

STING: MAN, MYTH OR MONSTER?

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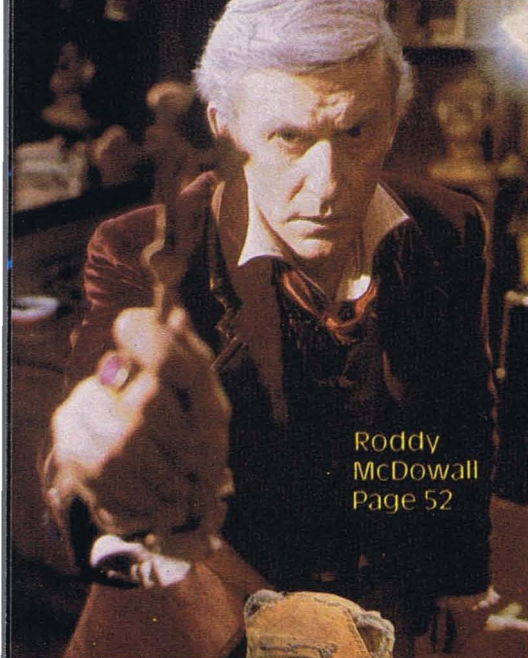


Warwick Davis  
as Wicket



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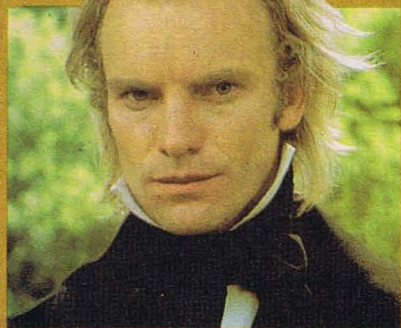
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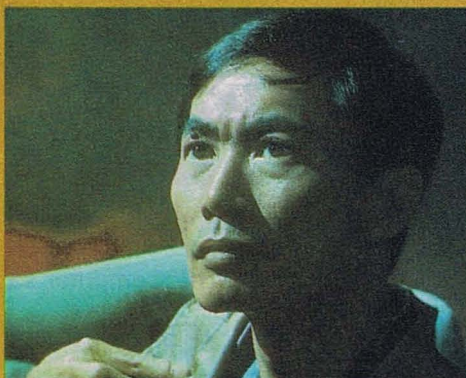
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# Roddy McDowall

## Occupation: Fearless Vampire Killer

By EDWARD GROSS

From beyond the "Planet of the Apes" to beneath the full moon of "Fright Night," this veteran actor loves playing characters without any labels.

**H**e hunts vampires, but only in the movies. He introduces those, fear flicks as host of TV's *Fright Night Theatre*. And then, one dark and stormy evening, the horror cinema's famed "vampire killer" is swept into battle between local teenager and neighborhood bloodsucker. And *Fright Night* becomes something more than movies. It becomes terrifying reality for Peter Vincent.

"He's an absolutely marvelous character," declares the man who portrays him,



Roddy McDowall, a veteran of more than 80 films. "I've never done anything like it, so it was extremely rewarding to me.

"The appeal to me is that Vincent is such a terrible actor. The poor dear is awful. He's just a very sweet man with no talent in a difficult situation, though he's able to rise to the occasion—like the Cowardly Lion."

While he feels that any explanation of his approach to the character would sound extremely "dumb" on the printed page, McDowall does mention that he drew Peter Vincent—named in tribute to Cushing and Price—partly from childhood memories.

"There were a couple of very bad actors," he says, "whom I absolutely adored as a child, and whose names today's audience wouldn't know. They were very bad actors from another time, and Peter Vincent is like them. He's full of sounds, but no content."

### Biting Satire

When writer/director Tom Holland approached him with the *Fright Night* script, McDowall's reaction was immediate enthusiasm. "I thought it was fascinating," he notes, "very imaginative and very good. Tom is a good director and writer, and all those elements were very conscientious. A great deal of hard work went into it."

The mixture of horror and humor in *Fright Night* may recall the similar structure of John Landis' *An American Werewolf in London*, but the comparison agitates McDowall.

As Lucky Pierre, McDowall took part in TV's *Tales of the Gold Monkey*.

"I never saw that film," he begins emphatically, "but I absolutely apall the idea of comparing one thing to something else. Nothing is worth anything unless it's taken on its own terms. It's one of the great pathetic sins that people go around in the world trying to compare this to that or something to something else. Why doesn't everybody just accept a thing on its own terms?"

"All you can do is make a piece of product, sell it on its own terms, stand behind it and hope that people will go see it. If you try to be like something else or appeal to any given group, then you can very easily end up being gratuitous and imitative. There's not much to be gained by that, and I think too much time is spent going around trying to be like someone else."

Additionally, he doesn't appreciate *Fright Night* being labeled a "horror" film.

"Some people think *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is a horror movie, so I never quite know how to deal with that kind of labeling," McDowall says. "When I did the pilot for *Night Gallery*, I never looked at it as horror. It was a wonderful script, and my character was just a lousy son of a bitch who turned people over to get what he wanted. I don't look at *Legend of Hell House* as horror either. It was just a story of people trying to exorcise a spirit from a haunted house.

"The so-called 'slice-and-dice' films are just gratuitous rubbish. I thought *The Omen* was a very good film. To me, horror is something gothic, strange and peculiar, like a fairy tale. Approaching the premise of *Fright Night* realistically, it's very scary. The script

made sense, dealing with a vampire living next door, just like a ghost—but I'm probably overstating my case because I think that too many things are labeled incorrectly."

Nevertheless, he feels that his character probably holds a great appeal for the audience. "I suppose every territory at various times has a horror host who introduces late night shows with rubbishy dialogue," he explains. "If the audience cringes watching them, they'll identify with the characters in *Fright Night*. Also, the kids in the cast [William Ragsdale, Amanda Bearse, Stephen Geoffreys] are excellent. What sticks out in my mind is the group camaraderie and closeness of everybody working on this film, really caring about *Fright Night* being good. And I think that comes across on the screen."

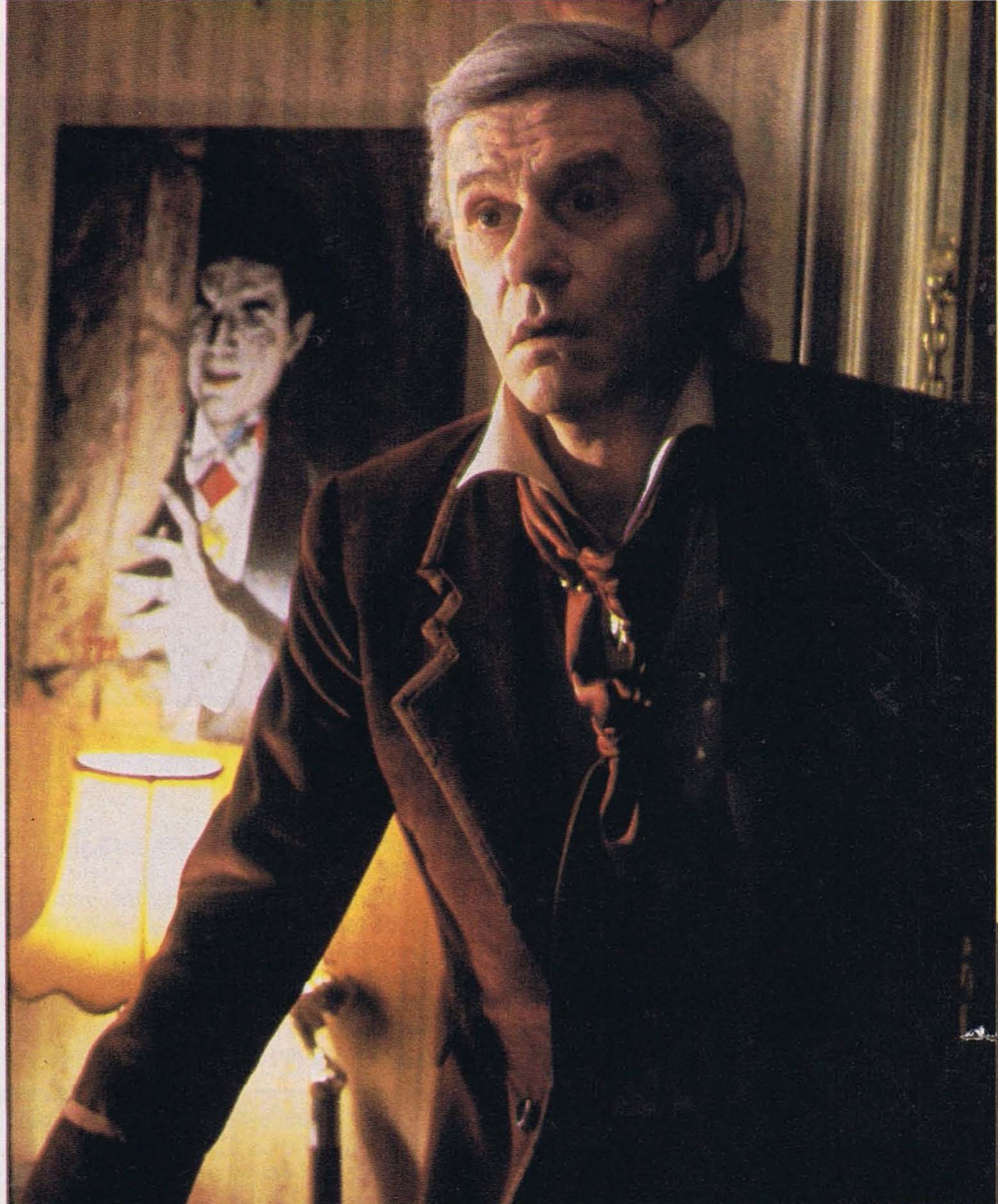
Could he see himself returning as Peter Vincent for some future foray into fear?

"He's a wonderful character and great fun," McDowall observes. "It's a little early to say, but it's like after I did the first *Apes* film. Nobody figured there would be five of them and a TV series. But there were, and they were all interesting to do, so you never can tell."

### Video Ape

McDowall previously captured the hearts of SF fans as Cornelius, the talking chimpanzee, in *Planet of the Apes* and *Escape From the Planet of the Apes*, and as Cornelius' son Caesar in *Conquest of . . .* and *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (all of which he extensively discussed in STARLOG #6). McDowall makes no secret of the fact that he would return to the series if somebody

As Galen in the *Apes* TV series, McDowall befriended two human astronauts (Ron Harper, left, and James Naughton). "The shows were much better than they were given credit for," says the actor.



In spite of the presence of werewolves and vampires come *Fright Night*, McDowall shuns the "horror movie" label.

PHOTO: CBS/20TH CENTURY FOX



seriously wanted to produce a new chapter.

"You seldom get to play something unique like that," the once and future ape comments, "but doing it again would depend on the content. I think it would work today, just as *Star Trek* has worked. It took nine years to convince people, but *Star Trek* worked. I think the *Apes* films have aged very well, particularly the first, third and fourth ones. They deal with constant human problems."

From the *Apes* films, the actor segued in 1974 to the small screen in CBS' short-lived *Planet of the Apes* series. McDowall portrayed the primetime primate Galen, a diletante chimpanzee who befriended two fugitive astronauts from Earth's past. The series aired on Friday nights at 8 p.m. against NBC's then-super hits, *Sanford and Son* and *Chico and the Man*, and failed to garner the ratings hoped for by CBS. Thirteen episodes later, it was cancelled.

"Anyone who remembers all that has a  
(continued on page 71)

EDWARD GROSS, New York-based writer, profiled screenwriter Don Jakoby in STARLOG #99.

# McDowall

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good memory," says McDowall, "but the TV shows were much better than they were given credit for being. *Apes* went off the air not because it wasn't good, but because it was on in the *wrong* place at an entirely wrong time slot.

"Everybody has a reason for *why* something is taken off the air, though *Apes* shouldn't have gone off. The merchandising alone could have carried it, and there were plenty of directions to go storywise, but the show wasn't on long enough."

Between his many film assignments, McDowall also appeared in two other genre TV series, *Fantastic Journey* ("which didn't last long enough to make an impression," he says) and *Tales of the Gold Monkey*.

"*Gold Monkey* is another series that I absolutely loved. Like *Apes*, *Gold Monkey* shouldn't have gone off the air. I loved everything about it. Stephen Collins was a wonderful person to work with, and I truly liked my role. The show itself, though, was rather badly treated by the network, because half the time you never knew where it was on the schedule. Same old story," he sighs.

Despite his TV disappointments, McDowall has two more forthcoming video excursions planned. The actor will portray the March Hare in Irwin Allen's mini-series production of *Alice in Wonderland* (scheduled for airing in December). He has a recurring role in Suzanne Pleshette's new CBS series, *Bridges to Cross*, an hour-long, newspaper drama/adventure intended for a mid-season premiere.

McDowall admits that he's hesitant to talk in detail about these projects.

"The thing is," he explains, "when you listen to a record and then read the blurb on the back of the album cover which says what it was all about, you say, 'Oh, is that what it was about? I thought it was something entirely different.' Everything means something different to everyone. It's all in the eye of the beholder, and I'm fascinated when 10 different people in a room have 10 different reactions as to what a film was about.

"I played my role," concludes Roddy McDowall. "I loved playing it. There it is, and I hope people like it.

"It is what it is."

★

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