Swimming

Fritzi Cohen’s big fish story is no exaggeration.

If it’s summer in New England, you’ve got to be thinking Jaws. Especially if it’s the summer of 2012, when Universal Studios is behind a monster clambake on Martha’s Vineyard from August 9-12 called “JAWSFEST: The Tribute.” Sponsored by MV Promotions Networks, the event will celebrate Universal’s 100th anniversary as well as the cast and crew of this frighteningly successful film.

While the late Roy Scheider, Robert Shaw, and Jaws author Peter Benchley will sadly miss the BBQ, the event will still be thronged by well-wishers and fans hoping for glimpses of original cast members Richard Dreyfuss (Hooper), Susan Backlinie (Chrissie, the most famous night-swimming shark attack victim ever), Lee Fierro (Mrs. Kintner), and possibly Maine’s Fritzi Cohen (under the stage name of Fritzi Jane Courtney), who made the most of her part as a selectwoman in the fictional town of Amity. She reprised her role as Mrs. Taft
With the Sharks

I’d just been working on *Lenny* at Charles Playhouse in Boston when I got the call to audition. I was exhausted. I asked what it was about. “A big fish.” Who’s directing it? “Some kid.”


Faced with tourism revenues in free fall because of great white shark attacks, Cohen is memorable in juicy scenes where the audience sees her staring into the public-relations equivalent of the abyss.

“When I auditioned for Spielberg for a role in *Jaws*, he was 24,” Cohen remembers, “just at the beginning of his incredible career. He saw every actor personally and couldn’t have been friendlier.

“I was about to read from a script handed to me, when he waved it aside and said, ‘Let’s do an improvisation instead. You’re an Islander and this guy (another actor with me) isn’t. He wants to rent the Katharine Hepburn suite in your hotel. Who does he think he is? Okay, you know the attitude. Go!’

“And so we did, and both of us got the parts simply on Steve’s gut feeling that we could do it. Our month’s work on Martha’s Vineyard was no glamorous picnic. It was freezing on the beach in May. In the water, it was supposed to be July!”

During shooting, Cohen impulsively told the young director, “I have a feeling you are going to have a dynamite career.” To which he replied, “From your mouth to God’s ear!” The rest, as they say, is history.” Spielberg also told Cohen, “You sound just like my Aunt Sophie.”

When Bruce the shark begins devouring the locals at Oak Bluffs Ocean Park, today’s viewers can clearly see Cohen at work and channeling a Maine sensibility when she tells Chief and Mrs. Brody, “You’re not born here, you’re not an Islander. That’s it.”

As shooting continued, a New England cliquishness ran through the entire cast. “There was a little gazebo on the beach,” Cohen says, “where Richard Dreyfuss, three crew members, and I’d meet to play poker. Peter Benchley walked by, and Richard asked him to pick up a pack of cigarettes. I said to Peter later, ‘He didn’t even say...”
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please.’ But Peter said, ‘I’m not about to teach him courtesy at this point in his life.’”

Of course, jaws isn’t the only big fish Cohen’s caught. Among her co-stars across the years is Joan Crawford. No wonder she didn’t blink at the prospect of working with a shark.

CRAWFORD NOTCH
“I wasn’t a bit surprised by Tina Crawford’s novel, Mommie Dearest, about her mother, Joan,” Cohen says. “I knew Tina years ago when we were both working at the Kennebunkport Playhouse, and I worked briefly with Joan at Poland Spring in ‘Same Picture, Different Frame,’ an episode of the television series Route 66.

“At the time Ms. Crawford was married to the Pepsi Cola magnate and she was Lady Bountiful, dispensing Pepsi to the peons on the set. I played a librarian in a scene with Patrick O’Neal.

“The scenario is that he sees me and remembers Crawford in the same setting years before. There’s a dissolve and I become Joan in his mind. I’d had my hair done, lots of makeup, the works. The word came down that Ms. Crawford needed no competition—I want the excitement taken out of her make-up’—so my makeup was removed and my hair was pulled back off the face and dowdy. Only then was the star pacified, without ever saying one word of any kind to me. Oh well, the residuals keep coming!”
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