In a genre that tends to celebrate expressionless masks and the interchangeable stuntmen underneath, it's heartening to see an actual actor like Michael Berryman as busy as he's ever been. Fango readers may still know him best from his signature performance as the feral desert marauder Pluto in the original THE HILLS HAVE EYES; while audiences were quick to react to the actor's unique and compelling facial features, it has ultimately been his layered portrayal of a childish savage that has left the real impression over the years.

In more recent roles, Berryman has flexed considerable comic chops as the simpleton straight man to Ken Foree's pimp in THE DEVIL'S REJECTS, and sporting a greasy toupee as a smarmy studio exec in Lee Demarbre's amusing gore farce SMASH CUT. More recently, Berryman got back to serious business with the likes of NECROSIS, the upcoming SATAN HATES YOU and the recently wrapped thriller BELOW ZERO, which we previously reported on here
and which he asserts is "definitely not a comedy. It's the story of Frank, played by Edward Furlong, who's a screenwriter with writer's block. He's not meeting his deadlines, so his manager makes arrangements to have him flown up to…well, we filmed it in Canada, but you're not sure where he is—somewhere cold! He's given food and everything he needs to write, but he has to be locked in a meat locker in order to pound out his screenplay before the deadline, or his manager's going to drop him. That's how it starts.

"I play the owner of the slaughterhouse," Berryman continues. "Then there's the gal who drives Frank out there; she has been in touch with his manager and made all the arrangements. She's also a screenwriter, so she and Frank have common ground. During the writing, she helps him compose some of the ideas, and he says, 'What if this, this and this happens?', and you see the potential scenario acted out. There are darker elements that I can't talk about just yet so as not to spoil the surprise for viewers. It's dramatic, horrifying in moments and very intriguing. Honestly, I believe we have a sleeper here. If it's edited properly, it could be a runaway hit."

Berryman also deflects rumors that the film, directed by Justin Thomas Ostensen from a Signe Olynyk script, was to be yet another victim of the great 3-D conversion epidemic. “As far as I know, it’s not [being converted],” he states. “You know, I watched every take on the monitor, and the dailies looked just tremendous. The acting is so strong, and the composition of the shots is so good, that I think 3-D would actually detract from it.”

He was particularly impressed with co-star Furlong: “Eddie’s great, just a warmhearted guy and a very talented actor. He doesn’t run off to his trailer every five minutes like maybe they do in Hollywood. We have a lot of scenes together, and he lets you have your ‘shining moment.’ I’d work with him again in a heartbeat.” Berryman is also quick to praise director Ostensen. “He doesn’t have a lot of credits, but the guy studied hard and really knows what he’s doing. He and his DP crew were just wonderful to work with, because I’m a real hands-on guy when it comes to lenses and pulling focus, the lighting and the composition of the shots, all those little nuances. I love all that stuff, so in between takes and setups I would be right there on the set, just so I could get a really solid layout of what the next shot was going to be. They really appreciated that, when an actor is not just throwing lines and hitting a mark. Eddie is the same way; he knows his craft, and I give him a lot of credit.”

As for the Canadian location, Berryman is no stranger to hanging out above the 49th parallel—even encountering the Dalai Lama in a hotel lobby while shooting in Toronto a few months prior. However, filming BELOW ZERO in remote Northern Alberta was a different experience entirely. “It was east of the Canadian Rockies, in a little town called Edson,” he recalls. “I saw a wolf one day, some moose… The conditions were tough, they were long days, but it’s these independent films I really enjoy because they’re a little more intimate. You’re with a bunch of people, and they’re your family while you’re working. It’s a different atmosphere than a studio or location shoot, and it’s one I find exciting and stimulating. Everybody goes the extra mile.” BELOW ZERO has an official website (just a homepage right now) set up here , and a Facebook page
here
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Along with BELOW ZERO, Berryman has a raft of films scheduled for release in 2010, and he’s itching to let fans know what he has in store for them. “This could be a really big year. I have some projects shaping up that I can’t really mention until they’re solidified. There might even be one or two franchises in there. I do have a project that I can’t talk about that could put my good buddy Robert Englund on the bench for a while, and I’ve got the starring role.” Berryman has saved his most shocking and sensational news for last: Is the world ready for Michael Berryman: Musical Star? “I’m in the new Scooby-Doo movie,” he reveals. “I play a zombie and have a song-and-dance routine with the kids and Scooby at the end. I had to pull the choreographer aside and try and learn the dance in about 10 minutes, but we did it!”

While Berryman's schedule may be hectic these days, don't assume that he values quantity over quality. He assures Fango that he does his best to seek out material with some substance behind it. "There's a lot of crap out there that shouldn't even be bothered with," he notes. "I'm not saying I'm better than anyone else, but if you're going to go into a production, try and raise the bar, grab the best script you got. I understand that sometimes you just have to knock out something to get money to fund a project that's close to your heart. But everybody who knows me understands that, to me, it's not about carnage. I mean, yeah, I do appreciate a good effect, but you've got to have that story, that reason for why things happen. Otherwise it's just a violent video game."

After such a long and varied career, Berryman is certainly pleased with the measure of respect he now enjoys in the acting field. "If you stick around long enough and don't screw up your life in the process, it's a wonderful industry. I'm forever grateful to [famed producer] George Pal for giving me my break [in 1975's DOC SAVAGE: THE MAN OF BRONZE] and letting me show my potential. And I'm keeping my promise, George! Because he always said to me, 'Tell them that George Pal discovered you!' It's nice to be getting so many phone calls asking for my availability, and after 32 years of doing this, it's kind of neat to be at the point where I don't have to audition any more!"

Finally, how does Berryman handle the down time between acting jobs? Surely it involves sharpening rusty knives or maybe stalking stranded teens in an isolated locale? "Well, I'm an organic gardener," he reveals. "I've got fruit trees and walnut trees, and I grow my own vegetables. Every week I go through my fan mail, and I answer it all. That's always a lot of fun. We've rescued a few of the Santa Cruz horses from off the islands of California, so I tend to my horses and wait for that phone call. Then I'm off to do it all over again!"

{jcomments on}