



QUITTING THE FAMOUS COBBLES IN DRAMATIC STYLE SHOBNA GULATI THROWS A PARTY FOR HER FAMOUS FRIENDS AS SHE BIDS A TEARFUL FAREWELL TO 12 YEARS ON 'CORRIE'



Looking super glamorous in her little black dress, actress Shobna is streets ahead of shop worker Sunita Alahan, the character she's played for 12 years on *Coronation Street*. Leaving after such a long time is bittersweet for the 46-year-old, as she has to say a fond farewell to colleagues, including her on-screen husband Dev, played by Jimmi Harkishin (together, inset top)

Looking stunning in a black Philip Armstrong dress, *Coronation Street*'s Shobna Gulati marked her departure from the show in style. The beautiful 46-year-old, who has played Sunita Alahan for more than a decade, shared tears and laughter with friends including Kate Ford, Samia Ghadie and her screen husband Jimmi Harkishin at her leaving party – before bowing out of the show in dramatic scenes that air this week.

Shobna was accompanied to the party by her real-life love Anthony Brown, whom she met on the set of ITV1's *This Morning*, where he works as a runner. "I'm usually rubbish at men and pick the wrong ones; I could never tell the ones who were interested in me because of the fame, but with Anthony I just felt it was different.

"It was a gut instinct and I've decided to listen to it and give it a go," Shobna said of her new love, who at 29 is 17 years her junior.

"I didn't even think about the age gap – we see each other every week without fail and we are having a great time; we fit together nicely. I had gone off men, but then he turned up in my life and he was jolly. He is fun and it's a lovely relationship – he takes me out of my stupid seriousness and sensitivity – he's good for me."

The party, exclusively covered by **HELLO!**, took place at Annies, the Manchester restaurant opened last year by *Corrie* actress Jennie McAlpine (Fiz Stape) and her boyfriend Chris Farr. When Jimmi (who plays Dev Alahan) arrived, Shobna greeted him with a playful punch. Just two hours earlier the actor, who has enjoyed a 12-year on-screen relationship with Shobna, had texted to say he would not be able to make it. Luckily, it was simply a prank. "Of course I was always coming," he laughed as Shobna told him she almost sent him a very angry reply, demanding to know why he was missing her big night.

"Saying goodbye to Jimmi is hard because he's been the closest person from the beginning until the end," Shobna said. "He said to me the other day that we have an unspoken knowledge when we work together. That is very rare and very special; when he said that I cried."

For Shobna the evening carried extra poignancy, coming as it did just days after she revealed that her decision to quit had been prompted by crippling bouts of depression.

HIDDEN ILLNESS

Talking exclusively to **HELLO!** ahead of the arrival of her guests, she said: "Depression is an unspoken illness and I've suffered from it since my teens. I've never talked about it before, because I don't know if I really recognised it as depression, but it's important for people in the public eye who suffer from it to speak about it. It's not stopped me doing what I'm doing, but it's been part of the choice to change my life.

"Sometimes I would shut my front door and not come out for a week. When you work at *Coronation Street* and leave the studio you are still on duty because viewers want to talk to you and I didn't have any space. It felt like I was Sunita 24/7. It has been a brilliant job, but it doesn't suit me – I have to admit that."

Also enjoying the party was Alison King – also known as factory owner Carla Connor – who told us: "Shobna is a beautiful person, inside and out, and she means a lot to me. Depression affects a lot of women and we all have a trip switch, but it is often a taboo subject. She will leave a massive gap at *Coronation Street*, but I know she's going to fly."

Added Kate Ford, who plays Tracy Barlow: "We have got so many happy memories together,



'Coronation Street was a big part of my life and I will miss everyone. But people say I look and sound better already'

she hopes she may be able to work in the US. "Loose Women is a completely new challenge – I'm not trained as a presenter – but part of me choosing that job was for people to see me as me. And I'm applying for my Green Card, which gives me the option of going to live in America – I'd love to do the pilot season there – so we'll see."

Shobna will keep in contact with the "firm friends" she has made on the *Street*. "It was really important to me to have this party – it's the first one I've had since I was 19. I'm not normally a party girl, but I thought it would be a lovely way to say goodbye to everybody. I have been lucky enough to work with people who understand how I feel and the people I have formed friendships with know me inside and out."

Samia, who plays Maria Connor, was at the party fresh from her stint on *Dancing on Ice*, but her skating partner and new boyfriend Sylvain Longchambon was not with her. "He's lovely and everything is great and quite a few of the cast have met him already, but I wanted to ease him in gently," she joked.

STREET FOOD

Shobna, who organised her party with the help of event organiser Taylor Lynn, was given a magnificent cake designed in the shape of *Corrie's* famous corner shop, where her character worked for most of her 12 years in the show.

The actress will take with her many fond memories. "My favourite is of sharing a dressing room with Kate Ford and just falling about laughing. We were both single and daft and we'd mess about and talk about boys and just giggle. We'd literally be laughing so much we'd be rolling on the floor – I remember us giggling uncontrollably about having to wear the pregnancy bump when our characters were both expecting babies."

"*Coronation Street* was a big part of my life and I will miss the people there, but my predominant feelings at leaving are freedom and relief. Lots of people who know me say I look and sound better already." **H**

INTERVIEW: SUE CRAWFORD
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EVENT ORGANISER: TAYLOR LYNN (TLC-LTD.CO.UK)

ADDITIONAL PHOTO: ITN



One of the many highlights for Shobna over her *Corrie* career has been the friendships she's forged with the women on the show – none more so than Kate Ford (above, second from left). "My favourite [memory] is of sharing a dressing room with Kate Ford and just falling about laughing," Shobna told HELLO!. Other smiles are shared with (below, from left) Samia, Sue Cleaver – who attended the party on crutches after injuring her ankle – and John Michie, before the tears fall at the final farewell (below)

