

CREATIVE ENERGY

Creative energy

Tyrone Huntley and Oti Mabuse.

Strictly Come Dancing's Oti Mabuse talks to **Marianka Swain** about her theatre choreography debut, *Ain't Misbehavin'*

To say Oti Mabuse is busy would be a vast understatement.

"I'm working three jobs at the moment," she admits, "but loving every second!" The South African ballroom professional, who swiftly became a favourite on *Strictly Come Dancing*, has been venturing into new territory: as a judge and mentor on new BBC talent show *The Greatest Dancer*, and as a choreographer for the stage musical *Ain't Misbehavin'*.

Getting involved with musicals has been a long-held ambition, she explains. "I love creating, and my agent kept saying, 'I really want you to be involved with a West End show – I feel you could do more.' I'd been talking to [producer] Paul Taylor-Mills

about maybe performing in a musical, but I was always nervous about the singing part. Then Paul asked if I'd like to create something instead, and I said absolutely. So now I'm doing my own project outside of the ballroom world, which is very exciting."

Ain't Misbehavin' celebrates jazz legend Fats Waller and the raunchy nightclubs of 1920s Manhattan – an era of liberating experimentation in both music and dance. Was it daunting taking on a whole stage show, as opposed to a comparatively short *Strictly* routine? "Actually, it's amazing on *Strictly* – if you're lucky, you have 13 weeks, around 15 numbers, and each dance has its own character, so I can adapt easily as a choreographer.

"With this musical, what's special is that the story is all told through song, so I did have to be aware with my numbers that someone is singing as well – and they need breath! My thought process was partly incorporating the story and relationships into the movement, but also being aware that

someone is singing and acting for two hours, and for a lot of shows. I couldn't make it too difficult, but at the same time I wanted to make it interesting."

Mabuse notes that doing her tour with Ian Waite gave her experience creating for the stage. "The extra element here is the performers really interact with the audience directly, so I got to think about that." Taylor-Mills gave her "absolute freedom", she reports – "he wanted it to feel completely new. He's been so supportive, and I really want to make him proud."

The era of the 1920s felt like familiar territory, Mabuse explains, "since a lot of Latin dances come from there – dances I spent years competing in. I know about people who were influential with these styles, and how they changed dance. It really became about people expressing themselves through movement." That's a key element to *Ain't Misbehavin'*: "It's all about relationships and how, whatever's happening outside, people

came to these clubs to have fun, relax. It feels very relevant to today, and with our production, we want the audience to feel involved, like they're a part of it – and to be taken back in time."

The dancer is excited to bring her ballroom experience to this new medium. "Everything I've learned in my dancing, those elements of Charleston, jive, Lindy, it's new here – it's more from the competition world, rather than musical theatre. It's my style, and then marrying that with the language of the show. I'm still learning – I always want to make it

bigger and better, more intricate."

Has it helped that actor Tyrone Huntley is also making his debut, as director? "Yes, it's really nice. I know he wants to do a good job, and I do too. It's the first time stepping out of our everyday roles, and we're doing our best to make this a success. He's clear, he knows what he wants, and I know what I want – it's amazing that we want the same thing. That's really rare. It's a brilliant partnership."

Mabuse has also explored a new role on *The Greatest Dancer* – to the

delight of the viewing audience. "It's similar but also completely different to *Strictly*," she declares. "I've learned a lot about myself, as a teacher and mentor. I knew how to push myself, but on this programme, I'm working with kids, the future of dance. It's great to give them this platform, and some insight into what they'll face when they grow up."

Formation dancers KLA, eight girls aged from nine to 11, "have great personality, and they're also pure ballroom," enthuses Mabuse. She's equally proud of her other young charge, 14-year-old contemporary



dancer Ellie Fergusson, who “has beautiful power when she’s dancing, and her flexibility is amazing. She’s a shining star.” Unlike her *Strictly* partners, “who don’t know what they’re doing”, Mabuse’s *Greatest Dancer* acts “need a different kind of nurturing. I’m still choreographing, and working in the studio night and day, trying to motivate them, but they already come in with their talent and work ethic as dancers. The KLA girls practise until nine in the evening, because they want to. They don’t think of it as work – they just love dancing.”

She is particularly proud to showcase ballroom in an accessible way. “It’s not as popular as street or contemporary, but it’s special. It’s an amazing dance form, involving a lot of discipline and technique, and if you start young you can do incredible things. KLA make it look fun because they have fun, and they’re so brilliant that it becomes interesting and cool for people watching.”

Mabuse’s two worlds came together, with the *Strictly* pros making a guest appearance on *Greatest Dancer*; when we spoke, she was just about

to rehearse the number. It was particularly meaningful coming soon after the announcement that long-time professional Pasha Kovalev was leaving *Strictly*. “It’s really nice to share this with him – his last TV appearance with all of us together. He’s been a vital part of the show for so many years, and we all love him.”

Kovalev and Mabuse have both wowed audiences with their choreography on *Strictly*. How do you keep it creative and fresh with so many routines? “It’s hard,” proclaims Mabuse, “and you never know who you’ll have as a partner. If it’s someone good, you want to push them – and if it’s someone learning, you push them twice as hard. I get inspiration from other classes, and working with my husband [Marius Lepure], and I do a lot of research into different styles of dance to put into my choreography.”

Any favourites among those many *Strictly* numbers? “I loved the American smooth and samba with Danny [Mac], the American smooth again with Jonnie [Peacock], and the waltz and tango with Graeme [Swann].

The cast of *Ain’t Misbehavin’*: Carly Mercedes Dyer, Adrian Hansel, Renée Lamb, Wayne Robinson and Landi Oshinowo.

I guess it’s a lot of ballroom. Probably because they all had storytelling – that’s what I really enjoy.”

What about dream future celebrity partners? “Everyone is a dream partner, when you get to know them. It’s amazing – you push them, and then it pushes you. I’m constantly thinking about creating something that’s not only special for my partner, but that hasn’t been done before and that looks different from the other contestants. It’s been a lot of learning and bettering of myself. I’m very grateful for that, because I’ve grown a lot – that’s made me ready to take on these new challenges.” Would she like to do more stage shows in future? “Yes! More and more. More dancing, more choreographing, more judging, more everything. I’m having the best time.” ■

***Ain’t Misbehavin’* runs at Southwark Playhouse from April 19 to June 1. See Calendar for booking details.**