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***Strictly Come Dancing* and the Postmodern Musical Aesthetic**

by Paul Zinder

Strictly Come Dancing sits neatly in the Guilty Pleasures category for me for many reasons. I was first introduced to the series by my father-in-law, a die-hard BBC I-Player aficionado who used to burn DVDs of British television to send to his daughter and me when we lived in Rome. The television choices that made it to these DVDs were primarily made by my father-in-law, a man who has a strong affinity for British documentaries about steam engines and the “great British weather.” He also felt that *Strictly* was a show that had to be seen even from thousands of miles away. So I gave it a shot.

He was correct. For anyone in the room who hasn't seen *Strictly*, the show is one of those series that claims to involve “celebrities”, though I had never seen or heard of any of the participants, and my British wife recognized but a few. And I realize that what I'm about to say is sacrilegious in some circles, but I found the preening host, Sir Bruce Forsyth, quite grating most of the time, and pseudo-sexist some of the time. Tess Daley, the statuesque co-host, acted as bizarrely-dressed, banal, straight-partner to Sir Brucey, as his strained jokes fell flat regularly throughout the telecast, which didn't deter him from flapping his hands to encourage the audience to applaud. So what's so entertaining about that?! Well, a lot, actually.

Strictly Comes Dancing maintains a structural sophistication hidden by its lightweight facade. The more I watched *Strictly*, the more I recognized that the show entertains because of its narrative structure, one that harkens back to the glory days of the Hollywood Musical genre while acknowledging its own position as a talent show/reality show/Musical hybrid. While many of the series' segments appear to celebrate and endorse thoughtless entertainment, the show's divertive value depends on the complexity of the organization of its various segments, which together form a highly successful (and entertaining) template from which the show is built.

Through an analysis of *Strictly's* ties to classic genre tropes, and through a close reading of segments from a single episode of the series, the following paper will explain how the appeal of *Strictly Come Dancing* lies partly in its dependence on a narrative structure that recalls the classic Hollywood Musical, albeit with a postmodern spin. When Rick Altman, in his tectonic work [The American Film Musical](#), defined the Hollywood Film Musical for a generation of scholars as having a double diegesis, he outlined the relationship between the story elements and the musical sequences in the classic film Musical. Altman's theory can be taken to a new level when applied to *Strictly Come Dancing*, a series that has proven itself a highly viable substitute for the virtually extinct film Musical genre, by increasing the external audience's interest in ballroom dancing through a structure I define as a quadruple diegesis. *Strictly's* episodic construction combines Musical sequences (the competitive dancing and special guest musical performances), with narrative (the scripted skits), reality show scenes (the training of the celebrities by professional dancers), and talent show segments (the judging by both internal and external audiences). This complex structure helps to account for the popularity of *Strictly Come Dancing*, a television series celebrated by a contemporary audience that long ago tired of Hollywood's attempts to create Musical film fantasies.

The film Musical, of course, has a long and varied history. As Steve Neale notes in his book *Genre and Hollywood*, “the musical has always been a mongrel genre. In varying measures and combinations, music, song and dance have been its only essential ingredients” (105). Neale notes how this fact inspired numerous writers to utilize (and sometimes invent) terms that best describe the musical to them, including “musical comedy”, “musical drama”,

“the rock musical”, the “integrated musical”, and the “backstage musical” (105). And although there are varying definitions for these types of musicals depending on which theorist one reads (105), the backstage musical seems a particularly apt description for at least part of the structure utilised by *Strictly Come Dancing*.

As many of you know, the backstage film musical is one that focuses on the backstage mechanics of an on-screen show that usually unfolds during a climactic musical sequence that entertains both the external audience (which refers to you and me, the ones watching the stage show on screen in a movie theatre or on DVD) and an internal audience (those people who serve as the audience for the show in the film we are watching). These “behind-the-scenes” sequences establish character and encourage audience identification with (sometimes) a variety of on-screen personalities. Backstage film Musicals like *42d Street* (1933) celebrate the work that performers and technicians undertake to prepare for a climactic filmic performance, a performance that usually take place on stage. Although *Strictly* is a competition, the producers depend on behind-the-scenes segments that on a minor level establish the hard work that goes into each routine, but more importantly, establish the relationship between the competing celebrity and her/or his professional partner.

It’s important to note, however, that Rick Altman argues that the term “backstage musical” is too semantic and thus too limiting, and instead proposes the replacement term “Show Musical”, which allows for the inclusion of films like *Singin in the Rain*, where the climactic performance does not occur on stage, but on a movie screen within the diegesis. But Altman’s argument here doesn’t exactly apply to *Strictly*, as the Show Musical’s plot focuses on the creation of a “show” that depends directly on the successful romance of the lead couple. *Strictly*’s episodic structure builds to (usually) a single musical dance-performance by each couple, but the couples on *Strictly* do not usually fall in love (with few exceptions, including a notable 2004 mid-series romance between *EastEnders* actor Kara Tointon and her professional partner Artem Chigvintsev). Outside of rare relationships like that one, however, the lack of loving relationships on *Strictly* dramatically drives the show’s syntax away from that of a traditional Show Musical.

However, Altman also argues that most Show Musicals are comedies that focus on the couple’s interaction with other groups. And we do see this in *Strictly*, in every episode. After each single live performance, the episode cuts to shots of other contestants and professionals on the balcony applauding and/or reacting fairly wildly to the performance just concluded, inferring that each non-professional about to be judged has fully supportive co-stars. The interaction between groups is particularly highlighted during *Strictly*’s special theme weeks, with montages of all the participants focusing on the fun leading up to Halloween Week, for example. And considering that Altman’s definition of the Show Musical includes an internal diegetic audience (those supportive co-stars) that guides the response of the external audience (those of us at home) the Show Musical designation is not wholly inappropriate for *Strictly*.

That written, one of the lead characters in an average Show Musical is often an unknown in theatrical or film circles, and one whose rise to fame coincides with her increased ability to perform successfully for an audience. This point is particularly interesting when applied to *Strictly Come Dancing*, a show that claims to include celebrities from the very first episode of each season. This means, of course, that a “rise to fame” narrative strategy may not be applicable to the series and in fact, that the show risks an almost contradictory outcome – if a character begins the *Strictly* competition as a famous person, her participation in the series could result in either a more successful celebrity career or a quick exit and a potential loss of some of that famous luster – a gamble that never comes into play for a protagonist in the Show Musical film.

In the *Strictly Come Dancing* episode I will now analyze, which originally aired during the second week of the competition in 2011, the bevy of so-called stars is introduced with the concept of celebrity in mind. The names as well as short descriptions of each of the show's lead characters are broadcast by the show's off-screen announcer in the opening of the episode. These include "Comedian and Impressionist Rory Bremmer" (and his professional partner, Erin Boag), "Actress and Pop Princess Holly Valance" (and Artem Chigvintsev), "Singing Legend Lulu" (with Brendan Cole), and "Stage and Screen Superstar Jason Donovan" (dancing with Kristina Rihanoff). The fact that I had never heard of Jason Donovan is actually an impactful facet of my analysis – in fact, one could argue that since I am a member of the external audience and will be judging each contestant along with the professional judges on screen, each person has a chance to "rise to fame" in my eyes, which coincides with Altman's syntactic explanation of the leads in a Show Musical.

Before the introductions of these "stars of our show", the show's hosts are introduced with an effervescent, "Live from Television Center, your hosts, Sir Bruce Forsyth and Tess Daley!" After this oral introduction, Bruce tap dances across the stage as the camera follows him in a single shot, admiring his old man form, as Tess looks at him curiously (Tess openly reacts to Bruce's showmanship throughout the episode, failing to hide her impatience at times). He finally stops dancing after Tess simply walks over to him, only to throw her leg into his hand and her arm over his shoulder as the music stops on a final trumpet blast. This opening foreshadows the fun to come – in both its awkward "performance" by Bruce (no matter how much he is loved, he does look a bit ridiculous shuffling during that mini-dance) and its sometimes cringe-inducing coupling of Bruce with the much younger, sometimes uncomfortable Tess (who always manages to plaster a smile on her face at that final moment of Bruce's dance). Of course, the pairing of a much older "lead" male with a much younger co-star harkens back to classic Show Musicals, including *Singin in the Rain*, which stars Gene Kelly, who was 39 years old at the time of shooting, and Debbie Reynolds, who was making her debut in the film at 18. In films like *Singin in the Rain*, of course, the external audience roots openly for a successful romance. In *Strictly*, one does not root for the same outcome for our cohosts.

Bruce begins this episode (and every other one) with the words, "Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen and Children. Welcome to Strictly Come Dancing. It's nice to see you, to see you...", following this opening with an intentional pause, which allows the crowd to shout "nice!" in an incredibly enthusiastic manner. This catch phrase references Bruce's past history in entertainment and recalls the use of the aural reprise in film Musicals, as does his consistent references to his own aged self, in jokes like the one in this episode that refers to another television show set during his own childhood, *Planet Dinosaur*.

Rick Altman's analysis of the narrative strategy of the Musical focuses on the importance of what he designates the Musical's "Dual Focus", the presentation of scenes that alternate between the male and female leads and provide a parallelism between these two characters, centering primarily on their differences, which often leads to a confrontation between the male and female before a final union in the climactic musical sequence in the film. Altman also argues that these films need a non-musical context (the performance-level of the double diegesis) so that the oppositions in the couple can be explored in the plot of each film so that their union during the film's climax is a union of oppositions. In *Strictly Come Dancing*, oppositions within each couple often exist as well, and are best seen in the reality show-style training segments in each episode.

In the training segment that introduces the week's work undertaken by "Waterloo Road's" Chelsea Healey and her partner Pasha Kovalev, *Strictly* dramatizes the differences in work ethic between the inexperienced Chelsea and the professional Pasha. The sequence

begins with shots of their first performance, filmed one week earlier, followed by an interview with Chelsea that indicates that she was “absolutely terrified” before that first dance. A flashback cut to judge Alesha Dixon’s post-performance comment that Chelsea looked like a “little princess” is followed by an interview shot of Chelsea claiming that she didn’t understand judge Len Goodman’s comment that she reminded him of Musical star Petula Clark because she doesn’t know who Petula Clark is. This admittance, of course, only reminds the external audience of Chelsea’s lack of knowledge about the Musical genre in general, and may or may not cause a chuckle, depending on one’s own familiarity with Clark. Reality show-style training shots follow, and focus on Chelsea’s obsession with her own phone, including an interview shot of Chelsea admitting how easy it is for her to lose her concentration, followed by Pasha’s explanation in a separate interview of how difficult it is for him to keep her focused. After he “grounds” her by taking her phone away, banning it from the training room, Chelsea claims that “I’m gonna full out concentrate on the salsa I’ll be performing Sunday night.” The differences between these two performers, one an immature novice who needs to be punished to focus on training, and one a pro who only wants a student who will listen, establishes a Show Musical-style dichotomy that makes the audience wonder how the two will perform live on Saturday night, and whether a synthesis can be achieved from two so very different personalities.

Rick Altman notes that music and dance in the Musical serve as expressions of personal and communal joy, and link directly to the value of the lead couple in a Musical. One could argue that *Strictly Come Dancing’s* competitive dance numbers serve a similar purpose, albeit one that may end in despair depending on the judge’s reaction to each dance. The judges for the 2011 season, including the abovementioned Len Goodman and Alicia Dixon, joined by Bruno Tonioli and Craig Revel Horwood, assign a numerical value to each expression of personal and communal joy, and the lasting value of the aforementioned joy depends at least partially on these judge’s comments and the numerical value fixed to the dance, each of which are scored on a scale of 1 to 10.

After some overly excited comments from the judges (Although Len called Chelsea and Pasha’s dance “a little bit chilly around the willy”, Bruno noted that Chelsea has “the energy of a wild kitten!”), the couple is sent upstairs for a short interview with Tess before their scores are announced. “The judges scores!”, in this case, totaled a 29 (Len, Bruno, and Craig gave the couple a “7”, while Alesha gave them an “8”), a very respectable score for the second week of the competition. So I suppose her shenanigans on her phone didn’t cost her much training time after all?

As noted, the reality-style training material serves as a postmodern answer to Altman’s definition of the Musical’s Dual Focus narrative. While *Strictly* mostly avoids scenes that separate each couple after their original pairing, the oppositions between the two characters often appear in the training sequences, as seen in the Chelsea/Pasha phone obsession example. And while the overcoming of personality differences in the film Musical leads to a final, loving synthesis for the couple in the film’s climax, in *Strictly*, such overt love is replaced by each episode’s climactic dance. That is, a couple’s success on the dance floor and in the judge’s eyes serves as ample proof of their connection, of their ability to overcome their differences. And sometimes, the oppositions seen in the rehearsal footage are reinforced during a poor performance on the big night.

For example, “Italian Siren” Nancy Dell’Olio and her professional partner, Anton Du Beke, struggle to communicate in the reality show segment that precedes their dance. As Tess explains in a Voiceover at the opening of the sequence, their problems actually began the week before, when “disaster struck for Nancy and Anton” when they couldn’t overcome the insistent interference of a feather boa. When the segment cuts to the current training

timeline, Anton and Nancy sit in a 2-shot, as Anton notes that this week “We are dancing the salsa.” He then points to Nancy, who repeats the same wordage in Italian. The segment eventually takes on the feeling of a skit, as Nancy tries to teach Anton Italian. Their language differences are mimicked by their obvious differences in skill on the dance floor. In the following shot, Anton drops Nancy during a lift, and follows with the comment, “Sorry, there might be a bruise.” Nancy tries to teach Anton some Italian words. He tries, and fails. During a single-shot interview, she notes that Anton’s performance in Italian is lacking. His following comment to her in a shot from the training room is quite telling: “Why do you laugh at my Italian? I don’t laugh at your dancing.” On the night of the competition, after the pair conclude their attempt at a salsa, Bruce Forsyth turns to the judges and says, “Tell him what you think.” Anton quickly counters, “Don’t.” They do. Bruno sums up the judges’ feelings by claiming that Nancy “broke records. How many times someone went wrong in this competition.” The couple’s scores, a 3, a 5, a 2, and a 4, are the lowest of the night, meeting the expectations established in the reality show sequence. Interestingly, this result also mimics the performance failure experienced by couples in a Show Musical when they fail to synthesize their oppositions.

At the end of an average episode of *Strictly Come Dancing*, the series becomes a more straightforward talent-show-style popularity contest. As Tess reminds the viewers at home regularly throughout each telecast, the external audience determines which couples make it cleanly through to the following week’s competition, while the two couples with the lowest number of viewer votes will have to participate in a dance-off the following day in a results show. In the early part of recent series, the judges decide the one couple that makes it through, eliminating the remaining couple from the competition, and sometimes, from their dream of moving forward to become a talent show/reality show/postmodern Musical hybrid-dancing star.

That written, the enduring popularity of *Strictly Come Dancing* may at least be partially explained by its connection to another of Rick Altman’s subgenres, the Folk Musical. As Altman explains, everyone in the Folk Musical sings and dances, creating a truly unifying world of communal joy. In *Strictly Comes Dancing*, all of the celebrities, the professionals, and even the judges dance, which draws the entire group together in a common pursuit. And as noted earlier, even the lead host dances his way across the stage at the opening of each telecast.

Which brings me back to Sir Bruce. When the BBC announced in April of this year that Bruce Forsyth would not be returning to *Strictly* as host for its next series, I felt a pang of loss, as though a star of a long forgotten genre had announced his retirement. Yes, Bruce has grown on me over the years, and I wonder how his departure from *Strictly Come Dancing* will effect the feel of a series that contains a structural complexity wholly dependent on the history of another enduring classic, the film Musical.