

STRICTLY SPEAKING



The *Strictly* judges, Craig Revel-Horwood, Bruno Tonioli, Shirley Ballas and Darcey Bussell. Below: Debbie McGee and Giovanni Pernice dance an Argentine tango.

Marianka Swain, our resident *Strictly Come Dancing* blogger, gives her take on Series 15. Photographs by **Guy Levy**, courtesy of the BBC

Ah, 2017 – wasn't that a blast? When *Strictly* returned to our screens in the autumn, it didn't just feel like sequined fun, but wholly necessary, temporarily unifying escapism. The nuclear fallout shelter of light entertainment. (Metaphorically speaking. At time of writing.)

It was also a critical year for the show, replacing beloved head judge Len Goodman with Shirley Ballas, bringing in new professional dancers, and trying to gaslight us into believing that The Ten Second Rule has always been a thing – oh, you know, ye olde Ten Second Rule, which doth appear in the Domesday Book and scrawled on the side of Stonehenge.

Which is to say that the judging was no more or less inconsistent than in the Goodman days, and at least we had some proper technical analysis from our Queen of Latin. Heel leads! Standing leg! What joys! All delivered in kindly, constructive fashion (except

when a mouthy Brendan Cole was dispatched with exquisite *froidueur* #TeamShirley). By the end of the series, it felt as if Queen Ballas had been with us from the very beginning.

Meanwhile, Bruno Tonioli skipped a show for the first time ever – and wasn't entirely missed. Might he be following Len into retirement in the near future? Or do we have many more years of colourful mixed metaphors and Culture Wot Bruno Encountered This Week?

BEST IN SERIES

★ Best performance: Debbie's tango. I recommend rewatching with your own choice of proper music.

★ Best costume: WonderSusan. Runner-up: Anton's sentient ruffled sleeves.

★ Best move: The series of increasingly loaded pot stirs. Such delightfully literal, well, pot-stirring.

★ Best line: Claudia to Aston re: his pregnant wife affecting his sleep: "You're not making a human." Quite.



SUNDAY BLUES

Other aspects of *Strictly* could certainly use a revamp, not least the Sunday results show, which seems to have been plunged into full existential crisis. In addition to the often dismal and/or pointless dance-off, we got a succession of bland musical acts, the ballroom pros having a crack at every style BUT ballroom, and Len's Lens rebranded as the (embarrassed mumble) Dance Debrief.

If we're going to justify this second – not remotely live – show in any way other than "Squashing *X Factor* like a bug", it sorely needs a rethink. How about showcasing other professional dancers, with visits from New Adventures, same-sex partnerships, or current competing ballroom pros? The visit from ZooNation this series showed how well that could work. *Strictly* has a remarkable platform – millions of viewers tuning into a primetime TV dance show – and it would be fantastic to see it used to better showcase a thriving, but sometimes too insular, industry.

SURPRISE, SURPRISE

Back on the main show, it's been an enjoyably open series, with constant leaderboard shake-ups, couples rising from the dead, favourites falling into danger, and even a frontrunner pair being eliminated: Aston Merrygold and Janette Manrara.

It made for a more interesting watch than past series when the champion was all but decided by Week 5, though it also showed just how much external factors can either promote or doom a celeb in this current incarnation. With

SERIES HITS AND MISSES



Aston Merrygold and Janette Manrara in their *Trolls*-themed cha cha cha.

★ Shirley's launch show entrance majorly raising the bar. **HIT**

★ Neil Jones and Chloe Hewitt still benched – BOO. Hope they get their chance on the main show soon. **MISS**

★ Fringe, fringe everywhere. The official dress code of Series 15. **HIT**

★ Claudia remains a vital source of organic comedy. Tess... does not. Though a major highlight was Susan's sarcastic deconstruction of the dance-off and Tessbot's subsequent panicked malfunctioning. **HIT/MISS**

★ The Dad Dancers cometh. Too many this year, and they lasted too long. An issue with casting, voters or both? **MISS**

★ The copycat klaxon continues to weary – though it may need to be joined by an "Are you kidding with that music choice?" klaxon. When the producers' creative decisions annihilate dances ahead of time, we've reached Russian hacker levels of electoral interference. **MISS**

★ Oh what bliss it was to see some training footage. If only we could ditch the "comedy" VTs entirely. **HIT/MISS**

★ Some particularly egregious theme weeks, from baffling Halloween to inconsistent Movies and Musicals. *Trolls*: never forget. **MISS**

★ Do we really need the -thons – this year the Paso Doblathon? They never deliver on the teased collisions, and no one outside of a crack M15 squad understands them. **MISS**

a more ballroom-focused pro, and free of over-theming, Aston would almost certainly have made it to the final.

There were other curiously early eliminations: Chizzy Akudolu surely deserved longer, as did the Rev Richard Coles, but in their stead, Ruth Langford proved an unexpected source of comedy in two memorable routines – a deeply camp paso doble and a *Strictly Ballroom* throwback samba, complete with Anton du Beke's retina-searing pink trousers.

Filling this year's "Spirit of *Strictly*" slot was Susan Calman, who, together with pro Kevin Clifton, found a wonderful balance of entertainment and demonstrating a true love of learning to dance, and of partnership. These more accessible contestants are key if *Strictly* is going to serve as not just a competition, but inspiration for others to join in, and her Wonder Woman number struck a chord in a year of women reclaiming their power. ➤



Susan Calman and Kevin Clifton dance a quickstep.

TOP OF THE CLASS

Perhaps no one was more of a surprise than the 59-year-old Debbie “Flexy” McGee, the former sidekick who embraced her turn in the spotlight. Yes, she had former experience, but who would have expected such daredevil lifts, enviable extensions, and a delightfully teased May-December romance with Giovanni Pernice? It was a welcome reminder that there’s no age limit on dancing.

However, both she and Alexandra Burke fell afoul of “ringer” mutterings, complaints about past dance training – and tabloid attacks on Alexandra, in particular, soured the end of what was otherwise a lovely series. Meanwhile, Joe McFadden emerged as a not-so-dark horse, and there were good runs for the ever-eager (if not always clothed) Davood Ghadami, cheerily down-to-earth Gemma Atkinson, and – on the strength of a Disneyfied showmance – Mollie King.

It was a shame not to see more of a range in the latter stages – the glut of actors made Musicals Week feel more like Auditioning For The West End (Who Are We Kidding – Touring Will Do) Week. This year’s sportsman, Jonnie Peacock, made an indelible impression through his work ethic, cheeky humour and engaging partnership with Oti Mabuse, plus his insistence that the judges not treat him any differently because of his disability. A class act and an inspiration.



NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

Amy Dowden The Welsh lass fought her way past partner Brian McConley’s overbearing shtick to make a decent impression. I’d definitely like to see what she could do with a ringer.

Dianne Buswell The upbeat Aussie, meanwhile, had a sadly short run with the Rev Richard Coles. If she can tone down the comedy slightly, she too might be interesting with a real prospect.

Nadiya Bychkova Handed the easiest task, the Ukrainian had only moderate success with Davood Ghadami – relying too much on their shared smoulder and flashy tricks. If she returns, I’d want to see far more ballroom fundamentals.



Above right: Brian Conley and Amy Dowden dance a tango. Below: Jonnie Peacock and Oti Mabuse dance a quickstep.

STAR-MAKING

This wasn’t a series boasting a major name from the start – like Ed Balls last year – but, gradually, a strong cast emerged, with a good range of characters. If Aston’s exit perhaps made for a less competitive final stretch, it was still a thrillingly open finish.

See you soon for more fleckerls, swivels and spatulistic hands. In the meantime... keep dancing! ■