

The Woman Who Seduced Superman Pamela Stephenson

Some of Pamela Stephenson's most endearing contributions to *Not The Nine O'Clock News* were her devastating send-ups of contemporary pop personalities. Those parodies of Kate Bush, Clare Grogan et al had such an effect that, for many viewers, the original subjects could never be viewed straightfaced again.

In Auckland for a few days recently Stephenson met the press, looking not a little like a pop person herself. Her black skirt and top were offset by bright pink earrings, necklace and one sock. The other was lime green. Her eye-catching blonde hair was fashionably teased and straggly. The general image of 'modest punk for the over-30s' was completed by her wide, heavily studded belt.

Stephenson's eyes sparkled when she recalled her pop-star satires. Asked whether the subjects themselves ever resented the treatment, Stephenson smiled, all sweetness and false innocence:

"I don't know. And I don't care." Then the demure tone is dropped and she laughs. "I do know someone who was with Kate Bush when she saw me doing her on television. Apparently Kate went..." and suddenly the mimic has returned in a twee little girl's voice, "Oh gosh, she does me so well. It's really great."

Even when *Not The Nine O'Clock News* parodied male pop performers, (Rowan Atkinson as Marc Almond for example) Stephenson was directly involved. She might have played the BBC-type interviewer, or maybe the screaming fan. But virtually always she was an important contributor to the writing. Those daft song lyrics — from heavy metal to Abba to Two-Tone — Stephenson wrote nearly all herself. It is not surprising that

PHOTO BY KERRY BROWN



she is proud of her association with the programme.

"Of all the sorts of things one could become famous for — being in a soap opera or something — probably the best was to do a satirical comedy programme. It gave me scope to do a lot of different characters, something where I could develop and show what I could do."

She is certain it's that diversity of role playing which has helped her make the crossover into movies.

"In the movie marketing area people aren't

going to say, 'OK we know she's that type'. What they say is, 'That's that woman who's done all those different people. I'm sure she can do this'. So it's a lucky thing."

Increasingly the movie offers are coming from America, especially after her success in *Superman III*. Stephenson is unphased by the observation that Americans often don't relate well to British humour, especially that of a topical, satirical nature.

"Having been born here in New Zealand and brought up largely in Australia I'm very aware of both sorts of comedy. Our movies and television have always had a balance of British and American humour. Because of my background I've not found it hard to do American films. An English person might not have found it so easy."

It was also this background which enabled her to complement the English Oxbridge-style humour of the males on *Not The Nine O'Clock News*.

"It was useful not to be part of that tradition because the girls I've known who've been through that are very restrained — you know, English roses, probably with money. So it's been refreshing being Antipodean because it means I was able to look freshly at, for example, famous people in Britain which I think helped the impersonations and things I did."

Nonetheless, Stephenson's brand of humour, with its taste for the extravagant and the outrageous, has often landed her in trouble. Take for instance her much-publicised speech at the British 'Woman of the Year' presentation. On that occasion she offended a large proportion of the audience and provoked a storm of protest.

"Well there I walked right into it because I thought that 'Woman of the Year' meant people who were young, used the same sort of language as I do and thought the same things as I do." She pauses, choosing her words carefully and slowly. "There were a lot of, um, very straight people indeed there." She stresses that there were women present who did enjoy her cholostemy joke, who came up and thanked her for breaking up a very stuffy lunch. "You could say it was an interesting experience."

The ability to shock has been with her ever since childhood.

"I was always a real little showoff. I think I was a painful child. I wanted to perform all the time. The last time I came back to New Zealand I was thirteen and mini skirts had just come in. I remember one of my aunts asking me how I stopped my stocking tops showing as my skirt was

so high." This desire to 'show off', to function at the limits of acceptability was, of course, a crucial element in her achieving such fame — though some see it as notoriety — on television.

"On *Not The Nine O'Clock News* we'd make a joke about something and lots of people would write to us and complain. If we didn't have a certain number of complaints every week we considered we weren't doing our job. I'm fascinated by the whole question of censorship. It is extraordinary that people like Mae West and Lenny Bruce were damned and persecuted in the past because they were outspoken and told the truth about different situations. Then in a matter of three to fifteen years it became totally acceptable. Censorship seems so crazy when you can't say certain words on television yet they do show people hacking each other to bits. There are boundaries, however. I'm shocked by certain things, violent cruelty for instance. That's the sort of thing that should be censored, not people trying to break down barriers about things we fear."

Because Stephenson's penchant for "showing-off" had never been confined to a stage or screen, her private life began to make headlines too. She found she was getting less and less privacy.

"I do understand how people think 'How can she complain about her lack of privacy when she takes her clothes off in a restaurant?' But that was a spoof to wind up a papparazzi who'd been bugging me for weeks. It was a nice way of dealing with him. He got such a fright when I did it he didn't know where to point his camera. His hands shook; he ran out of film. It was a joke."

Eventually, however, this approach backfired on her. The Fleet Street press, by now ready to salivate every time Stephenson appeared in public, were hounding her day and night. Imagine their ecstasy when they found that she was involved with Billy Connolly. Stephenson became very bitter.

"The problem was that when I got involved with Billy there were other people involved too: his children, his wife. The press just had no respect. That's why neither of us would talk for a very long time. It's different now we've got the baby. It's much more stabilised. But at that time I was very wild about it."

Billy Connolly, claims Stephenson, is one of only two "really great modern comics. I think he's a genius." She grins. "And that's said without any bias whatsoever. The other is Richard Pryor."

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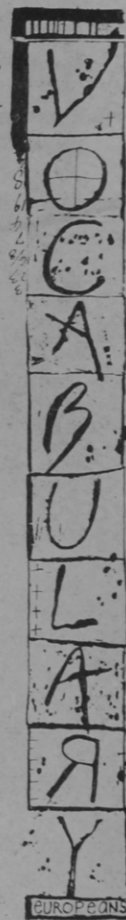
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