

Talent runs Depp

Denise Pearson is the swashbuckling doppelgänger of Capt. Jack Sparrow.

By Roberta Staley
Photography by David Lowes

SAIL HO, ME SQUIFFY MEN! The seas are a place of rum and riches for those of a mind to pillage and plunder.

The most spirited and nefarious of these buccaneers is the fictional Capt. Jack Sparrow, sword in the side of Capt. Hector Barbossa, whom he wrangled for control of the pirate galleon *Black Pearl*. Capt. Sparrow, of course, was portrayed by actor Johnny Depp, the undisputed star of the Disney pirate trilogy.

The charismatic captain has a doppelgänger on Vancouver Island. But when this Capt. Jack Sparrow is stripped of pirate gear, he turns into impersonator Denise Pearson who, instead of mining along a ship's deck, captains a household and family at Mill Bay.

As Capt. Sparrow, Pearson is the star of *Island Savings Credit Union's* latest marketing initiative to promote a free new mobile banking service for members who want to check their account balances via text messaging. Pearson adds pirate cachet to Island Savings's message: this real-time service is a way to keep tabs on personal accounts, whether you be near or far from your part of call.

Island Savings, where Pearson is a member, asked the 45-year-old to be the face of its new mobile banking service. Pearson has impersonated the captain at events and openings around Vancouver Island for five years. This past summer, she appeared in full garb at the Tall Ships Victoria 2008 Festival where she strutted the decks of vessels like *Lady Washington*, which played the role of the British brig *Interceptor* in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*. With cutlass by her side and flintlock tucked into a broad leather belt, Pearson freaked out 300 children and charmed older kids and their parents with her bang-on parody of the high-sea marauder. The impersonation is virtually perfect; Pearson has studied the pirate trilogy innumerable times to capture Capt. Sparrow's effeminate gestures and unique facial ticks.

Pearson, "a major" Depp fan, has shown a flair for the theatrical since high school drama in Toronto. However, busy with home and helping run husband Bob Pearson's corporate law practice, her main way of indulging the acting bug was to plan elaborate Halloween productions, press-ganging Bob and the two children, Victoria, now 18, and 15-year-old Spencer, into participating in her scallywag schemes. After teaching herself to sew, Pearson created costumes for Bob and the kids, turning them, respectively, into Capt. Barbossa, Will Turner and Commodore James Norrington. Their Mill Bay home has become famous, drawing 300 trick-or-treaters every year.

While it may not be true to a pirate's character, Pearson does this mainly for fun. It is only in the past few years that Pearson — a blue-eyed blond sans pirate get-up — has started charging a minimal event fee to pay for her time and costume upkeep.

But pirates can't sail the Seven Seas forever; the time eventually comes to hang up the cutlass and retire to a bucolic island. Pearson is already an Islander, but retiring she's not. Her salty crew is breaking up — daughter Victoria is heading to Vancouver Film School — so Pearson is looking for new acting challenges. Once again, Depp is her muse. This past Halloween, Pearson dressed up as Depp's character Sweeney Todd in the 2007 flick *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. "I'm having a blast," says Pearson. "It's blowing my socks off right now."