

## CHAPTER 16

# Unapologetically Me

‘Oh my God, you were *hilarious*, you looked like a crash test dummy!’ Todd McKenney blurted out for roughly one million viewers to hear.

While these weren’t *quite* the words I was hoping for after dancing on national television, I knew in my heart that they were true. When my *Dancing with the Stars* partner, Carmelo Pizzino, spun me through the air in the final episode of the show, I really did feel like a crash test dummy. That said, I also felt wild, free, comfortable, in my element and, for the first time in a long time,

unapologetically me. (I was also at peace knowing that people generally can't look away from a car crash.)

For much of my career, Paul had acted as my manager. Since I wasn't bouncing around from job to job, this mostly entailed basic contract negotiations for *Home and Away*. While this was perfectly fine with me, Ada kept raving about her manager, Claire McLennan (now Savage), and said that we should meet up and have a chat. On top of negotiating my deals, Claire could get me side gigs and endorsements.

This is one of the things I love about my cast mates: you rarely get the feeling that there's competition between us. Don't get me wrong, I've worked with some dickheads over the years and there's every chance I've been a dickhead to somebody, but for the most part, people like Ada have never let their own success get in the way of their desire to watch those they respect and admire rise with them.

After sitting down for a meeting and discovering that we got along like a house on fire, Claire became my manager in 2013. One of the first things she asked was what my professional hopes and dreams were. While she knew I was very happy on *Home and Away* and loved doing pantomime over the holidays, she saw opportunities for me to expand my repertoire and wanted to know if there was something specific on my bucket list that she could help me tick off.

As a matter of fact, there was.

'I'd love to be on *Dancing with the Stars*,' I said.

For years I'd watched my co-stars get to cha-cha, foxtrot and tango on the show and had secretly been wondering why the bastards hadn't called me yet. (Okay, so maybe my body didn't scream 'built for ballroom dancing', but still.)

'Leave it with me,' Claire said and grinned.

Six months later I was offered a spot.

As I began my nascent reality TV dance career, I delighted in the fact that I would get to dust off my amateur dancing shoes and spend hour upon hour whirling, twirling, twisting – and sometimes flipping – to some of my favourite songs. I don't know if it was the exposure to my parents' records at a young age, my innate love of musical theatre or the fact that I'd spent so much time with Paul and his muso mates over the years but knowing my part-time gig would involve dancing to songs I love was my idea of a dream job.

Seriously, in my next life, I'm coming back as a triple threat.

Until then, let me take you back to 2014 when I found you can roam well outside of your comfort zone after the age of sixty – and live to tell the tale.

While slightly terrified at the idea of being dressed only in strategically placed fringe, feathers and diamantes, I was confident that I had enough rhythm to proudly shake what my mother gave

me (without scaring small children) and was hopeful it would be enough to keep me on TV for at least a few episodes.

My greatest fear (and anyone who has done *DWTS* will tell you this) was being voted off in the first week. My fragile ego simply would not have coped. Like all of my other professional endeavours, while it would be fun to ‘win’, I was really there just because it looked like a good time. Never in a million years did I think I’d be dancing in the finale against AFL footballer David Rodan ...

But week after week, for some unknown reason, the judges and Australia kept having me back.

I’m not exaggerating when I say that I’m shocked that I am alive and well enough today to even write this chapter, because *DWTS* was the most physically and mentally gruelling thing I have ever done. The unexpected weight loss of seven kilograms was much appreciated, especially after I saw the first promotional images. For some reason, the wardrobe team dressed me in a form-fitting leprechaun-green dress ... which made me look like a dancing zucchini. But by week four, my body had toned up and I no longer resembled something out of the *Soupe Opéra* basket.

Although my torso may have been trim, taught and terrific, my feet resembled those of a murderous eagle prone to snatching lambs from farmland. Every night I’d roll them over frozen water bottles in an effort to stop the rigor mortis. It wasn’t until Sal of

the *Natural Normans* told me that I needed to be applying heat, not ice, that they finally regained their flexibility.

There was also an injury to my bum that forced us to swap our plan to do the salsa for the Charleston. I have to confess that this injury didn't happen while dancing. No, angry at my cat one day, I tried to bend down to pick him up, which pinged something in my posterior. (I don't know what we were arguing about.)

From having to learn a new language, to getting comfortable 'vocalising' my moves, to trying to make my sore bum (which lives halfway up my back) exude a 'Latin swagger', I can safely say that it *is* possible to teach an old dog new tricks, although you might have to take her out back and put her down after.

Regardless of the fatigue and injuries, it wasn't difficult to keep showing up. While yes, I was dancing because I love a good time, I was also dancing for a very good cause. When the producers had asked me which charity I wanted to support, I knew it had to be Bears of Hope. Ada had lost her son Harrison just a month before. This incredible organisation really rallied behind her and her family to help them get through it. From providing parents with bears they can take home from the hospital to counselling and support groups, Bears of Hope make it easier for families to face the unimaginable.

Each week that I got to stay on the show, my mind went into *Good Will Hunting* equation-solving mode trying to figure out

why I'd outlasted Ricki-Lee Coulter or my *Home and Away* co-star Tai Hara. Both of them were much better dancers than me. Maybe they lacked the boofhead appeal that reality TV viewers love so much? (Obviously, I had buckets full.) The only plausible explanation that I could come up with was that I was brave, gung-ho and not afraid to make an idiot of myself.

Regardless of *why* I made it to the finale, it's an experience that I now keep in the same file as doing stand-up comedy and psychedelic drugs. The 'if you have a good first time, it's best not to risk doing it again' one. Also in this file is my promise to never again to talk about my daughter's bowel movements on national television. In an interview with Edwina Bartholomew during the first night of the show, I used one too many descriptive words to explain why Clancy wasn't there to support me ... 'She's back in the hotel with a terrible case of the runs!' As soon as it came out of my mouth, I made a mental note to leave Clancy's trysts with gastro out of the spotlight, but as I type this, I can't help thinking, *Oh dear, I'm doing it again*. Sorry, Clancy.

Even though the world tends to believe Ricky Bobby's catchphrase from *Talladega Nights*, 'If you ain't first, you're last', I would have been mortified if I'd won *Dancing with the Stars* because I knew it wouldn't have been because of my dancing. David Rodan was truly extraordinary. When he and his partner, Mel Hooper, did a Bollywood dance, I couldn't tell who was the

'star' and who was the professional. My only issue with coming second is that Ada and Johnny Ruffo love reminding me that they both won.



Fans and jourmos often ask what my secret is to a long acting career and how I have energy for things like reality TV dance shows. Not wanting to pontificate, I think there are three contributing factors:

1. I believe you should 'live your life, not your age'.
2. I stopped being a people pleaser.
3. I have an overactive thyroid.

As soon as I started accepting the fact that not everyone is going to like me (and I'm not always going to like them), I was able to find the tools needed to avoid my knee jerk Red Mist response to confrontation and find peace knowing that what others think of me is really none of my business.

I mentioned earlier that I believe people come into your life for a reason, a season or a lifetime. Over the years I know that certain people have helped me hone the subtle art of not giving a f\*ck, while others were my reason for being. (You know who