



# SCIENCE MADE SINISTER

By PETER BLOCH-HANSEN

During a "War of the Worlds," Catherine Disher emerges behind enemy lines as the malevolent Morthren, Mana.

**M**ana enjoys the power of inflicting pain," declares *War of the Worlds*' Catherine Disher, newly recruited as the implacable Morthren chief scientist. "She is a cruel person. Maybe even on Morthrai, Mana would be considered a cold, calculating, *unMorthren* kind of female. As for romance, even on Morthrai, Mana would have no time for it."

The first sight of Catherine Disher getting out of her sleek red sports car for an interview is a surprise. She seems much taller than Mana, and has long, thick, wavy brown hair. "The people on the crew don't know who I am when I arrive in the morning," she says, laughing. "Then, I get into my makeup and hairdo and I walk onto the set and everybody goes, 'Hi, how are you?'"

"At first, they tried this black Chinese wig on me and I went to get fitted for opaque contact lenses. I looked like a geisha doll with a very white face. But they didn't like that so they said to Jenny, the makeup artist, 'Just try something.' We tried different things and then Jenny said, 'Maybe a bun.' Then, she did something and that looked interesting. Every week, it changes. Some weeks, it's really big. It's fun to see what she'll do each week. It's hard to lie down in it, though, impossible to take naps when I'm working."



Admits Disher, "I was actually very pleased when we dispensed with the wig and the contacts because I thought the simplicity could be more frightening. Also, if the aliens are to go among the humans, then the simpler the better. You don't have to worry about how to disguise them, although the bun is pretty hard to miss. If Mana is to go undercover with her hair down, maybe no one will recognize her. Besides, when you saddle yourself with a really extravagant look, it's hard to keep it up for 22 episodes."

A more theoretical question about the appearance of the aliens arises. Since they created their human forms, how did they arrive at the precise look that each of them would have? "I don't know that any of us have decided that," responds the actress. "I don't think it was like a bunch of mug shots they had that you could go through and say, 'OK, I'll take that look.' There was a certain amount of randomness at work. There *had* to be. The aliens didn't have total control, just the idea of perfection."

Despite Mana's high opinion of herself, Disher maintains that the alien isn't vain



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Leaving Malzor (Denis Forest) by the wayside, Catherine Disher would like to get to know the human males (Jared Martin & Adrian Paul) better and then get real nasty with the females (Lynda Mason Green & Rachel Blanchard).

about her appearance. "Maybe for other Morthren," she reflects, "femaleness could be important, but certainly not for Mana. If she could choose, she would pick components that were perhaps not as beautiful by alien or even human standards, but the best component parts she could find, ones that were very strong—eyes that can see the

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best, or have the best peripheral vision, skin that can withstand weather, whatever. I have very large hands. I can see her going, 'Yes, large hands and yet delicate for fine control.' "

According to Disher, Mana is aware that human women are still, to some degree, valued for their physical attractiveness. "She probably regards it as very strange, as I do, that a woman is examined and judged by society and put above or below others because of how she looks. When you have an objective eye outside the world, you can see it anew and notice these ironies. You notice that the humans talk about God, but

are always doing things that contravene what it says in the Bible. That is what is most interesting for me about how the aliens function in this TV show."

### Technician of Terror

As for the future, Disher has some rather particular plans for her character. "I would like to see her get out and explore the world more, mostly because I'm getting base happy. I would love to let her bun down, let her go out and try to seduce Harrison Blackwood or just *anybody*." Disher laughs brightly. "She brings all the men back to the base and kills them. I don't know. I think





Disher would like Mana to inherit human qualities starting with her hairstyle.

Photo: Courtesy Barrow-Huffman

she would know how to seduce a man, but she would do it by the book and think it was quite amusing and, ultimately, stupid.

"Exploring the relationship between Malzor and Mana would bear a lot of fruit. I would like to see her let loose her ambitions about Malzor, maybe have a surreptitious war with him, where the audience would never be too sure just who she's working for—ultimately the good of the Morthren race as she sees it, with herself as head. I like that idea about her, that she's sneaky. A coup attempt by Mana would make a great story. It would have to fail, of course, but it's something that Mana would do. She would make it look as though someone else were behind it. Ardix would be her right-hand man, but Malzor would be unaware of it until it was too late. Maybe the Eternal would know, but he doesn't talk. Malzor seems quite oblivious to what seem to be quite obvious facts, but that's

just the way Mana sees Malzor, too."

Notes Disher, "Mana is quite contemptuous of Malzor [played by Denis Forest]. She thinks he is weak and that she could do a better job. Even when Malzor takes her ideas, he makes her do them his way and that's why they don't succeed. When she sees Malzor fail, she drives in the knife. She sees Malzor quiver in front of the Eternal as if he were a small child trying to be too big for his own britches. Mana wouldn't quiver. She feels totally secure because she knows she is needed as the scientific brain. They can't do anything without her.

"Perhaps Malzor was a needed general on Morthrai," the actress suggests, "and maybe he was chosen to command just because he is male, but on Earth, he is next to useless compared to what she can do. Mana is more dangerous than Malzor is, just because she's very smart and very predatory and ambitious."

Playing one of Earth's leading alien invaders is not without frustrations. "Denis' personal bugbear," Disher reports, "is that you never see the aliens sitting down. I sat down in one episode, but we always walk into a shot, or walk around, talking. I wanted to get more into how the aliens live, how they interact, grow up, brush their teeth, sleep. Who does the alien laundry? Plotlines could spring out of the details of everyday life and get the aliens more involved with the humans, too. There are many scenes where Malzor and I are just talking. We could just as easily be going on about things of everyday alien life. *That* would be more interesting.

"I made a few suggestions about how the aliens eat. My initial idea was that the aliens feed off a certain beam of light that they are having trouble getting on Earth. That's why they are pale. They would have a sort of gun that would shoot a ray of light into their mouths. That didn't happen.

"You have to write down these suggestions and really go and talk to the producers. If I just catch Jon [Anderson, supervising producer], he scribbles in his script and suddenly the feeding stations appear, and you go, 'Uh-oh. This is *not* how I imagined it.' The feeding stations just didn't work. They sprayed me in the face, or they would come to the close-up and they couldn't get the pump to work. We did quite a few takes, and it was tasty water after running through all that plastic. I have a bunch of ideas."

And she has a few objections as well. "There has been a certain amount of violence in the show that I have found personally distasteful to do, but when you're playing someone who does that kind of thing, you have to go with it. I quite enjoy it when I'm Mana, but when it's over, I think, 'Blagh.' It *is* playing alien. You are on the set; all these weird things happen and you just dive in and go, 'Sure, why not?' You suspend any personal tastes or distastes. The way I have been playing her, she has real contempt for humans. She sees us as a weak race, a race full of contradictions and inconsistencies, a people who kill each other and not even for the right reasons. It is all very rational for her. She kills other aliens, other Morthrens, but for the 'right' reasons—if they are imperfect, or unstable, or a threat to the race's survival, but not for petty, personal reasons."

### Engineer of Evil

Catherine Disher is a graduate of Canada's national Theatre School in Montreal, where she made her home until moving to Toronto a few years ago. She has worked mostly on the stage, in such shows as *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Nerd* in which she played opposite *M\*A\*S\*H*'s Gary Burghoff. While she has made guest appearances on a variety of TV shows, audiences may know her best for her role as Mr. T's wacky receptionist on *T & T*.

The actress also made two appearances in Triumph Entertainment's other Toronto  
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## Treas

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the entire film having to continuously play intense panic and terror. Believe me, a film like *The Terror Within* keeps you honest and very sharp."

Treas recalls being equally sharp during her tour of duty in *The Nest*.

"I loved doing *The Nest* because I got to play a character [Dr. Hubbard] with a totally insane and warped perspective. I worked real hard at establishing a whole metaphor on what those cockroaches meant to her. But I told the director that there was no way I was going to touch those bugs. I'm willing to do anything to make a part believable but I draw the line at touching cockroaches," she laughs.

Treas offers that her current status on *Alien Nation* may be her biggest acting challenge.

"Playing the same character on a regular basis is a bit chancy. Cathy isn't like a character you play one way for a single film or TV episode. Since Cathy is an alien, there are so many character parameters to deal with, I've had to constantly use my imagination as well as all the tools of my trade to make this character believable and real.

"But while it's a big challenge, it's also a lot of fun because we're dealing with a concept that doesn't have any boundaries. I would like nothing better than to have people look at this show and say, 'Hey, she really pulled it off.'"

The correspondence Treas and other cast members are getting indicate that the show is indeed pulling it off.

"I've gotten mail from all over the country," says Treas, "from educators and PhD's in psychology who are using the show as a teaching tool to teach children social consciousness. The creators of this show are doing an incredible job of giving us material that has real depth to it. It's great that people are getting the message."

Treas claims that despite the obvious parallels between her real life and Cathy's, she does her best to leave the character on the soundstage when it's time to go home.

"I'm able to leave Cathy at the set. For me, there's a real big difference between Cathy and Terri. When I get out of the [Newcomer] head, she disappears and when I put the head on, she's there. And no, I haven't left the back spots on and gone home. At least not yet," she roars.

The conversation returns to the potential for an interspecies love affair.

"There has been talk," she offers, "but nothing specific yet. There are many questions that have to be resolved. We know it takes two alien males to impregnate an alien female but we don't know whether a single human male can impregnate an alien female by himself or if he needs help. Then, there's the question of offspring and any anatomical differences we don't know about yet. But I'm convinced that America is ready for human/alien love. And I can't wait for it to happen." ❄

## Disher

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production, *Friday the 13th: The Series*. "The first was 'Double Exposure,' in which I played a girl friend of Ryan's who gets chopped halfway through the show. The other was about witches. We filmed that in an abandoned church and I felt very guilty about it, because we were pretending to do satanic rituals with bowls of blood and everything. It seemed like tempting fate."

Disher feels that the *Friday* work probably contributed to her winning the role of Mana. "Jon Anderson knew me from that. I came in and read, and honestly, I don't know if they knew what they were looking for. I don't think I gave that incredible a reading, but [executive producer] Frank Mancuso Jr. saw the tapes and he asked to see me. We talked and then they asked me. The thing about this show is that because I shoot two days a week, it allows me to do other things, although when you work from four in the afternoon until eight the next morning, it takes you the whole day to recover.

"There is not much comedy in *War of the Worlds*, but Denis and I keep trying. The crew does this thing now when the aliens are on. Denis and I will be doing one of those scenes where I say, '...and I'll kill them,' or something and the crew all hiss. It helps the atmosphere. We did a shot for the Christmas reel where we had Denis in this chair that changes his face. The camera follows me off and you see me saying, 'Dammit, I told you not to sit in that chair.' Then, it pans over to Denis who has been accidentally turned into Bozo the Clown."

Confessing she's a science-fiction fan, Disher notes, "I read a lot of Larry Niven, Harlan Ellison and Ursula K. LeGuin. Sometimes, I just pick up one with a cover that I like—*Thor*, *God of Montron* or something. Actually, I read a lot, but occasionally I get this science-fiction urge, you know, like for a certain food? Different books for different moods."

Since she claims to have seen only half of one of last season's episodes, she is reluctant to make many comparisons between the two seasons. "I think it is much improved," she says. "It gives much more leeway to the heroes and the aliens too. You can see their faces, for one thing, without those big masks. That can only help. I like very much what they are doing this year, in terms of the show's look. It looks like nothing else I've ever seen on TV. The show is the best kind of science fiction. It's not like you go off to another world. It is creating another world within our world, which is where your imagination can go nuts, having the aliens among us, and so on."

Actors are famous for having their own secret, irreverent ideas about the shows in which they appear. Catherine Disher is no exception. She grins mischievously: "I can see Malzor turning to Mana in a fit of pique, which she never has, and saying, 'The Eternal always liked you better.'" ❄

## Besch

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"I had this red wig on in *Date With an Angel*," she remembers, "and somehow, when I feel like I have a disguise on where nobody will know it's me, then I'm willing to take a lot of risks and look like a fool. And it feels wonderful."

### Star on the Street

Besch's philosophy as an actress is to never be a liar, explaining, "My responsibility to the audience is to be truthful, and that can take many different forms; that doesn't mean to be boring. What I think is important is to reveal some aspect of myself, and I can do that in a comedy or a serious piece. It's important for me to connect with something inside of me; if I don't do that, I'm ripping myself and the audience off, and nobody gets anything out of it. It's to try to get to the heart of the matter, whatever that is, and it doesn't have to be heavy, either."

The personable actress has also had roles in *Steel Magnolias* and in the SF thriller *Tremors*, in which "creatures under the earth do in a lot of people" (including Besch).

She says she has been spotted by fans over the years, although most of them were not from Los Angeles. "I was in Paris a couple months after *Trek II* came out and I got recognized going up the Eiffel Tower; it was wild," she smiles. She also likes attending SF conventions. "I've had a lot of fun at the cons. I've been to them all over the country, and I've always been treated wonderfully."

"Part of the fascination with the genre, I think, is that many of the people who go to the conventions are people who themselves feel like they're outcasts," she believes, "and the whole *Star Trek* universe accepts people who are outcasts. It doesn't matter what you look like, what color you are, whatever. And so, many people I've seen at SF cons are people who don't ordinarily feel like they fit in. That's why they love *Trek* so much, because they feel like there's a place where they do fit in."

In addition to appearing on the LA theater circuit, and doing guest spots on *The Famous Teddy Z* and Martin Mull's new show, *His and Hers*, Besch played a cigar-smoking secretary in *Kill Me Again*, a film noir starring Willow's Val and Joanne Whalley-Kilmer. "Sometimes, I just wait to see where life's going to show me to go," Besch says. "I used to think that I could move my life and career where I wanted to move it, but my life tends to tell me what to do now. The kind of work I do is really all over the place but I like it that way; I like that kind of variety. I get to play the heavy and the light, and it seems to have given me a longer, more interesting career."

As for her life as Carol Marcus, she's not sure it's over. "I would like to come back to *Trek*; I invite them to tie up a few loose ends between Carol and Kirk," says Bibi Besch, with a gleam in her eye. ❄