

Even during a "War of the Worlds," this actor still prefers to fight byte-sized battles.

Philip Akin

Hacker Attacker

Who is Norton Drake anyway? Not even Philip Akin, who portrays the computer-whiz alien-fighter on *War of the Worlds*, has a clue. "We know *nothing* about Norton," he says emphatically. "He's a guy in a wheelchair who's good with computers. He makes coffee. He does some martial arts. That's *it*."

"We've got to see more of Norton's life," Akin insists. "I mean, where is his room? What does it look like? I keep pushing for Norton to get a lady, but I'm not sure they want to address that problem."

"I've added a few things, like the bicycle racing hats Norton has been wearing. In my mind, I created that he loves bicycle racing. He can't do it, so he wears the hats. If we

PETER BLOCH-HANSEN, STARLOG's Canadian Correspondent, profiled Richard Chaves in issue #144.

By PETER BLOCH-HANSEN

ever see his room, I think it would be neat to see pictures there of the Tour de France.

"Since I've never been told how he got in the wheelchair," says Akin, who is *not* wheelchair-bound, "I made up my own story. He got spinal meningitis as a baby and lost the use of his legs. I don't know if that's medically feasible, but in my head it is. For an actor, that's good enough. He says in one scene that he has never known what it's like to walk, so there's no angst involved. They don't want Norton to be a particularly angstful character but I have a couple of story ideas for Norton that I think would be interesting. Maybe next season."

Akin also has ideas about the show's general direction. "You know the old science-fiction term B.E.M. for 'bug-eyed

monsters'? That's the sensibility that we have now. I want to get away from that to classic SF concepts, even going back to guys like John Brunner. He came up with a whole future."

Complains Akins, "The show's basic idea has one flaw that has never been properly addressed—the amnesia. How come *nobody* knows about the 1953 invasion? A hook should have been set earlier to somehow bring the aliens into it, something. I have this question asked at *every* convention I attend. And I tell them, I've heard theories from writers, directors, actors, producers and *none* of them hold any water."

"You have two choices: Either the idea of alternate Earths, that is, it *really* happened someplace else and we're somehow receiving the psychic emanations of it—which I don't believe you can sell any better than anything else— or you just have to suspend disbelief

and say, 'This is how it is.' But it bothers me, because I love a story where the author creates a universe and the rules of it are intact. When they bring in these things that don't work properly, that is *bad SF*."

Private Program

Akin, an experienced stage actor, appeared in *Iceman* and *Switching Channels*, as well as in episodes of two series also shot in Canada, *Adderly* and *Night Heat*. "My Canadian work accounts for about one per cent of my yearly income," he discloses. Born in Jamaica, married to a ballet teacher, he has lived in Canada since he was five and claims no desire to move to the U.S.

"I'm a Canadian," he explains. "If someone offered me a particularly good role down there, I would go. But to move my family down there is *not* an option. My wife is white, I'm not. *That* causes problems. I did a science-fiction convention in Philadelphia. I won't say the service was really bad. It was noticeable enough that we were a mixed couple, but that my wife, who hasn't mentioned this for years, said, 'We're getting an awful lot of stares around here, aren't we?' It's an uncomfortable feeling.

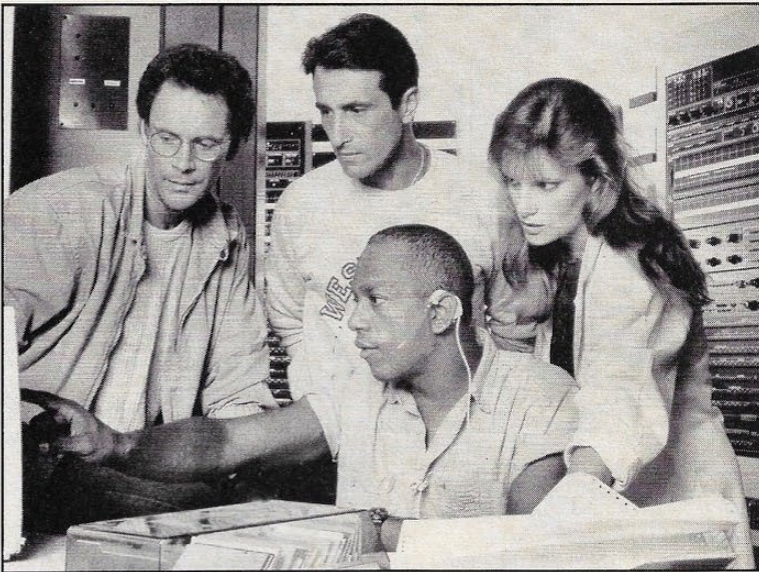
"In my neighborhood, or in most parts of Toronto, it just isn't a problem any more. It used to be. People may still feel the same way, but they just don't say anything. In the States, I find people are more open about their feelings. Generally, I feel that's good, because you know exactly where you stand with them. But I don't want my 16-month-old daughter growing up in that atmosphere."

Akin, an avid SF reader, frequents his local SF bookstores on almost a weekly basis, but it is his physical pursuits that draw the most comment. "I'm a bit quirky," he explains. "I like to ride my bike here. I mean, even in a June rainstorm at two in the morning. I found that if I just went home after shooting, I would be all wired up. This way, I take 35 minutes and blast across Toronto. When I get home, I'm all mellowed out. It's my way of waking up in the morning, too. In Toronto, you don't need a car. People find that peculiar. You can't convince them. I can't convince my wife."

Relaxing in the *War of the Worlds* studio's busy dining room, Akin radiates intense vitality. He holds a third-degree black belt in aikido, which served him well in the episode "Among the Philistines," where from his wheelchair, he battled an alien with a staff or "Jo."

"Adapting martial arts for the wheelchair," he reveals, "was very difficult. The staffs they made were too light. I shattered the ends off. Also, in martial arts, your power comes from your hips, but since I can't move my hips, all my power comes from my back and shoulders. I made all these big strikes and so on, and it was pulling my upper thighs. I would come home and they would feel *ripped*."

"That fight was done mostly in one day. At one point, the alien picks me out of the chair and drops me. That was a straight fall onto the concrete. We did three takes. I've



As *War of the Worlds*' resident computer whiz, Philip Akin (center), with help from (left to right) Jared Martin, Richard Chaves and Lynda Mason Green, defends the Earth from the Martians' deadly assaults.

done a lot of break falls, but that shook parts of my body. Then, we were going up a slight incline [very quickly] and I just rolled over backward, dropping all of Gertrude's electronics out."

Before he got the role, Akin confesses he didn't know much about computers. "My computer was too small and I didn't want to spend the money to upgrade. After I got this part, I bought a bigger system, and now I spend a great deal of time fooling around and learning a lot."

Surprisingly, being TV's resident computer wizard hasn't provided him any further training. "They won't let me use *working* computers," he explains. "The visuals are matted in afterwards."

Consequently, for his screen work, Akin has invented "a strange sub culture computer language known only to Norton Drake. I don't even look at what I'm typing. I work on rhythms. When people pretend to type, they make this constant staccato motion. But every time you finish a word, you hit the space bar. Every time you enter a series of numbers or a command, you hit the return key. That sets up a definite rhythm.

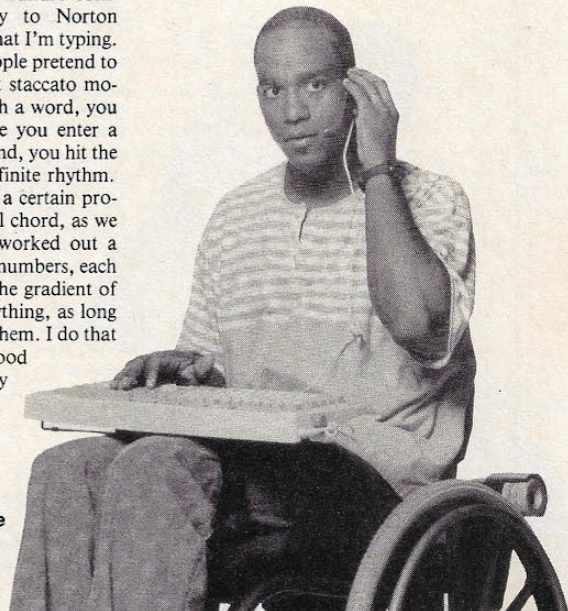
"Let's say I'm working on a certain program to break apart a musical chord, as we did in 'Choir of Angels.' I worked out a descending series of two-digit numbers, each one gradually slowing down the gradient of the thing. You can set up anything, as long as it has rules and you follow them. I do that for what I think would look good on screen. I give them plenty of takes so they can

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match it all up. So, it *is* a computer language; it just doesn't work on *any* known computer yet.

"Sometimes," he adds, "it's difficult. There was a time where the graphics were *obviously* mouse-driven, and I was typing like a mad fool. So, the props department got me a mouse. Now, I give them some typing and some mouse stuff, so they have a choice in editing."

Overall, the role of Norton Drake didn't require much preparation, despite the character's handicap. "One of the main things I did," Akin discloses, "was to bring in the strap Norton wears around his legs. The wheelchair zips around a lot and the strap keeps my legs together so I don't have



All War of the Worlds Photos: Copyright 1998, 1999 Paramount Pictures TV

to move them back into place by hand. Also, psychologically, when I sit in the chair with the strap on, I tend not to move my feet. When we do looping, I don't use the strap, but I have to sit down. I *can't* do Norton standing up. We tried the first time standing for an hour-and-a-half and got nothing.

"I get double-crossed sometimes. I try to make sure that Norton is doing nothing that I haven't tried out first myself, like getting onto a couch from the wheelchair. Then, they'll want to move the couch a little bit and it doesn't look right on the screen. How did the wheelchair get so far away?"

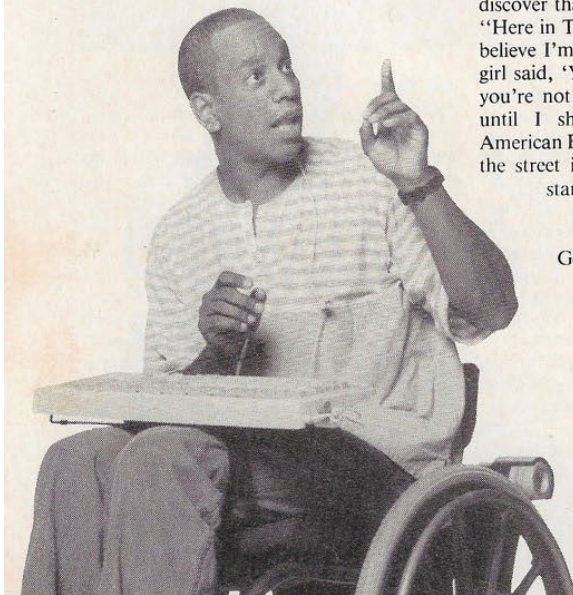
Also, says the actor, "It annoys me when they shoot a scene and the only way in and out of it is steep stairs. How did Norton get there? That's television. You just have to create in your mind that he got there. Sometimes, I look around and say, 'There is *nothing* in this room that I can reach. All these switches are too high, so let's get me some extenders or something.'

"They haven't been able to adjust most of the problems as much as I would like, but that's the nature of the series. You have to focus on one or two things and push those to gain the audience. Our first season has been pretty hectic, what with the writers' strike and everything. Sometimes, scripts would be handed to you as you walked on the set! It was madness some days. The second will have more time to branch out.

"I'm not complaining, though," Akin adds. "This show has given me a great opportunity and I appreciate it."

Gertrude Glitches

Norton Drake's voice-activated wheelchair, Gertrude, has proved to be as temperamental as any live actor might. Radio-controlled from off-camera, she requires much care and nurturing. "When I arrived on set last May," Akin recounts, "Gertrude was driven by an umbilical cord. It was huge, like something out of NASA.



Unlike his TV counterpart, Akin is not wheelchair-bound, often causing confusion for fans who don't recognize him without his steel companion.



Akin hopes the show's general direction will turn away from the "bug-eyed monster" sensibility, allowing exploration of more classic SF concepts.

"The first day was hell. They would lose control and I was smashing into desks, banks of computers. We ended up tying a rope from the wheelchair to the camera dolly and pulling me around. Then, they switched to a radio system, but Gibby, the operator, has spent hundreds of hours and a lot of money redesigning the circuitry.

"I like the freedom of putting on my coat, or doing something else and the chair is just taking me along. The problem is that to make her work properly, you need time. Gibby has to figure out the shot, the best place for him to stand. It's a different maneuvering system depending on whether I'm facing him or going away. Many directors say, 'Jeez, we don't have time for this. We'll hand-push.'"

The wheelchair affects Akin's real life as well. He finds that fans are often shocked to discover that he isn't handicapped after all. "Here in Toronto," he says, "people don't believe I'm doing a series. This weekend, a girl said, 'Yeah, you *look* like Norton, but you're not really him.' They don't believe until I show them my cast jacket or American Express card. If people saw me on the street in a wheelchair, I would be instantly recognizable. It's a godsend, actually. It protects me from being typecast into a role like George Reeves. The minute I stand up, I'm another character.

"I'm always asked why they didn't hire a disabled actor. I tell them I don't know. It's

odd. You think you're just doing a part, but then you realize you *are* affecting people. One woman told me that her friend teaches disabled kids, and they look up to Norton because he can do things and doesn't let people help him all the time."

At first, Akin wasn't particularly excited about the part. "My manager," he recalls, "said, 'Go do this audition.' I got there and said, 'OK, you want a paraplegic, West Indian computer genius.' I went, 'Oh, God! How left-field can we get?' So, I did it—with a *lot* of attitude. Every black actor in Toronto was there. I left, thinking that was it." Two more auditions followed.

"About a month later," Akin continues, "they still hadn't found the other people. I wondered, do I have the part or don't I? Then, *bing*. It all happened."

In 1988, Akin worked on another SF project as well, *Millennium* (STARLOG #142). However, "I had very, very little to do with *Millennium*," he insists. "I was in a couple of scenes. I had read John Varley's book and thought it had a really interesting concept. I looked at the script and they had changed the concept sufficiently that it wasn't as interesting."

A crew person suddenly stops by to tease Akin about his plaid tie. Explains Akin, "My great grandfather was a white Scot named Gervan who married a Jamaican woman. The Gervans were affiliated with the Kennedy family. So, legally, I'm part of the Kennedy clan.

"A big joke in our family has been who's going to get the kilt, so I went and got a full Scottish drag, the kilt, the socks, the jacket, the whole thing, and wore it to our Christmas party. When we did this episode where Norton wears a suit, they bought me this Kennedy tartan tie. But," laughs Philip Akin, "if I had known that girls would do to me what they did at that party, I would have been wearing a kilt when I was 16." ❄️