

THE AVENGERS

BRIAN CLEMENS
Producing, creating
and writing...

BLAKE'S 7

Stephen Pacey alias Tarrant
the reluctant sex symbol

DOCTOR WHO

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Fantasy Flashback to...

STAR TREK

Where No Man Has Gone Before





EVERY now and then you begin to notice a name on programme credits, and then suddenly it seems to be everywhere. One such name is Brian Clemens, who has been connected with Fantasy and cult programmes for some time. Towards the end of 1991 Brian Clemens talked to *TV Zone* at the Fantasy Films Convention in Manchester.

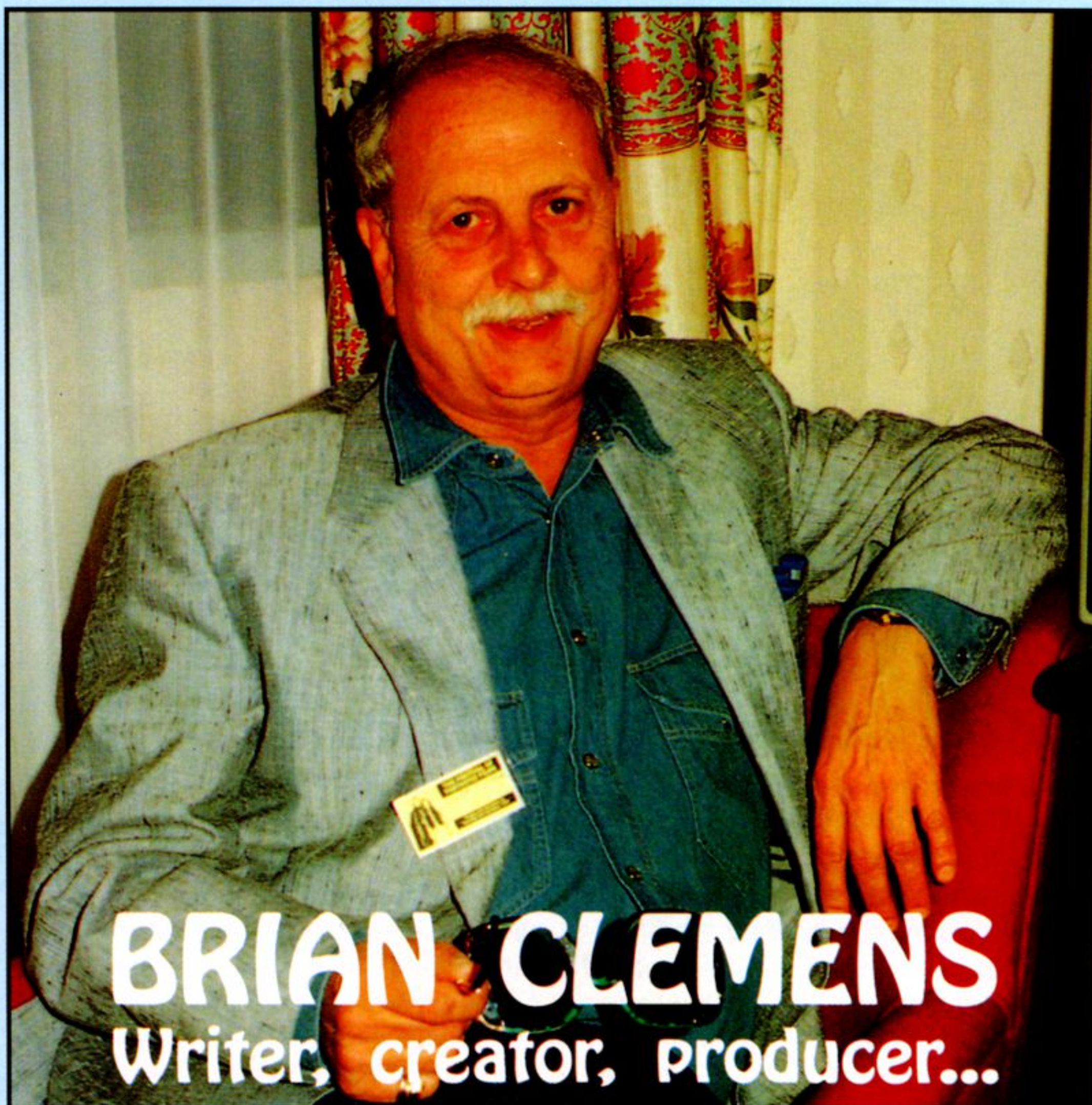
"I script-edited and wrote the very first **Danger Man**, when it was a half hour black and white series. I was with the first 26 'Danger Men', and I think I wrote something like nine of them."

So what sort of character was **Danger Man**'s leading man John Drake?

"Well originally, I suppose — remember, this pre-dates Bond — I saw it was kind of Bondian, but Patrick McGeehan saw him as more ascetic and cold than that. I mean he refused to kiss anybody for a start, so we had to adapt the script to suit his foibles a bit. He was basically a cold, ruthless agent — a bit more real than Bond — and that's about it actually."

The Avengers

Next came one of most famous series Brian Clemens has worked on. "I wrote



BRIAN CLEMENS
Writer, creator, producer...

The Avengers Mother (Patrick Newell) was brought in to give a foil to Steed's humour and appeared in very strange situations such as a swimming pool (opposite page, from *All Done With Mirrors*). Below: Filming the last episode, *Bizarre*





Are two little old ladies, Ermintrude and Cynthia, what they seem? Typical characters in Brian Clemens's 1964 *Avengers* story *Build A Better Mousetrap*

the very first *Avengers* as well, with Ian Hendry. I wrote the pilot of that too. So I was in at the conception of it.

"First of all they had a series called *Police Surgeon*. It was a terrible series, but they liked the character Ian Hendry created — of a young Doctor — and they wanted to move him into something... Sydney Newman said, 'Let's call it *The Avengers*. I don't know what it means, but it's a hell of a title'. So that was the brief.

"Then I came up with the idea... we did a two-parter where Ian Hendry's girlfriend (who, incidentally, later became Mrs MacNee) was murdered in episode one, and in the second episode Ian Hendry *avenged* her death, with the help of a young man in a raincoat called Patrick Macnee, who later became an older man in a bowler hat.

"Then Ian Hendry left. ABC had already commissioned about eight or nine scripts — they didn't want to waste the money — so Cathy Gale was really playing a man's rôle. And that's how, to a certain extent, we came up with the emancipated feminist woman. So it was lots of happy accidents.

Avengers Style

"The style grew up out of the fact that they didn't have enough money to build huge sets. So if they were doing a bar, they'd have two glasses and a table. They stylized it, which worked from the budget point of view but also worked from the visual point of view."

So was the style of the programme deliberate? "No no, I don't think there were any conscious decisions in quite that way. If you like, it was a sort of boredom

because we'd made so many and been with it so long that we thought we should have some fun. I suppose if there was any hard and fast thing that came out of *The Avengers* is that gradually we said that we can do real situations, but they must always be bent in an *Avengers* way. Like, if you had a bakery it must always be called 'Mr Dough' and had some kind of eccentricity. You couldn't have a straight baker or a straight publican. There was always another dimension to the characterization. I suppose if we had any leaning it was back to Hitchcock, because in Hitchcock's films the dentist was always

sinister, and the last person you expected to be the villain was the most normal."

Was he surprised by the success? "Not really... not really. The success in England happened almost immediately. It was shown quite late originally, about 10 o'clock at night. It was an after dinner with the brandy programme. As it became more successful they pulled it up to 9, maybe earlier.

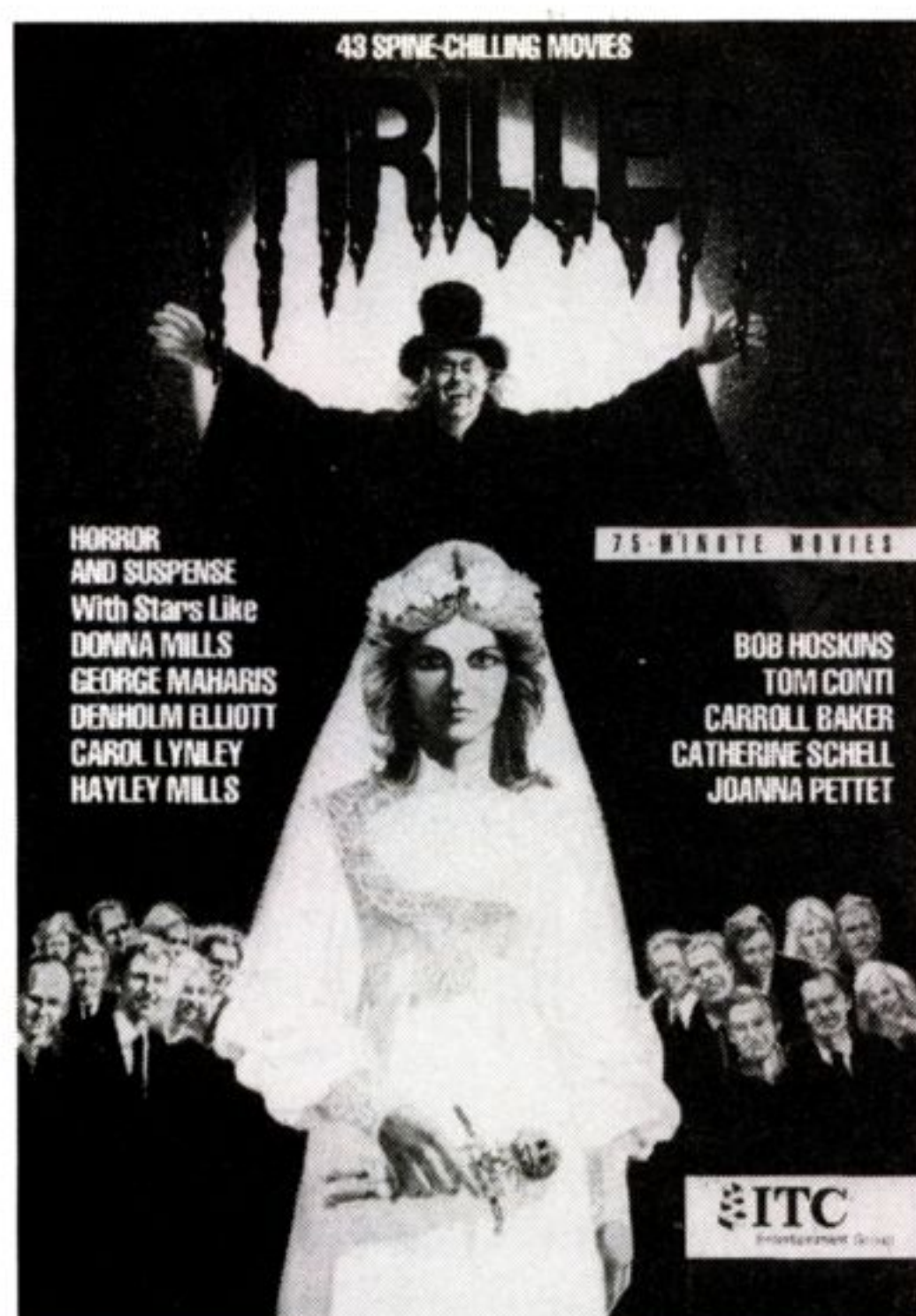
"The success in America I think was because we were presenting England as they thought it was — perhaps it never had been. We were doing things they *couldn't* do. If the Americans do something that they can do they usually do it better than anybody, but when they come up against things they can't do... and that is a kind of spoofy thing. They're not very good at send-up. The American sense of humour is grounded a bit more in literal truth than English humour. They're not very good at Agatha Christie, which is again not miles away from *The Avengers*, because Agatha Christie is full of country houses, eccentrics and vicars who probably never existed, but we all *think* they did. *The Avengers* was a bit like that."

Avengers Return?

Would it work, bringing back *The Avengers*. "Oh I think it would. If it comes back, or rather *when* it comes back, because I'm sure it will. It's become a sort of immortal character like Bulldog Drummond and Sherlock Holmes. Steed's in that genre. In the papers they sometimes

Pantomime characters in Clemens's 1963 *Avengers* story *Dressed to Kill*, Pussy Cat (Anneke Wills, later to become *Doctor Who* companion Polly) and Napoleon (Alexander Davion)





ITC's promotional leaflet for *Thriller* which continues to sell over the world

say, 'In the English mould, like Steed and Sherlock Holmes'. They are bracketed together in some people's thoughts.

"I think it will come back. It's mooted every three weeks or so. I get phone calls asking 'If I get the money shall we remake it?' If I were going to do it I would totally recast, as obviously Patrick's now too old, and just play Steed and Emma Peel again — go back to the halcyon days. Most people's idea of *The Avengers* was either Cathy Gale, which is my idea basically because I fancied Honor Blackman, but I think the general consensus is that the Diana Rigg and Patrick MacNee were the ultimate definitive Avengers.

"It's the *right* nostalgia. It's got lots of legs on it, because when you see *The Avengers* it seems quite fresh. Because it was a pantomime, in a sense, there are really no terms of reference as to what period it is, apart from that inevitable Sixties feel. But you can't really say that it's an old show because all the cars look old because our characters drove cars that were very old in the Sixties. There were lots of things like that.

"It was quite deliberate. We never put Steed in reality. If you put him or Emma Peel in a bus queue they would look like pantomime people. They weren't real people, so we had to create our own world."

Is that why Mother came about? "Mother came into it because during a sort of hiatus when I left the series, they hired Linda Thorsen. She later became a competent actress, but was Canadian and I don't think she had the right sense of humour to handle the girl's rôle. So I brought Mother to at least give Patrick somebody to be funny with."

Thriller

After *The Avengers* Brian Clemens created the anthology series *Thriller*. "I enjoyed *Thriller*. The only criterion was whether they scared women in the house on their own. And it did of course. I always approached it from the point of view of what scares me. I'm never scared by Terminators or anything like that, but I'm scared if I hear the back door click open and I know I locked it. I said in the brief that we should take violence off the screen and put it back where it belongs, in the mind of the audience. Not because I'm anti-violence but I think it's much more frightening. For instance, everybody thinks that in *Psycho* they see the girl stabbed, but actually she's not stabbed on screen. That's good news I think. That's the form and director doing their job."

New Avengers

Moving on from *Thriller*, Brian Clemens created the BBC comedy series. *My Wife Next Door* and then went on to films including *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad*, *Blind Terror* and *See No Evil*. And then came *The New Avengers*. "Of the 26 that we made I'd say that about 20 are as good as the original *Avengers*. Some people didn't like the trio, but I kept Patrick. We could have done it without Patrick, but I felt it needed some link to the old... I thought Jo Lumley was pretty good. Perhaps Gareth was wasted, I don't know. But some of the scripts were good, bizarre.

"But of course it started to run out of money and we were being financed by the French, who are all crooks anyway. They let us down very badly. I've told them they're crooks. I'd love them to sue me.

I'd love to get them to court because they owe me money. It was really that, it was the communication between us and the French financiers and the fact that they suddenly said, 'We've got the money to make the last four [episodes], but they have to be made in Canada with Canadian directors'. We threw out good English directors... *The Avengers* is a delicate beast — there were lots of good directors in Canada, but they couldn't adjust to what we wanted. So dealing with unknown Canadians was pretty disastrous.

"The direction really needed to be motivated. The director who said I'm going to make this look like a commercial and have some fun out of it, got it. Bob Fuest got that, he was a good director. It's true of the actors as well. The actors who really needed a completely delineated character didn't get it. As I said at the time, in the first *Avengers* we had cardboard characters, and in *The New Avengers* we just used a bit thicker cardboard. It had to have that pantomime effect. That's a difficult thing to put down on paper. Sometimes you didn't know they were getting it wrong until they'd done it. So it was a tenuous sort of beast really. We did pull one or two directors off.

"What we did was take a cliché, turn it upside down and write it in such a way that nobody could ever write the cliché again without it being laughed at. We actually had people in the first series saying, 'The natives are restless tonight'. Terrible cliché lines we used, We redid *High Noon* and *The Maltese Falcon*. We consciously spoofed. Some people noticed. I always think that the humour in *The Avengers* worked on two levels. If you had a really dirty mind some of it was quite Freudian really, if you didn't it was a nice piece of entertainment."

Jan Vincent-Rudzki

The New Avengers Thicker cardboard...

