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Hadley Presents

Star Trek and Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, creator and performer Bruce Horak joins us to discuss his new role on Star Trek: Strange New Worlds. Welcome to the show, Bruce.

Bruce Horak: Thanks very much for having me, Ricky.

Ricky Enger: It's so good to have you. Although I have to say, it's a little bit surreal, or I feel like something's missing. I don't hear the warp engines in the background as I hear your voice.

Bruce Horak: The thrum of the Enterprise. Yes.

Ricky Enger: Yes. But hey, we'll muddle through somehow. You are a really cool new character on a very, very cool new Star Trek franchise. It's Thursday, so I'm like, "I can't wait till work is over so that I can go and view the latest episode." But you have done some pretty cool things even before your role here. So before we talk about Star Trek, why don't you just give us a bit of background with a little history?

Bruce Horak: Sure. Well, I was born and raised in the suburbs of Calgary, Alberta. I'm the youngest of four boys. My father was a high school English teacher and a drama teacher, and an amateur cartoonist. My mom wrote quite prolifically and is now exploring the world of painting and music. She's just become a bit of a Renaissance woman. When I was 18 months of age, I was diagnosed with bilateral retinoblastoma, which is cancer of the eyes. It was so bad in my right eye that the eye had to be removed completely. And my left eye, there were just three tumors on the retina.

Sort of through circumstances, I was flown to Toronto and they tried an experimental treatment where they blasted my left eye with radiation. The general consensus was that scar tissue would develop and I might have some perception of light and shadow, but that would be about it. And by a happy accident, the middle of my retina, which was unblemished by cancer, remained clear. Scar tissue didn't develop there. But when I was about four-and-a-half years old, a cataract developed, so I had cataract surgery. So, I'm left with about 9% vision. So, my visual acuity is quite narrow. It's extreme tunnel vision, as well as a lot of floaters and flashers and all that fun stuff that goes along with visual impairment. It's been my normal ever since I was a kid. So, for me, that's just kind of how I've always seen. Being the youngest of four boys, just tried to keep up as best I could. They didn't really let me get away with anything, which was great. I mean, I learned to ride a bike. They'd put me in goal when we'd play soccer, so they had something to kick at. Basically, I could see the ball well enough to know where to jump and get in the way. Then I went to a regular school or integrated school. I guess back in like the early '80s, late '70s, there was still a real practice of kind of packing up blind kids and sending them off to blind school. But my parents said, "No, we're not going to do that. He's going to- He's got enough eyesight that he can stay in." I had an itinerant teacher who would come and see me once a week and teach me to type. I used to have to sit right in the front of the classroom and then get up out of my desk and walk six inches away from the board to read what the teacher had written, and then go back to my desk and write it down.

As I said, my family is very artistic. I've got three older brothers. They're all involved in the arts in some way. So, the Horak family reunions often involved the boys getting up and doing a show. We'd perform. Got into music really early on. Got into visual art very early on. And theater and acting. I saw a play come to my school when I was in about grade three or so. They transformed our school gymnasium into a theater. It was kind of at that point that I thought, "I really want to... I want to do this. I want to write. I want to create shows like this."

As I went through school, I continued to pursue visual arts and music and theater. And eventually, I just kind of made my focus theater. I ended up meeting the director of the show that had come to my school when I was in grade three. He and I hit it off. I worked for him for a number of years in Calgary. I did Shakespeare in the Park for a number of years, so doing outdoor theater in Calgary. Eventually, I joined up with a theater company that toured across the country. I toured with them for a number of years creating shows. One of our first shows with Monster Theater was called The Canada Show, which was the complete history of Canada in one hour. We created the history of the world. We created the history of the future. That has been kind of the passion, is being on the road and doing shows and living the artistic lifestyle. I jokingly say that I'm just trying to avoid getting a real job.

Ricky Enger: You did a lot of this stage acting, you did some music, all of these creative things that you've had the chance to enjoy. You, I guess, had an agent, I would assume. Somehow got the call to be on this lovely little series called Star Trek. I'm curious how that came about. And even more so, I think this was... the pandemic was in full swing at that time. Right? So how were auditions different than they might have otherwise been?

Bruce Horak: Well, I got the call from my agent, Chris Oldfield. I've been with him for about 10 years now. Over the last five or six years even, maybe longer, but the call sheets have become very specific in who they're looking for, for certain roles. Representation has become very important. When there are disabled characters being brought on the screen, they're looking for actors who have a bit of that lived experience. So when the call went out for Star Trek, the character that they were casting for was a blind alien. Chris knew that I'm a huge Star Trek fan. He also knew that I checked the box of that lived experience. Kind of threw my hat in the ring for it. I did a little research on the Aenar, discovering that they're telepathic. They've got this wicked telepathic sense that basically they can see better than a new one else.

We ended up doing, I think, about four auditions over Zoom. I was in Stratford and the casting agent was in Toronto, and then there was somebody in LA. It was very Star Trek. I was set up in my kitchen and I had my computer out. They were somewhere ... Yeah, it was really surreal and a lot of fun. I really appreciated that. At home, I was still pacing like a fiend beforehand, but I was at home. There was a bit of a sense of comfort to that. And I think that might have played a bit of a role in it. All the way through the process, they were incredibly supportive. I expressed from really early on my concern about being on a multi-kajillion dollar film set, TV set. They're just incredibly accommodating for all of that. My nerves were immediately dispelled. In that respect, I could just do the best work that I was able to do.

Ricky Enger: That is so cool. Because I was actually wondering about that. I was thinking, like stage acting is one thing and it has its own degree of nerves and all of that, but you've done it a lot so you're comfortable.

Bruce Horak: And it's very dangerous. It's very dangerous. Being on stage, I think ... I don't know. I read some statistics somewhere that it's one of the most dangerous places to be. Just so much can happen. And certainly, over my career, I've had some pretty near misses. You can rehearse and rehearse and rehearse, but there's still the element of the live experience that is unpredictable. Certainly, I spent a good chunk of my career doing improvisation as well, so you can't even plan for that. You just basically have to go in, get a sense of the space. I figure out, "Okay, there's the lip of the stage. Don't go any further than that." Maybe put a few markers on the stage so I can find my way around. But it's just kind of leaping without a net.

Going into the film and TV world, I mean, there's so much at stake in terms of the equipment and just the general environment of it. Right from the start, the production team at CBS Paramount said, "We're going to make this an experience that will give you the confidence. You're going to feel safe." And I did right from the start. I had an assistant with me throughout the entire day to let me know where obstacles were. Because it's changing all the time as well. Like, you do a shot and then they turn it around. Suddenly, there was a wall there before and now it's a bank of cameras. You know, everything is changing around. There's boom mics and all of that. So, they really... I just have to give such a huge shout-out to the crew and to the assistants who were with me through all of that, because it just gave me the confidence to do the work. For any artist, that confidence is really the first step.

Ricky Enger: Absolutely. So, you were able to relax and do what you were actually there for, rather than spending a lot of time worrying about these things that were kind of beyond your control. That's excellent.

Your character is actually introduced in episode two of Strange New Worlds. It's a really cool scene. It's a short scene, but a ton of stuff happens. We learn a lot about your character and kind of the interaction between you and the rest of the crew in this scene. It's- you're preparing, along with a few other crew members, for this dinner party with the captain. You're there chopping your veggies. And of course, you're chief engineer of the starship, so there's got to be some competence in there somewhere. Uhura just innocently asks, "Hey, you need some help with those veggies?" And then off we go. This really short, but really impactful discussion. Can you talk a little about the scene? And then I'm just curious what you felt when you first read that script.

Bruce Horak: In the scene, The Blind Engineer, the Aenar character is preparing the vegetables. Uhura asked to help if she can. And then her sort of response is that she was always... she was brought up to offer help to someone with an impairment. Hemmer kind of goes off about the word impairment because he doesn't consider himself impaired. His other senses compensate. As he says, they're superior. We just kind of go from that.

Yeah, it's a really cool scene. It was actually the first scene that I read. It was the one that I did in my audition. Which was slightly different than what ended up on the screen. There was a little bit more about his particular senses and what they call his precognition. He doesn't consider it precognition because he says, "Is it precognition to feel a temperature change or a breeze on your face or the heat on a light bulb? Is that precognition?" It's just, no, you just happen to be more aware of those things. I really connected with that. I get that all the time. It's like, "Oh, you must have a super hearing and you must have super smell," or whatever. It's like, "No, it's not that it's any better. I just do it differently.” I rely on it in a different way. My hearing will kick in when I walk into a darkened room. I'm able to pick up on where people are or where objects are. It's the same with sensing when a stove is on. We all do that. With our hand or whatever, you can just hover... You don't have to touch it to know that it's on. You can feel the heat radiating from it. We all do this. I think that it was the way in for me to understand what his telepathy was like. Imagine if you could feel if a stove was on without having to use your hand. If you could just feel that in your skin or in your... You would just know that.

I kind of struggled at the beginning of trying to figure out how he would read the screens. Because he's in engineering all the time and it's a lot of visual data coming off of these screens. But again, if you had such heightened awareness, you would be able to sense which part of the screen was lit up, and maybe even what color it was. Or if it was flashing red or if it was flashing green, or whatever. So that kind of telepathy, I was so jealous. I'm like, "I want that." Just to have that incredible sense of the environment. There's a lot about Hemmer that I kind of aspire to and that would certainly be one of them to be that tuned in.

Ricky Enger: I think it's such a cool history because even though that doesn't necessarily get described on screen now, it still comes across whether through how you're portraying him and just lines here and there. So, it's really interesting to know the script was written a little differently, initially, and that helped you find your way into the character.

I have loved Star Trek forever. One of the things that I've always appreciated about Star Trek and been really fascinated by is the technology. Because I love tech in just my own life, but imagining this futuristic universe and thinking, "Oh, I would love to take a quick trip to the beach in the holodeck," or whatever. Even now, there are things that when I was growing up, they sounded really just so sci-fi, like a data pad where you have all this information at your fingertips. And yet, here we are. There's the iPad. It's basically a data pad. So, are there things for you that kind of fit the bill in that way? Tech in your everyday life that have opened doors for you or that helped you prepare for either your role here or just help you in everyday life in some way?

Bruce Horak: Well, even going back to elementary school, when they taught me how to type on a typewriter. I mean, that was really my first experience of that kind of tech and how it can help me to stay in the pack, as it were. And then it's like things hit warp speed with the computer and the cell phone. I mean, my goodness, the iPhone now is... I mean, it's just the most remarkable piece of technology with the... I can dictate to the phone. I can have it read to me. I use GPS on a daily basis. I get my Google Maps to walk me around.

As someone who loves to travel like I do, I never imagined that I would be able to do it on my own. I always wanted to do it, but I thought, "I got to have a partner. I got to have a buddy. I got to have a group of people that are going to drive me around and get me to places on time," all of that. I laughingly remember most of my teens, I spent sitting by the front window waiting for a car to pull up so I could get out of the suburbs. Now it's like, "Oh, you can get an Uber." Every day I'm just so grateful for the tech that we have.

Oh, and speaking of the tech and Star Trek and all of that. In the initial testing for the character, they wanted to put these contact lenses in my eyes that would white out the pupil and the iris, and whatever. Of course, my right eye is artificial. So the production team was already in negotiations to have me a new eye made that would be painted with the white. And then they were going to try these lenses on me. So, they brought me into a eye specialist. He kind of took a history of it. They tried one of these lenses on me. Now, because of the makeup on my hands, I wouldn't be able to put the lens in myself or take it out. So, somebody else would have to do that, which just made me almost instantly nauseous. But when they put the contact lens in, it was just such a distressing and upsetting thing.

Anyway, the doctor said, "Look, you got 9% vision. Let's not mess around with it." The production team just rolled around and said, "No problem." They fixed it in post. So, what you see now on the screen is my eyes are digital. They've given me new eyes. That's that level of technology that I see moving things forward for performers. I imagine a time where... Like, if they can give a blind man new eyes, imagine what the next stage is. The sky's the limit with that.

As an actor, one of the things that attracted me to acting in the first place was just getting on stage and getting to be somebody else, getting to transform myself. Putting myself in somebody else's shoes and seeing the world from a new perspective. It's an exercise in empathy and compassion. That's such a huge draw for me. I felt like, "Well, there's a limitation here because there's certain characters that..." Certainly on camera. The camera doesn't lie. When I was in theater school, we would do the film and television classes and they'd film me. I would look back and I'd go, "Okay, the guy's eyes are obviously messed up. How do we ... Is this a thing? Do we have to acknowledge it? Is it a whole storyline?"

There's that great story about Peter Falk who had the same cancer as me. Lost one of his eyes to retinoblastoma. He was told by a producer once, basically, "Why would I hire you when for the same money I can get an actor with two eyes?" That has now, I think, changed. I think we're moving forward. And also, the technology is enhancing and helping to push those kind of preconceptions and those notions aside.

Ricky Enger: Finally is right. I think it's such an important thing. Star Trek is good at that in general, right? There's this founding principle of IDIC, infinite diversity in infinite combinations, which was one of the huge things that attracted me to Star Trek. Because it was, rather than thinking of disability as this departure from the norm, it was just another totally legitimate way of being in this infinite list of possibilities. So, it didn't have to be not normal, it was its own thing that was perfectly fine. Star Trek is great about that. And it's great about storytelling. There's the escapism, certainly. Star Trek's also willing to explore societal issues that we deal with right now.

I'm sure that for you, there's a little bit of pressure as you're basically bringing this character to life. And you're creating Star Trek canon because not a lot is known about this particular race. So, you're it, in a sense. As you're bringing this character to life on screen, do you think about what you want people to take away from the experience as they're watching Hemmer?

Bruce Horak: It's even a little emotional for me because being raised on Star Trek and in the kind of science fiction canon, that it just holds such a place for me. It's about hope. It's about optimism for the future. It's about imagining the best of us and bringing that out. My dad had this expression that, "Let us be the angels of the world, for the devils have had their day." That just encapsulates so much of the ethos of what Star Trek is trying to do.

Ricky Enger: You know I could talk about Star Trek all day, just ask my coworkers. I really could. But you do other things aside from acting. It's not just about Star Trek. You actually have done some painting. I'm sure this is a surprise to some people, because people think, "Don't you need some really good vision to do this stuff that people are going to actually look at?" Clearly, you don't. You've enjoyed painting. You got into it. You're doing some portraits now. How did you actually get into exploring what it was like to paint? And what's keeping it fun for you?

Bruce Horak: Through most of my '20s and early '30s, I tried to hide my visual impairment. Going through theater school, and certainly, starting out, anything that I could do to appear fully sighted, I would work on that. Certainly, getting into acting, you're just basically lying anyway. So that just seemed obvious to me to do that. I was obviously concerned that my disability would stop me from getting roles and stop me from getting work. So if I could fake it, I would.

When I was 33, I auditioned for a role in a film in Toronto. The role was calling for a blind person. My agent told me that I didn't look blind enough. Wondered if I could look more blind. So, I went to the CNIB and I got my very first white cane, which was life-changing. I mean, I had some mobility training. Myself and my guide went out onto Young Street in Toronto, which is a very busy street that I had been living on for a number of years. I had my cane out and suddenly I could walk with my shoulders up, my head up, and my shoulders back. I was able to navigate the sidewalk in a way that I'd never navigated before. People were getting out of my way and people were offering arms. It was just like, "Why did I never have this cane?" It was so silly. It was ego. It was ego.

Anyway. So, flash forward a couple of years. I was on stage, and I did a show. When I got off stage, I grabbed my white cane. This old friend of mine that I had actually gone to college with saw the cane, said, "What's up with the cane? Is it a prop? Are you planning for a new role or something?" I explained to him about my eyesight. He had no idea. I said, "Well, I'm going to try to paint a portrait of you and show you how I see you." We sat for a couple of hours. I threw some acrylic paint on a canvas and tried to sort of capture all the distortions. I see auras, so I tried to capture that. I just disappeared into this acrylic paint. We had the most incredible conversation that was... Brandon and I have been friends since our early '20s. Yeah, it was like this barrier had been shattered. While we sat there, we just connected and had a really, really wonderful time.

That same day, I just put a call out and I said, "I'm going to be doing portraits. I've got a studio. I'm sitting for two weeks. If you want to come and have your portrait done..." The response, I was in Calgary at the time, and honestly, the response from the theater community was just incredible. I was booked solid. I was doing three a day. At the end of the first year, I had done 365 portraits. I had a showing at the Kelowna Art Gallery. I had a showing at the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto. It's like this whole other career just started picking up.

And then I was introduced to the Disability Arts Network in Canada. Finding all of these other artists who identify as disabled, and what they were working on, how they were working on. The struggles and the triumphs. Just everything about it. It was like finding my people. There was absolutely no shame in the work that was created. It was a celebration of the vision. I mean, vision in artistic sense that we all have, creativity. For me, the portraits are about connection. They're about seeing and being seen. Which people are hungry for, just to be seen, to be heard.

Since the pandemic, I have moved my practice online. So, people go to my website and they book a portrait sitting. We sit for an hour. I do a digital sketch, which then gets emailed at the end of the session. Also, I can do an acrylic 8 by 10 canvas as well. So, I'll record the session and take screenshots. And then I work up an acrylic canvas from that. I'm working towards a thousand paintings and I'm at 635 right now.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. Not too much further to go. It'll be interesting to see what happens when you reach a thousand. If you decide, "Hey, I really love this. I'm going to continue." I bet it's fascinating to look back through, even just the last year, and go, "Wow, things have changed." Maybe your approach even has changed since that very first painting.

Bruce Horak: I can see the leaps and bounds that my technique has taken. I really wasn't a great student in school, but I absolutely devour textbooks and art instruction books now. All the exercises that are given in these things, every 100 portraits, I do a self-portrait. So, I could definitely see within what I've been painting of myself, how it's all been changing. Yeah, honestly, I can't wait for a thousand. We'll see what happens after that. Maybe I'll just add another zero.

Ricky Enger: There you go. I have one last question before we wrap up. This one is probably the most profound, the most impactful question of this whole thing. Did you get a chance to sit in the captain's chair?

Bruce Horak: I did. I did.

Ricky Enger: What a relief. That is awesome.

Bruce Horak: What a relief. Yes, it was. It took a while. I really had to work up the nerve to do it. My first day, on-camera test, I did my camera test on the bridge, I just remember I was circling the chair getting closer and closer. Put my hand on it and thought, "No, I can't do it." It took me almost a year later. I talked to one of the assistants, and she said, "Do you want to go and sit in it?" Yeah, it's one of those boxes on Star Trek bingo that you just got to check off.

Ricky Enger: For sure. If you have the chance, there's no way you shouldn't take it. So, as we wrap up, where can people go to keep up with you, find out kind of what's happening in your world?

Bruce Horak: Well, you can find me at brucehorak.com. That's my website, which has got links there to pretty much everything I'm working on. It's got a current and upcoming events page. So all the announcements for the shows that I'm working on and will be presented in the next year or so. I also publish a monthly update, what I call The HoboSapien Chronicle. It's kind of covering the last month and a little bit musing on what I'm up to, and then the month ahead. I also have a Patreon page. So, if you would like to support me in my journey, you can sign up as a patron. Top-tier patrons, I actually make a hand-drawn card every month. So, you get that in the mail, plus all the updates and all the info. I'm on all the social medias, Twitter and Instagram and Facebook as Bruce Horak.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. We'll have that in our show notes. If you're not watching Star Trek: Strange New Worlds, you should be. It's streaming on Paramount+ right now. The great thing is that I don't think you really have to have ever seen another Star Trek franchise in order to just jump into the story and enjoy this, right?

Bruce Horak: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It's a prequel to the original series. Basically, everything that's happened in the Star Trek world hasn't happened yet. Other than the first two seasons of Discovery, but we won't get into that.

Ricky Enger: Exactly. That's a different series. Well, Bruce, thank you so much for stopping by and spending a little time with us. Really look forward to learning more about the character of Hemmer. And also look forward to keeping up with you in general. Thank you, again.

Bruce Horak: Thanks, Ricky. Thanks for having me.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say, share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T @hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.