



## INTERVIEW

by Katie Hind

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**T**HE heels are a tottering five inches high. There's a swaying cavalcade of turquoise feathers attached to her rear and a costume so tight it would make a mermaid blush.

It's remarkable enough that Samantha Flores has been appointed 2018's Queen of the Rio Carnival, the first non-Brazilian to lead the thousands of dancers through the streets to the famous Sambadrome, the parade area.

It's even stranger still given that the woman gyrating for a 90,000-strong crowd last week is – as she puts it herself – 'a nice Jewish girl' from North London, who only stumbled her way into samba dancing after a holiday with friends.

Then again Samantha, 37, probably knows a thing or two about revealing outfits because, as she laughingly admits, she was once the publicity guru for lads' mag favourite Abi Titmuss.

Indeed, her journey from upmarket Highgate to the Rio Carnival – which reaches a deafening climax this weekend – has taken more than a few unlikely twists and turns.

Born Samantha Mortner, her childhood was 'all very middle class', a life of horse riding, Brownies, family trips to the synagogue, and a private education at the £20,000-a-year King Alfred School in Golders Green.

She went on to study at the London College of Fashion before embarking on a career in public relations, representing stars such as Peter Kay, Catherine Tate and Ms Titmuss, the former girlfriend of disgraced TV presenter John Leslie. With Samantha's help, Ms Titmuss went from winsome NHS nurse to millionaire pin-up.

'My years of working with Abi were crazy,' Samantha acknowledges. 'It was a world of showbiz parties, photoshoots and skimpy outfits, though back then it was her wearing them, not me.'

**S**AMANTHA would spend hours chaperoning the blonde star to TV shows, industry events and those notorious photoshoots. All rather different from the Highgate Brownies.

Today, as things have turned out, Ms Titmuss – now known as Abigail Evelyn – keeps her clothes on as a television actress in America, while it is Samantha who draws the admiring glances of the crowds.

Her life changed for ever when, in 2006, she went travelling in South America with two female friends – and decided to stay. Samantha found work and a Brazilian hus-

band (for a short while, at least), studied Portuguese and, in her spare time, learned samba.

'It's tricky. You've got your feet going one way, your hips going another, your arms going yet another way, and then your hair has to go the right way too,' she explains. 'It's hard to get the hang of it.'

Quite aside from the tricky steps – the samba routinely humiliates contestants on Strictly – it took

Samantha six months to acquire the necessary physique for success in body-conscious Brazil.

'I might have lived here for 11 years but that doesn't mean I have been given one of their famous posteriors, so I have to work for mine,' she confides.

'It takes a lot of effort... I have to do the best with what I've got. There are some incredible bottoms over here. At the Carnival, I have

pert-posterior envy. So I have to do squats – it probably took about a million to get there.

'But nothing is going to stop me looking my best. Then there are the two hours a day of boxing exercise on Copacabana beach. In the afternoon I go to the gym, where I do weights. It sounds hideous but if you saw the bottoms I see, then you'd understand my motivation.'

Even the costume sounds exhaust-

**CROWNING MOMENT:** Samantha Flores leads the Carnival last week, left. The 37-year-old, above, has lived in Brazil since 2006. Far left: Pictured aged three in North London

ing. 'Mine is made of 600 feathers and they can be dyed to the colour we need,' Samantha continues.

'The feathers can be used again and again. The rest of the costume is made by my samba school. They've used 12,000 crystals, applied one by one. It took a month's worth of man hours to make.'

'And then comes the really tricky bit, which is me putting it on. I have to be so careful not to put my foot through the gusset that I have two people helping me. They're like, "Hands off, you'll break it!"'

Samantha explains that she was chosen as lead dancer through Imperio da Tijuca, one of many samba schools in Rio. 'Part of what is important to them is your dedication. I make sure I attend the practice sessions, the street rehearsals and the technical rehearsals for the Carnival. This year, they wanted me to be the muse for the very first float that leads the parade – the lead dancer of the Carnival.'

'I had goosebumps. I kept thinking, "What on earth is going on

# From Girl Guide to Saucy Samba Queen

## How did a nice North London girl get to be Rio's new carnival star? Answer: with help from a lad's mag pin-up, 12,000 crystals and a LOT of work for a Brazilian booty

*'I want to cry with joy when the drums and music start up'*

here? Eleven years ago I was freezing cold in London, accompanying Abi Titmuss to parties.'

'When the parade fireworks go off, the drum section starts playing and your song begins, I just want to burst into tears of joy. Obviously not though – it would ruin my make-up and that takes ages!'

In an age where even P1 grid girls have been banned is all this nakedness just a little exploitative? Samantha responds with laughter. 'There are just as many naked men as there are women at the Carnival and the men wear tiny things – you should see those,' she says.

'They are being objectified just as much as women, if you choose to look at it like that.'

'The Carnival is a celebration of the body, all shapes and sizes. You have fat men, skinny men, short women, fat women.'

With her Brazilian body and coffee-coloured tan, it is only, she says, when she opens her mouth that she is rumbled as a native of London not Rio.

'Lots of people have asked to have their picture taken with me, though I think they were disappointed when I spoke,' she says a little ruefully. 'It is clear that I'm not Brazilian. They looked shocked and tried to speak to me in pidgin English. I still have work to do.'