

"They're irreplaceable!"

AVENGING THE NEW AVENGERS

by Gareth Humphreys

'The New Avengers followed in 1976, but they were chasing shadows.'

So wrote Jonathon Wilson in *The Observer* on the eve of Lumiere's launch of *The Avengers* on video in October 1993. Such dismissals of the Seventies follow-up to *The Avengers* is common. Take a more recent article by Andy Thompson in *Thermal Lance* magazine (#31, Sept/Oct 1996):

'From the obscene brown flared trousers of Mike Gambit to the cat-gutting wah-wah guitar music, *The New Avengers* reeks in exactly the same way that *The Avengers* doesn't.'

Twenty-one years since Steed, Purdey and Gambit first burst onto our screens and still many would rather they had never existed. By a strange coincidence this anniversary of *The New Avengers* seems to tie-in with a new revival of Steed's adventures, this time on 'the big screen'. As with any revival the producers of *The Avengers* film will certainly hear the baleful cry of 'You're not as good as you were first time around ...' This, in essence is the success and failure of *The New Avengers*.

When Brian Clemens, Albert Fennell, Laurie Johnson et al set about constructing a brand new set of adventures for Steed, they knew that they could not turn back the clocks to 1969 and expect to carry on as before. Firstly, copyright prevented them from using the name 'The Avengers' or the original theme. So it was that a NEW Avengers series was born. Part of this newness was to move *The Avengers* formula into the future and by so doing make Purdey (as Brian Clemens put it) 'a girl for the

1980s.' This time *The Avengers* would have one foot in a pseudo-real contemporary world and the other firmly in 'Avengerland', a situation not too dissimilar to the early Cathy Gale episodes.

The new three-handed formula would owe much to the ITC action series of the late Sixties and early Seventies: *Department S*, *The Champions* and *The Protectors*.

Both changes have been roundly condemned by fans of the Emma Peel/Tara King episodes as the main weakness of the series, however, these changes were made inevitable by circumstances. *The New Avengers* was not guaranteed a prominent time slot in the UK and had to fight its way into an international television market swamped by American hits like *Charlie's Angels* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*. Therefore it had to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, many of whom had never heard of the original series. At the same time it could not ignore its own heritage, represented most prominently in the constant presence of Patrick Macnee as John Steed and also in the occasional sly references to the original series which are at their most obvious in 'Last of the Cybnauts..?'

The character of Mike Gambit has come in for considerable criticism from all quarters. A man of action – a Seventies hero there simply to provide the strongarm tactics expected in an action series – when such heroics were previously handled by *The Avengers* ladies, being just one criticism levelled at the character. But the conventions of the 1970s dictated that Purdey had to share the heroics with a man, so

Gareth Hunt must be praised for making his role so much more than 'the third team member'. In particular, his subtle flirting with Purdey provides much of the fun of the series. Indeed, it is to the credit of all three actors and their writers that they work *together* so well on screen, at least in the first block of thirteen stories, the balance between the three being eroded in the second thirteen episodes with Gambit often finding himself the loser to Steed's expanded role. The image that remains is of Gambit chatting up a succession of pretty girls or, (in the Canadian episodes) being constantly arrested by the police. And we should not, forget how popular the 'chalk and cheese' partnership of Purdey and Gambit was. Gareth Hunt has often remarked how he would have liked to recreate the formula with Joanna Lumley. Certainly the producers of London Weekend Television's 1980s crime series *Dempsey and Makepeace* had their eye quite firmly placed on the Gambit/Purdey flirtation between their lead characters – a comparison which shows how well-written and performed *The New Avengers* remains when compared to its successors.

Without question the single most successful element of the series was the character of Purdey. Much of this triumph is down to actress Joanna Lumley, who brought just the right sense of light banter and deadly earnestness to the role. Some have suggested that Purdey combined elements of the characters of Emma Peel and Tara King. Perhaps – but the character might have been very different indeed had a different actress won the

role. (I understand that both Louise Jameson (later to star as Leela in *Doctor Who* – and looking very much like Emma Peel) and Carolyn Seymour, from Terry Nation's *Survivors* (whose Abbey Grant character was as liberated a heroine as Cathy Gale) were considered for the role.) Purdey was a breath of fresh air, content to whip up a stylish French dish or a giant tomato salad in the kitchen (in 'Gnaws') because she *knew* that she could scale a wall and knock-out an assailant without losing her breath.

Her flirtatious relationship with

Gambit is mutual. With Steed there is a strong air of respect and avuncular love. As the series progresses, Purdey finds herself facing danger side by side with Steed. Indeed, in the episodes 'Hostage' and 'Dead Men Are Dangerous', it is Steed's affection for Purdey which places his career and her life on the line.

In the original series, Cathy, Emma and Tara were allowed to shine under pressure in virtually solo adventures such as 'Don't Look Behind You', 'The Joker' and 'Pandora'. Purdey too takes the limelight in the emotionally-charged episode 'Obsession'. With the bulk of the story resting on Ms Lumley's performance she does not disappoint. Purdey must confront an old flame, whom she nearly married, and prevent his vengeful plans – an episode which also gives Patrick Macnee and Gareth Hunt a chance to shine as they express their love for their partner.

The linchpin of *The Avengers* will always be Patrick Macnee as John Steed. Having his name on the cast list was vital to secure that loyal fans of the old series would tune in to the New. This time Steed is seen to have adopted the role of a country gentleman with a succession of mature, but attractive lady friends – a factor that initially raised a few eyebrows among the fans and signposted the fact that herein lay a danger of Steed being sidelined by the bright young Purdey and Gambit – at its most obvious in 'To Trap a Rat' where Steed is almost confined to headquarters for the duration of the story. The producers had reckoned without Patrick Macnee's determination to have Steed step back into the forefront of the action – a change of style endemic during the second block of 13 stories when plots revolved around attempts to frame Steed – or erase him from



existence by vengeful old enemies. Steed survives in the new and dangerous world because he's a gentleman – but one who 'never fights fair'. His relationship with his new partners is one of respect. With Purdey's life in the balance, Steed is forced to confront Gambit in 'Hostage' and, significantly, in he wins. At other times the two are happy enough riding and shooting clay pigeons, though on one occasion, ('Faces') the writers elect to emphasise the class difference between them (but even Patrick Macnee can't soften the underlying awkwardness of the line in 'You can't help your own background'.) It couldn't be otherwise – Steed remains a perfect gentleman and the ultimate hero of the series.

The New Avengers can be divided into three sections: the first thirteen episodes, the six British episodes of the second thirteen and the seven French/Canadian episodes.

The first group is usually regarded as the series at its finest, with even its detractors finding 'Target!' and 'Sleeper' as highly entertaining stories. Both can legitimately lay claim to being among the finest Avengers episodes, as indeed can 'Dead Men Are Dangerous' and 'Obsession' in the next grouping. The pilot episode, 'The Eagle's Nest' set the agenda for the series by taking a classic television formula and giving it a contemporary twist. Much of the pleasure in this episode comes from the skillful direction, beautiful, yet unusual locations, the well-judged performances of the cast and the delightfully witty script. The remaining episodes provide a constant change of style: one week a Hitchcock/horror pastiche ('Cat Among the Pigeons'), with its Bernard Herrmann-esque score, the next a spy story ('House of Cards', 'To Trap a Rat'), the next sci-fi ('Last of the Cybernauts...?', 'The Three-Handed Game'). Variety keeps the series fresh and exciting, especially when the episodes benefit from clever writing. How many have you been intrigued by the unusual storylines? How many times have you been rewarded by a marvellously clever ending? It is the twist in the tale aspect which always left me satisfied. One cannot end close this section without asking whether any reader knows the relevance of the opening scene to 'The Midas

Touch' (a man sending morse code is attacked by a man who smashes his equipment)? Answers to ...

The balance of the episode styles in the next batch make way for heavier emphasis on espionage. As indicated earlier, on more than one occasion Steed finds himself fighting for his innocence when framed by various traitors in the organisation. Even 'Angels of Death', the most traditional Avengers episode of the block, features a prominent traitor in the ministry intent on destroying Steed – the template for this story seeming to originate with the Cathy Gale episode 'The Wringer'. Perhaps the most disappointing story in the second series is 'Trap'. Despite the pleasure of seeing our three heroes surviving on their wits in the hostile estate of a drugs baron, it is not completely successful possibly because its narrative is so straightforward and the episode has no sting in the tale. Incidentally, it should be noted that Patrick Macnee was quite taken by the excellent 'Medium Rare' that he would have liked for the series to have gone down the paranormal phenomena route more often. Such was not to be.

Oh, yes. Then came the 'foreign episodes'. I must admit to a fondness for 'K is for Kill'. It's a well-written, pacy, perfectly dubbed tale and gives time to develop a truly epic adventure. Plus (did you think I'd forgotten?) there's the tantalising cameo (of sort) by Mrs Peel (who, astonishingly, might be indicating that she is now a Dame!?) This one also has several marvellous moments between the three leads and a clever plot. However, I loathe 'The Lion and the Unicorn' which seems to be the direct opposite of 'K is for Kill' – poorly written, slow paced, with some appalling French farce comedy car chases!

Finally, to Canada. Reviewing the episodes for this article, I was surprised to find that these were no where near as bad as I thought on first viewing. 'Complex' is a well-worn sci-fi cliché, used in every fantasy series from *Doctor Who* to *The X Files*, but remains competent entertainment. 'The Gladiators' should have been more fun, but the actors play it too straight – amazing when you consider the threat here comes from a bunch of flabby lumberjacks in vests! 'Forward Base'

could have worked well as a UK-based episode and is full of classic Steedisms (going fishing with a magnet, pedalling a giant swan) which cheered up the story no end. Then 'Emily', a New Avengers road-movie or a take on the classic film *Genievieve*. It's joy comes from the sheer amount of screen time given to Steed, Purdey and Gambit, the banter that passes between them and the marvellously eccentric Miss Daly (Jane Mallett). Overall, though, Steed's final remark in this episode ('Was our journey really necessary?') says it all. I think not.

Suddenly, after 26 episodes, *The New Avengers* was no more. Despite a rumoured LWT rescue plan in 1979 and more recent attempts at a reunion TV movie, nothing further was seen of the trio. As the series marks its 21st Anniversary this month, it's high time we began to appreciate the merits of *The New Avengers* for what it is – a stylish, contemporary action thriller ... a progression of the original series. *The Avengers* series did not survive by standing still, it continued to evolve and develop. *The New Avengers* should quite definitely be seen as a natural progression of the original. One could point to Tara King episodes such as 'The Morning After', 'Take Over' and 'Love All' as the pioneers of *The New Avengers* style and let's not forget that the series spawned several imitators: the aforementioned *Dempsey and Makepeace* and more recently, Carnival Films/BBCs *Bugs*, which ended its first series with a homage to a scene from 'Last of the Cybernauts...?'

It's important to remember the legacy left by the series, that of proving that there was still life in *The Avengers*. Its success has spawned a big screen successor which in turn may see John Steed in (possibly) his most daring assignment to date – to once more make *The Avengers* an international success. Dave has confirmed that Patrick Macnee will play a cameo role in the movie – but then, how could it be otherwise?

Whether such a venture might be seen as 'chasing shadows' only time will tell. In the meantime,

Happy anniversary Steed, Purdey and Gambit!