



Beauty And The Beast

A Starburst feature by John Peel

He's not exactly the normal image of a heart-throb: he's tall and dark, certainly - but handsome? Well, he has hairy paws with talons, a furry face, features like a lion and fangs which can tear a foe apart. Despite this apparent lack of appeal, he's one of the big romantic heroes of the year in American television. He's Vincent, the Beast of the series *Beauty And The Beast*.

Vincent is played by Ron Perlman, a 37-year-old New Yorker who seems doomed to hide his face behind masks. He was heavily made up for his rôle in *Quest For Fire*, and then again for *The Ice Pirates*. His rôle as Vincent is perhaps the longest make-up job of them all, and he originally turned the rôle down, not want-





ing to go through all of that again. His agent persuaded him to read the pilot script, and Perlman changed his mind. It's a decision which has gained him a cult following, lots of very strange letters from female fans, and an Emmy nomination as 'Best Actor of the Year'. The make-up was designed by Rick Baker - creator of **An American Werewolf In London's** effects, and also the costume for last season's **Werewolf** tv show. It takes Perlman about four hours to get ready for the show. He even has two different sets of fangs to wear - one for speaking, and one for roaring!

Beauty is Cathy Chandler, a District Attorney's assistant, played by Linda Hamilton. Linda is also no stranger to fantasy, having played in **The Terminator** and **King Kong Lives**. Since she is no more made up than the average actress, persuading her to take on the part was considerably easier.

The storyline itself is magical, and the producers have wisely used this as their selling point. "Once upon a time is now," the advertisements for it read. Indeed it is. It might go something like this:

Once upon a time, in Central Park, there was an entrance to a world of wonder. Down a circular staircase, into passages long forgotten by most men, and deeper down below the city of New York there exists another world. Here a man now known only as Father has created his own Utopian society. Everyone tries to care for one another, and they all work hard to share in the fruits of their labour. Everyone there does what they do best. They have friends in the world above who get them things that they cannot make - medicines and the like - but they are mostly self-contained, and stay in their underground world.

Vincent is a foundling, discovered by Father on the steps of St. Vincent's Hospital - from which he takes his name. Vincent was born deformed, and almost animal-

like. When his fury is aroused, he becomes bestial in his frenzy. His strength is super human, his agility more so. Yet within that infant, Father could detect a sensitive, poetic soul. In Father's Utopian society, Vincent could grow up accepted and loved. If he were ever to be caught Above, he'd be caged as a freak, or killed in panic. Vincent grew to love the classics, quoting freely from Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats and others. Yet he was sad.

He would walk the streets of the city Above at night, and one evening found a badly-mutilated woman, Cathy Chandler. She had had her face slashed, and needed help. Father was a surgeon once, and Vincent took Cathy Below. He and Father saved her life, and repaired her face as best they could. As Cathy slowly recovered, Vincent fell in love.

When Cathy was better, she was returned to the surface, but she, too, was in love - with Vincent. Skilful plastic surgery restored her beauty, save for one small scar by her hairline she insists on keeping to remind herself. Now in two different worlds, they are linked by a mental bond, and a love which neither can help. Neither can leave their own world to join the other, nor can they give up on their love.

Sounds soppy? Maudlin? Tear jerling? Well, maybe the latter (almost every episode leaves my wife in tears at the end with its wonder and beauty) but certainly never the former. **Beauty And The Beast** takes all the usual Hollywood plots and gives them its own subtle twist. We have gang warfare, drug pushers, subway vigilantes and the like. The producers had to sell the show to the Networks using terms which tv programmers could understand. "A love story between a deformed man and a pretty girl" would never sell anything these days. "A half-man, half-beast who stalks the city, fighting Evil" sells. It sounds just like what has always been done before.

Beauty And The Beast, however, is not

like anything which has ever gone before.

As the season progressed, the emphasis began to shift from the New York streets and the scum which inhabit them. First one story, then another, began to focus on the world Below. By the end of the season, more of the tales dealt with Father's society, and the problems they faced, than those stories contained in the average sort of plots. The ratings grew, and interest in the show is increasing steadily. The series was renewed quite early, and this next season will bring back the ill-starred (or is that scarred?) lovers. It'll be a trifle late, thanks to the writers' strike, but the show will be back.

I spoke with Science Fiction writer George R.R. Martin about the series. At the time, he was the Executive Story Consultant for the show ("which translates into normal English as: 'one of the writers'!"); now he is a producer. Martin's short stories and novels have won critical acclaim, and **Nightflyers** was recently filmed. He was introduced to television writing through the new **Twilight Zone** show, and from that he moved on to **Beauty And The Beast**.

"The show has been pretty well received critically," he said. "We're also winning our time-slot regularly every week. We're on Friday evenings at 8.00, and Fridays are a very low viewership night. Our total ratings are perhaps not as high as some other shows, but we have a very large share of the audience, so we're pretty solid."

"The only real stumbling block for the series was the fact that the show was costing more to produce than had originally been anticipated. It was the general all-round costs of trying to fake New York City when you're actually in Los Angeles," Martin explained. "The pilot was shot in New York, and at that time, we got a considerable library of shots, elements, skyline views and things like that which we could then use in future shows. If we use them skilfully, but the later episodes are all being shot right here in Los Angeles, in various areas that look enough like New York so that we can double. Unfortunately, Los Angeles doesn't have a whole lot of areas that look a whole lot like New York, so it is somewhat of a challenge, and involves a lot of location moves, which tends to be expensive."

The show manages to create the atmosphere very well, a tribute to the production crew's dedication. "We own several cabs," Martin amplified, "so we can just run them past the cameras. We don't own any buses, however. Buses can be a real problem. Our buses are really California buses, if you look very closely... You can tell it by the colours - they're the same models as the buses in New York. The only area of Los Angeles that looks a lot like New York's downtown Los Angeles, the very old section, with the alleys and the grimy streets that look like the grimy Times Square area of New York. They will allow you to shoot there, and many shots have been shot there. **Hill Street Blues** shot many of their alley scenes in that area. **Cagney and Lacey** shoot there... People are constantly shooting on those streets when they want big city looks. But they aren't going to let you shut off the



entire street and bring in fake buses! You simply have to deal with the fact that every once in a while a Los Angeles bus is going to come into frame!"

Surprisingly, the subterranean scenes of the show are not all television sound-stages. "It's studio mixed in with some subterranean footage of real New York," Martin revealed. "Certain things - like the big, spiral staircase that everybody remarks on - that actually exists, that's a real spiral staircase under the city of New York. It goes down about three stories under the earth."

The staircase is a feature of the credit sequence, beautifully illuminated in soft oranges and golds, to give the impression of descent into Vincent's underground world. "It's underneath Central Park somewhere," Martin explained. The producers are not allowed to reveal the exact location; the city fears a horde of fans swooping down to see where the staircase leads... "Many of the tunnel shots are real shots from New York. Some of them are matte paintings, the more spectacular chamber shots like the Whispering Gallery." This is a small bridge

over a vast, seemingly endless drop into the earth, and one of Vincent's favourite spots to sit and think. Sounds from the world Above filter down into here, and he can listen to music, street sounds and even people talking. "The Chamber of the Winds, another cavern, is also a matte painting." The matte work is very skilfully handled, and contributes to the excellent atmosphere of the show.

Next issue we hear more about the show's cast and direction.

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Last issue we looked at the idea of the show and talked to writer George R R Martin about it. This issue he talks about how he sees the programme.

"It might be considered an updating of a fairy tale in a contemporary setting," he suggested. "But it also has a gritty, realistic side to it. It's a juxtaposition of fantasy elements and real elements. At the heart of the story, it is a romantic show, not only in the love story aspects between Cathy and Vincent - which is a romance in the old, classical sense of it - but also within the wider definition of romantic fiction. The magical world beneath the earth... some of the other people... some of the things that go on down there... It's a romantic view of New York City. New York in our show is not the same New York that you see in an ultra-realistic show like *Hill Street Blues* or *Cagney and Lacey*. It's a mythological New York, New York as the City Primaeval, with its glittering spires and its terrible, dark depths. And everything in between. At least, that's what we're trying for! "Even some of our gangs in the story *No Way Down* - a story essentially about street gangs, with Vincent being pursued by the street gang - they're almost mythological street gangs. They're a little larger than life, a little more colourful. That whole episode was shot on backlots, which enables you to get a very stylized, surreal feel, which we were all very pleased with."

The show does sometimes venture into controversial territory. Masks gave us a retired Irish rebel, fighting for an unnamed organization, and now trying to die peacefully in New York. His fiery daughter, an advocate of peace, is being stalked by one of her father's former associates. The show parallels their quest for peace with Vincent's own quest for inner peace. "Northern Ireland is a terrible situation," Martin - who wrote the story - explained. "You literally do have two worlds, with walls that have been raised between Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods. People live in identical houses one block apart, but there's this huge, hideous wall that's risen between them so that they can't shoot at each other when they come to their windows to put out their laundry. It's a frightening kind of situation."

Father is something of a shadowy figure at first, but an episode called *Song Of Orpheus* sketched in his own tale; who he was before, and what drove him into the tunnels. "It takes him back to the surface for the first time since the early Fifties," Martin said. "He's a man who was unfairly persecuted by Society at that time, and who turned his back on it. He regards it basically as terminally corrupt, and went down Below. There he has built - at least on a

small scale - what he regards as a better, more sane and more human society than the one that exists above his head."

The central thrust of the story, on which the show stands or falls, is the character of Vincent. If he cannot be made credible, then the show cannot succeed. The melding of superior scripts, tight direction and Ron Perlman's masterful portrayal of the Beast all come together to create a mythic figure in himself. Vincent is ugly to the eyes, but beautiful in every other way. He's a caring, sensitive person, a lover of classical music, a romantic soul. "Having lived down there in some ways he's very much an innocent," Martin amplified. "He can participate in things like Shakespeare and all the things that really represent the best of our society. He hasn't really been exposed - except in some of the adventures in our shows - to some of the worst of our society and some of the trivial things, the mundane things. He has Shakespeare, but he's been spared from *Gilligan's Island*! No juxtaposition exists. A lot of what he knows of life he knows from books."

In the first story, Cathy is shown as something of a spoiled rich girl, working for her father. After her harrowing experience of being assaulted and having her face slashed, she changes. With Vincent's help, she has begun to see another way of living. "She is developing a depth of her own," Martin pointed out. "In some ways, she has a viewpoint that is different from Vincent's. It's equally valid. These are the interesting things to explore in the show: the different worlds that they live in, the different ways they have of perceiving the questions of our time, or matters of morality or justice. They come at these issues from very, very different vantage points."

One very nice point about the show is that it treats its audience as if it is intelligent. It doesn't talk down to them, or pander to the

lowest common denominator. "Maybe it was chancy," Martin agrees, "but so far, it's paid off for us. There's a great tendency on the part of people who make television shows to make people who read books, or quote poetry and things like that to look foolish, to make them objects of ridicule. Particularly in a sitcom."

Creator of the show is Ron Koslow, the Executive Producer. "He created these characters, and defined them, and gave them the shape that we've been commenting on - particularly Vincent. He's very much Ron's baby! We do a lot of the scripts in-house, but not all of them. That's what the pitch sessions are for. Free-lance writers will come in and pitch ideas - usually to me and to David Peckinpah, one of the producers. They tell us their ideas, and if there are any that we like, we take them up to Ron Koslow. If he likes them, we give the free-lancer work!"

Overall, the show has done remarkably well. It is the first fantasy series in recent memory to last out a first season with good ratings, and to be renewed with optimism. If the show can continue to work its magic as it has done for the first year, then we have on our hands a series that is likely to last for a number of years to come.

How does the romance between Cathy and Vincent work out? Well, the final story to date has her decide to leave him, because their love Can Never Be... On the other hand, at the end of the show, she's back with him again! If she can't live with him (in the literal sense of the word), she certainly can't live without him. The show has to tread a delicate boundary - they cannot allow the star-crossed lovers to get physical, but neither can they rule the possibility out. It might alienate their audience. How long can the show keep going without a real commitment?

We simply have to wait and see.

