

off the lip

The thinking woman

AMBER KELLY, 32

Actor, producer

A chap from Stratford-upon-Avon once wrote "all the world's a stage." And there's a girl from Texas who embraces that very philosophy with gusto. Amber Kelly, founder of Theater of Thought, has a vision for producing unconventional plays in a wide array of performance spaces ranging from a hotel and beach cottage to a touring bus or van. She is already preparing to produce a three-week run of "Tape," by Stephen Belber, starting May 9 at the Lighthouse Inn in Narragansett. Her goal is to get people thinking and talking and that she did with her company's first production of three short Neil LaBute plays, "BASH," in January at the Narragansett Theater. There is more provocation to come. Visit www.theaterofthought.com. **BY DAVE CHRISTNER**

Where did you get your theatrical education and training?

I have a degree in theater from Texas Wesleyan University, a great school in a really bad part of town, but I hardly ever did anything in school because I was so interested in getting out there and getting work. I started interning at Casa Mañana in Fort Worth right away and worked there until I moved to New York.

What made you to decide to make a go of it in New York?

My mom took me there for my 16th birthday. I told her that day I was going to move, and she laughed. But I actually had quite the diversion in getting there. I got engaged when I graduated from college and got married exactly a year later. That eventually ended in divorce. The big impetus for the exact time to move was my car broke down — like unfixable. And I said I'm not buying another car. I won't need one in New York.

Within a week of arriving in New York, you got cast in "Sex Signals," a semi-improvisational show about date rape by Catharsis Productions, and have been a working actor ever since. How did that happen?

Someone bought me my first "Backstage" magazine. I'd seen this audition notice. And I showed up. I could tell they were intrigued; people in New York are fascinated by people from Texas. I caught onto that real quick. In between my initial audition and my callback, I found a beat-up cowboy hat and I wore it to the callback later on that afternoon. And the co-director said, "I gotta tell you. I love that hat."



Immaculate conception. Her mother begged her to get a teaching certificate but Amber Kelly wanted to be an actress — and is stimulating minds anyway. She does a lot of her thinking in the bathtub. PHOTO BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

How does a "Sex Signals" performance work?

Date rape is so legalistic. People sit back and say that's not something I deal with. In the show, we play out scenarios that seem very realistic.

How do you get the scenarios to come out in an improvisational format?

We talk about dating and relationships and poking fun at gender stereotypes. We begin with what I like to call the adventure dating scene with two people meeting at a bar; he gives a pickup line, and I turn out to the audience and say "OK, he's kind of cute. What I shall I play? Smart or dumb?" And then it just sort of all snowballs until we have a fake improv scene that begins with the opening line, "I didn't really rape that girl." When it's all said and done, we ask the audience whether or not it was rape. Typically, about 20 percent of the audience thinks it was; 20 percent thinks it wasn't, and 60 percent don't know. Then we talk about what happened.

How did you end up living in Narragansett?

It was a very long trail. Because I tour a lot with the show I have excessive airline miles. Someplace I always wanted to go was Ireland. I swear this is getting back to Narragansett. So I took this hiking trip to Ireland a couple of years ago. Along the way I met someone else there who lived in New York. He looked me up

when we got back and we started hanging out. And he was from here. We started dating and living together in New York and visiting here. And one day I said, "Why don't we move here?" And a couple of weeks later I said, "Have you applied for a job yet?" And he thought I was kidding. So, the first job he applied for he got — with an architectural firm in Newport.

How do you go about selecting a play to produce?

I've got a pocket full of plays I'd like to do, especially after I saw that space (the old Narragansett Theater).

Being new to the area, how did you hook up with so many talented local people so quickly to produce "BASH"?

That was tricky. I held auditions on the worst weather evening of the year. I had New York actors who actually sent in video auditions. And a couple of people drove in on this horrible night from Connecticut and Massachusetts, and one of those people I cast, Jason Cabal, the young guy. Anna Smith I'd actually seen in the Bit Players, an improv comedy troupe in Newport. I started by being the crazy person that e-mails actors: "I'm new in town; I have to have strong actors. Are you or anyone you know interested?" Interestingly, I've got a lot of support for my theater because of that. People are so excited to hear about a company that is doing daring work

like that and they want to perform.

Who are your favorite contemporary playwrights?

Cindy Lou Johnson, who wrote "Brilliant Traces," and Irish playwright Martin McDonagh.

Have you ever had to confront the casting couch to be offered a part?

Of course I have. *(Laughs)* Look at me! Oddly it was for the play "Love, Sex and the IRS." The audition was in New York but it was for a dinner theater in, I think, Ohio. After the audition, the director wanted to go get a drink or something, but I had another audition to go to. So I go and this guy sits in a bar and calls and leaves a message about every 20 minutes. He did offer me the part but I turned it down.

Emmy, Tony or Academy Award: As an actor, which one would you prefer to win?

Are any of those awards made out of solid gold? I suppose the Academy Award would at least hit the street and get me some decent job offers.

If you could pick a leading man to play opposite you in a romantic comedy, who would it be?

You remember Max Headroom? He has good taste in music and a charming little stutter. I imagine he must also be quite the thinker. I imagine that would be a rather comedic romance.