

# LEAPS of FAITH

'Dancing With the Stars' provides escape from a world seriously out of step

By FRAZIER MOORE  
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You want to dance. You know you do. Lodged in your La-Z-Boy, you take flight with your fantasies as you watch "Dancing With the Stars." Unbound, you claim the ballroom floor and get yourself into the act.

In your dreams. But dreams fuel TV shows, along with the people who watch them. You watched plumpish, middle-aged John (Cliff the Mailman) Ratzberger stay alive for six weeks. You've got to figure, anything is possible!

But there's more here than vicarious wish fulfillment. "Dancing" offers you release from a world in chronic disorder. This is a show that insists upon order — order even you can help impose.

Success is all in the timing, which any dancer knows, and "Dancing" was a fluke of grimly opportune timing when it premiered as an instant hit for ABC two summers ago. Instantly it fell into step as a feel-good choreographed contrast to the escalating chaos of the war in Iraq.

The show feels that way more than ever now, completing its fourth season as a welcome diversion. The war goes on and the news is worse. Conveniently, the palliative value of "Dancing With the Stars" seems hand-in-hand with growing public dismay.

On "Dancing," plans are made and put in action. Failure or success is measured, forthrightly, by the panel of three judges. Then plans are modified. As early as the next week (and not, say, next September), you can look for signs of progress.

Best of all, there is blessedly nothing at stake here, beyond bragging rights and that mirror-ball trophy. It's on a grand scale, but "Dancing" is just a stylish way of stepping out, for dancers and viewers alike.

Of course, escapist entertainment in troubled times is nothing new.

"Face the Music and Dance," Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers advised in the Depression-era film "Follow the Fleet," one of many musicals that applied an entertaining balm to moviegoers in those painful years.

Not so differently now, TV viewers face the music and "Dancing" with its glamour, romance and family-friendly sex appeal.

It also comes with an added payoff those strictly formulaic movie musicals never could provide: With "Dancing," you get to be surprised by how the story ends ... and even play a role in the outcome!

"Dancing With the Stars," which began its current dance-off in March with 11 stars, is now entering the last phase. This week, former "Beverly Hills 90210" star Ian Ziering was dismissed, leaving three finalists: boxing champ Laila Ali, former 'N Sync member Joey Fatone and Olympic skater Apolo Anton Ohno.

Their final performances will air 8 p.m. Monday, with the winner announced on Tuesday's show, beginning at 8 p.m.

The winner will be chosen by the onsite jury ("renowned ballroom judge" Len Goodman and dancer/choreographers Bruno Tonioli and Carrie Ann Inaba) in tandem with the votes from you, the viewers: You may not know much about dancing, but you know what you like.

And whom. A personality showcase, "Dancing" gives widespread exposure to "niche" celebs (like NBA Hall of Famer Clyde Drexler — hey, everybody doesn't follow basketball) while giving has-beens a new chance to shine (who remembered Ian Ziering, much less knew he could dance!).

The athleticism is inspiring



CAROL KAEHLSON, ABC/The Associated Press

Tom Bergeron, host of the network's hit show "Dancing With the Stars" with contestants Laila Ali, a boxing champ and daughter of Muhammad Ali, and her professional dance partner, Maksim Chmerkovskiy.

(and often, um, arousing), especially embodied by the professional dancers with whom the stars are teamed. It is these pros' task not only to be great, but to also make their partners appear great — sometimes against all odds. (To paraphrase the nation's quickstepping ex-secretary of defense: They dance with the partner they have, not the partner they might want or wish to have.)

It's a fascinating collaborative process, unfolding live in front of millions, week after week, and it signals one big difference from Fox's talent search, "So You Think You Can Dance" (returning for a new season May 24).

"Dancing With the Stars" is all about the give-and-take between a demonstrated expert and someone who, however seasoned as a public person (Leeza Gibbons! Paulina Porizkova!), may not know a fox trot from a paso doble, or even be too swift at putting one foot in front of the other.

As a viewer you can easily identify with these stars: Each of them, raw talent to be molded, is your surrogate. They literally place themselves in the hands of the pros and, often enough, magic happens. Or order emerges from chaos, at least. This helps make good on your dreams.

What viewer didn't get a lift from Heather Mills, the activist and estranged wife of former Beatle Paul McCartney, during her seven-week stay?

Mills, who lost the lower part of her left leg in a traffic accident 14 years ago, was thrilling to watch on the dance floor with her partner, Jonathan Roberts, even when she took a tumble at the end of one routine, recovering

unflustered with a what-the-heck grin.

"You're so free-spirited, when you dance, you dance like nobody's watching," Carrie Ann Inaba told her.

To dance like no one's watching, knowing everybody is. To make it look easy, no matter how hard. That's what comes from "Dancing With the Stars," treating its viewers to the opposite of chaos. Now its exit strategy is firmly in place (at least for this season). The mission will really be accomplished.

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