

SF'S MOST WANTED VILLAINS

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# Who? Me a Villain?



He almost destroyed the Ghostbusters, but why hold that against Peter MacNicol?

By JAMI BERNARD

**W**ith the fate of a be-slimed New York hanging in the balance, marble-mouthed art restorer Janosz Poha turns to the evil mastermind whose bidding he is doing and asks: If he helps unleash evil forces into the world, can he have a date with Sigourney Weaver?

It's refreshing to come across a screen villain with such modest aims, no offense to Sigourney Weaver. But then, to Peter MacNicol, the mild-faced, sensitive, literate actor whose Carpathian art restorer practically pulled the slime out from under the feet of the regular gang in *Ghostbusters II*, Janosz Poha is no villain at all. "Oh no, no, no," he says, his wide eyes wider at the thought of poor Janosz being misread as a baddie. "He's an eternal optimist. And he's practical. If Sigourney won't date him all on her own, he will make a pact with the devil in order to secure a date. He's always looking for the inside track. He doesn't know that it's evil. He knows that he has been struck by what felt like lightning."

While restoring a portrait of Vigo the Carpathian, a malevolent despot of the 17th century, Janosz falls under the spell of the spirit of the painting as it comes to life. Vigo bosses Janosz around, ordering him to kidnap the baby of Dana Barrett (Weaver) so that Vigo may be born anew into this baby's

body. "Janosz just sees Vigo as another boss. Aren't they all like that in those Iron Curtain countries? It's not evil to them, it's just somebody yelling at them. I think they respond to being yelled at in certain Eastern bloc countries," says MacNicol, wearing, among other things, a VistaVision T-shirt, aqua watchband, white socks and brown sandals. "I don't see Janosz as a villain at all; I consider him a patsy. I would never consider anyone I've played a villain. Nobody who is who they are thinks they're anything less than what they need to be." MacNicol pauses, perplexed, as if he had awakened himself with a loud snore. "If you can follow that, you should go on a river cruise in the Amazon. The point is, everyone thinks they're right. Everyone thinks they're doing what needs to be done."

Originally, the bare-boned script called for your ordinary sort of villain, someone named Jason, "a straight man, kind of a dull foil to The Boys [Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis and Ernie Hudson]," explains MacNicol. He wasn't interested. "It's the kind of thing that 5,000 men can play, and I'm never interested in those roles." Indeed, MacNicol has stood

his ground against a dragon (*Dragonslayer*) and against Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline (*Sophie's Choice*); on stage, he has played King Richard II and the Ghost of Christmas Past. He wasn't about to take just *any* role.

"I had a dawning thought what I could do with the guy if only I dared, because certainly the script wasn't drawing a connection between the art restorer and Carpathia. I thought such a connection could be made, that's why this guy knows so much about this particular painting. I went in and said, 'Guys, does anything go here?'"

Co-writer Harold Ramis and director Ivan Reitman looked at each other. "They said, 'Yeeeeeeah,' sort of trepidatiously, and I just let fly with it."

## Twisted Tongues

All of Janosz, from his tongue-twisting accent to a whole imaginary Carpathian culture that goes with him, is from somewhere inside MacNicol, he's not quite sure where. "Occasionally in an actor's career, very rarely, very happily, a character

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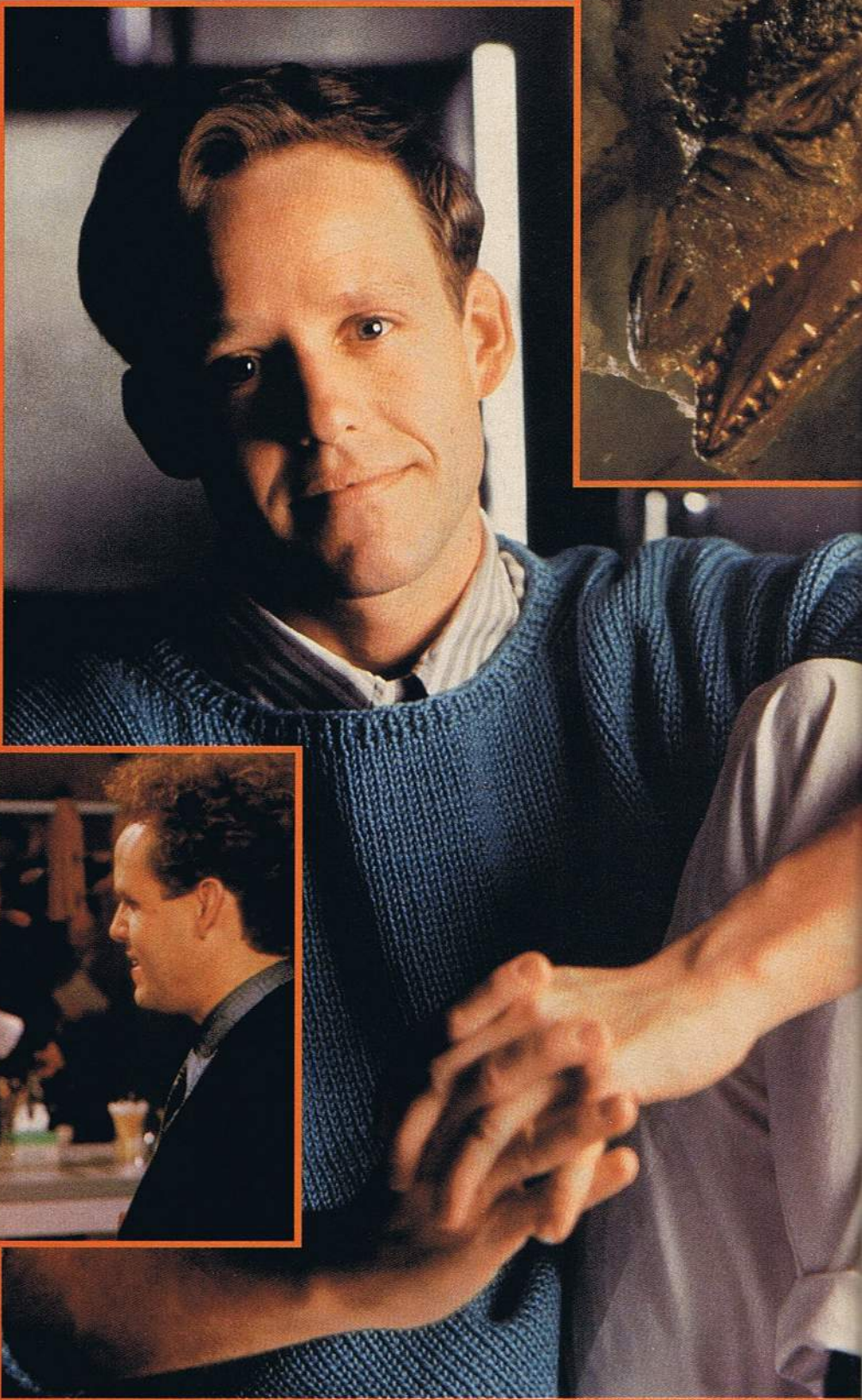
will simply spring like Athena from Zeus' forehead, it'll just come, fully realized, fully formed. They just spring forth and essentially tell you how to play the role. And that's what happened. I just knew instantly what I would do with this guy. I had never played this kind of fellow, never thought in advance about what kind of mannerisms he would have, how he would hold his torso, arms and such. But, he just showed me around, showed me where he lived, corrected me when I mispronounced words, mispronounced them for me," MacNicol laughs happily.

"Most of the language in the script is his-dash-mine. The first line I have is just bossing these other people around in the museum. Instead of saying, 'OK guys, you have to get out of here and stop fooling around,' I think I say, 'The joyfulness is over.' I don't want to get silly and mystical about all this. I don't understand the act of creation. I *don't know* why people are responding to Janosz."

But they are. Reviews have singled out MacNicol as the funniest thing in the movie, quite a trick when you're up against *The Boys*, all of whom had quite a bit more to say over the script than outsider MacNicol. "I refuse to think about it," says MacNicol of his character's popularity. "I willingly and willfully refuse to think about it. It's just a sweet tooth I don't want to indulge."

There was no clowning on the set, notes the 32-year-old, calling the filming arduous,

"Occasionally in an actor's career, very rarely, very happily, a character will simply spring like Athena from Zeus' forehead," explains Peter MacNicol of his *extremely* fictional Carpathian origins.



Janosz Poha a bad guy? Nah, he was just willing to do anything to get a date with Dana (Sigourney Weaver).

workmanlike and busy. "The sheer fun I had was off in my trailer, off the set, creating this fellow's origins, creating a mythology for Carpathia, a folklore, an idiom, a flag. It was just a way of making Janosz real enough to rely on him, to rely on a consistency in my performance over a *very long haul*."

Although he thinks the filmmakers originally wanted "someone more formidable" for the part, the only instruction

MacNicol received "was to be somewhat creepy. But there's lots of room there, gradations of creep, shades of villainy."

Now, about that accent. "*Do you vant to go and hoff a brunch vit me?*" Janosz asks Dana early in *Ghostbusters II*. MacNicol has previously shown a flair for accents, just

like his *Sophie's Choice* co-star, Meryl Streep. In that movie, the Dallas-born MacNicol played a coltish Southern gentleman writer. And in *Dragonslayer*, a fantasy in which he plays a sorcerer's apprentice who must defend a community from a dragon he calls "the single most amazing special effect





Dragonslayer Photo: Copyright 1981 Paramount Pictures & The Walt Disney Company

Despite his reluctance to discuss the film, MacNicol praises the effects that transformed him into the *Dragonslayer*.

that I know of," he affected a Mid-Atlantic accent. (Outside of noting that "the enraged mother dragon coming through that maze of caverns provides an experience of true awe in audiences," he won't discuss *Dragonslayer*—which is *not* listed on his resume—any further, for personal reasons.)

MacNicol says the key to Janosz's accent is in the *embouchure*, a way of holding the mouth, particularly by musicians. "I joke about how the accent is from copying the same embouchure which Samoan fishermen use on the conchshell to call their boats. I worked on diphthongs, triphthongs and beachthongs for vowels." When he calls at Dana's door and asks after her baby, he pronounces the "a" in baby as if it were three separate words. "I can't do it now, I've lost the guy utterly, but the word goes on for probably 10 seconds. You need time-lapse photography to view it as it unfolds."

Holding his mouth in that particular embouchure was painful, he recalls. "I had gland-aches. Numerous face and neck glands were screaming out."

He swears the language is not a direct copy of any existing one, but he did spend time with a Czech friend and loafed near a Rumanian tourist board on Manhattan's Lower East Side. "What I did was have a marriage of the most abrasive elements of both these languages. It's a language no country would embrace."

Yes, that is the language of Carpathia, a country whose flag consists of a snake stepping on a man, with a Latin-esque inscription that is pronounced something like "Eeeughhhh!" "It's the same sound harp seals make when threatened on ice floes," explains the man who made the whole thing up. "It's the universal cry of despair."

The only regret MacNicol has about Janosz is, in fact, his *hair*. "An actor prays for a kind of diplomatic immunity from outside prosecution: a director saying, I

want it to be this way, I don't want you doing that.' I want benign neglect. Ivan Reitman is a secure enough man that he let me do just about everything I wanted to, with one exception. I wanted to have a kind of odd Beatles wig and jet-black hair, as if to say the '60s had just now reached Carpathia, that it had taken a while, it had gone from village to village, and it was just now coming into fashion in this remote mountain area. They receive their culture like messages in a bottle. It looked like the wig was a go, and then, I'll never know if it was a fellow cast member or what, it was cut. It was the lamest of reasons, which is why I suspect it was for another reason. Someone said, 'Oh, everyone in this picture already has dark hair.'"

The resulting blondish fright-wig look is "rather nondescript," MacNicol thinks, "except for this contorted, imploring kind of face I have. Janosz looks like he's forever experiencing moments of grace and terror."

## Inventive Imaginations

Married to Marsue Cumming, executive director of a theater program for disadvantaged children, MacNicol does indeed live on the Upper West Side, just like Janosz—although when Janosz says that's where he comes from, it's as outrageous as when *Saturday Night Live*'s extraterrestrial Coneheads claim they hail from France.

The actor admits he is a fan of science fiction, special FX work and things that go bump in the night. "Before one has conversion experiences in terms of religion, one has conversion experiences in terms of the mystery of the universe. As a child, I saw movies like *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *The Time Machine*, and it provoked very deep, mysterious resonances in some way with the childhood imagination. I think, for me, when I was little, I best loved the proper combining of science with lyricism, the original *Wolf Man*, sciences like astronomy and anthropology and what some might call pseudo-science, like cryptozoology, a term that's coming into vogue right now. It's the search for the Yeti, the

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"Janosz just sees Vigo as another boss," says MacNicol.



Photo: Courtesy Marsue Cumming



# MacNicol

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search for Nessie. The research is serious, scientific and thorough, so it's not scorned by the scientific community."

However, he smoothly sidesteps a question about the original *Ghostbusters*. "I'm a fan of *everything* that works, just anything. I thought *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* was utterly, entirely their best effort. There's true fright in what's essentially a comedy. It was *masterful*."

The only other role in which MacNicol had the opportunity "to build something from the crudest, simplest of chassis, as I did with Janosz Poha," was when he played a five-year-old in *Found a Peanut*, an Off-Broadway production a few years back. A wonderful play full of insight about childhood, *Found a Peanut's* most striking feature was MacNicol's totally unself-conscious, big-eyed performance, sway-backed, his stomach sticking out, his finger pointing at things the way kids do. He really, truly appeared to be no older than five. "Originally, the little fellow just sat with a coloring book at the back of the stage, and I said, 'That's gotta go.' I went to FAO Schwartz and bought three or four dinosaurs, I found one skate—a right skate—a friend brought me a little red plastic cowboy and some string, and I built a food chain. The cowboy was shooting an Indian, the cowboy was in turn being eaten by a brontosaurus, and the brontosaurus was being eaten by a tyrannosaurus, so I had a whole chain. I put them all on a skate and pulled them around the stage, like a little wagon of carnage, and it just endlessly delighted me through the whole run to play with this little death cart."

When MacNicol was himself about the age of the boy pulling the death cart, he did something as villainous as anything he has ever done in his life. He confides openly, although he acknowledges that he has never made this story public before.

"My sister drew a treasure map, singed it so it would look old, and buried it. Then, she staged our finding it. We followed it, and it led to a disused, derelict airline control tower. We broke into it, and stole some stamp pads and staples, took them home in a grocery sack and set up offices in the backyard. I remember when the bust came because she and I were both eating blue popsicles. We got home and there was a policeman talking with my mother in the living room. Next thing I knew, we were in the back seat of his cruiser, heading for a booking. Even now, I am unduly afraid of the law. They booked me and my sister, and I had a juvenile record until I was 17."

Peter MacNicol draws his brown-sandaled feet up on his swivel chair and hugs his knees. If Janosz Poha is part and parcel of a man whose most dastardly act was an inventive backyard adventure, then the guy with the funny accent, the frizzled hair and a desperate yearning for a date with Sigourney Weaver can't be all that bad. ❄️

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