



With a TV show and a burgeoning film career, **Vanessa Feltz** is putting the bad times behind her. She talks to **Jenni Frazer**

Vanessa's real-life story

Vanessa Feltz is in love... with Russell Brand. "I absolutely adore him," she declares. The affection is mutual — the comedian, who is the hottest property on TV at the moment, was recently quoted as declaring his passion for Feltz, a passion which makes him feel, he says, "dirty and perverted."

"He sends me a series of very suggestive text messages," says Feltz. "I can't claim to be the first to have discovered him, but I was on one of his shows about three or four years ago and I thought, this guy's a genius. Extraordinary, mercurial, Renaissance man. I've been a great fan and friend — and the recipient of many titillating texts from him which I thoroughly enjoy receiving, long may they continue."

If you think Feltz and Brand are an unlikely pairing, at least they have TV in common. Brand has his own show, and Feltz started her own daytime talkshow this month.

The real love of her life is even more unlikely. He is 34-year-old born-again Christian Ben Ofoedu, a one-time singer with the rap group Phats and Small. The pair plainly adore each other.

"Vanessa emanates everything I think a woman should be," Ofoedu says. "Her company is second to none." Marriage, he reveals, is "definitely on the cards." Part of their attraction to each other, he reckons, is that both of them "have an understanding of God and a higher purpose. The fact that I am God-fearing and observe certain morals and codes of conduct, that I'm quite spiritual — we certainly have that in common."

Had he been to synagogue with her? "Not yet," he winks. "But she's been to church with me."

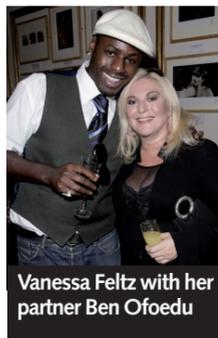
Ratings aspirations

Feltz has been in the public eye for more than 20 years, after starting out writing for the JC. Her new ITV show, "Vanessa's Real Lives," will raise her profile even further.

So far, the show — which after a Christmas break is returning in January — has fulfilled all its ratings aspirations, being watched by a respectable 1.3 million people, and taking, Vanessa confides, a 20 per cent audience share, "which is amazing."

It is fashionable to denigrate the kind of populist TV that "Real Lives" exemplifies but Feltz's hallmark is a genuine, bona-fide curiosity about people and how they function. The programmes are not scripted: "There's an Autocue for the opening, but that's it." Her guests, most of whom are unused to television, vary from a grandmother who became a porn star at the age of 62 to a man who loves eating roadkill. It is Feltz's task to encourage people to open up and deliver these extraordinary nuggets of information. Seven years after her last daytime TV talkshow, it is clear that she has lost none of her skill.

"This show gives people the chance to tell their stories." Had she been shocked by anything she had heard? "Not at all. My own life's been a big shock. I've been so shocked by that



Vanessa Feltz with her partner Ben Ofoedu

'I'm still as Jewish as ever I was, it wasn't that I rejected the North-West London way of life [after my divorce]. Not at all, I felt it rejected me'

that I haven't got room to be shocked by anyone else's. I've endured, or survived, the knocks I've had — which I don't claim to be of epic quality — but once you're discombobulated by your own life, I don't think there's much room for awe at anyone else's. So no, I'm not shocked. I'm entertained sometimes, and sometimes I'm very saddened. But the key thing is that I always want to know, I'm always curious."

At the beginning of her career, Feltz had "the North-West London Jewish recognition factor. People would come up to me in Brent Cross [shopping centre] with a sheaf of JC cuttings and tell me that they read me every week. I wasn't in every week, actually only once a month, but never mind. But it was only Jews who had heard of me. Then, seemingly overnight, everyone had heard of me. Recently, the News of the World did a poll and they said I had a 95 per cent recognition rate."

At one stage, with a cross-variety of shows, Vanessa was on television nine times a week. "I used to see little babies who couldn't talk yet, who recognised me."

Though she has had more than her fair share of nasty comments from journalists, the public have always been kind to her. "I learned very quickly that smiling isn't enough. They want a kiss, a cuddle or a squeeze. And that's fine with me." She also receives very positive feedback for her BBC Radio London morning show, which she resumed in November 2005. Even Sir Paul McCartney, who, like Feltz, knows a thing or two about marital breakdown, has sent her fan mail.

So on the whole, living in the public eye is more or less bearable for Vanessa, although she confides that there are times when she has seriously considered investing in a burqa. "Except that inevitably someone would say, I had Vanessa Feltz in today, buying a burqa. Everybody wants to get up to something clandestine occasionally, and I really can't. I don't think I could get away with anything."

Surplus to requirements

Six years ago, Feltz wrote a piece for the JC's Rosh Hashanah edition in which she let the community have it with both barrels about communal behaviour in the wake of the very public collapse of her marriage. Having been feted by the community, Feltz was hung out to dry. "People who shlepped in the shiva chairs when your mother died," she wrote acidly, "now vault across M&S aisles to avoid you."

She says she still stands by every word. "I feel exactly the same. When I wrote that piece I had hundreds of letters — some of them from rabbis' wives — from Jewish people who were reluctantly single, forced into divorce, and who were excluded from everything, from their friends, the community... You know, considered surplus to requirements."

While she is vehement in her declaration that "I'm not one of those Jews who got famous and suddenly they weren't Jewish any more," Feltz was plainly extremely hurt at the behaviour displayed by some people in the community. "I'm

still as Jewish as I ever was," she says robustly. "My daughters are still fairly observant — the elder one is a cheder teacher and is going on a gap year to Israel." But her divorce, she says, which was not of her seeking, "propelled me and expelled me from the community. I felt extremely ill-at-ease and cast into exile. It wasn't that I rejected the North-West London way of life. Not at all. I felt that it rejected me."

On the other hand, Feltz is certain that a large part of the media criticism of her stems from antisemitism. When she was poached by the BBC from ITV, much play was made of her allegedly enormous salary. "I hadn't asked for more money at all, but the idea of a fat, Jewish, greedy person was irresistible, and I think I got much more of a bashing than I might have done otherwise. Articles referred to me as 'the woman who ate Stamford Hill' or 'with her Golders Green hairdo.' Well, I don't have a hair 'do,' my hair just hangs down, I've never lived in Golders Green, I've barely been to Stamford Hill. What did it mean? It meant, she's Jewish. It's a code."

Post-divorce, Feltz moved, ironically, to a converted church in North-West London, where she lives with Ofoedu, whom she met a year ago at the OK! magazine Christmas party. To her great joy, all the people in her inner circle have given the relationship the thumbs-up. "Everyone who meets him loves him. He's just so nice."

Apart from her ITV show, Vanessa has been carving out a new career in film. Next year, she appears as the host of a Jewish home-shopping channel in the film "In Your Dreams." "It's a great movie. I'm hoping that if all else fails, I'll end up on QVC."



Vanessa Feltz: with fans, she says, smiling is not enough — "they want a kiss and a cuddle"

Vanessa Feltz in brief

■ Born February 1962 in Islington, North London. Raised in Totteridge — like "growing up in 'Fiddler on the Roof,'" she says

■ Read English at Cambridge, before launching her career in journalism at the JC

■ Current media work includes a daily radio show on BBC London 94.9; a weekly column in Tuesday's Daily Express; and an ITV

daytime talkshow

■ Given a TV chat show in 1996, which was cancelled when it was revealed that some guests were actors

■ Took part in "Celebrity Big Brother" in 2001 but was the second person evicted and told Channel 4's "Big Breakfast" that she "hardly survived the experience." Also appeared on "Celebrity Fit Club" in 2004

■ Her marriage with surgeon Michael Kurer ended in a very public divorce in 1999. They have two daughters

■ Vanessa jokes that she has been characterised as looking like an "ageing Italian porn star"

■ She also says that in her youth, her love life was so wild, she was known as "Vanessa the Undresser"