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Beast makes a mockery of the naysayers

- by Kenneth R. Clark - media writer

It takes four hours to apply the heavy makeup that turns Ron Perlman into Vincent, the leonine, half-human creature who roams the subway tunnels and hidden caverns beneath Manhattan in CBS "Beauty and the Beast," but New Yorkers, weaned on theater and surprised by nothing, can see through almost any disguise.

Perlman, who was not wearing makeup when he attended a play on Broadway not long ago, discovered that fact when he decided to take a subway instead of a cab to his Greenwich Village apartment.

"As I walked down the platform, I was aware of people making way for me, staring and whispering," he said with a rueful chuckle. "Then, just as I was about to board the train, I heard a guy behind me whisper to a woman, 'I wonder if he's gonna get in it or on it.'"

Vincent, of course, never pays his fare when he rides the subway. He simply clings to the rear of the last car like a huge bat as he races to the weekly rescue of Catherine [Linda Hamilton], the beautiful assistant district attorney with whom he shares a Gothically burning, unrequited love. That Perlman should be so widely recognized, even without his beautiful trappings, proves how fallible the professional prophets of television can be.

Well before the premiere of "Beauty and the Beast" [7 pm Fridays on CBS, Ch. 2] every one of New York's major advertising agencies, who must advise their clients early in the season where to put their money for best ratings and most desirable demographics, branded the series the flop of the season. Memory of that left Perlman gloating.

"It's totally original, and they had nothing to compare it to, so they didn't give it a chance," he said. "That feels particularly sweet now that it's pulling a good share of the audience and has been renewed for next season. Advertising is a very derivative art form, and there's something intrinsically dishonest about people who do that for a living," he said.

Perlman said the CBS version of the venerable fairy tale about the noble, gentle-hearted but thoroughly dangerous man-beast who falls in love with a beautiful woman in "with a tip of the hat" to the Jean Cocteau version, which is a screen classic of living gargoyles, enchanted forests and romanticism.

"We can never re-create that picture, but we can try to metaphoric ways of creating our own version of what he did," Perlman said. "In Cocteau, they're taking a lovely stroll in the gardens and suddenly his ears perk up and he sees a deer running off in the distance. He takes off to hunt, which is a beautiful impulse on his part--something he has no control over. When he returns, his hands are shaking, which was the symbolic way of saying the human part of his is ashamed that she saw that."

"There was a moment in our first episode where Catherine is being pursued by these people who are about to take her life, and the beast breaks through the wall and none of them are left standing. When he finishes mauling the seedy characters, he looks at her and the ferocity turns to shame. It was a way of finding a metaphoric equivalent of what Cocteau did."

Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the metaphoric of Gothic romance in which the storyline operates, women comprise the vast majority of the audience for “Beauty and the Beast.” Perlman offered a possible reason for the phenomenon.

“I believe Vincent probably is the fantasy lover for the average, basic woman,” he said. “He’s somebody who offers himself and all of his powers--and with Vincent, those are formidable and many--and asks for absolutely nothing in return. There’s something very mythic about that. What woman wouldn’t want to have her own, personal beast who’s there to love her, to read her poetry, to protect her, to guide her spiritually when she’s floundering, and who asks for nothing back?”

A lot of women, apparently. Perlman said their fan mail indicates a loyalty over which the ad agencies well might be scouring themselves for not detecting its potential.

“I get mail from people who never wrote a fan letter before,” he said. “It is incredibly literate and well-written and a lot of them say they don’t watch television at all, but they haven’t missed a single episode of ours.”

They might be even more grateful for an answer to the one question that must bedevil any fan of the show: Who, or what, is Vincent, and where did he come from? The question brings a conspiratorial twinkle to Perlman’s eyes.

“Vincent doesn’t know his own origins,” he says. “He was found, an abandoned child, by someone who brought him to the man he addresses as ‘Father.’ I have a feeling that before the series bites the dust, we’ll find out. If ratings are beginning to flag at the end of the seventh season, we’ll have a ‘Vincent’s Origins’ episode.”...

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