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From the look on Renfield's (Peter MacNicol) face, Dracula's not the only one who's loving it.

ha-ha-**HORROR STAR**

Peter MacNicol didn't pick the part of Renfield, the actor says with a laugh. "It picked me a long time ago. I've been hearing from friends and co-workers for at least 15 years that someday I've gotta play Renfield. I didn't know whether to take that as a compliment or an insult, but here it came along, and I snatched it."

"Here" is in Mel Brooks' loving parody *Dracula: Dead and Loving It*, currently in release from Columbia. The script by Steve Haberman, Rudy DeLuca and Brooks himself follows the Lugosi film in the first third, as MacNicol explains. "Renfield is in real estate. He's sent to Dracula's castle on a business assignment, to handle a transaction for Dracula—the lease of Carfax Abbey. He's well-groomed, middle-of-the-road in terms of intelligence and economic situation and quite, quite sane. All of that changes, of course, the night he sleeps at the castle. By sunrise, he's a human insectivore, Dracula's devoted minion and probably a real bad date."

The role not only benefits from MacNicol's outstanding abilities as an actor, straight as well as comic,

"Dracula: Dead and Loving It" gives Peter MacNicol another chance to play a creepy character for chuckles.

but from his deep love of horror movies. Yes, Peter MacNicol, as they say in *Freaks*, is One Of Us. He grew up (in Texas) adoring horror movies and dinosaurs. "There was never a time when I did not like horror films," he says. "In Dallas, Texas, we had something called *Nightmare Theater* that came on Saturday nights at 10:30. A local celebrity named Bob Campbell did the *Nightmare* show at night, and during the day, he did the *Icky Twerp Show*. If you had a birthday, you got to go on his show and get hit over the head with a plastic baseball bat by a guy wearing an ape mask." How could someone with that background *not* grow up wanting to eat flies in a Mel Brooks comedy?

"I was forbidden to watch the *Nightmare* show," MacNicol continues, "for reasons of bedtime violation, and because it was not fit

subject matter for the presleep hour. But the back of the sofa had an arch to it; the sofa was pushed against the wall, but I could snake my way from the bedroom along the wall, like one of Renfield's vermin, secrete myself between the sofa and the wall and watch *Nightmare Theater*."

"That's where I saw *Frankenstein*, *Son of*, *Bride of*, all the Dracula pictures, all the Mummy pictures. My lullabies were the music of Hans J. Salter and Frank Skinner and Franz Waxman. That's what I heard before I went to bed on Saturday night. I loved, loved, loved horror films. I made my own spiderwebs. I created a kind of Necropolis in my bedroom."

MacNicol is an open, warm person, in love with acting, the theater and movies; he has a delightful way of expressing himself, and not just in words: He plays the bagpipes. This

B Y B I L L W A R R E N

may be an odd talent for an actor to possess, but MacNicol's not an ordinary actor: he fell in love with bagpipes when he saw a skeleton playing them in a Three Stooges short.

While he always wanted to be an actor, his idols were people like George Zucco more than stars like Henry Fonda. Nonetheless, he didn't head for Hammer upon finishing high school, but for the highly regarded theatrical world of Minneapolis, Minnesota. MacNicol worked at the prestigious Guthrie Theater for two years, as well as the Cricket Theater.

He was called from there to New York to audition for the lead in a TV series based on the movie *Breaking Away*, and happened to read for the young hero of the Paramount/Disney adventure *Dragonslayer*. To his surprise, he got the role. As for the movie, "It was very well crafted," MacNicol says. "I think that even if the go-motion process is now a relic of the past, there was something so perfectly dreamlike and enchanting about that dragon that I really don't think it will be bettered. And the performance of Sir Ralph Richardson is so eerily, wondrously strange. I will remember that always."

MacNicol lived in New York for many years and became very active in the theater there, appearing in plays including *Crimes of the Heart*,

White Liars/Black Comedy, *Rum and Coke* and many Shakespearean productions, including the title roles in *Richard II* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Meanwhile, he also built a substantial reputation in films. He played the central character in the outstanding *Sophie's Choice*, opposite Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline; among his other movies are *Housesitter*, *American Blue Note*, *Hard Promises* and *Heat*. He has also been busy on television, including a stint on CBS' *Chicago Hope*.

To his delight, he had the chance to work with Christopher Lee in "The



Like MacNicol, Harvey Korman (as Dr. Seward) enjoys the art of going over the top.

Boy Who Left Home to Learn About the Shivers," an episode of *Faerie Tale Theater*. "Christopher has a very surprising and, I believe, completely unknown adeptness at witty, urbane comedy," MacNicol reveals. "It's a pity that we will never see what he would have done with the part of

"It's all very heightened, through the filter of comedy, but it's absolutely true to the spirit of the first *Dracula*."

Elliot in Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, or any number of Coward vehicles, or Maugham plays. He is wonderful, and dry, and sardonic. And this only comes across when you're sitting around a table with him and talking about acting."

After *Sophie's Choice*, the movie for which MacNicol is probably best known—so far—is *Ghostbusters II*, in which he plays arrogant dweeb Janosz Poha. Although the sequel overall is a disappointment, MacNicol steals every scene he has, drawing laughs from almost the first frame he appears in, and received the best personal reviews of anyone in the film. And he almost turned down the movie.

"I was sent the script, but I didn't even want to audition for it," he says, "because it was one more generic villain that could literally have been played by anyone from George Arliss to Robert Culp. It was so broadly, pallidly drawn that there was not the slightest bit of interest in it for me. But I had just come out [to California]; I was alone in Granada Hills—my wife was back east. I was sent here like an army ant, foraging for



Leslie Nielsen may play a comic Count, but Renfield learns the hard way to take him very seriously.



MacNicol should know something's wrong here; character actors usually don't get the girls this easily.

food. I couldn't just reject everything that was sent my way.

"I looked at the script one more time, and I saw the word 'Carpathia' in my dialogue," he continues. "And I wondered, what if this guy is a Middle European? What if he is a Carpathian? I had known this man at the Romanian tourist authority, because I had always wanted to go to Transylvania. So I would go in there and talk to this man; I remember his accent and worked it up, adding just a dash more paprika.

"I met Ivan Reitman and Harold Ramis, and asked if anything would go. They said, 'Why? What do you have in mind?' and I said, 'Just let me do it.' So I did this scene, as this guy. And there was a kind of pall over the room when I finished. I felt that in trying to read their faces, the reactions would stretch from 'Let's give him a callback' to 'Call security

immediately.' Happily for me, it was the former reaction that won out.

"I delighted in that role," MacNicol says. "I delighted in coming up with a whole lineage, a national flag for the country from which I hailed. It was a snake stepping on a man." MacNicol played the hapless Janosz, who's used as a cat's-paw by the real villain of the piece, Viggo of Carpathia, as a man divided against himself. The lower half of his face almost always has a tentative smile, while the upper half looks perpetually worried. And as MacNicol says, in the scene when he confronts Sigourney Weaver at the door of her apartment, the poor jerk is caught between being insecure and overconfident. "He's like some sort of rampaging, scared army," MacNicol laughs. "He's seizing a city, yet terrified that someone will raise a gun and oppose him. My proudest moment as an actor in that whole movie was achieving not a triphong, but a quadrathong, on the word 'baby.' I can't reproduce it now for some odd reason, but it was like 'und where is the baheybahee?'"

MacNicol's performance in *Ghostbusters II* is so odd and distinctive that it's not surprising that director Barry Sonnenfeld approached him to play the horrendously chipper and bouncy camp counselor in *Addams Family Values*, a guy who's also revealed to be a slimy, obsequious moneygrubber. While he found the secret to his *Ghostbusters II* portrayal when he created the accent, finding his way into the camp counselor came "when I found how high on my waist to wear my pants," he reveals. "The pants got a little higher and higher through rehearsal, until they were just below my sternum when we shot.

***Ghostbusters II* was a letdown, but the performance of MacNicol (with Sigourney Weaver) was worth celebrating.**

"I grew up on Charles Addams' books of cartoons; I had them all, and I loved them," he recalls. "In fact, they served me very well on the last day of shooting. There was no built-in demise for the counselors; they just simply disappeared. And I said, 'Barry, you cannot do this. These people must be punished. The universe demands it. You must do what Charles Addams would have done. We must be cooked on a giant spit.' I couldn't believe it when he called to an underling and said, 'We need a giant rotisserie made, and fast.' So it's

exactly what we shot. It was a wonderful kind of stirring tribute to Charles Addams, and a nod of respect to me for thinking of it."

And now comes *Dracula: Dead and Loving It*. When he met with Brooks and his partners, MacNicol says the meeting quickly shifted to a discussion of John L. Balderston, Martin Kosleck and other horror-related topics—and he had the role of Renfield. He hopes that audiences realize how much he respects Dwight Frye's take on the role in the Tod Browning version. "There is something so pungent about that portrayal," he says. "It's one of the most distinctive performances in the history of the horror film."

Since even Frye's performance is played partly for laughs in *Dracula*, the question naturally arises as to the differences between playing Renfield straight and playing Renfield funny. MacNicol pauses, thinking this one over. "I'm not sure!" he

"It's such a difficult achievement, that marriage of comedy and horror. It almost never works, almost never."

exclaims. "Of course, it's all very heightened, through the filter of comedy, but it's absolutely true to the spirit of the time in which that first movie was made. But God knows, it is a comedy; you're in situations where you have to have comedy rhythms—pratfalls, horrible things that go wrong for Renfield, which have funny consequences. So yeah, you're playing a comedy, but you're trying to be completely real in that world, comedic though it is.

"In my performance, I feel like I'm cooing a love song to my betters, to those movies that came before and those actors who were there. Not just Dwight Frye, but Colin Clive and Ernest Thesiger, the music they had in their performances. These people didn't just act scenes, they sang them, they declaimed them to the heavens, and I just love that. I was smitten with it as a kid, and I still am.

"Acting, at its best," he goes on, "is a kind of shamanic thing, an invocation of another spirit to take over your own. That's when it's the most satisfying for the actor, and that's when it's the most riveting for the audience." He feels that the broader, more "theatrical" style of acting has been, unfortunately, supplanted. "But I'm quite sure that in their day, players like Colin Clive seemed quite



Photo: Bruce McBroom/Copyright 1988 Columbia

odd fish to the people who had loved Henry Irving and Edmond Keane and contemporaries of that era. The very spirit of people changes over time. You watch war movies of the 1940s, and those people have an undeniable way of being; there is an effervescence there, there is a speed of delivery, a lightness of being, that is gone.

"Obviously, players are the representatives of the society, of the times in which they live; players change, styles of playing change," he continues. "But I miss it. I really bemoan the extinction of high style, for want of a better term. I don't want to say broad acting—I want to say high style, because I'm not talking about something that's surfacy. I'm talking about something that's more deeply committed. Gestures had a wider arc in 1935 than they do in 1965, '75, '95. Voices had a more expansive range. Emotionality and sentimentality were not embarrassing, they were values in storytelling; now they're frowned upon. Those story elements are now second-class citizens. It is very discouraging; I feel like we're in a very pallid time, both in real life and screen life."

But he was happy working on *Dracula: Dead and Loving It*. "This is one of those dull actor stories that you immediately channel through while you're watching late-night talk shows, but I really did hit it off with everybody on that set. Leslie, of course, had his contraption with him [a device that makes you think he's suffering from gas, to be polite]. "I truly believe he was holding it throughout the entire shoot, like an



Dracula: Dead and Loving It presents further proof of what a seasoned comedy performer MacNicol is.

asthmatic clutching an inhaler. He's a lot of fun. And besides being funny in this movie, Leslie has some scenes in which he has a lot of actor weight—he's very impressive in a couple of the serious moments."

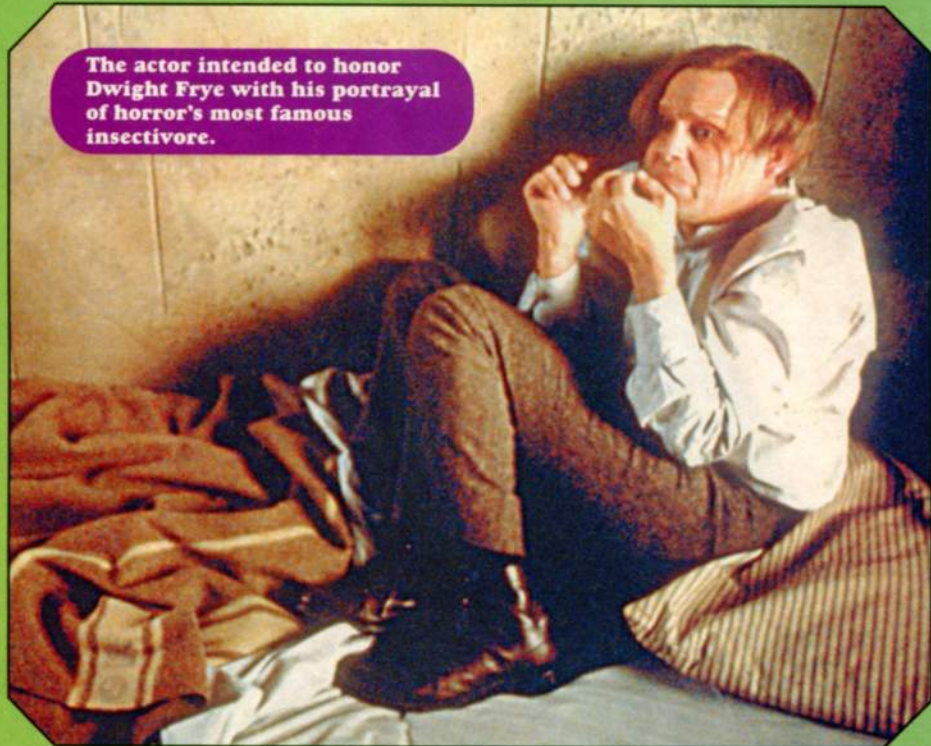
As for the legendary Brooks himself, MacNicol says, "He directs a lot if he doesn't see what he likes, but if he's getting what he wants, he's a man in a chair, laughing and smiling. He looks like a beatific child when things are going right. I had as good a time with him as I have ever had with the best directors I've worked with. He's about 100 different things, all of them wonderful. And I don't

need to sound sycophantic—the job is over."

Despite his love of fright films, MacNicol doesn't believe that horror/comedies are a pall on the genre at all. In fact, he says, "The problem with horror/comedies is usually that they reduce both their own comedy and their own horror. It's such a difficult achievement, that marriage of comedy and horror. It almost never works, almost never. When it does, those examples just shine in the gloom: *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, *Ghost Breakers*, *The Cat and the Canary*..."

In a medium in which cynicism seems as natural—and required—as sprocket holes in film, it's deeply refreshing, even moving, to encounter someone like MacNicol, who's as realistic as the cynics but whose buoyant spirit has never lost the love that brought him into the profession in the first place. "I don't think that there are a lot of people like me around," he admits. "I'm a product of the stage; I came from classical rep at the Guthrie Theater, and I played everything there. I did everything with a different look, a different sound. People like Peter Sellers and Paul Muni before him influenced me; Robert Donat was a huge influence, though you'd never see it. These were people I would have chosen to pattern myself after—protean types, people who saw acting as dress-up, as pretend, as pure play, *being someone else*. I loved other actors who didn't do that—Henry Fonda, John Wayne, Alan Ladd, Jimmy Stewart—but for me, the attraction was always to the greasepaint."

The actor intended to honor Dwight Frye with his portrayal of horror's most famous insectivore.



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