



On a Role

Ashlie Atkinson's done them all: TV, movies, Broadway, roller derby, wife, YouTube

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
June 9, 2015

BROOKLYN - Ashlie Atkinson slinks through a giant Valentine in a shiny bubble-gum gown, gloves to her elbows and pink feathered fan fluttering. Men in tuxedos spin and grovel, lift her up, parade her down pink stairs. Then she bounces on a diner counter, running her fingers up the straw of a frothy milkshake. She swirls a fingertip in whipped cream and licks it suggestively. "Every Dairy Queen/needs a Burger King/these curves deserve the finer things/not a prom necklace and diamond rings/I want curly fries and onion rings," she lip-syncs as Chunky Pam, circa MTV 2006, now preserved not just in the hearts and minds of millennials, but on YouTube.

The Little Rock-born, Brooklyn-dwelling Atkinson is recounting her role in the rap-comedy video "Pampered" from a cozy booth at South. It's one of her most

frequented watering holes, and though someone has played three Lynyrd Skynyrd songs in an hour, it's named, not for the South, but for South Park Slope. The exposed brick, video games and well-stocked bar read more trendy pub than Southern dive.

Atkinson, 37, may be better known as Chunky Pam, but to the Gotham City Roller Derby, she's "Margaret Thrasher." And if you're living in New Zealand, you probably know her as the straight-talking, hard-living "Nessa," best friend to Alexis Bledel's "Stacey" in *Us & Them*, a remake of a British sitcom. She also logs screen time in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Law & Order*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Eat Pray Love*, among other projects.

But to those who know her best, she's the girl who started reading before kindergarten and never stopped; the teenager with a newly minted license and no sense of direction, who had to drive home and start over in between errands; the high school revolutionary, savvy enough to protest the dress code with a three-month, self-imposed uniform but naive enough to take down the local punk scene in an unintentional expose.

She's a sloppy housemate (in college, other housemates put her dirty dishes in her bed, and she didn't notice), a fantastic neighbor ("It's like *Seinfeld* everyday," says the girl-across-the-hall, Jessica Whalen), and the inspiration for the Soophie Nun Squad song, "You Purple-Eyed Beeyotch, You Broke My Heart." She's the one who "always has your back and cares about everyone's well-being, and that everyone is taken seriously and given a voice," says her friend and colleague, Jennifer Laine Williams.

Chatting with Atkinson is like being in a hyper-charged undergraduate seminar, where every student is precocious and brilliant. Except that Atkinson, all by herself, is every student. She's eager and focused, wry but not jaded. She drops references to Edward Said alongside Salt-N-Pepa and embraces all topics unabashedly.

On being called a "baby killer" as a Pulaski Academy fifth-grader, because she argued for presidential candidate Michael Dukakis in the school debate: "My father was a physician and my mom was a nurse. They encouraged me to fight with facts."

On scripts that incorporate "unexamined racism and misogyny" - Nope. "There's a reason we roast the CEO."

On "the privileged class and underclass dichotomy," or more explicitly, "this intersectionality of experiencing the world as someone who is white but female and fat, and who was raised financially privileged but certainly doesn't have money now, and as an artist, but as a white artist whose voice gets amplified more easily than women of color?" Atkinson is still processing.

On her home state?

THIS PLACE MATTERS

"My friend works preserving beautiful places downtown. ... She was presenting some award, a big frame in the shape of Arkansas and it said, 'this place matters.' And I was like, 'Damn right, it does.'"

Arkansas gave Atkinson something to push against, in the form of roughly 70 Pulaski Academy classmates, nearly all of them white, Reagan-era Republicans. As a teenager, it gave her six weeks of fresh ideas and kindred spirits, in the form of Arkansas Governor's School. It gave her community theater as a child and Hendrix College as a young adult. When Atkinson left Arkansas for the first time, she was 18 and, as an Arkansas Times intern, had just written an article that would effectively alert police to the fact that teenagers had been throwing non-permitted rock shows using city electricity at the then-desolate River Market pavilion. ("This past year, I spoke to some people I hadn't spoken to since that happened," she says.)

She was freshly sprung from Pulaski Academy's "Forever Club" - kids who completed K-12 there - and she was eager to trade the proverbial fishbowl for New York's Barnard College, where she double-majored in political science and religion, became music editor of the paper and played an alto sax named Lulu in a ska band with her

boyfriend. ("So very mid-'90s of me," she says.) Then the boyfriend and the band ended, winter set in, and Atkinson stopped going to class.

"I didn't go outside for weeks. I would go down and check my messages, and I would write reviews of CDs ... but I crashed and burned emotionally," she says. Three semesters in, she came home, got a job at Olive Garden and nine months later, transferred to Hendrix as an English major.

Eventually her friend Heidi Richey convinced Atkinson to switch to theater. "I thought being an actor was shallow and self-serving, which kind of sucked because it was all I really wanted to do," she says. She discussed the change with her parents. "They were like, 'OK, fine, this is your second college. Will you just graduate, please?'"

THE NEW, NEW YORK

After Hendrix, Atkinson, then 24, moved back to New York for a two-year conservatory program at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theater. She had been there just over a week when she woke one morning, stepped on her stoop and did a double take. Dozens of ash-covered people walked up her street, some crying and others dazed as zombies. Many women carried high-heeled shoes. When she spoke to her mother, Beth Atkinson, by pay phone hours later, her mom burst into tears and asked her to come home.

But Atkinson stayed and, two days later, on Sept. 13, 2001, started classes. She recalls the neighborhood Pakistani grocer being harassed daily and, for the next six months, having to show proof of residency to walk down her own Lower East Side street.

"After the immediate concerns of safety, what I remember most was the feeling that we were no longer free to say whatever we wanted," she says. "We felt locked down, even emotionally and verbally locked down. It's hard to feel completely free when there are men with huge guns standing on your block."

WORKING GIRL

Atkinson's first big role was *Fat Pig*, which premiered off-Broadway in 2004 and won an Outer Critics Circle Award in 2005. She played Helen, the title character and love interest of Jeremy Piven's character, alongside Andrew McCarthy and Keri Russell. The performance landed her an agent and critical praise.

"I was wearing a fat suit, which was kind of great, because it inured me to the more painful aspect of things. It wasn't all my body so I was able to be political about it, without having to deal too intimately with the fact," Atkinson says.

It was the first of several roles that would be partially defined by her physique. She played another plus-sized love interest in half a dozen episodes of the television series *Rescue Me*, before being cast as Chunky Pam.

"What drew me to Chunky Pam was the fact that she acknowledged exactly what she looks like, and she thinks that is the ultimate in sex," Atkinson says. "It was revolutionary to me, because I'd been playing romantic characters ... but it's all about them liking me despite the size I am. So to go from that to Pam was really awesome and liberating."

Most of Atkinson's roles have had nothing to do with her body type. In 2006, she was in Spike Lee's *Inside Man* - her first big-budget film. The next year, she had a prominent role in the Broadway revival of *The Ritz*. Atkinson played Vivian, the wife of the lead, and she was hired to replace a fired actor roughly 48 hours before the show opened. The rest of the cast had been rehearsing for months. Atkinson learned her lines overnight.

"The most amazing thing about being on Broadway, you're working with an exceptional level of talent that is financially and technically so backed. I was used to of-

off-Broadway stuff, where, if my character needed something, I would probably bring it from home," she says.

Opening night, Atkinson panicked, realizing she had forgotten to let the prop department know she needed a handkerchief. But there, in the left pocket of her costume, was a hankie. She realized someone had paid attention during her single rehearsal, noting both the need and her left-handedness. "As soon as I felt it, I was like, oooh," she says breathily. "Like, this is big-time."

WHITE (WATER) WEDDING

Atkinson has roles in three feature films currently in post-production. In *The Blood Stripe* she plays Barb, who struggles with her best friend's (an injured veteran) adjustment to civilian life. She plays Deartra Sato in *The Lennon Report*, the nurse who managed the emergency room at Roosevelt Hospital the night John Lennon was killed, and she plays a teacher in the forthcoming Steven Spielberg film *Bridge of Spies*.

But in May, Atkinson was cast in her most important and enduring role to date - wife of Leon Chase, a painter, singer and stage technician, formerly of Michigan and now of Brooklyn.

"Ashlie never really wanted to get married. It just didn't interest her. ... When they decided to get married, that took us by surprise," says her older brother, Aaron Capel. "Then we asked where, and they said in a bar, and that didn't surprise me at all."

Their sister, Leah Capel, drove their mother past White Water Tavern. Then she called Atkinson and said, "Mom wants to know if you want a day or a night wedding?"

"That depends," Atkinson deadpanned. "Is she afraid of people getting mugged, or is she afraid of people actually seeing the structure?"

An hour after she and Leon exchanged vows ("You are the smartest, funniest, most talented ... woman I know," Leon said), on the same stage that has hosted blues legends, local hip-hop and countless garage and punk acts, Leon's sister, Sarah Jane Chase, delivered a toast.

"The first thing he told me about Ashlie Atkinson is that she loves Ramona Quimby. Day two, I get a message, 'P.S. She loves Nancy Drew.' And then he sends me a video of Chunky Pam," Sarah Jane says, pausing while the bar erupts in cheers. "Not only am I like, this wonderful lady is your girlfriend - can she please be my best friend?"

It seems to be a familiar sentiment.

"It never felt like we met officially, we just kind of belonged to each other. Kind of like you don't meet your sibling," says Atkinson's bridesmaid and Playhouse classmate Emma Gordon.

A SCENE

EXT. Little Rock, midspring. The sky fades from bruise-blue to black over a rickety shack that contains some of the city's most mythic and salacious stories.

INT. Fairy lights bounce warm against wood. One kid breakdances onstage and another swings off an inexplicable, sticker-covered pole. The upstairs billiard tables are laden with every type of pie imaginable. In the women's restroom, the tap perpetually runs hot. A photographer - a personal friend, flown in from New York - cases the joint, baby strapped to her chest. Eventually there will be vintage hip-hop, '80s pop tunes and enthusiastic line dancing, but here, in the calm before, Leon Chase stands at the bar with his father, watching Atkinson float from group to group.

FLASHBACK TO an hour earlier, as everyone eats barbecue under a white tent in a muddy parking lot.

Crys Duncan, a friend from Brooklyn: "Leon's face has been my absolute favorite part. I've never seen somebody look so happy."

CUT TO Atkinson as Nessa, in 2013's *Us & Them*: "It's pretty ballsy. ... You will have some residual pain, a few sweaty moments, and it'll end in smiles."

FADE TO PINK.