

VANCE HARTWELL: Weta Warrior

by Joel H. Cohen

When, in the opening sequence of TV's *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, a huge sea serpent tries to swallow our mighty hero, you can credit (or blame) New Zealand artist Vance Hartwell and his WETA Workshop colleagues for bringing the menacing monster to life.

They're responsible, too, for many of the bizarre creatures, costumes, and effects on another TV series glorifying fellow battler-for-justice, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and on numerous other adventure, sci-fi, and horror TV shows and feature films.

WETA Workshop, a complete facility with editing and studio space, is named for the weta cricket, which Hartwell calls "the classic New Zealand monster." Located in Wellington, New Zealand, WETA has three partners. About ten full-time employees and at times as many as 37 freelancers operate from its workshop. Hartwell has been with the firm full-time for four and a half years.

Hartwell, whose "official" job title is shop supervisor, describes himself as the proverbial jack-of-all-trades. He has worked in varied media—acrylics, fiberglass, gelatin, plaster, foam—and his creations have ranged from fangs and muscle suits to dental appliances and armatures. In Los Angeles, where he worked previously,



PROSTHETIC MAKEUP FOR "THE GOLDEN HIND" CHARACTER FROM *HERCULES*.
AIRBRUSHED WITH DINAIR WATER-BASED MAKEUP AND POWDERED WITH GOLD POWDER.



PROSTHETIC MAKEUP FOR "THE BLUE PRIEST" CHARACTER FROM HERCULES. PROSTHETIC AIRBRUSHED WITH ACRYLICS AND FACE AIRBRUSHED WITH MAKEUP.

artists tended to specialize, Hartwell recalls. On projects with short deadlines and big budgets, sculptors sculpted, painters painted, and so on. In New Zealand, however, artists tend to do a little bit of everything. And Hartwell is no exception. He is involved in painting (most of it by airbrush), mold making, life casting, and makeup application. He does some sewing, puppeteering, machining, plaster carving, wing sculpting, and hair work as well. As a result, he's "very good in a lot of areas," rather than an expert in any one field.

Hartwell also understands every aspect of the work that the workshop does, which is obviously beneficial. Because he knows about mold making, for example, he can outline for the sculptors certain things that need to be done in the sculpting. Likewise, his knowledge of the properties of the particular materials to be cast in a mold helps him ensure that the molds are made a certain way. Similar understanding of materials to be painted allows him to select the correct painting method for any given material.

Hartwell's considerable and varied know-how is the product of diverse experiences. In addition to *Hercules* and *Xena*, his artistry has been seen

VANCE HARTWELL AT WORK AIRBRUSHING AN ASSORTMENT OF "HARPIES" CHARACTERS.





FOAM LATEX "HARPIE" BODY (FRONT AND BACK) AIRBRUSHED WITH ACRYLICS.

on TV series such as *Young Hercules* and *Amazon High*, and in feature films, including the *Addams Family* films, *Batman Returns*, *Hocus Pocus*, *The Bodyguard*, *The Frighteners*, *Heaven*, *Forgotten Silver*, and *Mobsters*, among others. For *Hercules*, he created a she-demon, a stymphalian bird puppet, a number of half-human, half-horse centaurs, and a character known as "The Blue Priest." The "Golden Hind," another half-human, half-animal—in this case, half woman, half deer—required a lot of airbrushing, Hartwell notes,

particularly the spots on the hind portion of the hybrid, which was made of fake fur.

On some shows in the *Hercules* series, puppets, not actors, are used for creatures. For one such episode, Hartwell worked on a little gremlin-like creature with mechanical head, eyes, limbs, and body. He had his arm up inside the puppet to control its body movements, while someone else radio-controlled the creature's eye movements and ear wiggling. For the *Addams Family*, Hartwell developed hairy "Cousin It." He worked with colleagues to mold fiberglass for the tiny characters that populated the house's clock, and contributed to the production of the rattlesnake saxophone player and other musicians in the film's big ballroom scene. His craftsmanship also appears in *The Bodyguard*—Hartwell worked on the inflatable Whitney Houston look-alike doll—and *Cabin Boy*—along with sculptor, painter, and makeup artist Brian Penikas, he applied a half-man, half-shark creature's makeup.

One of Hartwell's favorite jobs was the painting he did for the two-part TV movie, *The Tommyknockers*. He recalls learning a lot from Penikas as they individualized the various alien creatures for the project. It also was one of his first assignments involving considerable paint work. "I always enjoy the painting part of a job,"

THE COMPLETED "HARPIES" AS THEY APPEAR ON THE HERCULES SET.



"SHE-DEMON" PROSTHETIC MAKEUP FOR HERCULES. AIRBRUSHED WITH ACRYLICS.



Hartwell says. "That's when whatever I'm working on comes alive for me. When I do a paint job I'm proud of, and other people like it, to me that's the best."

Of the other varied artistic duties he performs, Hartwell particularly enjoys makeup application because of its similarity to painting. "When everything comes together, the character comes to life," he comments. "It all becomes real, and that's a big kick." He likes puppeteering assignments for the same reason.

Two of Hartwell's favorite art pieces—a fully mechanical puppet of a dog, whose skin was painted to look like old leather, and a six-foot-tall, naked, spirit baby called "The Gatekeeper"—were created for *The Frighteners*. Unfortunately, both landed on the cutting room floor. Hartwell was especially pleased with how the baby—entirely airbrushed—turned out. But after the first rough edit, it was determined that baby's "look" didn't match that of the rest of the film.

According to Hartwell, the main quality that an artist in his line of work requires is the ability "to create what others want and to allow them to have input and make changes to your work." An apprentice or beginning artist who feels that art is not what someone tells you to do probably won't last in this kind of work, he asserts. "An artist does need an ego from the standpoint of having

pride in his or her work, but not in the sense that it's my work."

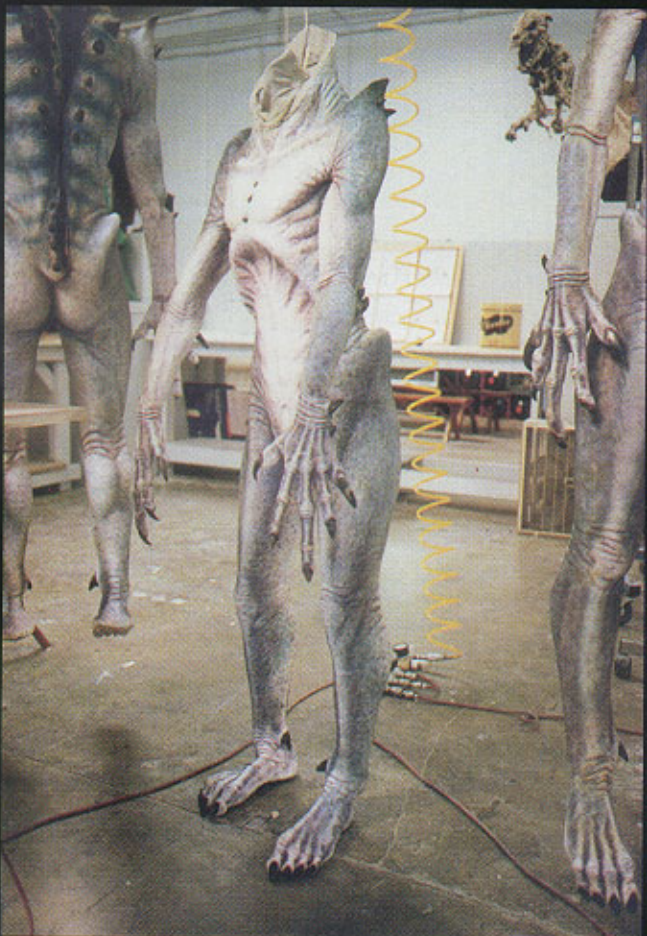
At WETA, where many artists work on a single assignment, "we think of ourselves as craftsmen and technicians with an artistic bent," Hartwell says. All of the studio's work is commissioned by producers, directors, or special effects coordinators, "but we have a lot of input into the design."

Although the artists sometimes receive scripts containing descriptions of what the director or producer envisions, most assignments start out with very general notions, of "a green-eyed monster," for example. Based on this description, WETA artists develop several drawings that are then faxed or e-mailed to the client. After the client makes a selection, the artists produce clay maquettes, which are miniature versions of the final piece. At this stage, the client often gets more specific, Hartwell explains. "They'll tell us, 'we'd like the monster's ears to be longer, the skin to look this way,' and so on."

On occasion, the studio is given free rein to conjure up creatures. For instance, the idea for Arachne, a highly mechanized half-woman, half-spider character with an abdomen that moved and little hook-like "spinnerets" from which she'd shoot her web, was born during a WETA brainstorming session with Richard Taylor, who heads up the shop. The client didn't use

"ARACHNE" ON HERCULES. AIRBRUSHED ACRYLICS WERE APPLIED TO THE FIBERGLASS AND FOAM LATEX SPIDER BODY, AND MAKEUP WAS APPLIED TO ACTRESS JO DAVIDSON'S SKIN.





VANCE HARTWELL AT WORK AIRBRUSHING ACRYLICS ON A FOAM LATEX HEAD AND BODY SUIT FOR THE FILM *THE TOMMYKNOCKERS*.

Taylor's script but did use Arachne, and a life cast of the actress who would portray her was molded in foam, which would later be airbrushed.

Life casts are used when actors are involved. "We also have drawings of what we want to achieve with the sculpture, as well as maquettes," Hartwell says. For creatures and puppets, or any piece not involving an actor, the artists work from drawings, photos, and maquettes. "Sometimes we have photos of something we're copying (an animal, for example) or we make use of portions of photos, taking skin texture from one photo, coloration from another."

Hartwell, who estimates that 70 to 80 percent of his work is airbrushed, says that the airbrush allows him to better produce certain effects, such as reptilian or amphibian-like skin. It also enables him to do jobs more quickly and easily. In his occupation, there's usually a need to work quickly, Hartwell says. However, he tends to work rapidly by choice, and not simply out of necessity. "If I think too much about a paint scheme, it usually shows. Fast and fluid is better for me." He doesn't like working on a given project for more than a few days straight, either. He tries to break up long jobs by doing something completely different after a few days.

Of course, he rarely has that luxury these days. His deadlines usually are short. Turnaround on *Hercules* and *Xena* is typically a mere two to three weeks. These short deadlines, coupled with last-minute changes or additions requested by directors and producers, are the major challenges in his work. "Sometimes," Hartwell says, "things change unexpectedly on both TV and film jobs, and you literally have only minutes to come up with something."

Always looking for ways to improve his skills, Hartwell sets two goals for himself when he begins any given piece of artwork: "First, I want to give clients what they want and expect. Second, I want to make the piece my best by always trying to do better than my last job, to bring something new to it, either by creating something that does not exist and doing it so that it's believable, or by trying to do something that's been done before, but doing it in a better way."

Accomplishing these goals often depends on finding new materials. For instance, switching from foam latex to the newer silicon gel can make the prosthetics glued onto actors more translucent and believably movable. Hartwell notes that procuring this new material of choice can be a lot harder for New Zealand artists than it is for those working in the United States. Access

LARGER-THAN-LIFE CHARACTURES OF FAMOUS RUGBY PLAYERS. AIRBRUSHED ACRYLIC ON LATEX.



is limited due to cost and shipping time, he explains—although WETA's broadening client base is making the materials more affordable.

Hartwell, who met his current boss, Richard Taylor, while in New Zealand to assist Penikas and a third artist in creating a film's "live" aliens (other artists were working on the "dead" ones), is the only WETA workshop artist from outside the country. He and his wife, Tami moved to Wellington (New Zealand's capital) in September of 1993. Before joining WETA, Hartwell worked at two California studios—MBP, Inc., in North Hollywood, and Alterian Studios in Monrovia. He sometimes misses the "cross-pollination" of ideas that occurred in the United States, where freelance artists move around more. Now, Hartwell gets his inspiration from "just about anything that looks cool," including nature, pictures, books, and primarily his colleagues and their work. "Bernie Wrightson was here with us for a couple of months beginning in late 1996," Hartwell recalls. "He's a really great guy, and just having him here and seeing his work was inspirational."

THIS LARGER-THAN-LIFE-SIZE FIBERGLASS STATUE WAS AIRBRUSHED AND HAND-PAINTED FOR A NEW ZEALAND BEER COMMERCIAL.



"PROTEUS" PROSTHETIC MAKEUP AND SUIT FROM HERCULES. AIRBRUSHED WITH ACRYLICS.

However, the two artists who have had the biggest influence on him are Larry Odien and Brian Penikas.

He describes Odien as an "all-around f/x man," who does mechanics, sculpting, painting, and other jobs. "His work always blew me away," says Hartwell. "I met him when I was about 17 or 18. He's the first guy whose work really made an impression on me." Penikas' influence on Hartwell was more direct. He has always been "very open and generous with information. I've learned tons from him, not only in airbrushing, but in all aspects of painting (color, techniques, tricks, etc.). I would not be the painter I am today, if not for him." Other special effects painters he admires include Steve Wang, who did the *Predator* paint scheme, and Gino Acevedo, who did much of the later *Alien* work.

Hartwell, who says he's "dabbled in drawing, but I'm not great at it," tried 2-D painting as a youngster and thinks that it's "something I'd like to go back to again, using both paintbrush and airbrush." In the meantime, he'll keep doing his part to bring us supernatural creatures and monsters to challenge our mythological heroes—and our imaginations. **AIR**