



In a taxi with...

Ian Waite

The diplomatic king of *Strictly Come Dancing* can teach anyone the right moves

Interview **Maureen Paton** Photograph **Matt Fagg**

Cheeky women are always coming up to Ian Waite in the street and asking this blond, blue-eyed god of the dance floor to give them 'a twirl'. It seems that the man who transformed Zoë Ball from ladette to lay-dee and turned the Olympic athlete Denise Lewis into a ballroom beauty in two series of *Strictly Come Dancing* is a one-man Ladies' Excuse Me. Which gives me the perfect excuse to take Ian for a taxi twirl round Trafalgar Square, then off to the Kensington Dance Studio where he teaches; fortuitously, our cabbie, Alan from Enfield, is a big fan of *SCD*.

In fact, Ian, 35, seems to get hit on, so to speak, by women all the time. So hot to (fox)trot is he that, after years of competing in dance competitions all over the world and working for his father, doing the admin in his engineering company, his showbusiness breakthrough came two years ago when Angela Rippon chose him as her partner for an instructional dance DVD. That was followed by a phone call from *SCD*'s Camilla Dallerup, suggesting they become a professional item.

Ian owes his entire career, he says, to two relationship break-ups – Camilla's split from her boyfriend/dance partner Brendan Cole, but originally his parents' divorce when Ian was ten. Ian and his little brother David went to live with their dad and grandmother, who introduced Ian to her favourite Gene Kelly song-and-dance movies. 'Then my father started going to dance classes as a way of meeting single people, and he took David and me along too,' explains Ian, who went on to become European

Youth Latin American Champion at 13. 'The girls just dragged me on to the floor. They were all huge, much taller than me; I didn't start growing till later on.'

And how. When we stop for photographs, the 6ft 3in Ian bestrides the pavement like a long-legged human flamingo in H&M jeans and passers-by do a double-take of recognition. 'I don't feel like a celebrity at all, although a lot of people say I am,' confides Ian.

He's so laid-back that he even took in his stride that famously ticklish-looking publicity pose with Zoë when she arched her left leg against his right hip. Ian is the perfect gentleman, talking about celebrity partners as if they were some kind of rare zoological species that must be handled as carefully as if he were the David Attenborough of the dance floor. 'The first time you get hold of your celebrity after meeting them, it feels absolutely alien to them because you haven't danced together yet. It's quite intimate so you have to be careful you don't frighten her,' says Ian, who clearly passed the test with Denise Lewis. So matey have she and her partner Steve Finnan become with Ian that they even texted him when their baby was born.

Not only was twinkle-toed Ian tall enough for Zoë, he was also a safe pair of hands in a world where some get tempted to take certain sexy dance moves to their logical conclusion. 'But for me, it would be too much,' says Ian, who is single. 'People's perception of Zoë is as a tomboy, but she loves the old movie musicals. I knew the moment I saw her prancing around in her living room to *West Side Story* that she was going to be quite good. And



we were the right match. I'm very relaxed and placid and she's very exuberant, expressive and hyperactive.' He was even paid the ultimate accolade by the short-fused Zoë when she admitted Ian was the first person with whom she had never had a tiff. 'Her husband Norman used to thank me for being able to get on with her so well,' adds this top diplomat.

He's now taking his career still further with voice lessons in the hope of becoming the proverbial all-singing, all-dancing star just like Gene Kelly in such classic musicals as *Anchors Aweigh*. 'My gran used to say to me, "That's what you want to do, become a sailor and travel the world." I feel I've done the second-best thing and been a dancer and travelled the world.' Ian Waite and Camilla Dallerup's new DVD, *The Magic of Dance*, will be out in October; and a new series of BBC1's *Strictly Come Dancing* begins the same month. Dance lessons with Ian can be booked via his website: www.ian-waite.com

'The first time you get hold of your celebrity it feels alien to them because you haven't danced together yet'