

# Strictly *Zoe*

From Footballers' Wives to Strictly Come Dancing, Zoe Lucker is now one of the stars of EastEnders. **Louise O'Loughlin** meets the actress at her home in Walton

## *How did your acting career start and what was your first big role?*

Like loads of teenagers, I didn't really know what I wanted to do in life. I had daydreams of becoming an actress, so my parents helped me pursue that dream. I ended up in The Manchester Arden School of Theatre. I got my acting degree and an agent. I was put up for the role as Jimmy Tarbuck's girlfriend, Busty Babs, in Brazen Hussies. All of a sudden I was on set with Julie Walters and Robert Lindsay.

## *Working with Julie Walters must have been a great experience. What did you learn from her?*

Loads and loads. She is amazing. I used to sit and watch her and absorb how she worked. She was very gracious and treated the runners, riggers and directors as equals. She never fluffed a line and was a definite role model. I learnt so much from her.

## *So what about EastEnders and your role as Vanessa Gold? What's she really like?*

I absolutely love Vanessa. The cast are great fun and I am having a great time doing this role. Vanessa is strong and glamorous, but with a big heart. She's quite a complex character and there are a lot of layers to her. Above and beyond everything, she is a doting mother who adores her daughter, Jodie. I'd say she is a lady who knows how to get her kicks!

## *Is Vanessa anything like you?*

No, not really. I'd be exhausted dressing up like her every day in real life. I would say the only similarities are that I adore my daughter, Lilly, and I have a big heart. In fact, I am actually a real softie.

## *How did you feel when you set foot on the set of EastEnders on your first day?*

I was so nervous. I have always watched the programme and dipped in and out of it since it has been screened. I was very lucky to be paired up with Jake Wood, who plays Max Branning, Vanessa's on-screen love interest. On my first day we went and had a long coffee

and he gave me the tour of Albert Square. I met the other members of the cast en route, which was surreal. The ice was definitely broken when I was put in a five-litre Mercedes for my first scene – I was terrified.

## *Why would driving a five-litre Mercedes terrify you?*

It's so embarrassing, but I have to confess that I failed my driving test five times, and I had only just passed before I started working on EastEnders. They stuck me on the set in this big car and I was concentrating on getting my lines completely right, whilst desperately trying not to hit the cast or crew or head through the doors of the Queen Vic!

## *What's in store for Vanessa? Can you give us any clues?*

Sorry, but I couldn't possibly give anything away. To be honest, the writers are so talented and, as we speak, they are creating wonders. But you'll just have to keep watching. I can assure you the plot thickens towards Christmas.

## *I've got to ask you about Footballers' Wives. How did that come about?*

Originally I was put up for a casting for Bad Girls. I didn't get that part, but the producers talked about a new show called Footballers' Wives, which they were looking to cast actors for later in the year. I instantly liked the sound of the show and bugged my agent to get a list of the characters. Finally, when that arrived, I immediately knew I wanted to play Tanya Turner. She was a brilliant character to play and the more diverse the storyline, the better for her, as she could handle anything that was thrown at her.

The show was internationally recognised, and thankfully, Tanya seemed to go down well with the audience.

## *How did it feel to win an award?*

I was very flattered when I won the Most Popular Actress in 2004 and to be nominated for the National Television Awards.

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## ◀ page 25 *Why did you leave after the fourth series?*

To be honest, I loved every second of it, but it was time for a change and I wanted to branch out into other roles.

### *But, you returned?*

I was in New Zealand and I had a call from Brian Park from Shed Productions. They wanted Tanya back, but to play alongside Joan Collins. What could I say? If you get an opportunity to work with an international icon from your childhood, how could anyone refuse? Also, the truth is I missed Tanya.

### *Didn't Tanya Turner end up in jail in Bad Girls?*

Yes, the producers took my character over to *Bad Girls*, the sister programme of *Footballers' Wives*, something which had never been done before. It was a success and *Bad Girls* was just brilliant.

### *Your family (including fiancé James Herbert and their daughter Lilly Alabama) obviously watch your work on TV. How do you make sure they don't see you acting in some of your more 'explicit' scenes?*

I generally brief them before a show and tell them the part that they need to go off and make a cup of tea. But one particular night in *Footballers' Wives*, they showed a raunchy scene of me 'getting it on' in a plane. My dad usually calls me after everything I do, be it radio or TV, and after this scene he didn't call. So I rang him and he was really off with me initially. He said that he had gone off to make a cup of tea, but came back right in the middle of it all happening. Even to this day it's so embarrassing thinking about it.

### *Have you travelled with your work?*

I took a break and went to New Zealand to embark on different roles over there, and I worked with GMTV, which took me to China, Cuba and Zambia. I was contacted by the Voluntary Service Organisation (VSO). My parents had worked with them in the 1970s and they asked if I would go to Zambia to see the changes they had made. It was such an honour. Then, ITV2 (UMTV Productions) covered my adventure to meet the 14th Dalai Lama. That was mind-blowing – an experience I will never forget.

### *Acting is obviously very different from being in something like Strictly Come Dancing. What was it like?*

I was really proud of myself. It's so easy to hide behind a camera when I'm acting, but with this show, you couldn't get more up close and personal with a camera. *Strictly Come Dancing* was such an amazing experience, but James Jordan, my dancing partner, really worked me hard. I've never been so fit in all my life.

It was a terrifying experience, utterly nerve wracking, but so much fun. My biggest fear was being eliminated in the first week, so I was chuffed to bits to make it to week seven.

### *How are you enjoying living in Surrey and do people recognise you when you are out and about?*

I really love it here. People don't bother me, especially if I am with Jim and Lilly. I get the odd stare while people are working out where they have seen me, and sometimes I get the 'do I know you from somewhere?' comment. That actually makes me want to shrink into the ground. I always think that if I say, 'yes I'm on the telly' it sounds so diva-ish. Generally everyone is very friendly.



### *How are you finding juggling motherhood and work?*

Emotionally it is really hard. I get a real sinking feeling when I leave Lilly to go to work. She's only two, and like most mothers who work, I carry a lot of guilt. Luckily, Lilly is such a happy little soul and doesn't have to be peeled off me every time I set off outside the door. When the Queen Vic burnt down, I was working late nights and it broke my heart that I wasn't there to kiss her goodnight, but Jim is amazing. He juggles work so that he can tuck her into bed on the days I can't do it. So I can relax knowing she is with him.

### *What do you do on your days off?*

My days off are very special, and I want to spend every possible second with Jim and Lilly. I really enjoy shopping in The Heart in Walton. There are some fantastic new shops and I can often be seen in my old favourite, New Look. To be truthful, though, I'm actually a real home bird. I'm at my very happiest when I close the front door and leave the world behind. ●