



CENTRE STAGE

Debs Gatenby's show *A Place Called Happiness* helps us through the rambling, non-linear journey that is your typical human life

Being human

After a successful tour of her routine about mental health, stand-up comedian Debs Gatenby tried to write about happiness. She tells **Nicola Mostyn** how it made her even more miserable and about the resulting show

It's not everyone who can lay their soul bare onstage in a room full of strangers, whilst wearing a swimming costume and goggles and riding an exercise bike, but that's exactly what Debs Gatenby did in her one woman show *Hi, Anxiety*, the hilarious, moving story of her and her mother's breakdowns.

Now the performer is back with a new show commissioned by Contact, Manchester. At first glance *A Place Called Happiness* might seem to occupy quite different territory.

"After *Hi, Anxiety*, I thought, OK, now what?" explains Gatenby. "What's the opposite of depression and anxiety – it's happiness! Great! That's nice and easy isn't it?"

Unsurprisingly, given the performer's passion for exposing the truer, less airbrushed aspects of our lives, things didn't quite work as neatly as that.

"A year went by and I sat in a room and nothing happened," she explains. "And I thought: 'Oh my God, I don't know about this happiness thing!' I got really miserable.

"I went to the library and got all these books

about happiness, and I just got more and more bogged down in it."

In her pursuit of that elusive feeling, she bought a wendy house, visited the Isle of Eigg, went whale watching in Provincetown, Massachusetts, argued with herself up hills and made a collage from a year's worth of *Grazia* magazines. "Cutting out pictures of Beyoncé and Jen – I thought I was doing research, but," she whispers, "I wasn't, I was just doing a collage."

But there was gold in this process, just as the creation of *Hi, Anxiety* was a culmination of years of false starts on the circuit.

"I was always close, but I would mess it up. One time, after getting to the final of a women in comedy thing, Jo Caulfield, who is a really amazing comedian, came up to me afterwards and said: 'Oh my God, you died there, didn't you?' Listen, I've died a thousand times. You have to keep going."

One day, post break-up and feeling like an emotional mess, Gatenby decided to talk about it onstage. "When you've got nothing to lose in your private life, it all becomes so un-private. And I got

this amazing response, as in: 'We get this! We feel like that too!'"

This was the seed of an idea – that being vulnerable onstage was a positive act. Then a conversation about her mother's depression led to an invitation to deliver a TEDx talk in Bradford. "I wrote 20 minutes of my mum's story. How she was having a breakdown, how we pick up the pieces, and who picks up the pieces."

The resulting show, expanded from the talk, became a funny, brutally honest, ultimately hopeful look at the realities of living with mental illness. It ran for three sold-out nights at Contact, then toured the UK.

Gatenby counts among her inspirations American performers Peggy Shaw, who made a show about who she was before and after her stroke, and Lois Weaver. With emotional honesty as her muse, inevitably Gatenby's pursuit of happiness ended up being navigationally challenging.

"All the things that we think we are, we're not. What is the story? What is the truth? Everyone asks themselves, what I am doing with my life? What should I do? Does what I do make a difference to anybody?"

A Place Called Happiness doesn't promise some neat emotional road trip from A to Z, but Gatenby hopes it might help us make some sort of peace with the rambling, non-linear journey that is your typical human life.

"And it could change between now and when I do it!" she says laughingly of the show, which will be shown in February as part of Queer Contact. "I will be trundling along to the Contact with my computer and a poncho, and that's it."

***A Place Called Happiness* is at Contact, Manchester, 8pm, 10 February, as part of Queer Contact Festival 2016 (contactmcr.com)**