



READY TO RAZZLE DAZZLE IN 'CHICAGO' ALEXANDRA BURKE ON HER NEW DREAM ROLE AND BEING PERFECTLY IN STEP WITH HER FIANCE

Sitting beside then boyfriend Josh Ginnelly in a Broadway theatre in New York three years ago, Alexandra Burke was blown away by a production of *Chicago* and the role of Roxie Hart. It is a moment she has never forgotten.

"I remember turning to my now fiancé Josh and saying: 'One day I am going to play that part.' At that point it seemed unrealistic as I was so new to theatre, but a few years down the line and here I am about to be Roxie," she tells **HELLO!** ahead of joining the show at London's Phoenix Theatre in the West End this week, starring alongside Martin Kemp as lawyer Billy Flynn.

The dream role is taking Alexandra to new heights – literally. "It involves lots of ladder work which, I'm not going to lie, is terrifying as I'm scared of heights."

When rehearsals started, Alexandra's anxiety levels went through the roof. "It tends to come on any time I do something new. My anxiety is something I am very open with. It's key for me to work out at least five times a week to keep this under control – I find that really helps," she says.

So how is she feeling about opening night? "It's a mixture of emotions: I am so excited but also nervous – although I have acting credits from a few shows," she says. "I am a solo artist, so I hope to use my voice to bring something new. Roxie is sexy, sassy and will go to the extreme to get to where she wants to be in her career; the only question is: will it work? One thing is for sure, I am going to have lots of fun playing this character."

It is yet another exceptional high in an ever-lengthening string of achievements for the 29-year-old, who won *The X Factor* in 2008. She shot to No. 1 with a cover of

Leonard Cohen classic *Hallelujah* on the back of her victory and went on to star in West End shows including *The Bodyguard* and *Sister Act*, as well as reaching the finals of *Strictly Come Dancing* last year.

But while she didn't get to lift the coveted glitterball with her dance partner Gorka Márquez, Alexandra won an altogether more special prize when stage manager Josh proposed in Paris just days later with a dazzling diamond ring.

The couple met when she was starring in *The Bodyguard* and her biggest supporter will be in the audience for her *Chicago* debut. "Josh and I met in theatre so we are used to having different schedules. Sometimes it is frustrating as we don't see each other for long periods of time, but it just means that when we do we make the most of it. I am very lucky as he supports me in everything I do and understands my work."

MOTHER KNOWS BEST

Alexandra has had to deal with more than her fair share of heartache, too. This month marks one year since she lost her beloved mother, former Soul II Soul singer Melissa Bell, who died aged just 53 after a long battle with diabetes and kidney issues.

"I owe everything I have in my life to her. This passion inside me, I absolutely inherited it from her," she has said. It was revealed last week that Alexandra will support a gala at London nightclub Café de Paris on 14 October to raise awareness and funds for stroke charities.

Melissa's death coincided with the start of Alexandra's *Strictly* journey and she says Josh was her rock – emotionally and physically.

Of the dedication and high levels of fitness needed to take part in the hit BBC1

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show, Alexandra says: "Wow, *Strictly* training was like nothing I have ever done before. Ten hours a day of pretty much pure cardio, using muscles I'd never used before. Cardio is something I have never really enjoyed because I haven't really been very good at it, but that all changed after *Strictly*."

Alexandra remembers being told how she was embarking on "a crazy journey" and that she would get lost in the *Strictly* bubble.

"I didn't really believe it but it is true. You become so dedicated to learning the dances week by week that it is difficult to focus on anything else," she says. "The further you get in the competition the more intense it becomes and the more hours you want to add in to rehearsals."

She is envious of the soon-to-be-announced celebrities for this year's show, who are about to become part of the *Strictly* family.

"They are about to head out on the most amazing journey. I am not going to lie: it will be tough at times, but it will be so worth it," she says.

"Doing that show was a dream of mine, there is nothing that compares. I loved every second of it – but I am very pleased I'll be watching this year's show either from my dressing room or on my sofa at home."

INTERVIEW: JANE DOWDESWELL

Alexandra stars in *Chicago* until 14 October. For tickets; visit chicagowestend.com.

West End girl: Alexandra is excited about playing Roxie Hart in *Chicago* (far left). The new stage role is just her latest cause for celebration after wowing on *Strictly Come Dancing* last year and getting engaged to her stage manager beau Josh Ginnelly (below far left)



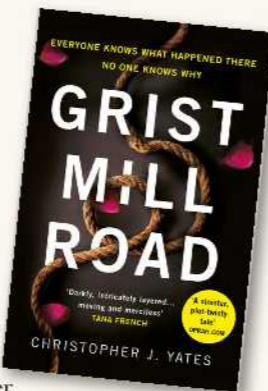
ALBUM **ARIANA GRANDE**
US pop star Ariana Grande is fiercer than ever on fourth album *Sweetener* – her first since the Manchester Arena terror attack at her concert last year. With the 25-year-old's signature dazzling vocals and heartfelt lyrics, the new release includes hit singles *No Tears Left to Cry*, *God is a Woman* and *The Light is Coming*. "It's about bringing light to a situation," Ariana says. **Out on 17 August on Island Records.**

TO DO LIST

HELLO!'s pick of the week's events and new releases

BOOK GRIST MILL ROAD

Christopher J Yates weaves a chilling tale in this summer's must-read novel. Matthew and Hannah are playing in the woods when things take a dark turn. Patrick is there too, hidden, watching. He can't take his eyes off Matthew's gun. Years later, the three meet again with devastating consequences. Prepare to be kept on the edge of your seat with this spine-tingling thriller. **Out now, published by Headline.**



MUSICAL CALENDAR GIRLS

Expect tears and laughter aplenty as the true story of a group of ladies from the Women's Institute baring all for a charity calendar is brought to the stage in this award-winning musical by Tim Firth and Gary Barlow. A UK tour kicks off in Leeds this week with Denise Welch (right), Fern Britton and Ruth Madoc heading the top-drawer cast. **Visit calendargirlsthemusical.com.**



FILM CHRISTOPHER ROBIN

Ewan McGregor stars as a grown-up Christopher Robin in this family adventure. When work commitments keep him from a family holiday, he gets a surprise visit from childhood friend Winnie-the-Pooh. They set out to reunite the old gang – including Tigger, Eeyore and Piglet – as Christopher realises he may have lost track of what's important in life. **In UK cinemas now.**

REPORTS: ALEXANDRA BURKE: EMILY HOESEN; PHOTOS: DAVID VERNICHILLI/INFERIA; JARRETT CROCKETT/WIREIMAGE