What's On! interview

Tracey Bell

1. How on earth did you get started?

It was February 14th, 1985. I was in my third year at the University of Alberta and had two part-time jobs, one at the Woolco smoke shop and the other at Chi Chi's Mexican restaurant. My friend, Steffany Hanlen, called to ask me if I would check coats that night at Goose Loonies Party and Playhouse. It was a bar where the staff wore costumes and performed. Three weeks later I auditioned as Tina Turner performing "Better Be Good to Me" and a few weeks after that I was hired to perform every night. I happily left university and my other jobs and put my whole heart into entertaining. The club was owned by Triple Five Corporation who had just built the world's largest mall. I performed at all of their properties for three years before becoming a self-employed entertainment entrepreneur.

2. Were you involved in singing/ dancing as a child?

I didn't want to take singing or dancing classes. I made up songs and dances of my own. I was producing my own shows when I was five years old. I had a tickle trunk full of great costumes. I was a promoter as well, convincing neighbors to watch my performances in the basement.

3. Tell us about growing up – where did you grow up?

I was born in Edmonton but I never grew up. I didn't talk until I was three and then I never stopped. I was very creative and expressive and loved art as well as drama. I starred in school plays but I was shy socially. Kids used to say that I only got the lead roles because my Mom made the best costumes. I did a Sonny and Cher routine at recess with another girl. Sometimes I had to be Sonny. I was the most popular babysitter because I entertained the kids and created new stories instead of reading them.

4. How/when did you realize that this was something that you could make a career out of?

The first three years of my career were easy because I had a steady salary as an in-house performer. Then I decided to move to Calgary and start my own business performing at corporate events and bars. I also worked in a talent agency for a while and learned about marketing and sales. I was really determined to make it on my own. I struggled for a few years. I worked incredibly hard. My success really started after I moved to Vancouver in 1990. This has been my full time living for almost 30 years.

5. Who is your favourite character to impersonate?

Why does everyone ask that question? I can't decide. I love the variety. They are all strong, diverse characters. Celine is really funny. Marilyn is soft, sweet, vulnerable and charming.. I love the contrast between Cher and Julie Andrews and I'm surprised by how much I look them. Dolly Parton and Madonna inspire me. I love Tina Turner and Janis Joplin songs. And Liza Minnelli is a kooky fun mess!

6. What is your favourite part of what you do?

I love making people laugh and getting them to play along. Every show is different that way. I have a blast when I'm on stage. I'm really present in the moment with the audience. I also love travelling, especially in Canada. I'm really grateful that I've been all over this great country. And I really really love wigs!

7. Do you have any new impersonations that you might be working on?

I spoke with Sarah McLachlan a while ago and she encouraged me to impersonate her. She's a really good sport. She gave me some ideas for a comedy routine and said she wouldn't be offended if I made fun of her.

8. How long does it take you to start, work on the mannerisms, voice etc for a character?

It takes forever. Working on characters is an ongoing process. I always feel like I could do better. I'm critical of myself. I feel like I should keep improving. There are characters like Barbra Streisand, Lady Gaga and Shania Twain that I've worked on for years but am unhappy with, so I leave them out of most shows.

9. Tell us about being named entertainer of the year! What an accomplishment!

I was nominated four times before I won. I thought I would lose again, so I wasn't going to fly to Toronto for the Awards Gala. I ended up going when Ken Kristoffersen, one of the world's top event planners, called to encourage me to attend. The audience was full of wonderful friends from the special event industry and I felt love and gratitude when I won.