

The Nice Bad Guy

Chances are you know [Clancy Brown](#) as the quintessential bad guy – the *Highlander* warrior, *The Shawshank Redemption* prison guard – so you might be surprised to hear that he’s actually really very nice, thank you.

by **Aimee Knight**

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Clancy Brown seems uncomfortable with compliments. In fact, he doesn’t seem keen to talk about himself at all. And he’s not being combative or petulant – far from it. The actor with almost 300 credits to his name takes every question as a chance to praise a colleague, to platform someone working behind the scenes, or to ask me plainly what I think. Is this deference inherited from his father and grandfather, both of whom were politicians? Perhaps it’s run-of-the-mill Hollywood schmooze, refined over several decades in the biz. Either way, earnest reserve is not what I expected from the 191cm bloke best known for playing villains and creepos. Life is full of surprises.

From his break-out role as *Highlander*’s immortal warrior The Kurgan (1986) to his persuasive preacher Brother Justin Crowe on HBO’s *Carnivàle* (2003-05), imposing baddies are Brown’s speciality. Landing just in time for Halloween, he stars as morbid mortician Montgomery Dark in the horror anthology film *The Mortuary Collection*, now streaming on spooktacular VOD service Shudder. When Brown asks me if I’ve seen the “silly” film, I ask him why he thinks it’s silly.

“Oh, because it’s so much fun,” he says. “It’s all tongue-in-cheek. It’s not real. It’s not heavy. It’s just a good time. A good yarn, you know?”

In the vein of *Creepshow* (1982) and *Tales from the Crypt* (in its many incarnations), *The Mortuary Collection* features a slew of stories detailing the horrid history of Raven’s End, Smalltown USA. Stuffed with Lovecraftian monsters and Cronenbergian body horror, the shorts splinter off a narrative spine that playfully pits Montgomery against mysterious Sam (Caitlin Custer, *Teen Wolf*), a young woman with her heart set on

inheriting the undertaker’s ghoulish gig. It’s directed by horror buff Ryan Spindell, who Brown predicts will be the next JJ Abrams or Steven Spielberg.

“I’m very glad I met him ’cause I think he’s a super talent,” says Brown of the director with “stories coming out of his ears”. Despite this being the director’s first feature (and Brown’s 59th), the actor says Spindell was not inexperienced. Having already directed nine short films, he knew his way around the set, surrounding himself with an enthusiastic crew. Brown name-checks the cinematographer and production design team, taking pains to commend Mo Meinhart, the special effects artist in charge of his make-up and prosthetics. She helped transform the fit 61-year-old into a wizened old codger, straight outta Salem.

Over the phone from Brown’s LA home, the click-clacking of a keyboard suggests he’s on the internet. He wants to find the exact name of the effects house responsible for his make-up designs. To his understandable chagrin, Meinhart’s credit isn’t appearing on IMDb. I promise to check it against the credits in the film itself. “Yeah, you make sure that Mo’s in there,” says Brown, fatherly. He spells out Mo’s name. “She was a champion. She was one of the heroes of that show,” he says. “I’ve got to pound the table about that.”

What draws Brown to roles like Montgomery Dark, or Sergeant Zim in *Starship Troopers* (1997), or US Attorney General Jock Jeffercoat on *Billions*? All these titan antagonists: authoritative, intimidating, intense. “I get to hide behind the make-up and be a little over the top, and that’s kind of fun,” says Brown. He thinks the real question is: why do people cast him? “Why do people trust me to do stuff like that? Why aren’t I just playing the same character over and over, some prison guard or something?” This is an oblique reference to his most iconic role, the brutal Captain Byron Hadley in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994). “I don’t know why people cast me,” he says. “It always baffles me why I work. I have no idea, no idea.”

But work he does. *So much*. In addition to his live-action roles, Brown has carved a robust career in voice acting for animated series and video games. His mighty pipes have breathed evil into Lex Luthor, Hades, a Mandalorian bounty hunter and myriad other ne’er-do-wells, though the role that gives his vocal cords a real workout is salty old Mr Krabs on *SpongeBob SquarePants*. That said, Brown doesn’t go overboard looking after his voice, nor does he think it’s that unique. “It’s the same voice my dad has, the same voice my brother has, so it’s never felt distinctive,” he explains. “It’s felt very familiar – *too* familiar.”

PHOTO BY GETTY



THERE WILL BE NO TRICK-OR-TREATING FOR CLANCY THIS HALLOWEEN

Brown grew up in Urbana, Ohio and Washington, DC, where his father – like his father before him – was a member of Congress. While his brother Roy went into the family newspaper business, young Clarence John Brown III developed a taste for Saturday matinees and *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine. A fan of Japanese kaiju movies and England’s Hammer Horror films, he recounts for me the plot of *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* (1966) with gusto.

We get to talking about ghosts, possession, *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, the pros and cons of conducting a seance versus snooping through a haunted house. “Tis the season, after all. “That’s what scares me,” he says, contemplating how far I might go to see a ghost. “You would go down that path just to have the experience, saying, ‘I’ll just go a little bit further,’ and you would doom yourself.

“There’s a point of no return,” he warns. “Just be careful.”

I ask Brown what the horror genre offers audiences, not just at Halloween but all year round – particularly in this cultural climate. Does it provide a catharsis that real life can’t muster? Can we still learn a thing or two from its cautionary tales? “I’ve been around since Nixon,” he says, “and I don’t know anybody ever learns anything.

“I think *The Mortuary Collection* has a theme through it where you get what you deserve. If you boff without protection, you could get in trouble. If you put your nose where it doesn’t belong, you could get eaten by a Lovecraftian monster. If you transgress, there’ll be a price to pay.”

In the US, penance for the unchecked pandemic means trick-or-treating is nixed this year. “I don’t think anybody’s going to any strangers’ houses, asking for handouts,” says Brown. “*That* shit is scary.” He asks how Australia is handling COVID-19; whether it’s flood or fire season here. On the topic of ecological horror, we set each other some Halloween homework. Brown will watch *The Dark Crystal* (1982) and I’ll revisit *The Shape of Water* (2017), which he considers a sequel to *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954).

But it’s dinner time in LA, and Brown’s friend needs to teach him a few lines in Russian. I say, “I’ll leave that with you,” and he chuckles, “Thanks so much!” Again, he says, “Be careful!”

A few days later, when I write this up, I check to see whether Mo Meinhart’s credit has been added to IMDb. There she is, “Key Special Effects Make-up”.

Call them “tricks”, call them “treats” – life is full of surprises. ■

THE MORTUARY COLLECTION IS STREAMING ON SHUDDER.