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To portray a paranoid android, actor gets inside the character



SEAN P. MEANS
ON MOVIES

Warwick Davis' latest movie role really went to his head.

The 3-foot-6 actor is the man inside the polished plastic body of Marvin, the paranoid android "with the brain the size of a planet" who reluctantly goes along for the ride taken by the heroes of "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy."

"I was treated like an expensive sports car," Davis said in a phone interview this week.

It wasn't a job Davis, who got his first acting gig as one of the lead Ewoks in "Star Wars: Return of the Jedi," had actively pursued. Davis runs a talent agency for short actors like himself, and he was asked to help Jim Henson's Creature Shop find actors to manipulate the film's creature costumes.

"They showed me this maquette [model], and asked 'Could we put a short person in here?'" Davis said. "They took a photograph of me, and sort of superimposed it over [a picture of] the model, and we saw that I indeed would fit in. Then they said, 'Could we build the prototype around you, to see if this would work?'"

A few meetings later, Davis (who is most recognizable perhaps as the title character in "Willow" or as the villain in five "Leprechaun" movies) was cast as the robot.

The costume ultimately weighed 55 pounds (Davis weighs 85 pounds), about 14 of it taken up by Marvin's globe of a head — which temporarily raised Davis' height to about 5 feet.

"I wore the head of Marvin like a hat," Davis said. "My head is right at the bottom of [Marvin's] head, barely in the head."

After practicing with the costume to get the balance right, director Garth Jennings decided the head needed to be bigger. "The first head was supported by my head. . . . But with a larger head, they actually rested it on my shoulders. I wore kind of a fiberglass brace over my head and down my back. . . . And then there are bungee cords down the back, that acted like synthetic muscles, so when I leaned forward, the bungee was taking the strain instead of my own neck muscles."

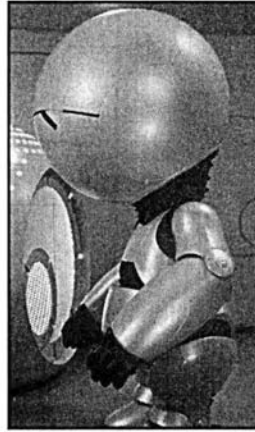
The costume left Davis feeling rather vulnerable. "Every jolt that Marvin felt, I felt," he said. "They put a sign on me that said, 'Do not touch Marvin unless he touches you first.'"

Davis had to maneuver by using two TV monitors inside Marvin's head — one hooked up to a small camera between Marvin's eyes, the other showing the entire set.

"I started off it's like a puppeting job, where I'm going to get in the suit and operate the suit. I videoed it and it didn't look very good," he said. "I forgot the suit for the time being and thought about the character a little bit more. What makes Marvin tick? Why is he so depressed? What does he think about the world? . . . If I kept these thoughts and this whole Marvin attitude in my head, the shell would do what exactly I was thinking."

Davis' favorite scene is toward the conclusion, when Marvin is caught in the crossfire of laser blasts from the movie's bureaucratic villains, the Vogons.

"They rigged up the suit with squibs, and gave me a button — and each time I pressed it, one of these explosions would go off," Davis said. After the first squib went off, "as I stagger forward, another short circuit causes another spark, makes me spin



Warwick Davis as Marvin the paranoid android in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," directed by Garth Jennings.

around. As I'm staggering forward, another squib goes off. . . . I got it in one take, thank goodness."

Davis also had a microphone in the suit to deliver Marvin's morose dialogue — though ultimately Davis' voice was replaced in a voiceover by Alan Rickman.

"Thinking back, I wish Alan had been involved earlier, to tie together the performance," Davis said. "Alan's voice has such a great character to it, and it's perfect for Marvin." (Davis said he and Rickman are good friends. "We have the same agent," Davis said, and they have worked together on all four "Harry Potter" movies, including the upcoming "Goblet of Fire.")

Davis' acting future may reunite him with "Star Wars" creator George Lucas. "He's hinted he's going to do a TV series, a live-action ['Star Wars'] series, and there's a possibility of a 'Willow' series, which is something I would enjoy exploring again," Davis said. "TV's a lot different now than it was 20 years ago. It's not the throw-away thing that it was."

Davis recently attended a major "Star Wars" fan fair in Indianapolis (besides his role in "Return of the Jedi," he had three roles — including the walking figure for Yoda — in "The Phantom Menace"), and the notion that Lucas' saga is nearing an end is just sinking in.

"It's kind of an odd feeling," Davis said. "For years we were

waiting for the prequels, and now they're finished. And I don't think George believes it's over yet."

Got a question about the movies? Send it to movie critic Sean P. Means: The Salt Lake Tribune, 143 S. Main St., second floor, Salt Lake City, UT 84111, or e-mail at movies@sltrib.com.