BUBBLY TELLY STAR GOES ALL OUT TO MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION, BUT...

Boris is a bit of a flop

THE MIKE WARD INTERVIEW

Debra Stephenson

IMPRESSIONIST & ACTOR

DOUBLE TROUBLE: Debra rested her versions of late celebs like Cilla

GAME FOR LAUGH: Mimic Debra stars in hit TV show The Imitation Game and is also currently on tour

Pictures: HUMPHREY NEMAR

HEAVEN help Boris Johnson if this is what he's like to interview.

"Brrrmmmmmppph!" he's going. "Braaaagh! Braaaaaaghh!"

Just as well, then, that this is not the real Boris I'm talking to, here in a dressing room at Television Centre.

It's the real Debra Stephenson – impressionist, actress and star of ITV panel show The Imitation Game.

That noise she's just made is the result of me asking if the former Foreign Secretary is part of her act.

She could have just said no, but that would have been dull. Instead, she's treated me to this fantastically barmy demonstration of why, for now at least, he very much isn't.

Her Boris is clearly a work in progress. No matter, though. Debra has plenty of genuinely sharp impressions in her repertoire.

Which is fortunate, bearing in mind her current tour is called Night Of 100 Voices. The snag is actually knowing which to rest. "It's tricky, for example, when some of these stars have died," she tells me.

"People like Cilla and Brucie and Victoria Wood. I did leave them out for a while. It felt too awkward. But they've found their way back in.

"The time feels right. We all loved them, so now it just creates this feeling of warmth."

Tricky

To accompany our chat, Debra is happily posing for photos, although a little wary of doing any in character, pulling faces. "It's tricky for me not to just look like a nutter," she says.

I suggest her job must constantly throw up problems like this. Do strangers pester her to do impressions, for example, as she's going about her everyday business?

"Sometimes people will say, 'Go on, do this person,' and I'll think, 'Oh, all right,' and it's a laugh.

"In my daughter's school playground, for example, I'll sometimes do that for the children. She might say, 'Hey, mummy, do Amanda Holden!' That's fun. But not if I were in the doctor's waiting room, say, and someone yelled, 'Go on, do Cilla!'

Debra developed her talent for mimicry from a young age, growing up in Hull.

"My dad was always doing impressions of cartoon voices: Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, etc. I guess I learned through him."

Drama school gave her focus, plus the confidence to take on straight roles.

"A lot of people actually know me better from Bad Girls (Debra played psycho Shell Dockley in ITV's early-2000s prison drama) or Corrie (as Frankie Baldwin, wife of Bradley Walsh's Danny).

Talking of the latter, does she have fond memories of Weatherfield? "It's all a bit of a blur, really, Mike. It feels such a long time ago, like a dream, just vague snippets I remember."

Something that does stick in her memory was competing on BBC1's singing contest Comic Relief Does Fame Academy, back in 2005.

"Craig Revel Horwood said I sounded like Minnie Mouse!" Debra recalls, seemingly still a bit miffed.

"Funnily enough, I've worked with Craig recently and he's lovely. But that did seem cruel, especially as nobody really likes the sound of their own voice, do they? Maybe that's another reason I do other people's."

The Imitation Game, where she's a rival captain to Rory Bremner, adds a competitive edge to her routine, albeit a good-natured one. Is it hard not to compare her impressions to those of other mimics?

"Well, you want to make sure yours isn't worse," she admits. "But in the end it's just about what's funniest. There's no right and wrong."

So are there times when she finds it hard to switch off? Does she occasionally find she can't stop being, say, Lorraine Kelly?

"Well, my husband James is Scottish, and sometimes at home I do go into a bit of that..." (adopts Glaswegian accent). "I become this wee character and I can't let it go!"

Before we end our chat, I ask if Debra could maybe teach me an accent. I point out I have absolutely no ear for them. She accepts my challenge. We try Scouse.

We try it again. We give up. I'm hopeless.

But she's way too nice to poke fun. In fact, she's probably one of the most easy-going, unassuming people I've ever interviewed.

"I feel so self-absorbed, talking about myself for this long," she actually says as we're finishing up.

"I'm really sorry. I suddenly get this thing where I think, oh dear, I'm just talking about me.

"I have to remind myself that's the whole point!"

● *The Imitation Game, Sunday, ITV, 10.05pm. For tour dates go to debrastephenson.co.uk*

DEBRA'S FAVOURITES

TV SHOW: Frasier
FILM: The Sound Of Music
SONG: Something (The Beatles)
COMEDIAN: Jo Brand
APP: Babel. I'm learning Italian.
BOOK: Anne Of Green Gables
CITY: Hull
HOLIDAY DESTINATION: Disney World, Florida
SPORTSPERSON: Nicola Adams
FOOD: Avocado on toast. Or Bird's Eye Potato Waffles
DRINK: Rooibos tea with almond milk. Or sloe gin.
GADGET: My stove-top coffee percolator
ANIMAL: Biscuit, our chocolate Labrador.