

Will Hollywood Ever Take Him at Face Value?

Though he's thrilled with his success on Beauty and the Beast, Ron Perlman worries that he'll never get the chance to play more realistic parts.

- by Mary Murphy

Ron Perlman is anxious, nervous as he walks through the crowded Manhattan streets, his breath coming in frosty bursts in the cold November air. He shoulders his powerful 6-foot-2 frame past scurrying New Yorkers. For the first time since *Beauty and the Beast* premiered on CBS in September, he is about to meet representatives of almost every major publication in the United States—more than 30 skeptical TV reporters ready to judge him at a moment's notice. The last time he met with the press it was an unmitigated disaster. "Most of the questions were of a negative bent," says Perlman. They ridiculed the show's concept. They confronted the star: "Do you think America is ready for this?" Perlman defended his series by quoting Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. That made the reporters press even harder. "You're acting like you have a cure for cancer," one reporter told Perlman. Finally, Ron Perlman lost his cool. "I think you are missing the boat, pal," he shot back vehemently. "Everybody put their pens down," Perlman said later. "They thought fisticuffs were going to erupt at any time."

Now Perlman has to face the press again. He smooths his jacket, tugs at his tie. At last he arrives at the "21" Club where the meeting is to take place. The waiters smile. The hatcheck girl speaks to him. "I love you," she says as he whisks by. It was the first indication that today everything was going to be different. The mood had changed. Two life-size pictures of Ron Perlman were on the wall. Reporters were shaking his hand. Questions were friendly—"People asked me how it felt to be on a hit show," Perlman says. "Suddenly, there was a feeling in the room that we were a hit." Two hours later, when he left the "21" Club, Ron Perlman knew the meeting had been a fantastic success. He came dancing out into the New York streets feeling exhilarated.

For the first time in his career, Ron Perlman is being recognized as himself. He is thrilled by the accolades, and yet all the recognition has shaken him, forced him to wonder about the gap in his life—how he has been a star without being a star, a respected but anonymous performer, a man who has been hidden behind makeup in his most successful roles: Salvatore, the hunchback, in *"The Name of the Rose,"* and a prehistoric man in *"Quest for Fire."*

But those days are over. Playing the Prince Charming-like Beast has changed that. Although the series is considered no more than a cult hit, there is an excellent chance that more people have seen Ron Perlman in any one of its episodes than have seen him in the sum of all of his previous roles. Vincent, the Beast, has given Perlman, at 37, what so many actors before him have yearned for—not merely fame but that magical, instantaneous gift and curse: public recognition. And Perlman is scared. "You feel vulnerable when you are not invisible," he says. And he's having to adjust.

"All these years you act and you are anonymous, you are just another person, and suddenly you are being recognized right and left," Perlman says. "It's like a drug, it's habit-forming, to base your image of yourself on the outside world, on what you are getting from the press. It's total fantasy, and the minute you take it seriously you are in serious trouble. It's just not real."

Ironically, the subject of Vincent, Perlman's torment and pleasure, was originally anathema to him. Even before he was offered the job, Perlman issued an edict to his manager, Erwin More, that he would not take another role in which he had to hide behind makeup. The ordeals of *"Quest for Fire"* and *"The Name of the Rose"* were enough. "I had explored everything there was to explore," he says dryly, "about sitting in a makeup chair for five hours a day."

And yet three days after the edict, he received a call from More. "Are you sitting down?" Perlman recalls More saying. "I have this project on my desk called *Beauty and the Beast.*"

Perlman was angry. "I told him I didn't even want him to mention it again, that I would not even look at the script. I said, 'Just leave me alone.' So Erwin, who just hangs on my every word," he jokes,

"dropped the script on my doorstep. Before I had even finished the second act, I called Erwin and said, 'What do I have to do to play this guy?'"

The guy is Vincent, half man, half beast, a mysterious character who lives below the streets of New York City. His face, fangs and flowing hair suggest a lion, but his soothing romantic voice suggests a poet. For a damsel at home, the man behind this crippling guise could be the white knight that she has always dreamed of, a man whose words and deeds promise warmth, safety and solace. He's a romantic hero in the most old-fashioned sense: his love affair with Catherine Chandler (Linda Hamilton) is unconsummated and appears likely to stay that way. And this has turned him, to his amazement, into a sex symbol.

"More than 95 percent of the people who write to me are women," says Perlman during a break in shooting on location in Los Angeles's Chinatown. "Their letters are filled with sexual fantasies. One woman has written to me nine times, each time it's seven or eight pages. She's created a whole scenario. . . . Women say that Vincent is the ultimate fantasy lover, someone who asks nothing in return but gives 110 percent. He evokes deep unconscious feelings of longing for a connection to someone who understands things on a very emotional level."

A few weeks later, he is standing on a sound stage in full prosthetic makeup, which changes the structure of his jaw into the soft, curved, grotesque lines that we know as Vincent. The scene takes place in a cave, and to create the atmosphere, special-effects people blow ice-cold smoke into the cave through huge hoses. Everyone except Perlman puts on a gas mask. "This stuff can be dangerous," he says, "but I can't put a mask over my makeup." When they are ready to shoot, Perlman dives into smoke, lying on the floor as he waits for a cue. Suddenly Vincent emerges, snarling and growling and attacking his foes. "I'd give that growl a 25," he says laughingly during the break. "It was really menacing."

On the set, his co-workers are impressed with the intimacy and nobility Perlman projects, given the role's strenuous technical demands. "You know it takes real psychological strength to lie there while somebody works on your face," says creator and supervising producer Ron Koslow. "A lot of people couldn't handle it."

Perlman now speaks of Vincent in the most reverential tones. He is almost insulted when someone suggests that Vincent—like ALF—might someday appear in public at a party, say. "Never," says Perlman. "I will never take him out. He has so much heart, so much soul. Playing him is calling upon incredible introspection on my part, calling upon what is best about humanity. This guy is so romantic and heroic and poetic, it's like playing Hamlet every week. This may just be the greatest role of my life."

Where did Ron Perlman get this inner depth that he conveys each week? Where did he nurture this gentle side? Playing fairy tales is the last thing Perlman ever dreamed of, growing up in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, the child of a radio and television repairman and a mother who works for the New York City Department of Health. It was a world that knew struggle and survival—a world of hilly streets populated in the 1930s and '40s by refugees from Nazi Germany. It's the same section of New York where Henry Kissinger came as a teen-ager. From these humble roots Vincent now emerges. "The amount that he has had to overcome in terms of his physical shortcomings and the heights that he has soared as a result of overcoming them was very moving to me. It was a pain I lived with daily, a pain of adolescence, that made Vincent easier for me. I know how he feels," says Perlman. "I was sensitive. . . and a pretty unhandsome type. I certainly knew that in the beauty-contest format of life I was falling short. If I was going to take a special place in life, it was not going to be based on how I looked."

So like so many others, Perlman turned to acting in high school as a way to become other people, a way to gain acceptance. His talent was immediately recognized and he continued acting at Lehman College in New York City and at the University of Minnesota, where in 1973, he earned a Master's degree in theater arts. Even then the prospect of becoming a professional actor scared him. "I had gotten to know a few actors," says Perlman, "and the life style seemed really insidious—they were very self-absorbed."

Like Vincent, he conquered his fears of stepping into the limelight. A year later he was hired by

the Classic Stage Company in New York City to perform in plays by Shakespeare, Chekhov and Pinter, among others. "Discovery is what I was after," says Perlman.

Discovery is what he got. In 1976, Perlman was picked from 1000 actors by Tom O'Horgan, the Broadway director who had done "Hair" and "Jesus Christ Superstar," to star in a two-character play called "The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria." He starred with Alexis Smith in the O'Horgan-directed regional tour of "Pal Joey." "I was one of these actors who landed wonderfully artistic projects once a year and then just sat around because nobody ever thought of me as a commercial property," says Perlman. "I never did soaps. I never did commercials. I tried, but I never did the things actors do while they are waiting for the good stuff; I only did the good stuff."

Then Hollywood beckoned with the role in "Quest for Fire." But his first brush with the West Coast power brokers nearly ended his career. "I got a tremendous amount of feedback during the filming from people like Sherry Lansing [then president of 20th Century Fox Productions] and the producers of the film, who said I was going to be the next big star and that everybody had faith in me because they loved my performance."

This is a special type of Hollywood lingo, a form of flattery that is bestowed on many unsuspecting young performers. Perlman took it seriously. "I projected that as a successful actor I would get the amount of attention I had always wanted; all the hip people would want to have lunch with me; I would no longer have any problems." And perhaps most important, Ron Perlman believed that with stardom, "I would no longer have a terrible self-image."

"Quest for Fire" opened at the box office, but Ron Perlman did not become the next Marlon Brando—or the next anybody else. "There was no difference: no phone calls, no offers, people were not jumping through hoops to meet me. I had been set up and then none of the things they promised came true. I was destroyed."

That was six years ago, in 1982. During that period Perlman withdrew from the world of acting. "I was just drained," he says. But the depression lifted almost as suddenly as it had begun. "It was almost like an exorcism," says Perlman. "I had been purged. It was like an incredible dividing line between my childhood and my adult life." In the end, it was an ordeal that prepared him for the rush of attention he is receiving today.

Ron Perlman is flying high. He has a successful marriage to fashion-designer Opal Stone, he is the father of a 4-year-old daughter, Blake Amanda, he has a home in Los Angeles and an apartment in New York. He has won over his worst critics. He has risen to a point in his career where he has played everything he wants to play—but himself. And how does he feel about that? He has agreed to a final meeting, arriving at a restaurant wearing black pants, a black shirt and a stylish black tweed jacket. He is charming, eloquent and handsome, but he does not have the bristling sexuality of the wild beast that is Vincent. "That's the trap," he says. "How can I ever live up to this character?"

But he is optimistic. "I'm balanced now," he says. "I have a wife and a child. I'm happy. I can handle it." Can he?

Perlman is silent. "It may seem strange, but I feel as if Ron Perlman still hasn't even begun his career. And if things go the way they should, I see myself ending up as perhaps the next antihero—like Jack Nicholson. . . . That will be the ultimate experiment—to see if anyone is interested," he says, "in my face." [End]

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