

So, who is AMBER TOPAZ?

Rotherham Open Arts Renaissance (ROAR) chief executive
SHARON GILL talks to performance artist Amber Topaz.

Rotherham-born Sheli (Michelle) Andrew, who adopted the name Amber Topaz at the beginning of her burlesque career, is back in her home town temporarily looking after her grandmother's bungalow.

Due to the nature of Amber's professional life and a season of touring her own production through the summer months, it was an ideal temporary base to move from London to Rotherham.

From the age of seven, Amber attended the Thompson School of Dance and followed her heart and became a full-time student, attending after school and at weekends.

She absolutely loved the discipline, which was clearly picked up by her school careers officer who stunned Amber by suggesting she seek an audition to further her theatrical career all the way in London.

True to her indomitable character and lust for life, Amber did just that at the age of 16 years, encouraged and supported by her mother.

She made the trip to the big smoke only to be denied access to her chosen course of study. Much like a driving test, there were some necessary techniques and refinements required.

Undeterred, Amber showed true resilience, which is often tested in the world of performance, and secured funding through the Prince's Trust to ensure private tuition that would see her second audition aged 17 secure her a place to study Dance Performance at the London Studio Centre.

Modestly, as Amber sits on our sofa of-fice, dressed in a warm fitted coat (it's February and we have no central heating), with her petite frame and ruby red lips, she leans forward and confides: "It was my voice that got me in."

With what is now a sense of real self-awareness, Amber acknowledges that while she was, and will be again once her broken foot has healed, a good dancer, there were much greater and more technical dancers on her course. What Amber had was a singing voice, which many great dancers did not have, making her the whole package. This was further evidenced by the receipt of six months' scholarship.

Working class Yorkshire lass to stardom tale.

Amber lives by "where there's a will, there's a way" which has served her well. "Being rejected is all part of the process" and having been knocked back so often you need to find an inner strength, with drive and ambition.

It took Amber four years of auditioning to secure a role in *Les Miserables*. She was often called back and the assistant director confessed they were waiting for the right space to become available, encouragement to many other performers seeking a regular role.

This has meant Amber has forged a career on the West End and National Theatre tours, including leading roles, and has earned her stripes.

So what led Amber Topaz to leave behind what to many is enviable success and take the risky route of solo artist, writer and producer?

"Auditioning is so disempowering," she states and explains how easy it can be to lose your self belief, and when you adopt the role of a character in a work written by someone else, interpreted by someone else and directed by someone else, you have little to no control of your own artistic expression. Amber's drive and ambition led her to want to be inside her own vision, to have artistic control and be able to change her creative output accordingly.

This transition was not immediate, but a gradual process.

"I was challenged to do burlesque," Amber gleefully pronounces with a chuckle, the memory clearly amusing. She went through with the challenge "for a laugh", little knowing it would alter the course of her life. The ability to be the creator performing her own work taught Amber she was more than a performer, that she was an artist.

As we have seen from Amber's approach to life, she embraced this new found knowledge and realised that by sharing her truth with an audience she could really make a connection: she could play with them, build a relationship and have a meaningful and participatory experience that brings true satisfaction. She would no longer be 'observed'.

It was at this point in the interview, I asked Amber whether Amber Topaz was a persona, an invention, larger than life and a vehicle for storytelling? Her reply was insightful in so much as the established protocols of the stage provide a sense of freedom. The audience expect

to be entertained, to be shocked, informed, to be moved, to laugh or cry; that gives the performer licence to do and say things they would perhaps not in daily life situations.

There is also a sense of safety too, with other venue staff around to ensure any unruly hecklers are swiftly dealt with, so she can truly be authentic and share her heart and soul with her audience. Their participation is the reward.

Very simply put, the difference from applause when cast in a play was a sense of relief: that you had performed well, the suspension of belief had been executed, as opposed to elation and joy when performing your own material.

So at this point I am totally sold! Why doesn't everyone do this? Well, it is a rare combination of talent, drive, vision and insatiable curiosity for the next thing, and ability to listen to your intuition, which combine to create Amber Topaz. We haven't even touched on nudity, or at least the scantily clad outfits yet.

So nudity. I couldn't do it, and Amber assures me she is not a natural nudist, so in comes humour as the armour, the great diffuser. Amber very much thrives in the genre of musical comedy with adult themes. Once again Amber set herself a challenge on her next show, this one being quite practical in its principles, and those were:

- 1 To enjoy it
- 2 Realistic business perspective – got to earn a living
- 3 No props
- 4 Simple to no costumes
- 5 Stand-up one woman show in a bag
- 6 Empower women's bodies and sexual choices.

Rude Awakening was conceived. As touched on earlier, the life of a performer on stage can be very disempowering, and you are a vessel for another's vision. You are objectified. Coinciding with the world's growing Me Too movement, Amber's own personal growth, through ageing and increased sense of self worth, meant the time was right. The sexist, misogynistic patriarchal conditioning she had experienced in the theatre and how it had led her to struggling with self image and imposter syndrome at different times in her life, meant she was compelled to tell her story for the benefit of others.

Embarking on this new project, now having toured her one woman show in Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, New York,

London's West End Museum and the Edinburgh Fringe, Amber has been moved, shocked and surprised at the impact her show has on audiences of all genders. She delivers "Comedy Truth Bombs". So much so Amber was invited back to New York in the Best of the Best category for the United Solo Festival 10th anniversary.

Rude Awakening is celebrating the end of its current run in Rotherham. Amber wanted to bring it home, back to where many of her insecurities began, eating disorders and body dysmorphia, like so many of us, in coming full circle and is delighted that SheFest has offered the right context within which a local audience can experience the show.

So what is next? Having left her friends and professional networks in London temporarily, Amber searched online for a local arts collective and found her way to ROAR.

This connection has led Amber to be able to develop some of her other artistic skills and has found herself designing, making and selling a range of FEM jewellery after learning to use the laser cutter, followed by an art exhibition of the original paintings, The Wombiverse oracle deck, which has now been funded through Kickstarter campaign. She is evolving as a visual artist in tandem with live performance while capturing tales of her bohemian life through the Rude Awakening in book form.

We have not seen the last of Amber Topaz. She is fully riding her own creative flow, currently devising a new show for this year's Edinburgh Fringe which will draw on her love of musical theatre.

Catch the last of the current tour of Rude Awakening in SheFest, in Rotherham at ROAR on Saturday, March 14. Tickets available through SheFest at <https://www.shefest.org.uk/shefest-2020>.

You can also check out <https://events.ticketstforgood.co.uk/events/1801-shefest-2020-the-rude-awakening-matineeperformance> and <https://events.ticketstforgood.co.uk/events/1802-shefest-2020-the-rude-awakening-evening-peformance>.



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