

ICE JUDGE ASHLEY'S

A REAL COOL CUSTOMER



Flirty dance for me

I'VE caught Ashley Banjo on a rare day off, a break from all that telly and touring.

His dance group Diversity are doing dozens of 10th anniversary dates, but for once there's no show tonight. Ashley gets to step out of the bubble.

"It means you kind of come back to the real world for a bit," he tells me. "When you're in that tour bubble, you become so focused on the show - that cycle of performing, sleeping, travelling, preparing - that you don't get to think about everyday things."

"You have caterers preparing your food, people to drive you around, etc. So yeah, it's good to snap back."

By the sound of it, the physical rest is equally welcome. Diversity's performances are pretty full-on.

"It's kind of hard to explain the trauma and the pain sometimes."

"We've just done four shows in two days, and last night almost the entire team was getting body cramps afterwards. A couple of the boys were really sick. You push yourself that far."

Not that Ashley's complaining.

The life he's been able to enjoy since steering his street dance troupe to the Britain's Got Talent title in 2009 is one for which the 31-year-old

THE MIKE WARD INTERVIEW



ASHLEY BANJO

Londoner will always be grateful. "I look around every day and I see people working hard, spending their money to come and see us. Without these people, there'd be no shows."

"Unless we entertain them and stay at the top of our game, then it's all irrelevant. Showbusiness is so fickle, this could all end tomorrow. It's important to enjoy every minute."

Charm

And Ashley certainly does that. Away from Diversity, his natural charm has won him tons of other TV work, most notably his judging role on *Dancing On Ice*, which returns in January. Hot favourite for this upcoming series is Perri Kiely, his chum from Diversity. So does Ashley plan to be extra tough on his pal?

"I may need to knock him down a peg or two!" he chuckles, pointing



STEPPING UP: Dancer Ashley. Left, in *Dancing On Ice*. Right, Perri, and the youngster on *Splash!* and Ash in Diversity. Below, with singleton Nife on *Flirty Dancing*



out Perri's record of success in shows like *Splash!* and the charity *Bake Off*. "He's on a winning streak," adds Ashley. "But seriously, as Diversity's choreographer it's pretty much my job to be harsh on him every day."

Before all that, Ashley returns to Channel 4 this week with a second series of *Flirty Dancing*, the dating show where he gets to play Cupid.

In it, he pairs up singletons through the magic of dance, hoping the routines he's

created for them - performed together for the first time just moments after they meet - will enable them to click.

It's the sort of show that surely only an old-fashioned guy could come up with. So would that be a fair label to pin on Ashley?

Values

"Yeah, it's weird. In some ways I'm really liberal and open-minded but in other ways I do have quite a few traditional values. There are things I love about the past," he says.

"I like the fact people weren't so quick to judge when it came to dating. They didn't look and swipe, like on an app. They took time to get to know one another." Ashley's

view is that dance connects us on a primal level: "You're tapping into an instinctive emotional response. You'll find out as much about someone by dancing with them as you would if you had a conversation."

What, even if, like me and Mrs Ward, you've been married for years?

"Yes, even couples who've been together for a while can find something."

"They certainly won't be able to hide anything from one another when they dance."

What, nothing at all? Maybe that's not such a great idea, then.

"OK, yeah. Maybe not!"

● *Flirty Dancing* returns on Friday at 8pm on Channel 4.

Picture: ROBERT RABBITT