

# Ted Cassidy

## Legendary Big Man

By JOEL EISNER

Surprising himself, Ted Cassidy admitted a certain fondness for working on the *Star Trek* episode, "What are Little Girls Made of?"

The late actor recalls "Star Trek" drama, "Lost In Space" larceny and monstrous Hollywood stereotyping.

**T**o most of the television viewing public, Ted Cassidy will always be best remembered as Lurch, the butler on *The Addams Family* TV series. It was Cassidy's first acting role, and although he did not think so, it was also one of his best. Until his untimely death in 1979, Cassidy found that the character of Lurch was destined to haunt him forever.

During the years that followed *The Addams Family* cancellation, the actor found himself cast in a variety of roles, including appearances on *Lost in Space*, *Star Trek*, *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, and two *Gene Roddenberry* pilot films, *Genesis II* and *Planet Earth*. He also played the role of Bigfoot on

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*The Six Million Dollar Man* (a part originated by wrestler *Andre the Giant*).

In 1977, Cassidy returned as Lurch for the television special, *Halloween with the Addams Family*. Regardless of the number of TV shows and feature films he did, Cassidy almost always found himself cast in the role of the "big dumb brute."

About seven months before he died, I was very fortunate to interview Ted Cassidy. What follows are perhaps the actor's last recorded words—candid comments by one of Hollywood's favorite "big" men.

**STARLOG:** Did you like your role in the *Lost in Space* episode, "The Thief of Outer Space"?

**TED CASSIDY:** Well, yeah, I guess so. It was a job like any of them, nothing special. It was a long makeup. I had my hair curled tight, a black moustache and a swarthy look to my face and I rushed around speaking Pidgin English, as they often have big men



Cassidy felt a great deal of affection for *The Addams Family* cast—(left to right) Lisa "Wednesday" Loring, Jackie "Uncle Fester" Coogan, Carolyn "Morticia" Jones, Blossom "Grandmama" Rock, John "Gomez" Astin, Ken "Pugsley" Weatherwax—and ultimately enjoyed the opportunity to work with them again in a TV movie reunion.

do. That's one of my pet peeves, that big guys apparently don't have an I.Q. above 50 in the eyes of audiences and producers. I liked the role in "The Thief of Outer Space" as well as



I like any of them. It's a job. A job that I like but nothing really takes place that is glamorous and wonderful and as unusual and memorable as people like to think. You know, I can't tell you that I'm very fond of *anything* I've done, including—and especially—*The Addams Family*. That's an albatross around my neck that I've got to get rid of somehow.

**STARLOG:** How did you get along with the *Space* cast?

**CASSIDY:** Well, actors get along. They tell stories, laugh, scratch. We are all frightened that we're not going to be working next week anyway, so we fill the air with a lot of noise and pretend that the noise will make all that fright go away.

**STARLOG:** Which show did you enjoy more: *Lost in Space* or *Star Trek*?

**CASSIDY:** I must say I enjoyed *Star Trek* ("What are Little Girls Made Of?") more, because I got to know Gene Roddenberry very well and we are now personal friends. I got to know the cast pretty well. Not so much Leonard Nimoy, I got to know William Shatner pretty well. They are a pretty good gang. The production company that made *Star Trek* is the kind of production company that likes to have fun. Almost every show, they would engineer some kind of outtake. I mean, it *wouldn't* happen naturally. They would figure out what to do to make a funny piece of film for Christmas, you know, for the dailies. There was nobody on the production end who was really nervous as they usually are on all shows. This was a very relaxed, fun kind of thing to do. I do remember *Star Trek* with fondness. It is strange, I hadn't thought about that till now.

**STARLOG:** But you have mixed feelings about *The Addams Family*?

**CASSIDY:** That is a complicated question. I liked getting a foothold in the business and *The Addams Family* indeed allowed me to do that. The first year, when we made 30 shows, was a whole celebration to me because it was my first job in film. I was fascinated by the whole fact that we were doing this and actually getting paid for acting. We were creating all those funny things for the butler: the "You rang" and crushing the hats, and all those things he does. Getting Lurch's character straightened out was fun because I was brand new to professional film acting. I had only been in radio up till then as an announcer or a program director.

But I had a ball. It was terrific until the second year, then I began to see that playing that guy, who really didn't do anything besides this shtick, was no fun. I began to react badly, not to the cast, the producer or director—because they were good folks—but to myself. I thought, "I must get out of this show. This is terrible, I want nothing to do with this character, it's ruining me." Everybody began to know me by the character's name instead of *my* name. I really began to panic, because if that keeps up, you never work again. It has happened to some people, so I was really glad when *The Addams Family* was cancelled.

I have been trying to shake loose the butler

image ever since. That's 15 years ago and people say you can't. Well, you can, but you have to do it in a very specific way. You don't do it by working, or by doing guest appearances on TV, or by making movies, because I've done all of that. What you do is you appear in *another* series on a regular basis as a character who has an impact the measure of what the butler had. It must be a memorable character, one that stays with you, that you can take to the fairs and the circuses on weekends and make public appearances. If you can find a show like that and appear on a regular basis with that kind of character, you have *every* chance of defeating Lurch, assassinating him. You confuse everyone because what you would be doing would be very current in the media, but the butler was done 15 years ago and is now in reruns on funny little stations. You confuse everyone, because they wouldn't know who you were. If you could do a third series, I think you would probably escape the illness of being the butler.

**STARLOG:** Who played Thing?

**CASSIDY:** You're *not* going to believe this, but I did. I always have. I have a separate contract for it. In fact, I did Thing in the reunion. They liked it so much, they gave me extra things to do with the hand. It was never publicized although a few columnists were able to get it out there as show biz information, but no one seemed to really jump on it and be bowled over.

**STARLOG:** Did you like playing Bigfoot on *The Six Million Dollar Man*?

**CASSIDY:** Oh, it was awful, just bloody awful. That was the most uncomfortable outfit any man could wear. There were times when I actually fell to my knees from the heat. I thought I was going to pass out, because we filmed the first show in a heat wave, and I was wearing that suit and had hair all over my face, contact lenses, a huge wig on my head, these heavy high-heeled boots—I had no mobility in that thing—and those awful looking teeth that clamp into your mouth. There was hardly an orifice that wasn't plugged up. It must have been 200 degrees at all times inside that hair suit! I'm *glad* that show was cancelled—at least on my behalf, because I would have had to do Bigfoot again. You may say, "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do." I say that's true, but I have to pay the rent. That's what this job as an actor is unless you are independently wealthy or you have become well known enough in the profession to command a lot of money, and I haven't—so you do what you must to survive. In the 15 years that I have been in the film acting business, I haven't done anything else to make my living and very few people in the Screen Actors Guild can say that, so that's a point of pride in a sense.

**STARLOG:** How did you get along with *The Addams Family* cast?

**CASSIDY:** We loved each other. It was a great bunch of people, and we're all great friends to this day. [The late] Jackie Coogan, [the late] Carolyn Jones, John Astin and even Felix Silla [STARLOG #34] the little guy who



His experience on *The Addams Family* left Cassidy with mixed feelings. It was the actor's first film job, but his identification as Lurch limited his career.

played Cousin Itt—I see him now and then. Even the people who appeared as guests—Skip Homeier and Don Rickles, who appeared once—everybody remembers doing it. It was a fun show for everyone *but me* because I didn't like the character and it started to interfere with my personal life. But *Family* was great.

**STARLOG:** Were there any funny or unusual moments that occurred during the filming of *Addams Family*, *Lost in Space* or *Star Trek*?

**CASSIDY:** Everybody wants to know that, but I can't ever think of any funny or unusual moments. The only funny things that happen are things that you trump up, they don't often happen naturally. The things that make people laugh are when you fall down as you cross the room because somebody left a sandbag in the wrong place or you blow a line and so you say another funny line because by blowing the first line anyway, the scene is lost. You have to do it again, so you might as well make a joke of it. But those are things that aren't big enough to be regarded as funny or unusual moments. Out of the entire two years of *The Addams Family*, I don't remember *anything* that was funny or unusual that anybody would want to hear.

**STARLOG:** Did you enjoy doing *The Addams Family Reunion*?

**CASSIDY:** Yeah, I did because first of all, I got paid quite a lot of money for that. And second, I got a chance for a week-and-a-half, to go over our histories with the others—Carolyn, John and Jack particularly and David Levy, the producer. We sat around like



Epitomizing the "big, dumb brute" image that Cassidy railed against was the Bigfoot character he portrayed in episodes of *The Bionic Woman* with Lindsay Wagner.

dialogue. His dialogue is often atrocious and he admits it and so does Majel Barrett, his wife. His dialogue is terrible, and you have to kind of talk him out of it, but he is just wonderful at whipping up story plots. He is a fun-loving guy. He's ready for a party at any given moment. I like him a lot.

**STARLOG:** What is your favorite role?

**CASSIDY:** I don't have one, as I said. I did a one-day job once on *Banacek* with George Peppard. My character owned an automobile junkyard and Banacek was supposed to show up and talk to this fellow about whatever murder had been committed. Well, I was actually *talking* to this other actor on film—that may sound silly to you, but it's not silly. I seldom get to say anything on film. So, here was a case where I was actually a normal person, talking to Banacek, regular conversation—it was an amazing feeling. I had never done it before.

After the scene was over, a couple of stuntmen were standing there and one guy says, "That's incredible. That was very good. I didn't know you did that." I said, "Of course, I do that! That's what I'm supposed to do. I've done it all my life. What makes you think I can't?" He said, "Well, because you've never done it." And he was right. So, maybe that's why people think I'm such an idiot, because they never see me doing anything.

**STARLOG:** What is the one role you have played for which you would like to be remembered?

**CASSIDY:** None. *None* of them! I don't want to be remembered for *any* of them because I *don't* like any of them. I'm not proud of any of them. I am still waiting for the one role I will have pride in and want to be associated with down the years.

**STARLOG:** Where can we look forward to seeing you in the near future?

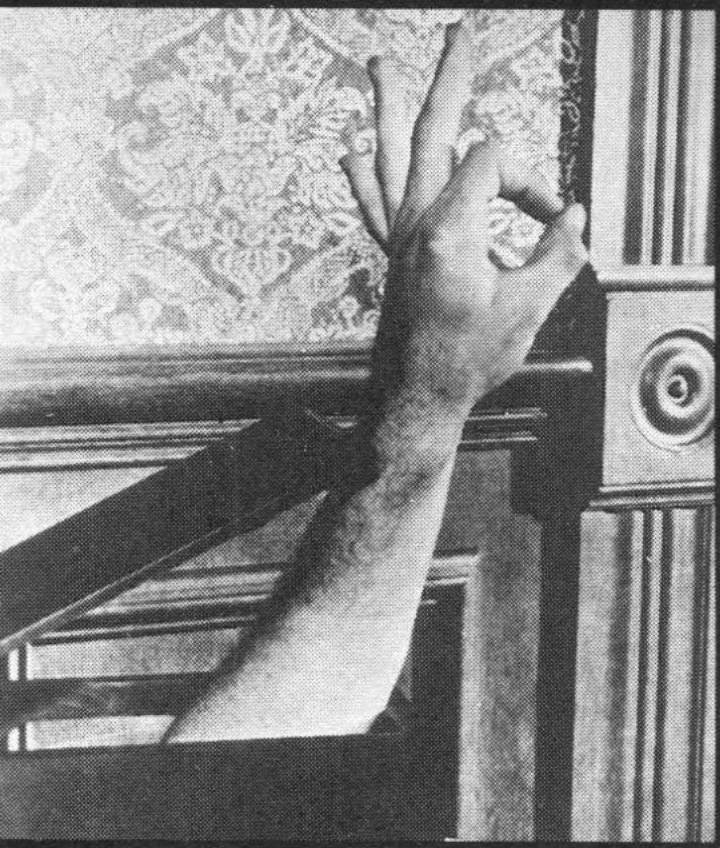
**CASSIDY:** Well, [laughs] you might see me in the supermarket from time to time, or maybe in the car as I zip from place to place pleading for work. I narrate *The Incredible Hulk* and then I'm doing Lou Ferrigno's voice. I also do six cartoons. On *The Fantastic Four*, I play Ben, the Thing, the guy made of rocks. That's the most fun because Ben has quite a lot to say and he is very whimsical and loose.

I unfortunately lost a number of jobs—which has left me very depressed. So, I'm threatening to fire managers and agents even though it's not their fault. We tend to overreact in this business because it's a business full of panic about working. You never know if you're going to work again. There are an awful lot of people who do what I do out here, people who look like I do, who sound like I do.

There's another actor out here by the name of Richard Kiel, who has done *The Longest Yard*, *Silver Streak* and *The Spy Who Loved Me*.  
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BIONIC WOMAN PHOTO: ABC



Cassidy had a hand in every episode of *The Addams Family*—he also played the part of Thing.

it was old home week. We rehashed our lives and laughed and went out and got drunk a few times and that was terrific. The show itself had too much happening, I felt. It was tough to follow—the big party with people rushing here and there. It could have been a simpler show and maybe gotten better ratings. We were a 90-minute program and the ratings tailed off in the last half hour. As people began to say, "Well, I don't know. It's starting to be too confusing." That was what I kept hearing, and indeed I felt that myself as I watched it.

**STARLOG:** How did it feel to play Lurch again after 11 years?

**CASSIDY:** The same. I thought I would never do it again, that there wasn't enough

money to *make* me do it again. I did it because I didn't want to let everybody else down. They all agreed to do the show. The fact that we were all able to reunite after 14 years is really astonishing. So, I didn't want to be the rat who sank the ship by saying no.

**STARLOG:** Did you like working on *Man from Atlantis*?

**CASSIDY:** *Man from Atlantis*—you saw that turkey, did you?—was my favorite show, because I think it was the funniest thing I ever did. Imagine me wearing a Prince Valiant black wig and a dress and offering two ping-pong balls in my hands up to some vinyl creature in a cave. It was just a laugh every time we came to work on that show. You wouldn't believe what we were doing, it was so farcical, the damn thing. I loved playing that silly guy. Man, he was supposed to be this island king and I looked absolutely ridiculous and it was all being done with such genuine sincerity, which made it so funny to me. So, that is why I liked that, it was *beyond* salvage.

**STARLOG:** How did you enjoy working for Gene Roddenberry?

**CASSIDY:** Gene is a nice man. He has always treated me fine. I think he's much better at dreaming up stories than he is at writing



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*ed Me*. Now, there are quite a few people who believe that's me when they see him, which distresses me beyond telling. There was a point at which I was ready to get out the business because of that—because he is not an actor. Not to me, he isn't. He does his best, but if that's acting, then I'm a bricklayer. I can't really bear the residual effects of what he has done yet. I have to bear them, because apparently, half the world thinks that's me, and I guess they think what I do is him. I don't know. But for somebody to tell me, "Oh, *The Spy Who Loved Me* was just terrific." I don't think it was terrific. It was awful. That's the big dumb brute character again and I will *not* be known as that big dumb brute.

If I'm up for a part if, I'm asked to play something, I really worry what I'm going to be because they always make fellows like me the big dumb galoot, the oaf who doesn't know anything, who trips over himself. We are apparently idiots, all big men. You end up never leading anybody to anything. You end up holding people, while the boss hits them in the face—scratching your head a lot wondering where all your marbles went. Well, that kind of thing doesn't appeal to me at all. I used to think that's how it was and I would do it, but I *won't* do it any more. I turn down everything that comes along like that. So, the only thing you can rely on are those who have worked with you and know that you are consistent, talented and reliable, and maybe they're friends of yours and are willing to put you to work so you don't end up in the welfare line.

That's about it, isn't it? I appreciate your interest, I ordinarily don't get into these interviews because I don't enjoy having fans, because there is nothing to be a fan of—I haven't done anything. It's kind of silly. I avoid crowds for that reason, just stay home and see if I can't get the tomatoes to grow a little better, that's mostly what I do. I have a car, a little Porsche speedster, that I race around in sometimes at rallies. But when you're among car people, they're interested in cars and not in the phoniness of "you're famous and important because you happen to be on a piece of celluloid, stomping around making funny noises." You become an important human being in the scheme of things in the world and I just can't come to terms with it, so I think it's all ridiculous and that's why I rarely answer with any kind of seriousness. People look at me as if I was something special. The way other people fix cars and stop leaks under sinks and build houses—it's no different than that.

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*Ted Cassidy died on January 16, 1979 of complications following open-heart surgery for a non-malignant tumor. His obituary in Variety referred to him as the man who was "best known" as Lurch on The Addams Family and as Bigfoot on The Six Million Dollar Man.*

