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Amber dextrous

Actress whips her altered egos back into shape

By MICHAELA BANCUD

Amber Martin darts around her house like a highly caffeinated debutante, wiping counters and careening through her kitchen.

When she answered her door seconds before, it looked as though she'd forgotten about the interview. Since then, she's been apologizing, offering coffee and plumping pillows like a madcap Southern belle.

One quickly discovers that the 5-foot-7 actress is like all your favorite wacky chicks -- Tracy Ullman, Carol Burnett, Cameron Diaz -- all rolled into one.

Martin is notorious for her work with the performance and comedy troupe that she co-founded in 1999 in which she sings, dances and acts with astonishing ecstasy. Or is it agony?

Martin is bringing back her solo show, "Hi!," for a three-week run at Conduit Dance Studio. The show, which she wrote and produced, won a Drammy Award last year in the best solo performance category.

Now Martin is testing the waters beyond Portland. She just returned from New York City, where she had a one-night slot at the Bowery Poetry Club. A West Coast tour will follow the close of her current two-week Portland run.

Martin's show, which runs just under an hour, is a trip through nine loopy and blasted lives. "It's the same characters with altered transitions," she explains, curled up on the floor and tangling with her cat, Bebe Mew. "The pointe-shoes dance number was cut, sadly. But the transitions are as important as ever. Each change takes you into these different little worlds, I like to think."

The naturally curly-haired Martin lives in North Portland with her partner and fellow performer, Andrew Hodgdon, and Hodgdon's 11-year-old daughter. She's been here since moving from California in 1995.

The one-time flight attendant for Horizon Air was hubbed in Portland for a while and entertained passengers with her in-flight removable-seat-cushion demonstrations.

Her use of expressions such as "Goodness" and "Bless them" are relics of her Southeast Texas upbringing. It's this hardscrabble region that inspires her characters, too, including the Bible-thumping evangelist Tammy Cross and scat singer Leeba Zewiwick from the land of Severia.

"Leeba plays a driftwood bass and hung out with Sergio Mendes in earlier days," Martin explains. "Once in a while she gets back to her roots with a show for the little people."

There's also Dottie Write, a jazz singer and musician loosely based on Martin's mother -- "if she'd taken psychedelic drugs in the '60s, that is," Martin explains.

Martin's been onstage since she was a child, encouraged by her mom to get into kiddie showbiz and beauty pageants. Cheryl Martin still hasn't seen her grown-up daughter's dramatics, though.

"She's very sweet and supportive of me as a person, but she doesn't like what I'm doing," Martin explains. "She thinks I'm selling myself short. That I look like a clown. She wants me to be like Celine Dion. She asks, 'Why do you do that? You're so pretty. You could be up there and not make all those faces.' Little does she know it's not all comedy."

Indeed. Martin's characters are presented with equal parts darkness and light. Some seem to be rocking in the embrace of the Almighty; others teeter on the brink of ecstasy. All seek salvation in their own way.

Martin, though a cheerleader and Daddy's girl in high school, was always tuned inward: "There was a world of church for me, but I always had a little thing for little pagan thoughts, little witchy things.

"I love going back home. In my eyes I have a video camera, and I'm just sucking it up: There's all those old Creole people, old black people and old white people.

"Half my upbringing was Baptist, and it's very conservative. They don't even clap in church or show any movement. The other part of my family was Pentecostal. I went to a 150-year-old tabernacle church in the middle of the ghetto of Beaumont, Texas. It's all white people. It's wild, with people talking in tongues and laying on hands." Her roots there run deep -- Martin's relatives founded the church.

Martin's future in Portland, despite a few shows, is uncertain.

"I'm currently faced with this: I'm 33, and I love Portland, and I'm secure here," she says. "I have so many very special friends here. And it took a long time to get to this place. Knowing that makes it hard to imagine moving and starting over. But I'd love to stay and make a living off my art."

Meanwhile, she has neither manager nor agent, which means that she'll continue waiting tables at Wild Abandon for the foreseeable future.

Martin's two-week run is sponsored by Conduit and Wieden & Kennedy. Martin (and the performance group whose name we can't print) last appeared in the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's Time Based Art festival on the cabaret stage in front of approximately 600 people. The show was originally set to play to audiences of 100.

Despite the attention Martin has received, she hasn't auditioned for any plays beyond the work she does with her current collaborators. "It's always been more exciting for me to create my own characters," she says. Still, it would be fascinating to see her talents in the hands of a good director.

"I believe in the choreography of theater, the importance of placement," Martin says of her show. "These are nine different people with nine different backgrounds. Most sing, and most are common people, a bit washed up. Each have their own personal oblivion. Some are superstars, and some are backwoods country folk."

In the end, Martin says, "people are usually surprised there are so many people in my skinny little ass."

