa has swapped one *Strictly* hunk for another – and her new partner has a very different temperament. "But I'm not tolerating his Russian gloominess; I'm going to make him camp and fun! We danced together on the show when Robin was sick, so I know he's wonderfully patient and kind."

The pair will be reprising a fan favourite, Lisa's cha cha routine (complete with her lifting Artem). "I had such an incredible response from that moment on, and I'm proud to show that anyone can dance, whatever your body shape. I'm chuffed to bits that our foxtrot, to 'Everlasting Love', is the most copied number

at weddings this year. It's lovely that more people are getting the confidence to have a go at dancing and express themselves."

Craig believes Lisa is the key to *Strictly Confidential*'s success: "As soon as I saw her on the show, I knew she was the right person to lead the company. She's a fantastic actor, singer and dancer, but more importantly she has this special ability to connect with people. You enjoy dance so much more when you're emotionally engaged."

His star admits to some nerves about dancing with professionals: "In the arena tour, I had all the other celebs to lean on, and now it's just me! But Robin says I'm a 'semi-pro', because we got to the semi-final. And I'm going to focus on the positive effect of dancing, how much it helped me through a hard time."

Lisa tragically lost her mum to cancer just two weeks before *Strictly* started, but didn't want to "make a big thing about it and ask for sympathy votes. She would have loved seeing me dance on telly, and she'd love *Strictly Confidential* too. The arts were a massive part of her life – she had

every musical theatre CD known to man. *Strictly* was a great way to work through that loss, and now this new show lets me embrace our shared love for dance and music, and invite the audience to join in the celebration."

Craig hopes that audience will include people who might not normally go to the theatre. "We've got some recognisable names from the show, which is a great draw, and I really want to get everyone off the computer and engaging with live performance. The more people who feel strongly about the arts, the more chance we've got to protect against crippling funding cuts."

"I'm so proud to have created a show that shines a light on these wonderful performers and gives them interesting material – anything I can do to get bums on seats and support my fellow creatives is an absolute pleasure. I'd love to write more in future, although it's very time-consuming, but I can't ever complain about doing a job I adore."

Craig won't be appearing in the show himself, "except maybe a cameo on screen," but he much prefers "sitting in the dark, directing and choreographing – that's always been my passion. I thought *Strictly* would be a flash in the pan, but here we are in its tenth year, and I can't think of a better way to celebrate the joy it's brought to millions of people." ●

Craig Revel Horwood's *Strictly Confidential* tours nationwide from June 12. To buy tickets, visit www.strictlyconfidentialetour.com