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REEL AWARDS 2007 - 'OSCARs' FOR CELEB IMPERSONATORS

By Eugene Wee

July 02, 2007

IF you had wandered into the Imperial Palace hotel in Las Vegas on 27 May, you probably would have thought that you had stumbled into a Hollywood awards show.

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Believe it or not: Ms Lisa Irion says she spent years perfecting her Cher look.

In one corner, you would have seen Johnny Depp chatting up Tina Turner.

Then, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Cher and Sean Connery saunter by on the way to the bar. And if that's not enough to make you rub your eyes in disbelief, tagging along behind them are recently deceased starlet Anna Nicole Smith and slain rapper Tupac Shakur.

Then you realise that Connery is a little plumper and there's something a little odd about Schwarzenegger's scowl.

That's when it hits you - they're celebrity impersonators.

And the very best ones have gathered at the Las Vegas Strip hotel for annual Reel Awards - the equivalent of the Oscars for celebrity impersonators.

Although some might think it's a bit cheesy to have an awards show for celebrity impersonators, performers like Ms Lisa Irion disagree.

Ms Irion, a 47-year-old blonde who is a dead ringer for singer/actress Cher, told The New Paper on Sunday that her job is a lot harder than they think.

'I think when people hear 'celebrity impersonator', they conjure up the image of a bad Elvis in a Halloween quality costume,' she said.

'They don't understand the years of work that go into creating a convincing illusion of a famous person.'

For Ms Irion, she spent years going through Cher's history, reading her interviews and studying her mannerisms to perfect her craft.

'It's ironic that in Hollywood, they give Academy Awards to those actors who do a great impression of another celebrity, (for example) Reese Witherspoon as June Carter Cash;



Reely?: When Ms Lisa Irion dons her costume, she's a dead ringer for the real Cher.



The real Cher.



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Jamie Foxx as Ray Charles; because it is very hard to do well, and the public raves about what great actors they are,' added Ms Irion, who won the Rising Star award for her Cher impersonation.

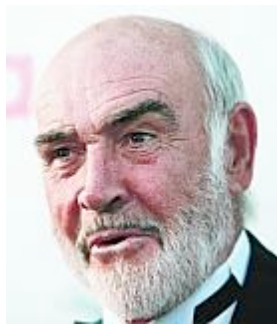
And if you think impersonators are paid like run-of-the-mill magicians or clowns who show up at kids parties, wait till you look at the pay cheques of some of the industry's top talents.

For example, Mr John Allen, who impersonates Sean Connery as James Bond, commands up to US\$5,000 (\$7,700) a day for his appearances.

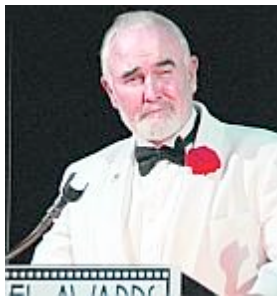
'This year I have been working non-stop because everyone wants 007 in 2007,' said Mr Allen, a former sculptor who got into the business after being spotted by an agent in a restaurant.

Another mimic, 57-year-old Brent Mendenhall, is said to earn a six-figure annual salary for jetting all over the world to impersonate US President George W Bush.

To give the profession more prestige, talent agent Janna Joos decided to organise an awards ceremony for impersonators with her sister and a friend who was an Elizabeth Taylor impersonator.



The real Sean Connery.



Never say never: Mr John Allen who is accepting his Reel award, gets \$7,700 a day impersonating Sean Connery.

'We thought that it would be a good idea to honour the impersonators and thus The Reel Awards was conceived in 1991 and we held the first presentation in February 1992,' she said.

Awards given out include Best Actor/Actress, Lifetime Achievement, Most Professional Impersonator and Classic Crooner.

And just like the Oscars, nominees for the Reel Awards are picked by those in the industry, such as impersonators, agents and managers.

'I am admitted everywhere from restaurants and clubs always because of my looks,' said Mr Allen, who went home with the Best Actor award this year.

Impersonators follow an ethical code - they don't pass themselves off for the real celebrity.

Still, Mr Allen said there are some occasions where he relents.

'A female cancer survivor grabbed me in Vegas and hugged me, saying I was her favourite actor,' he said.

'And she just got out of the hospital. I didn't want to ruin the moment for her, so I did not tell her I wasn't Sean.'

Ms Irion remembers when she was at a hotel waiting to be picked up by a limousine for an event when a couple of fans asked if she was Cher.



The real Dolly Parton - Pictures: International Celebrity Images, AP



Hello Dolly: Ms Sandy Anderson won the Country's Hottest Hitter Award for impersonating Dolly Parton.

'I told all of them that I was an impersonator going to an event,' she said.

'I could hear them debating with each other as to whether or not I was really Cher and lying about it. When the limo arrived, they rushed me and started screaming out, 'We love you Cher!', and they started singing the chorus to 'Believe'.'

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