

## TELEVISION

# The Monster of Her Dreams

A furry, far-out fable

When the American family watches television, the woman of the house usually decides what to watch. That's long been absolute dogma among network programmers, second only to the conviction that what women want in their TV men is a hip, hot-looking stud with a cool line of clothes and patter (Sonny Crockett, Thomas Magnum, David Addison, you know the type). So here's Vincent, the beastly half of CBS's "Beauty and the Beast." Vincent is deformed, fur-covered and befanged. Vincent's wardrobe consists of a cloak, vest and trousers cut from castoff sleeping bags and moving-van quilts, with a belt fashioned out of a horse bridle. Vincent's pad is literally the pits—a dank, subterranean cavern connected to the New York subways by abandoned steam tunnels. Vincent's idea of a with-it come-on is some melancholy Shakespeare or perhaps a sombrous passage from Dickens.

**Shallow ways:** Yes, what we have here is a most improbable sex symbol, yet no more improbable than the premise of "Beauty and the Beast." A living genetic accident (Ron Perlman), abandoned as an infant, is adopted and raised by the brilliant founder (Roy Dotrice) of a secret utopian society beneath the streets of Manhattan. During a rare visit topside, Vincent rescues a beautiful socialite attorney (Linda Hamilton) from some razor-slashing thugs, sweeps her to his digs and gently nurses her wounds. In gratitude, she abandons her shallow ways to become a crime-fighting crusader, while he tags along as her ever-watchful guardian and platonic soul mate.

Stop giggling—this series ranks as a major hit, especially among women viewers. Part of that is clearly Vincent's doing. Beneath his animalistic façade lurks a sensitive, intelligent, caring, vulnerable sweetheart (a sort of postfeminist New Beast). Mash notes are pouring in to the show from all manner of female fans, many of whom confide they see Vincent as an erotic fantasy figure. When the New York Daily News conducted a write-in poll to pick the sexiest men on TV, Vincent finished ahead of Bruce Willis. But most of the credit belongs to Ron Koslow, creator of "Beauty and the Beast." Koslow has transformed Jean Cocteau's classic 1946 film of the same title into a contemporary fable ideally suited for our times. What could be more appeal-

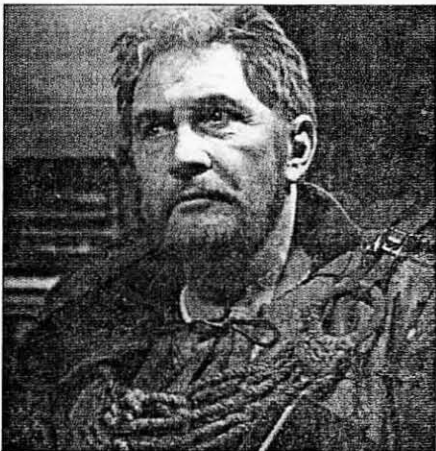


TONY ESPARZA—CBS

Reciting poetry in a steam tunnel: *Hamilton and Perlman*

ing than a love story in which love's only physical expression is a longing look? What could be more reassuring than the existence of a vast, netherworldly haven, even if it can't be found in any subway guide?

There's never been a TV series with such a split personality, and therein lies both its power and its major flaw. When the show goes underground, observing Vincent's lair through a soft-focus haze, it exudes an almost lyrical romanticism. Only an incurable grump could resist being charmed when the beauty and her noble beast cozy up next to a candelabra for a poetry reading (they do it often enough, in fact, to make the series required viewing for some high-school English classes). The letdown comes above ground. True, the writers are well-intentioned enough to take on such anything-but-fanciful issues as neglect of the



BRUCE TALAMON—CBS

Father of the Beast: *Dotrice as benefactor*

elderly, child abuse, police corruption and rapacious real-estate development. It's a jungle up there, they're telling us. But then we already know that. Nor does it help that the central dramatic tension between the spirituality of Vincent's universe and the materialism of the one above gets diluted by so many good-monster-show banalities. After a pair of unscrupulous anthropologists capture Vincent with a tranquilizer dart, the younger of them inquires of his partner: "You really believe this thing has a conscience, don't you?" Didn't someone say that in "King Kong"? Or was it "The Incredible Hulk"?

Koslow envisioned Vincent's abode after reading a newspaper article about the discovery of people living in steam tunnels beneath Manhattan's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Subsequent research revealed that there

are more than 300 miles of such tunnels snaking through the city's bedrock, many of them built a century ago and uncharted by current maps. Constructing a facsimile of this secret world proved almost as expensive as mounting "Phantom of the Opera" (each episode of "Beauty and the Beast" costs well over \$1 million). The search for an actor willing to endure four-hour makeup sessions to become Vincent quickly led to Ron Perlman, who has carved a career out of heavy makeup (he played a prehistoric tribesman in "Quest for Fire" and a deformed monk in "The Name of the Rose"). And Perlman has the perfect voice: soft, seductive, meltingly sincere.

To Koslow, keeping this fantasy dramatically fresh looks like the least of his problems. "There are a million plot possibilities," he says. "This is unexplored terrain. We can go anywhere." A future episode, for instance, will have TV's oddest couple marking the first anniversary of their meeting by searching for appropriate gifts (imagine having a beast on *your* shopping list). The problem Koslow has yet to solve is how to keep viewers interested in a love affair that can never be consummated. Or can it? "I won't rule anything out," he responds. "We have to get them closer, but we don't really know what the limits are."

Hmmm. In any event, consider the psychological uplift that this show has already brought to millions of women. For all the seeming impossibility of finding a decent date these days, Mr. Right could be right under the next grate. Of course, it helps if they're willing to look beyond superficial appearances.

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