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Political faux: Washington's power players work hard to perfect an image — and so do their impersonators.

**By Sally Dadisman, Published:
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Two men in dark suits, hands to their earpieces, hurry through the crowd of partygoers. The guests — in town for a dental convention at the downtown Marriott — cast quizzical glances at them as they disappear up an escalator. When the men reappear, they're just as serious. But this time, they're not alone. Behind them is another man, about 6 feet tall, with a confident stance and wide grin, accompanied by an elegant woman. Immediately, eyes turn and whispers are traded.

Is that Barack Obama?

It's a mistake that Larry Graves counts on. The 56-year-old has the president's height and build, and his voice carries the same rhythmic quality. Both are left-handed. Graves makes slight alterations to his appearance — thickens his eyebrows, adds a mole, uses body wax to get his ears to protrude ever so slightly. But in the right suit, the right light, he causes double takes.

To be a celebrity impersonator, however, it's not enough to just resemble a famous figure, says Jan Kearney, owner of the McLean-based agency [Cast of Thousands](#). "Of course, that's a big help, but they have to have a kind of spark or personality that is similar in charisma or feeling that you would have if you were with the actual celebrity."

The District is a popular destination for professional conferences and corporate events, and Cast of Thousands hires impersonators out to groups that want to add a little pizzazz to their gatherings. The look-alikes will stand for photo ops, give speeches tailored to the event's theme, improvise conversations as they mingle with guests. Rates for an in-character appearance vary depending on the doppelganger and the event, and can be anywhere from \$2,000 to \$10,000 per performance.

These actors are the closest many visitors will ever get to being in the presence of our nation's biggest decision makers. Some event-goers get a thrill out of the chance to trick family members back home with photos of themselves with "famous people"; others take the opportunity to praise or criticize as though the impersonator were the real deal. "I think people kind of enjoy the joke of being fooled, even if it's for a few seconds," Kearney says.

She says Cast of Thousands draws from the city's active theater community to find versatile actors who can improvise and are eager for a side gig. Bob Heck is one of those people. "You'll always get work here," says Heck, whose oeuvre includes Washinton-friendly characters such as Bill Clinton and Larry King. "It's a smaller talent pool, so it's an advantage if you can do lots of things."

And although Brad Pitt and Lindsay Lohan look-alikes might rule in star-saturated cities such as New York and Los Angeles, impersonators in political roles — from Obama to the Clintons to the Roosevelts — have carved out a niche in Washington.

It was a gang of fourth-graders that got Graves — who lives in Gaithersburg and is a substitute teacher and model by day — into the business.

During the 2008 campaign, "I had half of them out at recess asking me for autographs," Graves says. "I hear at least three or four times a week: 'You look like Obama.' I just basically say thank you. It's a compliment; I have no problem with it."

Graves decided to put his striking resemblance to use; he found Cast of Thousands, which immediately started training him. More-seasoned impersonators showed him the ropes, and he carefully studied the president's political views and personality. For two weeks straight, he listened to speeches, focusing on Obama's pronunciation and vocal cadence. "I have to lower my voice a little bit, and I'll start talking in clips, and I get a little bit more serious," Graves says. "Because Mr. Obama can tell you the funniest joke in the world, but he's very controlled, very calculated."

At trade shows, corporate events and birthday parties, Graves will give prepared speeches and mingle with guests.

"The best part of the job, I think, is the look in people's eyes when they think I'm the actual thing," Graves says. "For the near second when you see the amazement in people's eyes,

there's nothing like it." But that doesn't mean everyone who sees him is a fan: Graves is used to being a punching bag for the president's detractors. "There's always people who ... want to take [their frustrations] out on me because I'm the closest they'll ever get to him," Graves says. "One woman was spewing vile at me. ... It wasn't profane, but it was vicious, so I just had to walk away."

On the job, he has to draw the line between what Graves thinks and what Obama would say. And with great power (or at least the impersonation of it) comes great responsibility.

"There are some people who would want me to do something very un-presidential — like holding up a sign saying 'pro-marijuana' — but I treat it with the most respect I can give it," Graves says. "You don't want to totally disrespect the office of the president, because it is the highest office in the land. If I'm walking around being totally disrespected, you kind of lose the shine, and that's very important in playing the president of the United States."

Graves has never come face to face with the man he impersonates. But back in the simpler days of the mid-1990s, before 9/11, reaching the big man was a little easier.

Bob Heck had started playing Bill Clinton in a variety show in 1992. After the election, Heck was hired by a public relations firm that wanted shots of Heck-as-Clinton in front of the White House. "But instead, being the subversive dude that I am, I said, 'Why don't we go in?'" he recalls.

No [Salahi-style maneuvering](#) was required: Heck asked a Secret Service agent if he could meet Clinton. The agent took his information, ran a quick background check and let Heck join the line to meet the newly minted president, who was greeting guests during his second day in office.

"I get off the line — they thought I was hired, and nobody stopped me," Heck says. "I was kissing babies; I was posing. So I got to the head of the line, and Clinton turns. I'll never forget his face. He looked bewildered."

After hearing who he was, Heck remembers Clinton responded: " 'Damn, that's good.' "

Clinton is just one of the characters played by the 58-year-old, who lives in Baltimore and was "Bob the Vid Tech" on a children's show of the same name on Maryland Public Television. An animated talker and avid performer, Heck easily goes from one recognizable voice to the next, proving perhaps that impersonation is more about what doesn't meet the eye. A self-proclaimed "jack-of-all-trades, master of none," he says his greatest talent is his ability to imitate voices. Although you wouldn't walk into a bar and mistake Heck for any of the people he impersonates, if you close your eyes and listen to him speak, you'd swear you were being questioned by Larry King himself or awaiting your fate in Donald Trump's boardroom.

Heck moves easily from one accent to another: a mother in Queens, N.Y. (where Heck grew up), to a quirky French inspector (Clouseau) — and finally a Southern boy from Arkansas.

“If you’ve got the voice, it’s like the soul, like it’s inhabited you,” Heck says. “I don’t study; it’s instant or nothing. There are impersonators who watch hours of videotape; I can pretty much hear it right off the bat, and then I’m ready to go.” But he puts effort, too, in perfecting Clinton’s look, especially his coif. “I had my wig custom-made in New York from the guys who do wigs for ‘Saturday Night Live,’ ” Heck says, noting that it has had to become whiter over the years. “I used to wear a nose prosthetic, but it hurt, and I was doing so much I had to stop wearing it.”

Though Clinton left office a decade ago, Heck still gets booked as the character for birthday parties, roasts and other events. “I try to make it theatrical, always,” he says. “Because every single performance is like a Broadway show in miniature.”

Theatricality is especially key to the non-political characters played by Liz Demery. If you ever show up to a red-carpet party and see her brandishing a microphone while wearing a leopard-print, sequined jacket, prepare to be critiqued.

Demery has spent the past four years performing as iconic red-carpet correspondent Joan Rivers. The 39-year-old owner of the improv venue the Comedy Spot in Arlington took over the role of Rivers from a fellow Cast of Thousands performer three years ago, learning Rivers’s raspy voice (which is “goat-like,” Demery explains) and other mannerisms.

“I’m borderline OCD about it,” Demery says of the physical transformation it takes to become Rivers. “You have to get the angles just right. It needs to look like [your eyes are] being pulled.”

And anyone who has seen Rivers playing “Fashion Police” knows she puts her makeup artist through a workout. “It almost is Kabuki makeup,” Demery says of the heavy liquid eyeliner, eye shadow, pale skin and red talons that make her look the part.

But while Rivers can be hypercritical of celebrities’ looks, Demery keeps her sharp tongue in check. “I’m not going to say anyone looks bad,” she says. “In general, Joan is everybody’s greatest fan.”

A natural comedian, Demery enjoys Rivers’s penchant for comic relief.

“There was one party where all the women were dressed to the nines and ... they were all huge Joan Rivers fans, so we were all celebrating Joan and being divas and strutting around,” Demery says. “The worst is when I feel like they just don’t want to play.”

“For me, Joan is just another character,” says Demery, who also gets work as historical figures

including Betsy Ross, Amelia Earhart and Rosie the Riveter. “And the nice thing is everyone is already in on the joke. And the joke can mean that they love Joan or they hate Joan. However they want to act, Joan will accept it.”

On NPR: [More stories from our celebrity impersonators](#)

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