

ROCHELLE: Hello, and welcome to the Invisible Cabaret Podcast! I'm Ferrero Rochelle.

ROS: And I'm Rosie Verbose.

ROCH: And together we run Invisible Cabaret, a performing arts troupe dedicated to opening up the conversation surrounding mental health.

ROS: Join us as we talk to some of the most bodacious burlesque babes, cabaret creatives and inspiring artists about how their creativity and mental health intertwine. Let's pull back the curtain and strip away stigma!

ROCH: Please note we at Invisible Cabaret are not mental health professionals. If you're affected by any of the issues raised in this program, we've made a list of resources for you on our website: www.invisiblecabaret.org/podcast/resources.

ROS: Hello, hello, yes, welcome to the Invisible Cabaret Podcast. Now if you know us here at Invisible Cabaret, we love a sexy brain, and our guest today definitely has that covered. Not only is she an absolutely stunning burlesque performer and model, Miss Burlesque Perth 2017 and 2019, and a co-producer of queer femme troupe Burlezque, she's also doing a PhD in clinical neuropsychology in her spare time. Joining us all the way from Down Under, please welcome the glorious Sammy Sparkles!

SAMMY: Hello! Such an honour. What an intro. That was amazing.

ROS: How are you, how is life in PhD land and how is life in Australia?

SAMMY: So I'll start with the PhD first, so yeah, as you both well know, it's been a bit of a whirlwind, starting a PhD. But I love it, I absolutely love it. So I quit my job to do this and I've got support from my very wonderful partner so it's nice to just put everything into one aspect for a while for sure.

ROS: For sure. And has this been a long-time ambition for you, Sammy?

SAMMY: Yes and no. So not necessarily the PhD, I wasn't intending on doing it so quickly. The only way that you can do clinical neuropsychology in Perth or a Masters of it, is to do a joint PhD and Masters together because why not, you know? Which makes no sense.

ROCH: They just don't think it's hard enough to do one, you know, by itself?

SAMMY: Exactly, exactly. It's a purely fiscal decision from the university, but, so I just missed out by the masters by one, which is actually, like, the best thing that could have ever happened because now I get a whole year to just kind of, like, chill out. I use, like, the...

ROCH: Air quotes.

SAMMY: Yeah, around that: "just chill out and do a PhD." So I should get into the Masters next year and then I'll be doing a Masters and a PhD.

ROS: Together? At the same time?

SAMMY: Well, you kind of do them like, concurrently. It's, like, the only way to do clin-neuro-psych, because it's such a rare degree, and how they structure in Australia. There's only like three universities in Australia that offer it.

ROCH: What is it that drew you to it?

SAMMY: So my partner is a psychiatrist, and so we have a shared love of kind of mental health and helping people with mental health conditions. And when I was kind of doing psych, I loved psychology, but I was also potentially looking at maybe doing psychiatry and going into the medicine pathway to do psychiatry, primarily because I'm very passionate about inequality and I think when you're in a "position of power," again with air quotes, doctors have a lot of power and I think you have a lot more chance to do a lot of advocacy work. I've just come from the homeless sector so I'm super passionate about it. And I tried for medicine for a couple years, and it's a really difficult pathway and I think I was a bit worried about the load, like, from, you know, physical health, mental health, kind of just general, like, living perspective, so was kind of going clinical psych way, and I was like, oh, I don't really know. I don't really want to just be doing, you know, talk therapies all day. And then found neuropsych, and neuropsych for me is that best blend of, you know, the biomedical model, but also kind of the humanities model, with some cool things in the middle. So it's kind of like the lovechild of psychiatry and psychology for me. But then also I really like the hard sciences and I love, you know, coding and data and statistics, so it opens up that avenue.

ROS: That's the bit I could never get on board with that, so rather you than me.

ROCH: Right, yeah, cracking out that sexy brain! Crikey.

SAMMY: You know why I love it? I never used to love it back when I was in high school because I went to a performing arts school, right? So like, dancing, whatever, and I used to fight with my math teacher about, like, 'I'll never use this,' and bitch, was I wrong! And what, the thing I love about it is there's only one answer, like, once you have the answer, that's it, you, you're good, you know? Like when you do an essay and you're talking about, like, your opinion, you know, people can mark it differently or whatever, but like, when it's math, it's like, it's 'b,' like, there's only one answer. So when you're, like, quite, like, perfectionistic, it's, like, well, I can win.

ROCH: Yes, but as a fellow perfectionist, that's where I always came unstuck with maths and science, because if I was wrong, there was no two ways about it, I was wrong. And so then I couldn't deal with that very well. Whereas like, a creative field, you're like, 'oh, but I can never be wrong!'

SAMMY: That's true.

ROCH: Because that's just my opinion. I think it's pretty cool that you're able to have quite a creative brain and have gone to performing arts school and then also have this other side of, like, 'yeah, I love coding.' That's so cool.

SAMMY: I'm a walking paradox, and that's not always a good thing, because I have this, like, part of me that is, like, really ambitious and wants to do all these things and, like, give back to the community, and in order to give back, you kind of have to create, and like, you know, have money and things like that. And you know, I want material things so I can give back, but then I have this part of me that's like, yeah but what about sparkly bras? And like, go on a stage and stuff, and like, money.

ROS: Oh, preach.

SAMMY: You know what I mean? But you don't make money, like, because you spend it on, like, we're on chat right now so they can see all of my sparkly costumes in the background.

ROS: We've already talked about the princess dresses going on there.

ROCH: Absolutely.

SAMMY: I have a problem, which I think I'm not the only one on this chat right now.

ROS: No, no. Essentially, the burlesque community is just a big sort of helpline for people who've got a sequin addiction, I think for the most part, isn't it, yeah.

SAMMY: Yeah, I'm addicted to rhinestones. You know, what I have, like, a funny feeling of, do you know when you see like those, like, book stores. I don't know if you have this in the UK, but you have, like, those random book stores that, like, open up and then they have all these, like, you know, human body and blah blah, and they have these, like, craft books and they're for, like, people who want to rhinestone, and they've got, like, a pattern and then they can rhinestone them. I'm like, who are these people? I have work for them! Who are the people that buy this product?

ROS: Just have your contact details at the back, be like, "for the next step of your training..."

SAMMY: You want a better task than this? You could, you know, you have to pay money for this but you could do it for free!

ROS: Right.

SAMMY: If you're one of those people, call me.

ROS: It's my favourite part. I love to rhinestone stuff. It's one of my absolute favourite things now, and I've only discovered it through doing Invisible Cabaret, and all of a sudden, I'm just like, what in my house can I make sparkly, and can I do it now? I nearly did my coffee machine. I

was really close, really close to rhinestoning my coffee machine. To be honest, I've not decided I won't yet.

ROCH: You should do it. Please do.

ROS: Makes it difficult to clean, but who needs a clean –

ROCH: I mean, sparkly is also a synonym for clean, sometimes.

ROS: See, there's that essay mentality coming in, like, 'I can't be wrong'!

SAMMY: Yeah, exactly, I see that, yeah, that's good, yeah.

ROS: So the idea is to be a psychologist, is it? So working with patients, is that the end goal?

SAMMY: Yeah, so as a clinical neuropsychologist, it gives me a lot more kind of access to what I want to do, so on a day-to-day basis, I could be doing, maybe, some type of psychotherapy for somebody with trauma, which is something that I want to do. I'd love to like, work out of a shelter and do psychotherapy for people with trauma. But then also, like, clinical neuro-assessments, so, say somebody has ADHD and they perhaps need some type of assessment to do that. So that's a huge area, particularly in Perth. Or autism, ADHD, dementia, so anything involving the brain. So effectively I'll be a "brain expert," again, air quotes, because-

ROCH: What is 'expert'? Sure.

SAMMY: And then on another day, I could be working out of a hospital, maybe doing assessments. Somebody's come into ED, they've hit their head. So I won't be a doctor, but I'll be consulting on a case with doctors.

ROS: Got you, got you. Where did the passion for mental health start for you, Sammy? Because obviously this is clearly a long-term passion.

SAMMY: Yeah, I am kind of one of those people where I want to understand why. I have a real curiosity for the world, which I think is a really good kind of thing that you need when you love science, right? You want to know why things work the way they do. And I find humans are so fascinating, you know? Like, look at group dynamics, look at, you know, group cultures and group mentalities and, you know, even like, the psychology of burlesque and the community. You know, like people, you know, have to work their way up the hierarchy and they have to do a certain amount and that type of stuff. It fascinates me and, you know, there's positives to burlesque communities, not just - you know, I used a negative example there.

ROS: Sure, I get you.

SAMMY: So that really fascinates me. I also think I have a huge desire to kind of leave the world “better” than I found it, again in air quotes, because you know, how do we do that, right? I feel like there's potential there. Also, you know, I have some personal experience. I've had previous partners, my mother, you know, other people around me that I've known and love, and I have my own kind of struggles, but I don't have any kind of diagnostic stuff. But, you know, everybody has mental health, right? It's not something that you have or don't have. Mental illness and mental health are two very different things, which is something that not many people know, which is why I want to do psychology so I can be like, ‘hey, this is a thing.’

ROS: Yes.

ROCH: Have you ever combined your two passions in, for example, in the way that we do, you know, talking about mental health through burlesque?

SAMMY: Yes, so I have to be very careful about the two, because I can't, so you won't find my real name anywhere on the Interwebs because, you know, like, God forbid I take my clothes off for a living, like, I can't be a reputable person. My god, like, oh no... So I have to be quite careful, but yes, I do in some really wonderful ways. So, for example, I was asked to teach with one of the, kind of, key burlesque courses in Perth which is called Sugar Blue Burlesque. And so I did a six week course and I really pulled into my, like, psychology into the class a lot and I really tried to, you know, set really clear boundaries at the beginning about what people want. You know, have goals for people, work out what they want. And a lot of that stuff, as you both know, it gets really personal. You know, some people are escaping, you know, domestic violence relationships and they've finally gotten divorced and this is the only time in a week that they can have for themselves. Like, that is some powerful stuff, right? Like, you have 60 minutes of time with someone, like, I'm getting goosebumps, like, to do a dance class, but for them, it's so much more than that. And so effectively, you know, as many of us know that creativity is an outlet and so I really tried to implement tools and strategies for whoever it was, and then right before, because at the end of the six weeks, they do a performance, so we go and it gets videoed and photoed. It's a huge thing, it's really exciting. And so at the last one, I did a 20 minute talk about anxiety and anxiety management around performing. It's something that, I really want to put it to my Youtube channel, I just haven't had the time. But it breaks down, actually, the science of, you know, why we get anxious and also how to cope and strategies based on science and how to kind of utilize them, and every single person came up to me and was like, ‘I've used this technique and I've used this technique and that talk helped me so much,’ and I had so much feedback from people saying that they really felt the psychological influences, which was really lovely, like, to, that was really special.

ROS: Oh, man! That must have been such a rush to know that you hit the nail on the head so well there.

SAMMY: Yeah, I don't even think it's, like, ‘hit the nail on the head’ because there's no right or wrong, right? Like, how I like to work is it's just kind of like the net effect. It's like, I'm going to throw a bunch of tools and techniques to you and you do what works best for you. I'm going to

explain why it does that, you know, why, what's going on in your fight or flight response, what's going on in your frontal cortex. For me, personally, I find understanding that helps me, it kind of helps me be, like, 'well, it's not my fault, you know, it's my brain,' you know? Like, it gives you a sense of control or, I guess a sense of like, being able to let go and say, well this is actually a really common thing.

ROCH: There's something so satisfying about like, the idea of sexy science and like, adding that extra layer in like, yeah, I just can't - I can't picture it because I'm not a particularly science-minded person but I think, yeah, having a little Q and A afterwards that actually breaks everything down must be so satisfying.

ROS: And to give them tools ahead of time as well.

SAMMY: It's funny, like, none of my routines are very sciencey. Like, it's very much an escapism from that or whatever I feel like doing, right? Like if you look at, like, my range of performances, it's so random. There's like, no - the only commonality is, I guess, like, my dance background.

ROS: Escapism seems to be quite a common thread through all this for your creativity and how it benefits your mental health, but is dance, obviously, part and parcel of that?

SAMMY: Yeah, definitely. I think it was just what I know, it was something that I kind of was drawn towards as a child. I didn't start ballet at like, the age of three, which I will never forgive my parents for. I'm so salty about that! So I started dancing around 11, and it was just, I loved it and went to performing arts school. It was such a dodgy school, but it was performing arts, so I had that, so like, when home life was not good and home wasn't really a super safe place growing up, you know, I had dance and I had school. And for some people, it's the opposite, you know, but for me, it was like my safety net. And you know, all the parents at the dance things, you know, were my parents um stuff. So I don't think you can ever, like, spell out how important having outlets and having these things are for everyone, you know. For me, it's dance and coding, and you know, sewing and whatever, but for other people it's, you know, bush walking or horse riding or whatever. They're necessary, you know, sometimes they're lifelines, they're literal lifelines for people sometimes. And so, I just think it's so - I'm just so grateful, I think, that I had that.

ROCH: I feel like this, in most of our other interviews, this would be an opportunity for us to go, "has it been a lifeline for you during lockdown?" but as someone in Australia, you don't seem to have been as affected. In fact, you've been winning awards and nominated for things and taking part in fringe festivals.

ROS: How's it been over there?

SAMMY: Like, I feel so guilty, and that's, I think, that's a huge emotion of 2020 for us all, like, the guilt, right? Like, the heaviness of seeing the world literally fall apart. But especially, I don't want to speak on behalf of Australia, but we got it so easy. It's amazing. I felt so guilty. I do my

own costumes and I'm part of this, like, corset makers group on Facebook and I love it. And I finished my corset for my show in January and posted it, and being like, 'oh, my show's opening in a couple days,' and some of the responses, I felt so bad because they were like, 'oh, you can have a show?' And I was like, 'oh my goodness,' and like, wrote this big post being like, 'yes, you know, sending love,' and I was just like, 'Oh, read the room, Sam!'

ROS: Tell us about what you've been doing on stage in the last while. Give us all the juicy details, let us live vicariously through you for a moment.

ROCH: Give us a taste!

SAMMY: Okay, so as a co-producer at Fringe, so January/February is the biggest time of the year in Perth, so we have the Fringe Festival and it's huge. So Burlezque and I will spend the whole year preparing and developing our show. So our last show was called 'Pillow Talk,' and it was basically sex, sexuality and gender through a queer lens. It was a really special show. It was really intimate, it was very personal. All of our acts went to a really deep, beautiful place. I mean, some acts are really dark, as they should be, you know. That's one aspect. My particular routine was, so we all co-produce, so there's seven of us, we all co-produce and we all perform in the show, and we usually have, like, an opening and closing. We've got, like, the world's best emcee, she's so amazing. She does a lot of sexual education, queer education, so she just has these amazing monologues that, honestly, I was telling people to just come to my show just because, I don't even care about like, the money or tickets, it's like, you need to hear these monologues and see these acts because they will change you profoundly, especially if you're queer. And literally, that was the response. So many people came to us after the show like, crying and it was phenomenal. So my act was about the concept of lust and using lust as a framework of understanding sexual identity. And you know, for me, it's, I'm attracted to a lot of women. You know, what does that tell ya? Probably not that I'm straight! And so I used lust and then kind of blended it with some Crazy Horse aspects. It was really fun.

ROS: Nice. And how do you feel when you're on stage, Sammy. What does performing do for you, brain and body?

SAMMY: It does a lot of things for me, I think. I can't answer that in one sentence, but I'll throw some words out. Definitely escapism. Empowered. No one can tell me what to do with my body or what I can or can't do or, you know, they can judge me till the cows come home but I'm still getting paid for it and people are still clapping. You're never gonna impress everybody in the audience, but I don't do it for that. You do it for those four people that come up to you afterwards and go, "that blew my mind, I got exactly what you were saying there." Those are the people you perform for. And this is universal to all burlesque performers, you know, don't perform for everyone. Perform for your tribe, right? And when you find your tribe and when you can profoundly kind of change someone's worldview, or even just their day, right, it doesn't have to be so huge. I think that that is a power that, you can't buy that, right? And then also, like, the kind of, you know, on paper things, right, like good exercise, good for my body, you know, pushes me creatively, all of that stuff. But for me, it's about the connection, connecting

and sharing sometimes really deeply personal messages or themes and having somebody on the other side be like, "I heard that, I feel that, and I've experienced that." You know? "I'm still going through that and you've survived it," you know, like that, like, wow, you know?

ROCH: I feel like people often find it baffling when they're like, 'oh, but you do burlesque but also you're talking about mental health?' Like, those two things don't go together. But just hearing you say that, right there, that is it, isn't it? That covers what it feels like to perform, what creativity can do for someone and how important it can also be for someone's mental health and their mental experience and their just experience of life in general.

SAMMY: And you see that in the literature, you know, you see, you know, things like art therapy, you see things like animal therapy. You know, there is a lot of literature supporting this. It's about, you know, escapism, expressionism, you know, like, all of those things. There is literature here, people.

ROS: Totally. Do people ask you about kind of like, how you can juggle both? Do you ever get that from people that like, "oh, but you're a burlesque dancer but you also do the smart things and the science things." Do you get a lot of that or not really?

SAMMY: I get it probably more than anything. The six other people that I co-produce Burlesque with, constantly are questioning how I do things, like, and like, not - that sounds really judgmental, but they're more just like, 'how can you do this?' And they kind of have like a joke. They're all into star signs and I'm a scientist so I believe in it in a superficial, funny level, but they're like, fully into it. And so like, I'm a Capricorn, right, and I'm like, a true Capricorn in that I'm like, kicking things off my list, getting things done. So that's the only way that they can comprehend it.

ROS: That's so brilliant. "Of course you're a scientist, you're a Capricorn!" I love it.

SAMMY: Yeah, and they're all into like, the moon cycles and astrology and all of that, and so I - like, for me personally, like, obviously, science is my religion, but like, I respect what it, you know, like, you believe in the moon cycle, like, that's not hurting anyone, go for it, like, so I'll go along with it. It's actually really cute, so I love it.

ROCH: Well, I think we've come to that time in our podcast where we're gonna start to wrap up by talking about what we're grateful for this week. So Sammy Sparkles, what are you grateful for this week?

SAMMY: What am I grateful for this week? I'm grateful for a lot of things. I'm definitely grateful for my puppy, which I'll show you after we stop recording. I have a Samoyed dog and she's like, the cutest thing in the world. She's like a giant teddy bear. So I'm grateful for her because I have to walk her every day, and so that's really good for me, for my physical health and my mental health, and she makes other people happy.

ROCH: Well, she's already made us happy and we've not even seen her yet.

SAMMY: I'm gonna go get her after we stop recording and you will lose it.

ROCH: Yes! Oh my god. Sorry, listeners.

SAMMY: Look at my Instagram, you'll see her on my Instagram page.

ROS: We were just talking before, actually, weren't we, Roch, about just how brilliant dogs are for your mental health. True thing.

ROCH: It really is. Rosie Verbose, what are you grateful for this week?

ROS: So I've been trying to pick stuff that I haven't said before and I feel like at a certain point, you do get quite repetitive, but there's nothing wrong with that, because some of the things that we're grateful for are, you know, stuff that pops up all the time, and it's just good to be grateful for every day, innit? But what has been sort of getting me through recently, I think, maybe, I'm grateful for the Internet, I'll say. There's a lot that's not cool about the internet and I'm very circumspect about the spaces I hang out in, but I'm grateful for it from a sort of like Facebook group perspective. I've got, I'm in a couple of, like, very niche groups, like your corset makers group, Sammy, a little bit.

SAMMY: Yeah, they're great.

ROS: I'm like, okay, Facebook, by and large, might not be for me, but I'm so glad to be in this little niche of people, you know? And so I'm grateful for that, and I'm also really grateful for Youtube, which I'm using a lot at the moment, doing, like, little tasks, in the same way that some people would put podcasts on or whatever or audio books, I have spells of that, but recently I've been doing a lot of kind of like, Youtube vlog-watching about all kinds of things, and it just really helps me. You know when you're in that space where you're like, 'I can't bear the idea of doing the dishes right now, that just sounds like the worst thing ever,' and it's because I'm feeling blue about other stuff, and then I put something on and take my mind off it and then the dishes are done, you know what I mean? So that's what I'm grateful for. I think it's, maybe just like, connection and distraction from the internet. That's, that was my long-winded answer for this week.

SAMMY: That's beautiful.

ROS: Oh, thanks, man. Roch, what are you grateful for this week?

ROCH: I'm grateful for therapy. That is what I'm grateful for. I've only recently just got back into it. By the time this episode airs, I'll have had quite a few more sessions. I've just been feeling really, like, alone in my struggles that I'm having day to day, because of lockdown. It's mainly

just lockdown. I say 'mainly just lockdown,' like, a worldwide pandemic has, you know, fucked with my mental health so, you know. It will.

SAMMY: It ruins everything.

ROCH: Yeah. So one of the things we've talked about is how losing my creative outlet during lockdown has, you know, affected me, and she's asked me how I feel when I'm performing and how I feel when I'm on stage, and I haven't thought about that and nobody else has asked me that. And just having some kind of outside influence just to take an interest in you and ask you the questions that you probably needed to ask yourself, and I think it's going to be really good for me, and I'm just, I'm feeling so much more positive, which is-

SAMMY: I'm really happy for you, it's such a big step, I think, to do something like that, and so really, really proud.

ROCH: Oh thanks honey, that's lovely.

ROS: Really lovely. What flavour therapy are you going to end up doing, do you know, Sammy? Is there a particular route that you're drawn to?

SAMMY: It'll probably be, so I'll develop a toolkit, so I'll have, you know, motivational interviewing, CBT, you know, your general kind of psychotherapy and then based on who I'm talking to and what have you. I definitely am very passionate about kind of somatic work with trauma, because for me, I went to so much therapy and got everything conceptually, I knew everything, I knew what was wrong with, you know, what "wrong", air quotes, but my body didn't. My body would still go into fight or flight. It wasn't until I saw a trauma expert and she was like, 'oh, this, you have to tell your system,' and so that's a lot of the stuff that I've taken. Because so many women, we're stuck in these trauma, and obviously I'm gendering here but it is something I've noticed because obviously rates of, you know, sexual violence and things like that are a lot higher for women. So I'm not trying to be sexist here. So many women I know have so much trauma and so I think that it's just something that I'm really passionate about.

ROS: Oh well, I'm going to continue chatting with you about because that's, it's an ongoing thing that I'm fascinated by and I'm trying to write a novel that is partially about trauma and trauma responses.

SAMMY: Oh, I've got some names for you to look into.

ROS: Ooh, how exciting! Lovely.

ROCH: Amazing.

ROS: Before we go, Sammy, is there anything that you would particularly like to flag up to listeners to go check out for you, anything you want to plug?

SAMMY: I'd love for you to check out my Instagram, so sammy sparkles burlesque. That's where I'm kind of the most active. It's a bit quiet at the moment because I'm a bit busy, but then I'm also part of Burlezque, but if you follow my Instagram, then you'll kind of go from there.

ROCH: Well, thank you once again for joining us, Sammy, it honestly has been such a treat and very enlightening. You're a very, very smart cookie, which I don't know if we've mentioned but yes, you are. Thank you very much to our listeners for joining us once again. If you'd like to share what you're grateful for this week or any week, you can contact us on all of the socials, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube. We're there so you should be too. We'll be back in two weeks' time with another fantastic episode. Until then, be kind to yourselves and we will see you soon. Bye!

ROCH: This has been the Invisible Cabaret Podcast, and thank you for listening. If you've enjoyed this episode, please reach out to us on one of our many socials. You can find us on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. Just search 'Invisible Cabaret.' We'd also be grateful if you could rate and review the podcast and share it with a friend, so we can continue stripping away stigma together.