

The StarPhoenix

Doing Johnny Depp

Celebrity lookalike Denise Pearson turns heads as Capt. Jack

BY MICHAEL D. REID, TIMES COLONIST MAY 31, 2011

Being Johnny Depp has taught Denise Pearson to expect the unexpected - like women who say they want to kiss her.

"What's stopping you?" Pearson responds and playfully points to her cheek when gals say they'd pucker up if she was a guy.

It happened again when the vivacious Mill Bay wife and mother-of-two, costumed and in character as one Capt. Jack, turned heads at SilverCity when she recently attended a sold-out screening of *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*.

The celebrity lookalike has become a familiar fixture on Vancouver Island's cultural landscape, appearing as Cher, Marilyn Monroe, Supergirl and other characters, but it's her uncanny impersonation of Depp that attracts the most double-takes.

She even has a website that describes what she does in playfully cheeky terms - DeniseDoesJohnny.com.

"If you think about it, yes it's a double-entendre," Pearson laughs, recalling how it was her husband, Bob Pearson, who suggested she needed a "catchy" slogan. "He said 'You need something that people will remember. Just don't use that.' "

She learned the significance of the title after being invited to a celebrity impersonators' convention in Las Vegas

"Don't say 'I impersonate so-and-so,' " delegates told her. "You say, 'I do Johnny Depp' or 'I do Cher.'"

There's also the Google factor. DeniseDoesJohnny.com is more likely to attract attention, and hits, than a more mundane title.

"I'm sure there are people who find it who have no intention of seeing a Johnny Depp impersonator," she quips.

Pearson, whose other characters include the Mad Hatter and Sweeney Todd, both portrayed by Depp, began studying the iconic heartthrob's mannerisms since she first dressed up as him for her family's Halloween event here eight years ago.

On the first Halloween they celebrated since she moved to Mill Bay 20 years ago, only three trickortreaters came to their door.

"The gory themes weren't working, so we said 'Let's try Harry Potter' and that was a hit. We went from three to 160 people," recalled Pearson, elated that her husband and children Victoria, 20, and Spencer, 18, share her passion for make-believe.

"Then Pirates of the Caribbean came, very Halloweenish but friendly with lots of props and costumes, and we got 240 people."

On their 10th year of staging Halloween events, they drew a record 420 people.

Pearson will never forget her husband's initial reaction when she first walked into their backyard dressed as Capt. Jack.

"He didn't talk to me," she recalled. "When I took the wig off he said 'Please take that off and put some lipstick on.' Originally, it was a little weird."

The family has since appeared together as characters at movie screenings, fundraisers, parades, Tall Ship events, festivals and on the decks of ships such as the Lady Washington (Curse of the Black Pearl) and The Bounty (Dead Man's Chest).

Pearson is often accompanied by her husband, who handles props and wore a fedora for his "role" as a tommy gun-toting mobster at a Victoria Film Commission fundraiser at Craigdarroch Castle. He also supports her by posing as Geoffrey Rush's Pirates of the Caribbean character Barbossa, with Victoria doing Will Turner and Spencer as Ragetti for POTC-inspired events.

"He is so there for me," she says appreciatively.

"I'm very proud of my family."

To perfect her impersonation of Depp, Pearson learned to sew and taught herself make-up techniques. She also studied Depp's appearances on The Late Show With David Letterman - "He has this brilliant walk, it's a bit of a saunter, and I'd look at that over and over" - and she's lost count of how many times she has watched the Pirates of the Caribbean movies.

"You can't watch them enough," says Pearson, who also learned how to hide her "female attributes" to become Johnny.

"I'm a female so I work on the visual," she says. "I don't sound like him like other impersonators who focus on audio. Johnny Depp has feminine features so I have a bit of a bonus there."

Still, it's a challenge for a woman operating in what's primarily a man's profession.

"Usually, it's the other way around - men playing women," she notes. "We don't have Adam's apples.

We don't have scruff."

What is it about Depp that makes him so irresistible?

"I think it's the feminine features, and he has boyish charm. And there's his shyness," says Pearson who, like Depp, was born in 1963, and has been a fan since his days shooting 21 Jump Street in Vancouver.

"He's had his run-ins, I know, but he's extremely private. And he's aging gracefully."

Pearson, who first appeared in character at the Vegas convention, took delegates by surprise when they learned her gender.

"When we let the cat out of the bag that I was Capt.

Jack ... I wish I'd had a camera," she said, recalling a social function when she arrived as herself after an earlier cocktail session she attended as Capt. Jack proved uncomfortable.

"I was with all these impersonators and my moustache started falling off. I started basically eating my moustache."

The convention was "an eye-opening experience," she said.

"I was tongue-tied, like a deer in the headlights when I met these pros who've been doing this for 20 years," she said. "I'm just floating along, riding the wave and seeing where it takes me."

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