

# The man in the bowler hat

"The Avengers" is back on our TV — a new series with some new faces. But the best known one of all is still there. Scarth Flett talked to Patrick Macnee during the filming.

A crowded set at Pinewood studios ... a confusion of lights and cables, half-finished room sets and waiting people. And in the middle of it all, the familiar face of the most famous Avenger of them all, the imperturbable John Steed, complete with bowler hat, furred umbrella, and amused turquoise eyes.

Patrick Macnee is back in the role he last played seven years ago ... the role he says has been a passport for him.

And he is still doing it. "If it hadn't been for the town of Chichester and a French commercial for champagne, I wouldn't be here now," he smiles.

He was in England last year to play at Chichester and in the middle dashed off to film the commercial with the third *Avengers* girl, Linda Thorsen. "A Frenchman there asked me if I would like to do the series again. 'I certainly can't do it in French', I told him, and forgot all about it."

Some weeks later he was appearing in *Absurd Person Singular* in Chicago and received a phone call saying it was on.

"Being an Aquarian I love the inception of things, the planning," he smiles. "I've approached this series as something completely new and now we'll see how the public take to it."

"You know, in America they don't think I've ever stopped doing *The Avengers*. It has been discovered by the colleges and become a sort of cult thing. Last week in New York it was on every night."

Filming is over for the day and we walk briskly through the rain to his dressing room where he exchanges the stiffly informal brown tweed jacket of Steed for the crumpled white safari jacket of Macnee.

He pulls off his boots and plonks his brown-socked feet on the chair before him.

## Kind and courteous

He is an interesting man, gentle and immensely courteous and considerate of others. Tall and bulky, he has a kindly face with temporarily plump, pink cheeks showing few wrinkles for a man who happily admits that he is 54.

Since February, when he arrived back in England, he has put on two stone and is disgusted with himself.

"I don't need all this fat," he frowns. "I feel awful, but when I'm under stress I eat a lot. We have been working terribly hard and at speed, and I find food a compensatory comfort."

"I get tense and I eat lots of sweets. I'm told Kissinger eats sweets, though I imagine his







reasons for stress are a little greater than mine.

"Look at me when I was in *Sleuth* on Broadway two years ago," he says, pointing to a photograph of a decidedly more streamlined Patrick Macnee. "That is how I will look again in three weeks."

When the series is completed he will leave for his home in Palm Springs, on the edge of the Californian desert, to check up on the state of his garden, and to melt away the pounds he has accumulated, by eating nothing out raw foods, and handfuls of a mixture of sesame seeds, pumpkin seeds, and sesame salt.

He keeps a jar with him all the time and says it helps to take away hunger pains.

"I couldn't keep to this diet all the time... it gets a bit dull, but it cleans you right out. The weight falls off and you feel absolutely marvellous. I swim and play tennis and walk eight miles a day.

"David Niven walks 20 miles a day. A delightful man. He is my cousin, you know, and was a tremendous help to me during my early days in Hollywood in the fifties."

Patrick gave up smoking 80 cigarettes a day five years ago and some years later gave up drinking.

"I found if I didn't drink I had more fun. At dinner parties I

want to say to some people, 'Do you realise that you have repeated yourself four times?' I don't, of course. It just reminds me how boring I must have been."

## Bitter Regrets

Born in London, raised in Berkshire, where his father "Shrimp" Macnee was a well-known horse trainer, and schooled at Eton, Patrick has lived abroad since 1952 when he rushed to Canada at a day's notice to become the first actor on Canadian television.

He left behind his wife Barbara whom he had married when he was 19 and their two children Rupert and Jenny who were then five and three, and to this day he bitterly regrets that he ever left them.

"I kept coming back, and then from 1960, when they were twelve and nine, I was here making *The Avengers*, but I feel a tremendous guilt that I left my children. They were sweet and adorable and I missed their formative years.

"I remember Sybil Christopher saying to me that when Richard Burton left, she could understand his leaving her, but not the children. She didn't realise then that I had done the same thing.



"It sounds sentimental, but I think it is the only bad thing I have ever done."

His children, now 29 and 26, have both gravitated to North America. Rupert is a documentary film maker in Toronto, and Jenny is a professional cook in Los Angeles and often lives with her father. The three of them are very close.

"Both children say they haven't suffered at all, but that

was because of their mother. She has tremendous guts.

"Her second husband, whom she was deeply in love with, died recently in Minorca, where they lived, and the least I can do is help and support her.

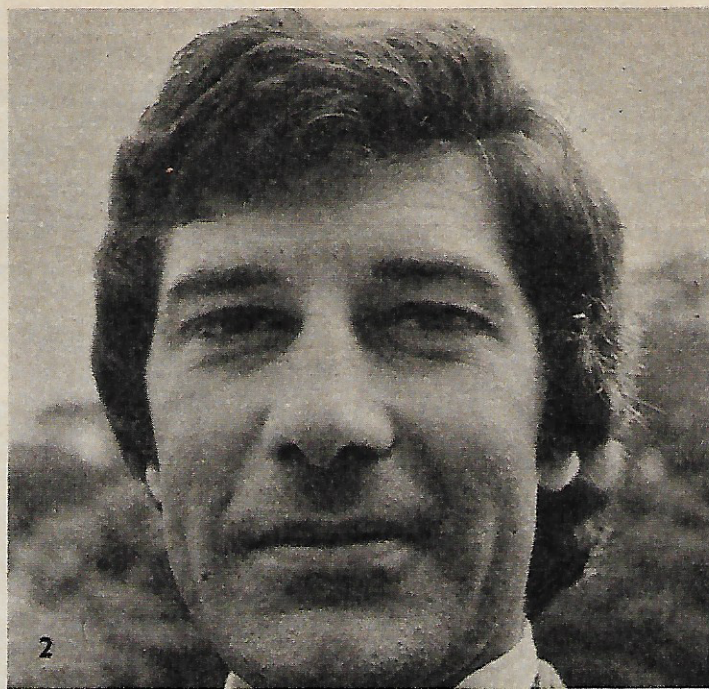
"Jenny has been with her and now Barbara is coming to live with me in Palm Springs. She's a very dear person, very close to me."

His second marriage in 1961





1. Joanna Lumley is Purdey, Steed's latest "Avengers" girl. She looks innocent enough but don't be fooled. She's quick and deadly as well as sophisticated.



2. The cool, calm features of Gambit, played by Gareth Hunt. He's the quiet one, but he can be tough when he has to be.

3. Patrick Macnee with his second wife, Kate Woodville. She was an early "Avengers" girl. Patrick says the marriage didn't last because she was 16 years younger.



to actress Kate Woodville didn't last he says, because she was 16 years younger. "And I think I bored the hell out of her."

"She was one of those glorious meteors that comes into one's life. She is a Pisces, a seeker, and she opened my eyes to many things, but I think in the end she wanted more fun out of life."

Today he says he has some good friends, but doubts that he'll marry again.

"I don't want to have a new family at my age. And my sexual needs are not what they used to be... they are enjoyable but not compulsive. Actually I'm rather looking forward to being a grandfather."

## Pleased to be here

"I've been an actor for 37 years and I imagine someone will always offer me a job. To be honest, I rather enjoy life today. I'm so pleased to be still here and I'm delighted to let one day follow another."

It is dark outside, the studios have emptied and it is time for him to leave for his rented cottage at Beaconsfield. He thanks me warmly for travelling all the way to Pinewood just to see him, and I leave him standing at the door, waving and still shoeless.●

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