

Some years back, a headmaster at Lincoln School told aspiring actor John Hurt to forget it. "You wouldn't stand a chance in the profession!" he informed Hurt, thus proving that when it comes to show business, nobody knows anything, least of all members of the British educational system. Still, one can't help but wonder if that headmaster managed to see any of his former student's countless film and television projects over the past four decades, and reconsidered his own expertise at career counseling.

As one of the preeminent actors of his generation, Hurt has created an astonishing array of characters, from lunatic emperor Caligula in *I, Claudius* to the tragically deformed John Merrick in *The Elephant Man*. He won an Emmy for *The Naked Civil Servant* and an Oscar nomination for *The Elephant Man*. He also makes acting look incredibly easy, but that's just part of a seamless technique that he dismisses as though unworthy of mention. "I've always said and believed that [one of the essential elements of] acting is that you don't want to be *caught* acting," comments Hurt. "That's the last thing you want. Hopefully, particularly in film, you're caught *being*. You're praying that the camera glances by you when you're at your best just being."

On this particular morning, Hurt is relaxing over a cup of tea at his apartment in London's Soho district, where he has agreed to talk about his role in writer-director Guillermo del Toro's fantasy adventure, *Hellboy*. Hurt plays Professor Bruttonholm, a.k.a. Professor Broom, who discovers a baby horned demon and raises him as a surrogate son. Broom also helps form the Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense (BPRD), with the adult Hellboy (played by Ron Perlman) as its key agent and heavy hitter.

"Obviously, we're living in a world of fantasy here," says Hurt, "but this is a man who sees a tiny monster-child and feels that it has a presence about it. Being as he has no family himself, Broom decides to become a surrogate father and, of course, it grows to be this extraordinary creature. But nevertheless, Broom still feels very fatherly toward this monstrous ex-demon and knows him better than anybody. He treats Hellboy like a father treats a child, probably even more so in a sense, because this particular kid is more childish than most children."

Surrogate Father

Before signing on, Hurt was unfamiliar with *Hellboy*, but a long chat with its enthusiastic director convinced him that it was a worthwhile project. "The reason I'm involved is Guillermo del Toro," he says. "I had never heard of *Hellboy*, so he sent me the comics and I talked to him and said,

In the grand tradition of cinematic scholars, *Hellboy's* Professor Broom (John Hurt) is a bearded, bespectacled scientist with wild white hair.

BY JOE NAZZARO

The Devil's Dad

ONCE THE ELEPHANT MAN,
JOHN HURT IS THE
PERFECT PARENT TO BE
RAISING HELLBOY.

'Guillermo, I don't know what the hell all this is about! I have no idea!' But I liked him enormously, we had lunch and I found him a good thinker and a powerful presence—not to mention a *big* presence.

"I just thought I would go with it, because I had never done anything like this before. My attitude was, 'Let's see what happens,' and, in fact, it isn't that much different from doing something like *ALIEN*. A character is a character and style is style, and in my book, style equals reality. If you find the right style, the reality will follow, which is the same with anything you do. It isn't peculiar to have pictures with monsters in them, or stories with strange origins such as *ALIEN*, or projects with pre-Christian thinking like *I, Claudius*. For every one of those, you have to find a style in order to create the reality."

That certainly made sense to del Toro, who created a very distinct, larger-than-life reality for *Hellboy*, and Hurt had no trouble fitting in. "You have to be on the same page [as your director], but that was easy with Guillermo," says Hurt. "I could see where he was at, it made sense and it was roughly where I was trying to be. It seemed to me that we were on the same page, and he thought so as well."

In terms of specific ideas though, "It's difficult to describe what exists in your imagination. What is brought to fruition by actually playing the part is what's important. But what became quite evident was that what I was thinking about and the way I was thinking about it was in exactly the same direction as Guillermo, so we were able to shake hands and get on with it. The more ideas you can throw at him, the better. He has such an active mind. For instance, he writes whole treatises on each character as to what they like and don't like. He'll tell you the kind of women they would enjoy, the type of films they would watch, the sort of cheese they would eat and so on. It's fascinating. I'm not sure how *helpful* it is, but it's absolutely fascinating."

Hurt also developed a good working relationship with Perlman, the film's red-skinned lead. "Oh yes, we got on enormously well, my child and me," he chuckles. "He always called me 'Dad.' Ron was quite funny talking about the film. He would say, 'They've run up against two problems: The first is that nobody knows who Hellboy is, and the second is that nobody knows who Ron Perlman is!' I hope it isn't tempting fate to say that."

The *Hellboy* cast is equally effusive about Hurt. "You couldn't get a better Professor Broom than John Hurt," notes Perlman. "He brings so much integrity and dignity to what is ultimately a fantasy/comic book milieu, and that lends it credibility. Whenever you make the leap from a comic



Abe Sapien (Doug Jones) is one of the stranger employees working at Broom's Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense.



Broom doesn't just mentor demons and creatures. John Myers (Rupert Evans) is one of BPRD's human agents.

book to the screen, you have to anchor it with things that are truly believable and verifiable. John's presence really lent credence to this particular adaptation."

"The first night that I met John Hurt was actually on set," recalls Doug Jones, who plays fish-man Abe Sapien. "I was fully made up, so I didn't get to greet him with my own face, but we walked up to each other, and I said, 'Hi John, I'm Doug Jones. It's such a pleasure to meet you!' He quietly looked me up and down, from head to toe, and asked, 'Is this everything you've ever dreamed of?' John told me all about working on *The Elephant Man*, and was very sympathetic to all the makeup that I was wearing."

Surrounded by larger-than-life char-

We don't know what killed this man, but—considering Hurt's history—it's probably wise if he stays far away from the corpse's chest.



Why is Hurt starring in an adaptation of a comic book he never read? Three words: Guillermo del Toro.

acters like Hellboy and Abe, Hurt had to play Professor Broom relatively straight. "It had to be ultra-real," he insists, "so yes, you can call it 'straight.' I really don't know how to describe it. My performance is slightly more comic strip than that; I emphasized certain areas of reality while leaving out others. It wasn't about naturalism, but it was about being real."

Elephant Man

Hurt has built a career out of being real. The 64-year-old actor had originally planned to use his keen eye for human behavior as an artist, attending St. Martin's School of Art in 1959. However, he was broke, and an Australian girl friend—who used to give him food from her job at a local burger bar—persuaded him to try out for the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Art acting school. He was accepted, and burned all his paintings in what he calls "one of those Faustian deals you make with yourself at that age." Hurt has since returned to painting, but at the time, he devoted all of his creative energy to his acting career. He made his London stage debut in 1962, the same year he appeared in his first feature (*The Wild and the Willing*). After that, the work began to steamroll in.

"Looking back on things in retrospective makes it appear a little easier," says Hurt. "In films, I guess my first major break was *A Man for All Seasons*. To be in a picture of that stature with [director] Fred Zinnemann, and to have a very good part, put me in front of both the business and the public. And then things went happily along until the next major one, a made-for-television movie called *The Naked Civil Servant*, which was the biggest break of my life. Jack Nicholson said the biggest break of his life was *Easy Rider*, so that was my *Easy Rider*. And then *Elephant Man*, *Midnight Express* and *ALIEN* came clustered together, so that was quite a formidable little body of work from that period, which one probably uses as a springboard, to a degree, for the rest of their life."

The most difficult project of that time was *The Elephant Man*, in which Hurt—under a truly massive amount of makeup—portrayed the real-life deformed Merrick. Before winning the role, Hurt met with a group of people that included producers Mel Brooks and Jonathan Sanger, all of whom appeared nervous to the auditioning actor. "As far as Hollywood was concerned, it was a difficult part to sell because the actor wouldn't be recognized," Hurt says. "But I didn't view that as a difficulty whatsoever. In the tradition I was brought up



Chris Tucker's prosthetics makeup passed its first on-set test with flying colors when a stunned film crew reacted with a roar of applause.

in, that was normality: The less you're recognized [as a performer], the closer you are to what you're *supposed* to be doing."

Not surprisingly, the biggest obstacle to overcome was creating a convincing makeup that also allowed Hurt to act. "Facially, it had to work," says Hurt. "The muscles had to move, the teeth had to be right, and that

was when Christopher Tucker was brought in to produce the makeup. You have to remember, prosthetic makeup was still in its infancy at that time [1980], and we were dealing with 22 different [foam latex appliances], so it was a big problem and we were just about to start shooting. Chris told them it would normally take him about six months, and he was being asked to do it in six weeks.

"The other difficulty was that [director] David Lynch wanted to introduce the Elephant Man in full makeup much earlier in the script than I felt was right or proper. So I entered into a dreadful collusion with Chris—who was working 20 hours a day—and told him, 'Be careful, I don't want this to be ready too soon. Because if it's ready, I have a feeling that David is going to put it in the film, and I still have a job yet to persuade him that the Elephant Man shouldn't be seen until much later.'"

Tucker still vividly recalls the first time that Hurt was brought on set in full prosthet-





Using 22 layers of latex prosthetics, Hurt was able to act and express emotion as the severely disfigured Merrick.

Unlike director David Lynch—who wanted to reveal the Elephant Man early on—Hurt felt the full makeup shouldn't be seen until the end.

These fascinating, rare color *Elephant Man* photos show off Hurt's extraordinary makeup as John Merrick.



ics. "We were getting ready to do the first test at my place, and by the time we got started, it was about 2 p.m.," says Tucker. "What I didn't know was that the production manager had called the entire crew to Wembley Studios for 11 a.m., so they were all sitting around, twiddling their thumbs, waiting for the Elephant Man. Anyway, we finally left the house at about 9 p.m. I was sitting in a Winnebago with John in the makeup, and he asked me, 'What happens if we break down?' I said, 'I don't know, but I'm not having anything to do with you if you go out in the street looking like that!'"

"When we arrived on the set, there was total silence. I suppose they were stunned, because nothing had happened for so long, and now, suddenly, the Elephant Man was there. The bedroom was all set up on a bunch of scaffolding, with a staircase leading up to it, so up the steps we went. It seemed like a long walk in silence, and as we headed up there, [director of photography] Freddie Francis said, 'We had better go into the 23rd Psalm bit and that's it, let's call it a day, fellas.' So John sat on the bed and said, 'The Lord is my shepherd' and all that business, and at the end of the scene there was a huge roar of applause from the entire crew. It was wonderful, because [all the struggle had] been worth it. Then we went back to my house to remove everything!"

Although *The Elephant Man* went on to win universal acclaim, it wasn't considered a profitable prospect. Black-and-white films aren't box office-friendly, and the unsettling subject matter didn't help, either. Hurt remembers going to a "heavyweight screening" of the picture with an audience that included several studio executives. "I've never been to a screening before or since that had an effect like that—ever," he remarks. "The atmosphere and the power it

Wake up! The beautiful black-and-white work of cinematographer Freddie Francis is even more stunning on the Special Edition DVD.



Accepting a role most actors would have shied away from, Hurt delivered an unforgettable, Oscar-nominated performance.

All Elephant Man Photos: Copyright 1980 Paramount Pictures

seemed to generate was extraordinary. I remember turning to [then-Paramount exec] Michael Eisner—who I had heard felt that there would be problems selling the film—and saying, ‘Surely, a showing like this must belay your worries.’ He didn’t really look me in the eye, just kind of over my shoulder, and replied, ‘There’s still a big problem selling monster movies!’ That’s when I thought, ‘I have problems with Hollywood,’ because I don’t understand that thinking.”

Nevertheless, the film has continued to find new viewers, thanks to the ever-growing home video market and recent Special Edition DVD. “I was at a dinner party with David Lynch,” says Hurt, “and he was thrilled with the DVD. He said it was actually better than the original [print], because he was able to tweak it and make the blacks even blacker and the whites a bit whiter. Because it was made on black-and-white stock, the film broke down all the time in the smaller cinemas. David went to see it in a tiny theater once, and there was an *entire* section missing. He went steaming up to the projectionist and asked what happened. The projectionist told him, ‘Well, it broke, so I just joined the bits together!’ We had spent all that time saying, ‘Shall we go again? Take 10, take 11 or whatever.’ But when it came to showing it, there was one guy who was happily cutting scenes out altogether! The DVD is the way *The Elephant Man* was intended to be seen, although mind you, it’s not on a big screen.”

Alien Prey

Many genre fans will forever associate Hurt with director Ridley Scott’s SF masterpiece *ALIEN*. Playing the doomed crew member Kane, who runs afoul of a deadly otherworldly organism, Hurt earned a place in cinematic history for the now-classic “chestburster” scene. It’s a moment the actor has since parodied to good effect in the 1987 Mel Brooks *Star Wars* spoof *Spaceballs*, as well as at a hotel bar while shooting another project, in which “a hastily cobbled-together bread roll was substituted for the tiny Alien.”

Like *The Elephant Man*, *ALIEN* has recently found a brand-new audience, due to last year’s director’s cut re-release of the film and the *ALIEN* *Quadrilogy* DVD box set. The fact that *ALIEN* continues to thrill as it marks its 25th anniversary next month comes as no surprise to Hurt, who claims not to have seen much of the movie since its original release.

“I don’t like seeing myself looking so young!” he jokes. “No, I’m just being silly. It doesn’t worry me whether I see myself or not. It was a totally different approach, wasn’t it? Again, that scene has a kind of reality about it that hadn’t really been done before. It doesn’t surprise me that *ALIEN* is still popular, because I know from the fan mail. In terms of the SF freaks, of whom there are



As a member of the *Nostramo*, Hurt had an encounter of the very close kind in Ridley Scott’s *ALIEN*.

Kane (Hurt) literally ends up with egg on his face when he decides to check out these extraterrestrial embryos.



Only in the science fiction universe would an alien infested astronaut’s stomach discharge be considered the best “chest” scene of time.

Hurt earned big belly laughs from audiences with his hilarious (if brief) cameo in Mel Brooks’ *Spaceballs*.



Spaceballs Photo: Copyright 1987 MGM/UA

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millions and millions, it's very high on their list. In many cases, it's their number-one movie, so it isn't shocking to me. When they release a director's cut and put together a DVD collection, that's going to cause a great deal of interest."

Hurt almost didn't work on *ALIEN* at all, and joined the cast just a day before Kane's filming was scheduled to begin. "Of course, my understanding of it all is colored," observes Hurt, "because Ridley came around the night before I was supposed to be on the set, because originally I was going to do the part... No, I think originally *they* wanted me to do it, but I happened to be employed doing something else. However, that fell through and I became available, and the fellow they had gotten to play Kane [*Frenzy's* Jon Finch] became ill. So Ridley explained everything to me, and continued to explain it to me until midnight! He went through the film, passionately talking about how he wanted to make it and what he wanted to do with it. My understanding of the picture was very much affected by that particular conversation, because I was on the set the next day at 7 a.m. So it all happened incredibly swiftly for me."

Looking over Hurt's crowded portfolio of work throughout the past four decades, it's quickly apparent that the SF-fantasy genre hasn't played a big part in his career since *ALIEN*. "Yes, but [those sort of pictures] don't always have directors like Ridley and Guillermo," he hastens to point out. "They're both highly artistic people, and it's that sort of medium, isn't it? We aren't dealing with literature. We're dealing with images on a screen."

Perhaps so, but listing Hurt's genre work doesn't take much time. There's the Roger Corman-produced *Frankenstein Unbound*, about which maybe the less said the better; voiceovers for such animated films as *Watership Down*, *The Plague Dogs*, *The Black Cauldron* and Ralph Bakshi's *The Lord of the Rings* (as Aragorn!); 1984 (which he discussed in *STARLOG* #93); a small role as the eccentric S.R. Hadden in Robert Zemeckis' *Contact*; and who could forget his brief appearance as wandmaker Mr. Ollivander in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

"I only did a day!" exclaims Hurt. "*Harry Potter* is a bit of a phenomenon, but there you are. *ALIEN*, as I said before, was groundbreaking, so it received an enormous amount of attention and was a big commercial film.

But I believe that many of the best examples of my acting have been in independent and smaller films, which never reach an audience of that size because they don't have the machinery in order to do so."

Hurt's latest project is *The Alan Clark Diaries*, a six-part biographical series that recently broke BBC records when it debuted on their new digital channel. Hurt received rave reviews for his portrayal of the maverick British politician renowned for his un-PC behavior. "He was a Tory MP, a member of Parliament for the Margaret Thatcher government, who wrote fascinating diaries," remarks Hurt. "They're bold, funny and intriguing [insights into] a politician's life. He was very outrageous, which is always interesting."

Beyond that, the actor hopes to continue working in quality, under-the-radar projects. "When all is said and done," reflects John Hurt, "those are the things that *really* interest me. But you also have to accept the fact that if you're going to take something that's more complicated and difficult, it isn't going to have the same size audience. If you want a big commercial film, it has to have a certain simplicity. Otherwise, it won't be a big commercial film."



1984 wasn't a very good year for Hurt, whose Winston Smith had a tough time living in George Orwell's totalitarian society.

A new generation of moviegoers are being introduced to Hurt's work thanks to such DVDs as *The Elephant Man* and *The ALIEN Quadrilogy*.

Hurt voiced Aragorn in Ralph Bakshi's animated take on *The Lord of the Rings*.



Essaying Lex Luthor...uh, S.R. Hadden, Hurt's eccentric bald billionaire hopes that Jodie Foster can make *Contact* with life in outer space.