

CULTURE

His mirror has two faces

Just Out chats with a Portland cable access star and legendary drag queen

BY ORIANA GREEN

The most fascinating thing about this person is how disparate his two selves are. It's about as amazing as Clark Kent morphing into Superman.

When you meet Jerry, you encounter a mild-mannered, soft-spoken, attractive man, 5-foot-10 with sandy hair. He's articulate, has a degree in psychology from Portland State University and is the director of education for a trade school. He's a bit shy, and in his youth he could've passed for the all-American boy next door—as long as you didn't mind that he wore a dress on Halloween.

But give Jerry an hour and 15 minutes to transform himself, and he emerges from his cocoon like a gaudy tropical butterfly and becomes possessed by the spirit of Snickers LaBarr. A really big butterfly—when she slips her feet into seven-inch heels and adds at least another 12 inches of hair, plus double Ds out front, you have yourself one towering babe.

And to further twist her story, this glam gal grew up in a place where a new parka had to pass for glamour. "I was up there before Alaska got statehood," she explains. And not surprisingly, this accessory-obsessed clothes horse recalls every detail of the first drag outfit she wore to school as a fifth-grader on Halloween: "A pink shirtwaist dress with a belt and a huge hat."

In a territory known for attracting rugged individualists, young Snickers didn't get any guff for donning some gay apparel. She smiles as she remembers playing Barbies with her two younger sisters. Gee, come to think of it, if Barbie could be inflated to larger-than-life size, she'd bear a strong resemblance to the busty 7-foot-6 LaBarr.

So when did the Snickers persona emerge in physical form? "In college theater classes," she recalls. Then once she turned 21 she started going out to bars and clubs as Snickers.

And what about that name? "I didn't want it to be a real girl's name, and when I first started out I was quite a sight to look at, and people snickered—so that's how I got the name."

Eventually, she took up hairdressing as a profession, which helped polish her image. And once she had her act together, LaBarr began performing in Portland clubs, including a five-year stint at Darcelle's.

How does she get along with the other longtime drag stars in town? "I do everything I can to avoid being a bitchy drag queen. I'd much rather have a cocktail than a catfight," she affirms in her trademark dishy mode.

From the club scene it was an easy leap—even in stilettos—to her own show on Portland cable access television. Lady Elaine Peacock was her very first guest, and this month LaBarr begins her eighth season. She creates nine half-hour episodes of *The Snickers LaBarr Show* every year, and each one runs several times.

LaBarr has used her public platform to continue to entertain but also to help the community. She says the philosophy behind her show is that "I like to support anybody with a sincere cause. There is no aspect of life that members of our community are not involved with."

She routinely invites various gay and lesbian groups on the show to promote their events, and she gets involved outside the studio as well. She has served as hostess for the past two Portland pride parades, is a frequent celebrity auctioneer and is a tireless fund-raiser.

And LaBarr has more personal reasons for adopting the alter ego. "Part of the attraction is the larger-than-life aspect of being Snickers," she says. "It's not for fun per se; it's my time to be 'on'—it's more for gathering attention and shedding inhibitions."

She goes on to admit that Snickers is a

lot less inhibited than Jerry. In fact, Jerry has a long-term partner, interior designer Steven Foust, who is a big help behind the scenes of the show.

"He's the main set designer, does the lighting, runs a camera, is good at helping with costumes and those all-important accessories," she says with a chuckle. But turning serious, she confides her partner initially struggled with her role as a professional drag queen. "It took a long time to integrate Snickers into our relationship."

OK, what all the women want to know is, how does a slim, regular guy manage to create such spectacular cleavage? "The three P's: push, pull and powder," she reveals with a hearty laugh. (That's contour powder deftly applied to the chest.) "It gives the illusion of the Appalachians," she says, adding proud-

ly that she uses no duct tape but plenty of rubber cement and foam rubber.

When people have the gall to ask her age she simply tells them, "My age and my bust measurement are about the same."

So what's the worst thing about dressing in drag? No hesitation here—"The shaving...but I actually like walking in high heels and the aerial view it gives me."

LaBarr is pleased her show has been well-received by all kinds of viewers. "The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. I'm always surprised at the diversity of the audience that leave messages on my voice mail."

The first seven years have been a labor of love, requiring "lots of elbow grease and grease paint," she says. LaBarr has



recruited a volunteer staff and crew and sunk a small fortune into bugle beads and pumps—her gowns and wigs require their own not-so-small storage unit.

But this season, she expects her show will reach a much larger audience and potentially earn a profit, once it is picked up in December by AT&T's commercial cable system. At that point she'll be able to have sponsors and earn advertising revenue. And the best part is her show will have a regular time slot, which is not the case on cable access.

Her eighth season premieres Oct. 20 with an hour-long theme show she shot out at the Multnomah Greyhound Park. She takes her cameras behind the scenes to inform viewers about her latest cause, Greyhound rescue.

It makes for some rather unlikely photo ops, but LaBarr is a big dog lover. In fact, during her childhood her family raised sled dogs.

So what else does Snickers enjoy about doing the television show? "I like that once it's done it's always there—you're kind of immortalized," she explains. "It's also good for self-critique, though sometimes it's a little cringy to watch yourself when you wish you'd done something differently."

But for now, anyway, it's safe to say Jerry/Snickers wouldn't change much about the way his life has unfolded. This is someone who says he knew he was gay "in the delivery room—the hospital gown was just fine." Someone who appears to have a full life and enjoys his teaching career, his family and his hobbies: artwork, reading and writing. "If I hung up my wig for good I'd focus more on writing."

And how will Snickers know when it's time to fade away? "When I don't feel good in it, then it's time to get out of it." j



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