

PROVOCATEUR- IN-CHIEF

By
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Portrait
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How a shopgirl from the North of England became the creative director of a global lingerie brand.

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I'm feeling naughty. It's the middle of the afternoon on a Tuesday, and I'm turned upside down in a leopard-print changing room shrouded in silk curtains, attempting to wrangle into a complicated situation called "Christalina"—a Swarovski crystal-studded, bondage-inspired web of fine net tulle and black elastic strapping. I'm not exactly certain what goes where. I begin to wonder if I have what it takes to pull this off. What it takes, according to Sarah Shotton, the designer of Agent Provocateur's lingerie collection, is a healthy ego and a solid bank account. As it happens, she has both of these.

With fire-engine red hair, a pin-up figure, and a corner office in central London, Shotton seems to embody everything her brand stands for: A woman in charge.

As creative director at Agent Provocateur, the London-based lingerie retailer, Shotton uses theatricality, role-playing, glamour, and female empowerment to create the brand's head-turning, femme fatale aesthetic. Combining shock value with craftsmanship, she helped turn what started as a single kink shop in Soho into an international luxury enterprise, with 112 stores in 29 countries. At this juncture, Shotton is busy launching the spring/summer 2017 collection, opening a new boutique in Miami at Brickell City Centre and strategizing with the company's new CEO, Fabrizio Malverdi—all while raising two young children in North London.

Getting here required moxie. “When it came to my time to have a go, the brand had become a man's idea of what AP should be,” Shotton says, in a decidedly un-posh English accent as thick as Devonshire cream. “I needed to make it more about women, femininity, and empowerment. At the end of the day, AP is about women.”

Originally, the brand was a man's idea. When Joseph Corré—son of dame Vivienne Westwood and child of the British punk movement—founded the company in 1994, he wanted AP to be about provocateurs.

“My irreverent windows, antagonism, political messages ... that's what designed the brand,” Corré says. “I grew up with the idea that somehow you could turn a shop into a phenomenon, and use that shop to expose your ideas.” He resigned from the company in 2010.

When Shotton stepped into Corré's shoes as creative director, punk underwear had yet go mainstream. And Victoria's Secret supermodels were everywhere. She would have to find an outrageous style all her own.

A few clues as to where Shotton's career would go, ironically enough, came from her innocent past. A farmer's daughter, she was raised in County Durham in north-east England, “heading up Scotland way.” As she tells it, she came of age riding horses, wearing wellies and jodhpurs, and attending an all-girls boarding school called Polam Hall, which sounds completely commonplace. But to her, it holds a certain magic.

“I wouldn't be doing what I am today if it wasn't for that school,” she says. “Their message to young women was that you can be anything and do anything you want.” Creativity was fostered, art classes were encouraged, and Shotton felt at home. With a wink, Shotton compares Polam to St. Trinian's School, which, for the unacquainted, is a fictional boarding school for girls where the teachers are sadists and the students are juvenile delinquents.

At 18, Shotton headed south to London, having been accepted at Central Saint Martins college. There she studied fashion and design, and picked up part-time retail gigs on the side to pay her way. At the same time, she'd been struggling with a self-destructive body image. “It's funny how things in life set you up,” Shotton says. “When I was a teenager, I thought I was fat and that my boobs were too big. I probably had a perfect body, actually. But it wasn't fashionable to be curvy.” >



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Shotton threw herself into a weight-loss program and sought out a plastic surgeon to perform a breast reduction. The doctor encouraged her to look at herself, and consider the fact that other clients were paying him to make them look just like her, followed by a presentation of all of the things that could wrong. "I left that day saying, 'I don't want to do this. Maybe I am okay.'"

A year later, an entry-level job came up at Agent Provocateur's shop in Soho. It was a foot in the door. Agent Provocateur presented the 24-year-old, still numb with self-loathing, with a new perspective: "The first week, I bought my first set of lingerie: a turquoise bra, suspenders, and knickers, and I felt like a million dollars. It was very self-empowering," she says.

From the beginning, the brand was edgy and rebellious, with a hot streak of sadomasochism running down the length of its stockings. Along with his business partner and then wife Serena Rees, Joe Corré had launched AP with one small shop on Broadwick Street, selling a smattering hodgepodge of smut—bejeweled whips and handcuffs included.

"It was all about dressing up in a different character. On Monday, you could be sweet, and by Friday night, a dominatrix in hell," Corré says. "But it was democratic. You could buy something for 20 pounds or 2,000. We had lines around the block." The idea was to take fetishized sex out of the dungeon and make it more glamorous. Corré and Rees commissioned the work of several French manufacturers, and launched their own line of upscale lingerie.

Still, this was a scratchy start-up. When Shotton joined, in 1999, she was thrown into the fray, doing everything from shipping inventory to managing department store accounts. She worked nights and weekends as Corré and Rees expanded the main line to include fragrances and began opening additional stores in London and California. "I even modeled in the fragrance campaigns," Shotton says. "And whenever there was a party, I was one of the AP girls in uniform." (Salespeople in AP boutiques still don bubblegum-pink shirtdresses with black tights and pumps—a cross between a 1950s diner waitress and a sexy nurse.)

It was Shotton's knack for designing AP's windows that garnered attention from her employers. By 2002, she had become a full-time member of the design team. Her craft continued to evolve under Corré's watch as they built fantastical showpieces for headline-grabbing fashion shows. At the time, their ability to legitimize lingerie on the catwalk—presenting it as couture—was considered groundbreaking.

Shotton's distinct style suddenly began appearing in music videos and on magazine covers. Celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez and Beyoncé wore pieces from her collections. Soon, AP gained interest from private equity firm 3i, which in 2007 snapped up a majority stake in the company for \$75 million. Shotton was then promoted to head designer.

It was a watershed year for the company. The founders filed for divorce, and Rees, who declined comment for this article, left the business while it was operating more than 30 stores in 14 countries. Garry



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Hogarth came on as CEO, and Corré eked out a few more years as creative director before making his own exit in 2010. It seemed obvious to Hogarth that Shotton would step into Corré's role. Shotton, however, had a momentary freak-out.

"I was shitting it!" Shotton says. "Joe Carré is a genius. Those are really big shoes to step into. And I was scared. But, then I just said, sod it—and decided to dive in." Her first move was to tap the hit music video director Johan Renck to help rebrand the company. She also looked to such Hollywood femme fatales as Kim Basinger and Sharon Stone for inspiration: "I used their characters to help me visualize what my ranges would be."

As Shotton hit her stride, the brand expanded exponentially—with the number of stores peaking at 118. Its e-commerce platform booked such mainstream distributors as Net-a-Porter, and her first collections, which flaunted underwear as outerwear, consistently sold out.

Meanwhile, the effects of the global financial crisis were ricocheting around the world. Still, AP marched on in black satin heels, selling silk kimonos for more than \$2,000 a piece, and adding jewelry and swimwear to its collections. The racy side of retail, it seemed, benefited from the so-called "Netflix effect," when people go out less, and instead invest in home entertainment. >



Eventually Agent Provocateur hit a snag, as it struggled to adapt to consumers who increasingly buy their skivvies online from Victoria's Secret and Amazon. A few months after luxury veteran Fabrizio Malverdi was named CEO, in April 2016, 3i sharply wrote down the value of its 80 percent stake. As a result, Malverdi and Shotton are forging fast ahead with a turnaround, which involves shopping the brand to wholesalers and expanding it into Asian markets. "We're trying to reach out to different types of women," Shotton says. She and the company are tasked with designing successful collections at lower price points. "We have our couture collection, and that remains, but it's really important for young girls to be able to buy in to the brand early on." After Beyoncé, in February, announced her pregnancy wearing AP's burgundy Lorna bra, the company's outlook improved. Maybe they can go mainstream, after all. But that still means competing with industry juggernaut Victoria's Secret.

"Honestly, everyone has a shot at taking market share from Victoria's Secret in this environment," says luxury retail analyst Kristin Bentz, president of The Talented Blonde. "Victoria's Secret has economies of scale and speed to market, but they jumped the shark with the whole Angels runway show. What was once a

clever marketing vehicle for male consumers now seems a bit past its sell-by date."

In today's cultural climate, the idea of dressing to please a man is becoming passé. Doing it for oneself, however, is considered an act of empowerment. As Bentz sees it, the task of the La Perlas and Agents Provocateurs of the world is to represent their product as "an accessory to the art of seduction by powerful, clever, and passionate women."

In her own way, Shotton is attempting just that. It won't be easy, judging from the narrative of her past, which reads more like a gritty British punk drama than a fairy tale. No one taught her how to be a lingerie designer. But today, by her own definition, Sarah Shotton is a success: "I've had to learn from my mistakes. But I'm very independent now. I would even say I'm a feminist."

Back in the dressing room, I've changed my mind. Maybe I should give "Christalina" another chance. After all, lingerie is all about attitude. I stand tall, cock my right shoulder up, tilt my head back slightly, and fall a little bit in love with the dominatrix staring back at me. She's giving me permission to feel sexy. With no one looking, I buy my first piece of expensive lingerie. It was worth every cent.

AGENT P: VICTORIA ADAMSON. (OPPOSITE) COURTESY AGENT PROVOCATEUR

