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Of Mouse & Men

In the Tunnel World beneath our feet, David Greenlee builds new legends of "Beauty & the Beast."

By MARGARET A. BAROSKI

The trick with *Beauty & the Beast* is that the title refers to Catherine as the beauty and Vincent as the beast. But the truth of the matter is that the beauty is what's underground, what's between Vincent and Catherine, and what's between these other people and the beast is this oligarchy on top, and this world that makes violence possible," David Greenlee explains. The young, blond, elfin actor who plays Mouse in the TV fairy tale/fantasy approaches *Beauty & the Beast* with the intensity he feels it deserves.

"I love the show's politics, to put it bluntly," he says. "For a long time, I thought I was the only person who thought the show had any politics or social statement because we were doing fantasy. At first, I thought *Beauty & the Beast* was a dumb idea. I thought, 'Linda [Hamilton] must have lost her mind,' but this is the kind of show that anybody would do, if they had any sense."

Greenlee's character is one of the tunnel denizens, a teenager who speaks in telegraphic English and can build or fix anything. He is, Greenlee says, grinning cockily, "much like myself in some ways. Mouse is what I would be if I was really lucky. All my best points are Mouse." But Mouse is not Greenlee. "My sister Tracy is one of the people I think about a great deal when I'm acting Mouse, because Tracy has always been able to take a machine apart no matter what, since we were little, even if she didn't know what it was. She would put it back together and fix it without knowing how she fixed it," he explains.

Although the breakdown sent out to casting directors specified "someone around 30 years old and dark, and very different from myself," Greenlee explains, "George R.R. Martin [*Beauty & the Beast* writer and producer], my hero, and Tom Wright, one of our prime directors, asked me to come in for it, which I didn't know when I got there. The reading was very strange because of Mouse's syntax, everything all cut up. I read some dialogue that eventually was cut from Mouse's first episode, 'Shades of Grey,' and I was praying and sweating because there was some stiff competition for the role. I left saying, 'If I didn't nail that, I'm really going to be upset.' It was only for one episode, but when I read the script, I said, 'This character will be back, if it gets in the right hands.'"

Now that Greenlee has portrayed Mouse several times, coping with the way the character talks is not a major problem. "It's just that I have to really concentrate on the words as written. Improvising is just out of the question, and it's difficult to get the

Where does Mouse hang out when he's not seen on the show (or in photos from it)? Well, Greenlee the actor attends SF cons, but he would like it if the writers explored what his character does on his days off.

meaning through. *Once*, shooting a scene with Vincent and Father, we did it four or five times, and they said, 'Print!' and I said 'Wait!' I had just realized what it meant, and I didn't think it sounded that way at all. But much of it is up to me."

He has more trouble with Mouse's age. "I've played him as an adult, and they say he's 16." Greenlee laughs maniacally. "There were people who were bald with beards reading for this part, so I just played him like an adult, but then," he adds with an air of teenage hopelessness, "people react like he's a kid, so there's nothing I can do about that. I would say he's probably 17, but Mouse hasn't been counting either."

Mouse Traps

A 25-year-old, self-styled hippie/beatnik/bohemian who reads Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, and whose roots "go back to the pre-Woodstock generation," Greenlee was born in Newport Beach, California, and trained at South Coast Repertory Theater, which was part of the original theater movement of the 1960s. He attended Orange Coast College, where he "dabbled" in theater and treated the college "like my playground, which was fun," he says, reminiscing. "I was very serious growing up, very academic. I was good at almost everything unless it involved numbers, and then I could force myself. I was a science whiz for a while. Later, I was into words and interested in the law, but," Greenlee's voice rises eerily, "not for long!"

His mad-scientist sort of laugh echoes through the room. "I spent a lot of time on the left brain, and then I started acting, and it all fell apart. Acting was the first thing I was good at that wasn't in a book, so I

Photo: Margaret Baroski



just couldn't say no."

Greenlee also couldn't say no to four seasons as nerdy Dwight Mendenhall on *Fame*, his "claim to fame," as he redundantly and deliberately phrases it. "Dwight Mendenhall has been probably the most rewarding, certainly, in terms of career," he says, "but what I had the most fun doing was Toby Ross in 'The Toys of Caliban' episode of *The Twilight Zone*. I was a retarded psychic who could materialize things. That was fun because it was crawling around on the floor, slobbering and rolling my eyes doing a wonderful script with Richard Mulligan."

Being known for *Fame* has made Greenlee fairly casual about being recognized for *Beauty & the Beast*. "I've been famous for a while now, although most people, when they think famous, think Mick Jagger. There's a concept that if you go out,

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you cannot get a moment's rest, and that's not how it is. You must be *really* famous before you can't walk to the drugstore."

Fame fans sometimes unnerve him, he notes. "You're walking down the street and suddenly 12 teenage kids are circling you; you can't move, they're being nice, but it's..." he trails off, remembering. "People from *Beauty & the Beast* don't seem to be that way at all. It's very respectful; it's very sweet. The show deserves it—people give you the same sort of attitude that people in the tunnels give to others. The show hits people right in the heart; it goes to the dreams."

Beauty & the Beast apparently has Greenlee's heart, and on the subject of Vincent, he is eloquent. "He's such a beautiful character, and for Mouse to be around him so much is wonderful. Vincent allows people's stoppers to be opened up, because looking the way he looks and being the way he is lets people say, 'I could do *this*.' Mouse probably can't write, but he could probably build the Hoover Dam, and it's knowing

Vincent that has let that happen, the extreme amount of work that Vincent has put in on Mouse to make him a part of society." A sweet smile lights up on Greenlee's impish features as he sums up the relationship: "Mouse loves Vincent very much."

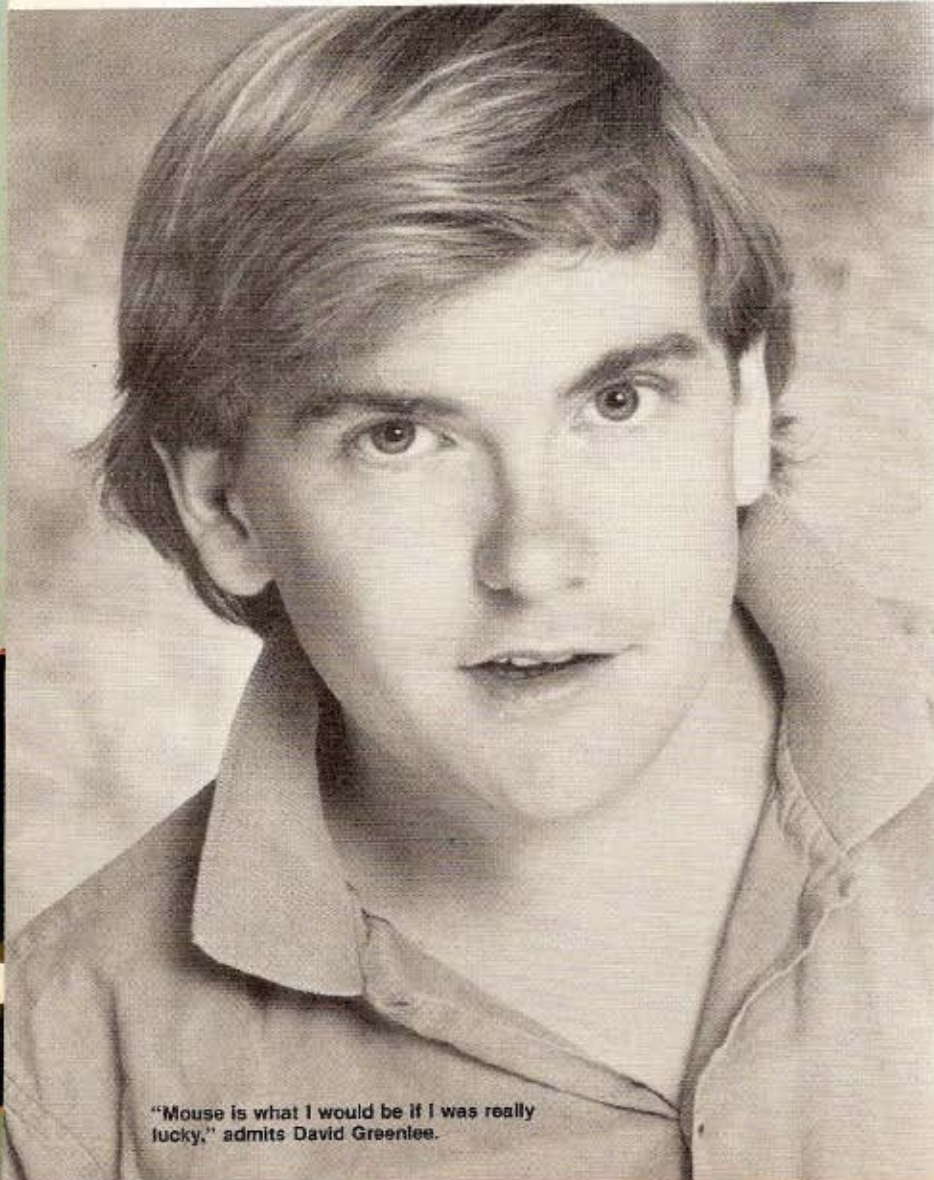
Greenlee points out, however, that Mouse and Vincent didn't always share such a profound relationship. "We've found out that Mouse has been living in the tunnels since he was very small, I would say about six, and he was an orphan for years before that, and very used to living on his own," Greenlee explains. "When he found the tunnels, he didn't speak to anybody down there for a long time. Nobody even saw him, they just saw him dashing around and so they named him Mouse. Eventually, Vincent captured him—Vincent's a cat so he caught the mouse and tamed him. Mouse was kicking and screaming, and had to be held and tied. Vincent and Father basically raised him, but it's Vincent who is his hero."

The show's writers get top marks from Greenlee. "George R.R. Martin—viscerally, I sense much of the show in him, and in Ron Koslow, the show's creator. They're the ones that I get the show's spirit from. I like George's writing the best. I worked with his writing on *The Twilight Zone*, and it was very good there, too. The 'Fever' episode was excellent as well. The writing has a very high quality, and it's difficult because of the fantasy level and that romance, especially on Linda and Ron [Perلمان]; it really puts demands on their acting skills to do lines like 'Vincent, I've never been so afraid in my life. I could see the whirlpool of darkness...'

"Roy Dotrice has many lines that on paper look like honey and syrup and almost gothic. I read them and moan, but then I don't even notice when they say them, because they're very talented actors. It's great that they can take something to that level."

"That level" is what is called "high concept," and Greenlee attempts to explain the term. "It has to do with not being about a family in a house, something where you've invented another world. With *Fame*, I could just show up wearing whatever I wanted. The show wasn't that different, particularly—my character was, because I was playing a nerd—but with *this*, every little thing has to be right. I've even started wearing my crystal on an old piece of leather instead of on metal because the metal picks up [on camera]. You're creating a place and time that couldn't be down the street; it has to be in space, or tomorrow, or Shangri-La. I find *Beauty & the Beast* very plausible. My early training was in Shakespeare, and this has really been the first time that my personal acting style has fit in. There's a romance about *Beauty & the Beast*, a classicality that's bigger than mine, and that's what I like about it."

Greenlee has no qualms about approaching the writers on behalf of his character. "They're sensitive writers, and any sensitive writer is going to listen a little bit. If something came along that made me



"Mouse is what I would be if I was really lucky," admits David Greenlee.

very uncomfortable, I would go and talk about it, but I can't imagine these particular writers and producers harming the character in any way. So far, they've been more inventive than I could hope for—and I have been thinking about pitching them a script idea or two. I've been working on a story with a friend of mine, not so much for Mouse, as it is for me to write."

The actor does have his own ideas about how Mouse should develop. "I would like to see some more things happen with Jamie, who has been a little love interest. She's as calm and sweet as can be, and when you have two leads who haven't kissed..." he leaves the sentence unfinished, obviously intrigued and amused by the thought.

"I would like that. And I would like to see Mouse start dealing with his responsibilities within the community, because there's a firm social structure down there; there are things that *must* be done, and people's talents as they're needed need to be used. When you need somebody thrown across a room, it's good to have Vincent, and when you need a tunnel dug, or if there's a mechanical emergency, Mouse is very necessary. But never having had a real up-top life, he doesn't have much understanding of that. He understands when it's life or death, but when Father's saying, 'Six months from now, there's going to be *this*, and therefore we need to do *that*,' it's really hard for Mouse to get responsible and project into the future and actually be a part of the community."

Pondering for a moment, he adds, "There are two women who take care of the children; I would like to see some of that. I would like to see where Mouse has been, and maybe even a friend, somebody close to Mouse's age."

Mouse Tales

A bona fide science-fiction and fantasy fan, Greenlee says he's also a first generation *Star Trek* fan. "I've been a Trekkie since Trekkies were born," he boasts. "I met Leonard Nimoy, DeForest Kelley and William Shatner at my cousin's wedding when she married one of the cameramen from the original *Star Trek* in the first season. They were the first professional actors I ever met, or saw. I was small—Nimoy's kneecaps were at eye level!"

He reads science-fiction short stories, watches science-fiction television, loves movies like *Willow* and admires Arthur C. Clarke, "one of the most brilliant minds on the planet," whom he once met on the set of *Fame* when *2010* was being shot next door. "I've always read and watched science fiction. It's creating science, and for me, art and technology are real close. When either of them are really good, they come really close together. Magic, they all look like magic whenever they do."

He watches the magic of *Beauty & the Beast* with friends and his black cat, Solstice, in his home in downtown Hollywood, an apartment building which he describes as "crawling with actors of all

sorts, artists and writers, the perfect combination of dorm life and big-cityness." He tries to decide if Mouse fits into the show, worrying that the noisy, yelling character is disrupting to the tone set by the other actors, for whom he has nothing but the highest praise. "Everyone in the cast is so extraordinarily talented. With Linda, it's really nice because I've known her before, so she's like a pal. I had a lot to do with Linda in the first episode I did, and I took some risks I probably wouldn't have if I hadn't known her. She's one of the most beautiful women in television and movies with or without makeup. Ron Perlman is just top-flight. Roy Dotrice is state-of-the-art. He's a sweetheart-and-a-half. Anybody that talented, who will work so hard on a crutch, with a broken hip, he's my hero," Greenlee confides, revealing, "I keep stepping on Roy's feet! It's awful—I hope I can stop!"

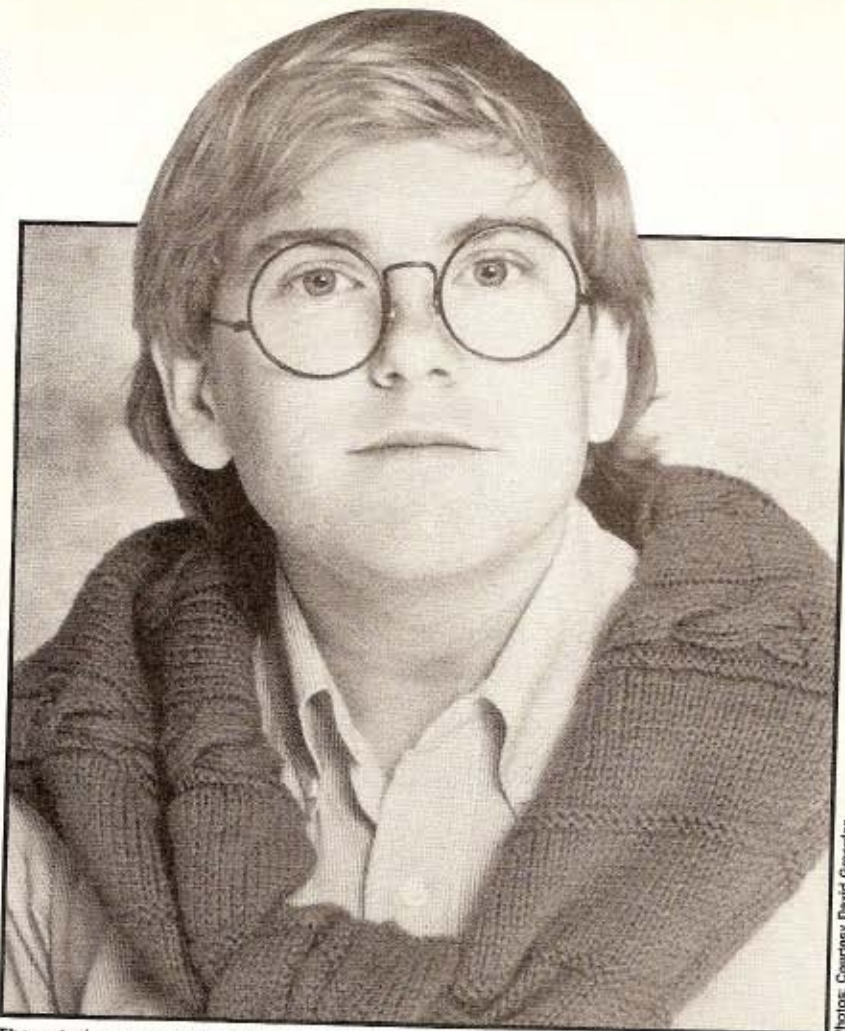
His visibility as Mouse has led to other TV work. "I got a lot of work when I started *Beauty & the Beast*. As a matter of fact, it caused some conflicts, so I had to juggle and didn't get to do one of the *Beauty* episodes because of another commitment. I did *21 Jump Street*, *Mr. Belvedere* and *It's Gary Shandling's Show*, which is more fun

than a barrel of monkeys. But, hey! I have the best season of my life *ahead* of me!"

Beauty & the Beast is fun, says Greenlee, "even though it's dirty, filthy work. I come home dirtier than my father, who built houses for a living. I take two-hour showers sometimes, because I'm the dirtiest on the show. When there are three people paid to throw dirt at you all day, there's not much you can do but get dirty."

He laughs as he insists that "we never make any mistakes," but he will admit to one bit of humor during filming. "Roy Dotrice has a habit of calling my character 'Moose' about one in 10 times, and that has created many good outtakes. Nothing *really* silly has happened, which is extraordinary, considering the ridiculous things we're doing." The reason for that, he says, is that "there's a really good camaraderie, a great deal of seriousness. *Beauty & the Beast* requires commitment and concentration."

Then, David Greenlee grins. "Every day is incredibly strange there. Anytime you walk in and see someone with Vincent's face, wearing Ron's clothes, leaning back in a chair and talking to his agent on the phone, you rub your eyes and say, 'What was in the punch?!'"



Photos: Courtesy David Greenlee

The actor's own youthful looks have led to confusion about Mouse's age, but Greenlee maintains he's playing the character as an adult.