



Little John

The neatly-groomed, down-to-Earth Englishman sitting in a restaurant in London's Covent Garden doesn't much look like a shaggy medieval peasant or a bald-pated inmate of a deep-space prison colony. It's only when actor Clive Mantle stands that his uncommonly tall frame calls to mind Little John, the part he played for three years in *Robin of Sherwood*, or William, his character in *ALIEN³*.

His two roles are worlds away from each other, literally and figuratively. Little John, despite his outlawry, was a model of kindness, but in *ALIEN³*, Mantle says, "I'm playing a heinous criminal. In fact, there are about 12 or 15 of us, the last

muses. "If you're literally playing the milkman or the butler or something like that, they'll all think, 'Now *why* is the butler so big? There must be a reason—ah, he's gonna come back later and kill someone.' Then, you don't. It worries an audience in a strange way if someone my height is playing a small part."

On the other hand, height can be an asset when under consideration as a potential merry man. "Esta Charkham, who cast *Robin of Sherwood*, was heavily involved with the National Youth Theatre. I suppose she had seen me come up through that, and then, coincidentally, I was doing *Robin Hood*, a very good version by Dave and Toni Arthur, at the Young Vic Theatre. Esta brought [*Sherwood* producer] Paul Knight and Kip [*Sherwood* creator/writer Richard Carpenter] to see it one afternoon,

because he was big; not a nasty person, but not very clever. Whereas in the TV version, he was headstrong and would go over very belligerent and strong-willed, but he ultimately knew that Robin had all the best ideas. And I think he was nicer, more sentimental, had more common sense."

Mantle was also conscientious about Little John's prowess with his weapon of choice, the quarterstaff. "[Stunt coordinator] Terry Walsh developed a new style of quarterstaff fighting for me. He didn't like the old bit," Mantle illustrates his point by miming someone holding a big stick with one hand at either end, "so he said I should use it like a rifle and bayonet. It's far more effective. If you have a 10-foot stick, no one with a sword can come within eight to 10 feet of you. So, I used it end on."

IN SPACE

These prisoners aren't nice people in *ALIEN³*, and Clive Mantle (right) assures they play a mean Scrabble game.



Far from Sherwood Forest, Clive Mantle faces the terrors of "ALIEN³."

remaining prisoners on a prison asteroid, which is hurtling through space. It was a hard labor prison, which is about the best place to send all your hardened, nastiest pieces of work. We're *not* nice people."

Mantle's path to that prison planetoid began at age 17, when he was accepted into the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain. A stint at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art followed. "I was an actor who *needed* drama school. I used to be so excited about being on stage that I would just run down to the front and shout; they had to knock that out of me. Physically, just being six-foot-five-and-a-half, I'm not one of life's gazelles. But having said that, I was made aware that I *can* be gazelle-like if I so choose. If I hadn't been to drama school, I would have just slouched around and bent over double and apologized for my height."

The tendency of casting directors to equate height with menace posed a certain problem early in Mantle's career. There were few small parts for not-small actors. "Height is a very strange thing," he

completely unbeknownst to me—and I got a phone call the January before the first series started to go out to Pinewood [Studios] to meet Paul. I walked into his office, and he just hugged me and said, 'Hi, how you doin'?' as if I was completely his best friend. We started talking very positively about the series, its shape and mood. I was looking to see Esta for some sort of signals and some support, 'cause it was all going a bit too fast for me. I left with my mouth open after having another huge bearhug from Paul Knight, and I think a day later, they rang and said, 'We want you for the series.' As far as I know, I was the *only* one seen for Little John."

Sherwood Stunts

Although his theater portrayal of Little John was a factor in his TV casting, Mantle played the two incarnations quite differently. On stage, "Little John wasn't quite the village idiot, but he was much simpler than the TV version. He was a bit of a bully, undisciplined, vulgar, not much of a sense of humor, but got away with it

He only used a sword "when logically I couldn't have taken the quarterstaff into the castle or I hadn't been seen with it climbing the castle battlements. Thus, I had to have a sword when I got to the other side. It would also have been unfair to the other characters—if I had a sword, I would have wanted to be excellent at it. In a sense, the swords were the trademarks of Will Scarlet, Nasir and Robin. Whenever anyone else had a quarterstaff, I would make sure that they weren't as good as the quarterstaff as Little John. Otherwise, where's his place in the pecking order?"

The quarterstaff figured in several minor mishaps during filming. "In the famous fight with Michael Praed [who played Robin of Loxley] on the log across the river, my quarterstaff ended up in his private parts, so to speak." Fortunately, Praed recovered after a few minutes. "Funnily enough, when Jason [Connery, who played Robert of Huntingdon, the series' second Robin Hood] took over, I had a quarterstaff fight with him. He literally forgot to put his quarterstaff above his

ABBIE BERNSTEIN, California-based freelancer, profiled Richard Carpenter in STARLOG #151.



Superman IV Photo: Copyright 1987 Cannon Films Inc. & Warner Bros. Inc./Trademark & Copyright 1987 DC Comics Inc.



As Little John, no one could best Mantle with a quarterstaff.

Despite being "a very small cog in the scheme of things," Mantle enjoyed his experiences on ALIEN³.

Playing Nuclear Man in Superman IV just wasn't meant to be a Mantle piece.

head. I was three-quarters of the way through the swing and I tried to pull it back, but a little egg-shaped Tom-and-Jerry shape appeared on the top of Jason's head. And he never forgot to put his quarterstaff up again.

"On *Robin*, the fights were very safe under Terry Walsh's expert guidance—but you can't help it. If you do 26 episodes with two fights in each episode, you end up with nicks, scrapes, cuts, scabs and sprains."

Minor wounds were sometimes handed out in sequences in which the outlaws as a group battled large numbers of enemies simultaneously. "Sometimes it could get a bit crowded. Directors like to pack the frame a bit, so if they've featured your fight in close-up or mid-shot, you're then suddenly in the back of someone else's fight that's in mid-shot, and the stuntmen [who played the merries' opponents] are completely knackered by this time, so they say," Mantle adopts a weary, pleading tone, " 'Just do it at half-pace.' The

actors always wanted to do it full-throttle. And that's when mistakes can happen; you get two different speeds going, and that's completely wrong. But, by and large, I think we were fairly accident-free."

Merry Men

The on-screen camaraderie between the merry men was mirrored off-camera. "Everyone hit it off right from the word go; it was fantastic. Because we were on different locations all the time, our only constant was this yellow Port-o-Cabin. We would end up in this thing for at least an hour a day. There were no chairs in it, we just used to *lie* in our costumes on the floor—it was a pitiful existence, almost like a load of caged animals," he laughs.

"We talked about that day's scenes, how we would play them and what we would like to do. We would rehearse them—this was all before we had stepped before the cameras and before the director knew what we were going to do. And so, we wouldn't present it as a *fait accompli* but we would say, 'We've had this great idea of how we're going to play the scene,'



do it for whoever the director was and they would either say, 'I hadn't quite seen it that way,' or, 'Oh, yeah, that's good, that's better than the way I had seen it.' Sometimes it was an amalgamation of how they saw it and how we saw it."

The cast and crew's high spirits were preserved for posterity on an outtake reel, which includes scenes of the actors suddenly bursting into musical numbers. "I was always too nervous that we were wasting film or that we would be sacked. I shouldn't have been so nervous, 'cause ev-



The *Robin of Sherwood* cast were truly Merry Men, says Mantle (center). "Everyone hit it off right from the word go."

it in my best Darbyshire accent. He said, 'Yeah, that's very good. Tell me, what accent was that?' And I said, 'Well, it's Darbyshire.' And he said, 'Why were you doing a Darbyshire accent?' I said, 'Well, that's where Little John was from; he's buried in Hathersage in Darbyshire.' 'What do you mean, he's buried? Do you mean he lived?' 'Yes. Little John was a real person. He lived and has a grave that's 11 feet long.' To 99.9 percent of the audience, it wouldn't have made a damn whether Little John was speaking in an English, an American or an Icelandic accent, as long as

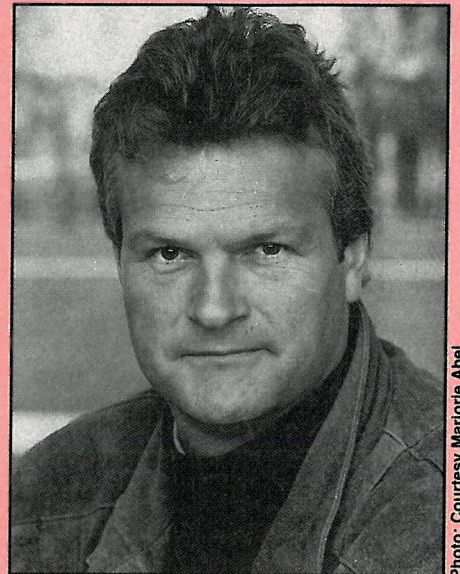


Photo: Courtesy Marjorie Abel

The 6'5" actor credits his drama school for making him a bigger actor.

it was played well and truthfully. But if Little John is known to have lived and died in Darbyshire, it's understandable that he might by some quirk of fate have had a Darbyshire accent."

The *Prince of Thieves* production company did ultimately ask whether Mantle was available to play their Little John, but by then, he wasn't. "It's a great shame. I would love to have done it, but I think Nick Brimble [the Monster in *Frankenstein Unbound*] did a very good job," although Little John wound up with a Bristol accent.

Super Shenanigans

Mantle was otherwise engaged playing the Frankenstein Monster in a series of commercials for the British electronic industry. Unfortunately, his portrayal of a similar character, Nuclear Man #1, in *Superman IV* was only seen by the film's makers. "I was like a Frankenstein's Monster, created by Gene Hackman [as Lex Luthor] to rival Superman, that went wrong. [Nuclear Man] was literally stupid. I would bump into things—I just didn't know my own strength, I just created havoc wherever I went, culminating in a fight between me and Chris Reeve [as Superman], which took weeks of night shoots to film. We started at one end of a
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out of *Of Mice and Men*, and I had a 1930s American haircut, which I don't think would have mattered. But they said, 'You can't be Little John without long hair and a beard.' So for two episodes, I wore this wig. It had a personality all its own; it was like a dead poodle on my head. And it affected the whole of my performance. I would try and hide behind Phil Rose [who played Friar Tuck], I would be doing everything I could to have my back to the camera. I was mortified."

"I've heard so many stories as to why I'm no longer in the film [Superman IV]."

Mantle and his *Sherwood* co-workers had "discovered a whole new lifestyle that we became accustomed to and really wanted to continue; we didn't want it to dry up." They were all very sorry to see *Robin of Sherwood* end—and startled, to put it mildly, to find that for many viewers, it hadn't ended. "When we go to [conventions in] America, it's unbelievable. There were conventions in Britain, which were good and well-attended and people were very interested, but it's nothing compared with the interest in America. They're great supporters. As an Englishman, it's very humbling—also very baffling."

Perhaps inevitably, Mantle was called in to audition for *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*. "I went in to meet [director] Kevin Reynolds, and I read from the script and did

everyone enjoyed it so much, but I was always saying, 'No, no, we can't do that,' and Ray [Winstone, who played Will Scarlet] would say, 'Oh shut up, of course we can. We'll do the scene, and then we'll break into the James Bond theme.' If Ray started, then we all joined in and pretended that we were always convinced that it was a good idea, once one person had laughed. But you know, Ray just has no fear."

Not all memories are quite so fond. "I wore the most horrendous wig for two episodes," Mantle admits. "I had just come

Mantle

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row of cars each and just crushed 12 cars together. I was picking up a lamppost, I was throwing waste skips at him. It was a fantastic \$6 million fight—gone.

"I've heard so many stories as to why I'm no longer in the film. All that I can vouchsafe is the fact that it wasn't my fault. If there was one thing I was sure about, it was that I had given an excellent performance. It's not often that you're clapped by a complete film unit—100 people applauded when I did stuff in that film. I know it was good and it got cut for some reason. That's pretty hard—when you're doing well enough as a British actor to even get seen for a film; then to get the part, you're doing exceptionally well, and then to play the part well, you're doing even better. And then to get cut from it after you've done all that, is just terrible."

"I'm playing a heinous criminal."

Mantle went on to happier acting experiences. He was directed by Clint Eastwood in *White Hunter, Black Heart* as a racist hotel manager, who has the distinction of being one of the very few characters ever to beat up Eastwood and live. At the same time, Mantle continued in his second career as a TV/radio comedy writer with fellow actor Nick Wilton, while embarking on a film producing partnership with *Sherwood* co-star Mark Ryan, Odds On Productions.

Alien Acting

With all this going on, Mantle heard through the grapevine that "they were looking for 'bald monks' for *ALIEN*³. Some 10, 12 years ago, I had my head shaved while I was at RADA for a play, and I had some photographs taken and they were very good. So, I got my agent to send some of these photographs to the production office."

Mantle describes the then 28-year-old *ALIEN*³ director David Fincher admirably as "a whiz kid. We used to call him Doogie Howser. He was controlling four units—main unit, second unit, the action unit and the computer unit. How his head didn't explode, I don't know. He was amazingly capable."

According to Mantle, Fincher told him, "You're the audience saying, 'Oh God, it's coming for me next.'" You've got to represent the feelings of the common man were he to be in this situation.' In other words, he blows with the breeze," Mantle laughs, "he changes his mind in as many situations as he's confronted with and quite willingly will go back on something he said half-an-hour ago. So, I think I'm largely there to represent what ridiculous things people are likely to do when faced with those sort of dangers. I'm probably

overcomplicating it. I was only a very small cog in the scheme of things."

More often than not, the Alien menacing Mantle and his fellow cast members wasn't physically present on the set. How does one play opposite a monster that isn't there? "To be honest with you, it's no different than exercises you do tucked away in small rooms in drama schools. Someone tells you you're a tree. You suspend your own disbelief, let alone the audience's, and say, 'Yup, that's it, I accept that, I'm a tree.' Or, 'There's an Alien over there—yup, there's an Alien over there. That's where I've got to look, that's where the Alien's head is, OK, fair enough.' There's no point approaching that from a sort of Method standpoint. I mean, you can recall many horrific memories from your own life to help you, but ultimately when someone's putting a bit of blue gaffer tape on a wall and saying, 'OK, that's where it is, react to that,' you get up there and boogie.

"The rest of the actors were new to *ALIEN*, so Sigourney Weaver was the continuing theme. Obviously, you respect and admire her work from the first two, and what she said went. She would bring her knowledge to bear—she didn't bring force, just common sense or humor to bear: 'Actually, I can't react like this because in *I and II*, I reacted like that.'"

Unlike *Robin of Sherwood*, life didn't actually reflect art—i.e. Mantle and company only look like quarrelsome toughs on screen. "I don't know what your experience of people who get parts like this normally is, but it was such a bunch of gentlemen, it was ridiculous," Mantle smiles. "I mean, we all looked pretty ferocious, but if you could have seen our Scrabble tournaments or our chess matches, you would have a very different idea. I've never had a better laugh than with these guys, except for *Robin of Sherwood*."

Mantle plans to spend his summer writing and acting with Nick Wilton in a new children's TV show, *Wysiwyg*, while at night playing multiple roles in the West End stage production of *Pocket Dream*, a radically revamped version of *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

And if the *Robin of Sherwood* reunion project should ever materialize, would Clive Mantle return to Sherwood Forest? "I would love to," he announces. "I've never met anyone with quite the same skill at storytelling [as Richard Carpenter]. To be able to popularize a story in order for 11 or 12 million people to want to watch it and also to maintain a standard below which he never drops—full of integrity, full of humor, full of style—it's not pap, it's not formula. I can't think of a popular action-adventure series that has come anywhere near it since." ✨