

Pamela Stephenson rushes into the bar at the Millennium Hotel in Grosvenor Square, central London, semi-incognito in dark sunglasses, a black leather jacket and a low-slung baseball cap, then dumps her bag on the table and promptly sends my bowl of nuts and pretzels flying.

“Let’s just pretend that didn’t happen,” she says in her breezy mid-Atlantic tones, pulling up a chair to the faint sound of crunching and ordering Darjeeling tea from a waiter in a bowtie. “Sorry I’m late.” That trademark wide smile. “I got sidetracked in this dancewear shop in an alley behind Bond Street.”

Sequins and sparkles poke from a corner of her bag: embellishments for the costumes worn by the 16-strong cast of *Brazouka*, the spectacular Brazilian dance-drama show that Stephenson, a remarkably youthful 65, wrote and co-created two years ago, and which has dominated her life ever since. A smash hit at this year’s Edinburgh Festival, and now in Australia en route to a six-week season on the Gold Coast, *Brazouka* tells the story of celebrated lambazouk dancer Braz Dos Santos, who also performs and narrates.

Thirty-something Dos Santos learned to lambada as a teenager while working as a fisherman in Porto Seguro, a coastal city in the tropical north-east of Brazil, first by peering through cracks in the wall of a local bordello to watch this new exciting dance being performed. All swaying hips and chest-to-chest contact, lambada had incensed the Catholic Church, which tried to have it banned; Braz and his older brother, Didi, who was there spying with him, were hooked.

As lambada grew in popularity, sashaying through the streets, beaches and ramshackle bars of Porto Seguro, these dancing teenage brothers became ubiquitous. Effortless in their flip-flops, and with women queuing up to dance with them,

THE FULL BRAZILIAN

Pamela Stephenson didn't want the music to stop after a stint on a television dance show reignited her passion and inspired her new stage spectacular, *Brazouka*.

Story Jane Cornwell

they won small lambada competitions and money and food for their family. Eventually, despite the disapproval of their father, a priest in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion, they took the dance to Paris and the world, soundtracked by the catchy 1989 hit song, *Lambada*.

Now, thanks to Pamela Stephenson, and with the help of renowned British choreographer Arlene Phillips and Australian-born producer Harley Medcalf, of *Burn the Floor* fame, the story of Braz Dos Santos is being told in Australia.

“BULGING BICEPS, TAUT STOMACHS AND a whole [lot] of Brazilian booty,” wrote one Edinburgh reviewer of *Brazouka*, a show that features such Afro-Brazilian dances as samba and forro as well as lambazouk, a lambada danced to the high-energy rhythms of zouk music and including flowing moves developed by Braz and Didi.

“Lambazouk is this sensual, showy dance with all these dips and arching backs, with the girls’ hair flying around and a strong lead by the men,” says Stephenson, brushing a stray pretzel onto the floor. “As soon as people see it, they just want to do it. I did. Arlene did. People in Australia will. It’s addictive.”

Brazouka is another (colourful ostrich) feather

in Stephenson’s (other, metaphorical) cap. The talents and achievements of the New Zealand-born, New York-based Australian are manifold. Trying to sum up what Stephenson does can get complicated, and not just for interviewers. Indeed, as she writes in her 2012 memoir, *The Unvarnished Truth*: “How shall I portray myself? Wife, mother, psychologist, writer, comedian, actor, dancer, diver, gypsy, dreamer, rich girl, poor girl, beggar girl, thief ... ?”

Stephenson is known, of course, as the wife of Scottish comedian Billy Connolly, about whom she has written two bestselling biographies, *Billy* and *Bravemouth*, and with whom she has raised five children, two of them from Connolly’s first marriage. They have been married since 1989, and weathered personal upheavals on both sides; the secret to their longevity, she says, is tolerance. Her newfound passion for lambazouk is a case in point: “My poor husband would be asleep and these samba sounds would come wafting up and he’d come downstairs and find me dancing around with a Brazilian,” says Stephenson of Connolly, who ended up narrating *Brazouka* for part of its Edinburgh Festival run. “So it’s become a family thing.”

A wise move, perhaps, on the part of Stephenson, who is also a paid-up psychologist with a PhD in human sexuality; who in the late 2000s showcased her skills on the television show *Shrink Rap*, interviewing celebrities such as Salman Rushdie, late comedian Joan Rivers and Gene Simmons from rock band KISS using various psychotherapeutic techniques. “I was worried that because Joan was so funny she’d just joke her way through the interview, that it’d just be shtick. But she was very articulate about the painful stuff,” Stephenson says. “I loved her. A fabulous loss.”

Then there’s her acting work. A graduate of Sydney’s National Institute of Dramatic Art, Stephenson arrived in London in the mid-1970s, dabbling in political theatre and making her name on the BBC topical comedy show *Not the Nine O’Clock News*. Sexy, sassy, taking no prisoners, she variously ▶



flashed her bra in a spoof American Express ad and donned a body stocking to perform the song *England, My Leotard*, a hilarious parody of Kate Bush that featured Rowan Atkinson on deep bass vocals and boasted lines such as “*People bought my latest hits / because they like my latex tits.*”

I tell her that I thought her Bush-esque gyrating was brilliant and she bats my compliment away. “Oh, I wasn’t,” she says firmly, as if that is that. Stephenson was a dancer before she was anything else; the eldest of three daughters born to academic parents, she grew up in the suburbs of Sydney attending ballet classes and dancing on stage and television. At age 12 she was performing with the Festival Ballet Company in London, and had written and staged her own musical.

“I’ve been in dance audiences my whole life, even though I stopped dancing kind of early,” she says. “When I went on *Strictly* I found out that I knew more about dance than I thought I did.” We’re talking about *Strictly Come Dancing*, the phenomenally popular BBC show (and British forerunner of Australia’s *Dancing With the Stars*) on which Stephenson appeared in 2010, wowing judges with dances including a Viennese waltz and a nimble show dance performed in a skimpy sky-blue frock to (*I’ve Had*) *The Time of My Life*. The experience was as rewarding as it was demanding – after an eight-month commitment that included a live tour of Britain, Stephenson was on a roll. She didn’t want the dancing to stop.

FINDING A DANCE STYLE WITH HEART AND passion, a style that she loved enough to want to pursue on her own, proved problematic. “What is the life after *Strictly*?” Stephenson pauses, sighs. “I went to Argentina because I thought tango could be my thing, but I ended up feeling disappointed in the *milongas* [dance parties]. I felt they marginalised women by forcing them to sit around waiting for the men to ask them to dance, which really isn’t me.

“I tried salsa but, although I love the dance, I didn’t love the scene; if you’re not young and cute, then it’s easy to be overlooked. I had this terrible experience in New York” – where she and Connolly have lived since the 1990s – “where three different levels were being taught in the same room, and I couldn’t hear a thing.”

Then a British magazine, *Woman & Home*, commissioned her to go to Brazil and write an article on its dance styles. Stephenson fell for the vast South American country first: “I loved that you could walk onto the beach and see women of all shapes and sizes in these teeny bikinis, not giving a shit about cellulite or whatever,” says Stephenson, a plastic surgery enthusiast whose fear of ageing is one of the themes of her memoir.

In Porto Seguro, she met Braz Dos Santos and fell for lambazouk. “I realised this was something



Latin translation ... *Brazouka* writer/creator Pamela Stephenson with dancers Braz Dos Santos, from Brazil, and Argentinian Romina Hidalgo.

fresh, which we hadn’t really seen in the West. It’s the same old dances [in dance shows] on TV, over and over again.” Stephenson held a lambazouk workshop in London that was attended by Arlene Phillips, a one-time *Strictly* judge. “Arlene just looked at me and said, ‘I have been dancing my entire life and I have never seen anything like this.’”

This was all the encouragement Stephenson needed. Fascinated by the against-all-odds story of a poor Brazilian fisherman turned feted international dance star, she began writing and creating a show

that would capture the fire and *va va voom* of Brazil’s top dancers – giving audiences at the 2012 Brisbane Writers Festival a glimpse of what to expect when she danced lambazouk with Braz Dos Santos at Fortitude Valley’s Judith Wright Centre, in between promoting her memoir.

“I adore Queensland,” says Stephenson with a sigh. “The diving ...” Not just any old diving. A self-confessed adrenalin junkie, Stephenson has explored ocean floors across the world, frolicking down in the deep with turtles and whale sharks and, occasionally, comedians – an activity she has since vowed to stop: “They tend to make you drop your regulator out of your mouth laughing,” she says. “One of my earliest dive buddies was Robin Williams, God rest his soul. I remember being in Fiji and we saw a shark; he hid behind me and edged backwards toward this coral outcrop.

“My husband is the worst. He’s learned how to position himself in the water as if he’s lying on a couch and looking up like this.” She does a poker-faced impression, leaning sideways and placing a hand under her head. “It’s weird and brilliant. He just floats like that and watches other divers who go by, trying not to laugh.”

Interview over, and with a final “Just tell everyone that *Brazouka* is a great night out with fabulous dancing and a moving story”, we stand to leave. Another cascade of nuts and pretzels hits the floor, which is already covered in them.

Stephenson flashes a grin. “Ah well,” she says. “Another trail of destruction.” ●

Brazouka, Jupiters Theatre, Gold Coast, Dec 4-Jan 18.
brazouka.info/index.html ticketek.com.au or ph 132 849.

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