



TALL, DARK & ALIEN

By PETER BLOCH-HANSEN

Denis Forest may
look like a Morthren
named Malzor,

but he assures fans, he's only human.

As Malzor, I am the head of this crowd of oddly-dressed extras milling about on the set," quips Denis Forest in his soft accent. A French Canadian, his name is pronounced "Denee Foray." He sits in his dressing room, waiting out the heavy rain outside. A photograph of an infamous dictator hangs on the door as a joke. Slender, pale, ascetic, Forest hardly looks the part of the "heavy," but he is the new villain for *The War of the Worlds*' second season.

"Malzor is a cross between Manuel Noriega and Edward Teller, the father of the hydrogen bomb," he continues. "He is a horrible autocrat who likes to sacrifice people to his power. Malzor tries to gather as many souls as he can, like an Aztec or Mayan warlord. He is ruthless. He thinks he knows how to stay in power, but he is an autocrat who must rely on his deity, the Eternal. The Eternal deals in very Eastern ideas, such as eternity and roads that you must travel without knowing where you're going. It's a bit of alchemy, a bit of shamanism. The Eternal knows all the answers, but Malzor is just guessing. I can't go too far with the characterization, though. I can't invent too broad a mannerism, an eye twitch or something, because I have to remain consistent with it all the way through the season. What I'm discovering is that the producers want more and more a kind of simple delivery, just as I'm speaking to you now—not too contemporized, just a stillness. Underplay everything. Just let the words say it."

Portraying a convincing alien remains a problem for any actor. Two-and-a-half months after that first conversation, Forest feels that he is still coming to grips with the character. "After doing six episodes with the character being slightly unstable and not knowing where his base is, I have to find a more concrete foundation for him, a greater stillness. He is weak in a sense, and he is strong sometimes. In a way, he's the puppet that we poke fun at. I mean, anybody in real life who provokes people to become more fascistic is clearly deviant. He needs to project more authority, less nervousness. He relies too much on other people to make his decisions for him. He is the one who has to link with the Eternal; he should be the one to make the final decisions."

Sitting in the cramped soundman's booth in a corner of the huge, darkened set, it is difficult to hear the actor's quiet voice. "The heart of the Morthren, I think, is that they're working towards eternal perfection. It's a fascistic perfection—you have to look a certain way, think a certain way, give everything to sustaining what the Eternal needs. Malzor will kill or destroy anyone or anything to further the Eternal. There is a spiritual strength behind it, though, so I look at Malzor as a warrior priest. You have to respect him, but he is very cruel."

An explosion shakes the Morthren lab set a few yards away, as a scripted accident destroys a huge piece of complex alien scientific equipment, incinerating a technician. "There's a certain amount of obsessive



"He is very cruel," says Denis Forest of his Morthren alter-ego (left).



For some, Forest's demonic personas have become too real. Here, he conjures another deadly stare from *Friday the 13th's* "Cupid's Quiver."

energy that has to go into this character," Forest says thoughtfully, his voice very low and calm. He smooths a wrinkle in his grey Morthren tunic. "I mean, to be taking over the world, you would have to be somewhat obsessed. I would like to see Malzor less human, with more twisted mysticism. And he can't be at all sarcastic. Sarcasm is far too human, so a more still, direct, stoic approach is needed which will distinguish us from the humans. It's hard sometimes when you get lines like, 'Kill the soldiers, but don't harm the leader.' It's not exactly like saying hi to the woman at the corner store. It's hard not to go over the top in doing this kind of thing. If you do, then the people won't believe you and they won't like you."

Hypnotic Villain

Denis Forest has more than a little experience as an actor portraying fiends. He appeared in the series' first season episode, "Vengeance" as the maniacally driven husband of a woman Ironhorse accidentally killed, and as "guest villain of the week" on

three episodes, including the pilot, of Triumph Entertainment's other Toronto-based production, *Friday the 13th: The Series*. A graduate of Toronto's Ryerson Theatre School, his guest appearances as unsavory characters on *Knightwatch* as well as other network shows and his portrayal of Chicout in Atlantis Films' *Destiny to Order*, add to his credentials as a screen bad guy.

"Your eyes are literally hypnotizing your public," says Forest of his technique. "The audience follows eyes, so if you can visualize and create an internal world and project that through your eyes, it can be very powerful. It's just a question of finding the evil aspects of my own nature to portray on the screen. I love to create images in my mind that will spark the feeling of the character, you know, where I want people to fear me. It's strange. The power of seeing someone suffer is incredible. If you're pious, you suffer with

PETER BLOCH-HANSEN, *STARLOG's* Canadian Correspondent, profiled Robert Lansing in issue #149.

Photo: Courtesy Denis Forest

Photo: Michaelin McDermott



All Friday the 13th: The Series Photos: Copyright 1988 Paramount Pictures

"It's just a question of finding the evil aspect of my own nature to portray on the screen," explains Forest who took "The Mephisto Ring" on Friday the 13th.

them, but if you're a maniacal individual, you goad.

"The Ayatollah Khomeini was a lot of the fuel for my visualization—hordes of people, spiritually motivated by him. He wasted thousands of lives. It's a Dantean nightmare—a demagogue who feeds on the death of young people and on the death of his nation to fuel a vision of his own. There are elements of *Nosferatu* in this, too. I would love to play a vampire—not the kind that bites your neck, but the kind that sucks the energy out of you. I try to find a parallel to the stoic mask the Ayatollah maintained and to the frenzy he created: That's every autocrat's dream, to have that kind of fervor from the people. Can you imagine? To have millions of people marching for you, people dying? The energy of it—a huge ego trip! That's obsession. That's what I would like for my character. As for my real life," he adds with a Gallic twinkle, "I would like a fan club—a *small* one. I don't really like writing letters."

It's a specific brand of villainy. "There's the whole idea of human sacrifice underly-

ing the character," Forest says, "somewhat reminiscent of what the ancient Mayans did in a way, sacrificing people for the appeasement of cosmic energies. I'm looking for literature on human sacrifices. I just picked up a book that deals with the recent rash of cocaine banderos sacrificing individuals in weird rituals. Another source I draw from is Edward Teller. Any mind that can conceive of such destructive power as the H-bomb is *definitely* a threat to mankind. It's always important for an actor to find a real basis for what he's doing.

"I look towards those archetypes like Adolph Hitler and the Ayatollah Khomeini who dwell on the idea of destroying things, to mold the character and yet still rely very much on my own way of perceiving things. It's hard to play a *character* on series TV: You assume a mold, sometimes you bring it up a bit, but you end up playing yourself."

Forest subscribes to the actors' theory that villains have more fun. "Actor villains," he says with relish, "work like the witch doctor in a tribal community. There you have the guy who puts on a mask and evokes evil feelings and fear in people. These evil feelings are in all of us. When you see the mask, you're repulsed and repudiate the feelings and get rid of them. That's the treatment I would like to give to Malzor.

"We look pretty good in these grey tunics," notes Forest of his and Catherine Disher's garb. "I don't know what all the pockets are for, though. We can't put anything in them."

The mask that I can turn on is a despondent death mask. I equate it to indifference which is the greatest sin. Malzor is indifferent to human suffering.

"For me to say that I get this rush from hypnotizing maybe 50,000 people sounds like complete madness," admits Forest with a shrug, "but the public is hypnotized by what they see on TV. I travel a lot. I was in Amsterdam and this girl from Philadelphia zoned into me and said, 'You played Eddie in that episode of *Friday the 13th*. You killed that girl with the bees. What are you doing here?'"

"When you get into these ideas, you do actually become more intimidating to people. You tend unconsciously to stare people down. I have these strange eyes. A little while ago, I went to the movies and I asked someone a simple question like, 'Have you bought your ticket?' He looked me in the eyes and didn't know quite what to do. Was I a cop? Was I theater police? He didn't want to answer; he just looked down.

"Sometimes, I like to read my lines out loud," the actor notes. "You have these words to remember, so you practice them, like a violinist practices his instrument. At the YMCA, I'll be working out and running these lines. People think I'm *nuts*."

Imaginary Alien

Of the details of Mordecai life, Denis Forest has little to reveal. How does Malzor relax, for example? Does he read about techniques of dismemberment? "That would be *fun*," allows Forest. "He likes to see innocent people tortured. For entertainment, the Mordecai probably do complex mathematics that humans couldn't understand. It's hard to know because our energy was sucked into human form when we came from our home planet to Earth. I can't prove it but I think of them as having originally been astral energy or beings of fire. It's as if I, or Malzor rather, was born like this." The actor spreads his arms and indicates his tall, slender human form.

"It's sad to see people attacking movie stars. We haven't figured out if Mordecai sleep or what they do at all, probably a lot of plotting and scheming. Malzor hasn't sat down once in six episodes. He hasn't eaten, though we know that they're vegetarians. We need to see these aliens express deeper feelings than they have so far. I would like the Mordecai to observe humanity more and try to understand what human suffering is—and human joy. It would be interesting, and perhaps insightful, to see how they would analyze that."

The actor adds that the show's creators have not been, in his view, especially receptive to his input, at least so far. "There's too much of a panic to get on camera what they have in the script," he explains.

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Graham

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hours a day and for days on end, and there was a good 15 pounds of pressure being exerted on that cockpit. It was rough. Every couple of hours, if I was good, they would let me out and give me some air and water.

"But I'm real happy with the way the movie came out and that surprised the hell out of me," he explains. "I had seen a rough cut of the film a while back and I thought to myself, 'Boy, we're in big trouble.' I was hoping the movie would never come out and ruin my career. But I saw a final cut recently, with all the music and FX in place, and I've got to tell you, it's looking real good."

Decorated Officer?

Chances are also good that, with *Alien Nation's* success, Gary Graham's low profile is about to give way to celebrity status. The actor is indifferent to that possibility.

"The prospect of becoming a 'star' doesn't really scare me," counters Graham. "I've been kicking around this industry for 12 years now. I've spent a lot of time hungering for the kind of notoriety I'm beginning to get now. But it's funny because now that it suddenly seems possible, I don't think about it too much. I don't think it will change me. I'm still going to be the person who values his privacy. I know it's going to be hard to avoid ending up being everybody's public fool like so many celebrities become, but I'm pretty sure it won't happen to me."

Graham claims that his upcoming *Alien Nation* production hiatus will offer him the opportunity to do other projects, but he isn't in a hurry to jump into anything.

"I'm one of those actors who is happy even when he's not working," says Graham. "I'm not a workaholic by any stretch of the imagination. My attitude has always been to have a life first and then go do the work."

And his attitude regarding Matt Sikes is that his character, as this and hopefully other seasons come and go, will continue to progress.

"Sikes will most likely go through a series of positive changes. I would hate to see him being the same old grouch every week. Ideally, Sikes will learn to deal with his prejudices, learn more about the better side of humanity and basically learn how to be a better human being. Being Joe Cynic may be integral to this character but I don't see it being the whole ball of wax.

"He's learning from George all the time. He will do things that will shock and amaze even himself."

That is something that *Alien Nation*, as a whole, seems to be doing on a regular basis.

"It definitely is doing some intelligent work," says Gary Graham. "In a way, we're a series of sign posts pointing the way to the future. In some shows, we're saying there are curves ahead, slow down. In others, we're saying, 'Warning! Stop and pay attention.'"

Forest

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An assistant director wanders by and comments that the night's shooting is progressing very slowly. A technician agrees. The camera is being aligned for a difficult shot of an agonized, dying clone. Eerie yellow and green lights shine balefully through the huge screens of intricately shredded latex that hang everywhere throughout the darkened warehouse and glimmer icily on the water-covered floor. Giant, fleshy alien machines loom up in the dimness, hang from the ceiling, twine and twist everywhere—the Morthren science laboratory. The mood on the set, though, is light-hearted. A grip passes, gestures at the spectacle and says, "It's like walking around inside King Kong's nose." Forest grins.

"It's a wonderful crew," he says. "It is always a treat to entertain them a bit with some humor. Now and then, we have to jump over some green glop, and maybe slip on a patch, but there have been no practical jokes so far, thank God. I don't think we have the time. I ad-lib funny lines during rehearsals, but once we start shooting, we're quite serious."

Despite all the changes in the show, newcomer Forest reports that there have been no difficulties relating with the survivors of last season's cast, Jared Martin and Lynda Mason Green. "We haven't played a scene with them yet," he discloses. "We do talk about them, though. Sometimes, we bump into them when we're switching sets. They have bigger Winnebagoes than we do."

As for the show's changes themselves, Forest has little to say. "I didn't watch the first season much," he demurs, "but the aliens last year were big Muppets. With those costumes, they weren't convincing in my book. The fact that we all have a tall, gaunt look this year indicates to the viewer that these are aliens. Ironically, I used to have a girl friend who, because I have an odd, knobby-shaped forehead and face, used to call me 'alien head.' Now, I make my living at it.

"Malzor is the leader that nobody has," Denis Forest confides. "We have nobody, for example, who can tell us not to do drugs and be listened to. Even our athletes now are full of drugs and steroids. We have no real political or spiritual messiah who can lead us towards a greater understanding of eternal things. I wish my character wasn't so antagonistic. It's a sick feeling because I don't like to incarnate these kind of characters, so I have to play Malzor as working towards perfecting a nobler race. The thing that I fear the most is that people will judge me for what I do, which is just a fantasy. It is sad to see people attacking movie stars. But Malzor could conceivably provoke some people to fascistic violence. What I hope is that he will make your skin crawl, but won't make you go kill your sister. I don't want to make babies cry when they see me on the street."