

FINDER'S FILES

THE NEW AVENGERS

GAMBIT: GARETH HUNT

They don't always call in the stunt man when there is action on *The Avengers* set. Gareth Hunt – who plays the tough and handsome Gambit – says 'I think it's OK having a stunt man for really dangerous acts, but most of the time I like having a go myself. I've always been a bit of a daredevil and it doesn't frighten me to get a few bruises and knocks. Maybe I'd draw the line at broken bones.' But broken glass is something else. 'Oh, that was in a particular scene on a Canadian location,' he says, touching a small scar on his temple. 'They told me that they'd like to fake a fall through a glass window. In scenes like this, they don't use real glass, but a substitute called sugarglass. This breaks much more easily but if you don't go through it with sufficient force, it doesn't make much difference to the real thing. You would find yourself stuck on jagged points! The director wanted me to hurl myself through the window from about four paces,' he says, with a look of 'I told you so.' 'But I knew I would need to run across half the room to make the trip safely. In the end I relented and did it his way. I didn't go through hard enough and I ended up with cuts all over my face from tiny sugarglass fragments. A nasty bit of work that was, I can tell you.'

Why does he do it then? 'Well, I feel that it makes a scene look so much more realistic if, when the camera

zooms in, it's me falling and not a look-alike. I mean I enjoy acting, and it's a challenge to have to do these stunts. I feel I'm doing my job properly, really acting out a fall. Naturally you get special advisors who tell you how to do it, but so long as you listen and take advice, things usually go all right.

The director wanted me to hurl myself through the window from about four paces ... I didn't go through hard enough ...

'I've always had an adventurous spirit,' he says with a gleam in his eye. 'When I was fifteen I decided I wanted to join the Merchant Navy. I got the taste for that after I'd made a trip abroad with my school. I just got the idea to travel and had to take off. I stayed there for six years and covered most places I'd always wanted to see. But after that time, I decided it was time to quit and I jumped ship when we docked in New Zealand.

'You wouldn't believe the list of odd jobs I've had, from washer-up to packer in a warehouse. I hardly had any money and eventually sold my watch to raise the fare to Auckland. It was there, after a bundle of laughs with a few guys I'd met who had also jumped their ships, that I was finally picked up by the authorities and stuck in detention for a while before being bundled off back to good old England.' It was through a twist of fate that Gareth found himself doing back stage work as an odd job man. 'Just

sweeping up and general things like that,' he says. 'But I used to watch the actors at work through the drapes or from the wings and I realised that this was what I really wanted to do. Until then, the nearest thing I'd ever come to a stage was at school or mucking about on the bomb sites with my schoolmates playing cowboys.'

Gareth was 25 and a latecomer to acting. He realised things would be tough, but he persevered and channelled all his energies into repertory theatre and drama school. Eventually, he was offered a role in *Upstairs, Downstairs* and from that he landed the part of Gambit in *The New Avengers*.

PURDEY: JOANNA LUMLEY

TV series can do peculiar things to an actress's life. For Joanna Lumley, it meant taking a giant step from being a girl at an audition to becoming the most sought after girl in the world. You think we're joking? Well, the series in question is *The New Avengers* and at last count it was scheduled to play in no fewer than 110 different countries.

So has this sudden change from demure middle class miss to deadly kung-fu lady, made all that much difference to her private life? 'A little,' she confessed, with that beautiful plum in her voice. 'Men begin to wonder whether I had to undergo rigorous training for judo and karate and if so then it's not all just camera

trickery it's for real. That makes them a bit wary. They realise I might just lash out with a high kick if things got a little hot. I even knew one guy who seemed to stick by me I think he felt I could protect him it was very funny!

Joanna hasn't always known stardom, and she never lets herself forget it. 'This acting profession is riddled with more possible pitfalls than any other. One minute you're on top of the tree, and the next you could be swinging from one of the lower branches, trying to get back to the top again.'

The second thing Joanna brings to the series is a touch of class in fashion. 'I get scores of letters from girls asking me where I buy some of the clothes I wear but the answer is, of course, that most of them are specially designed for the series.' One thing that keeps Joanna going is her taste for the exotic. 'I was born in India and then later moved to Malaya before coming to England. My father was an officer in the Indian Army and so I went with him whenever he was posted. It was a really exciting childhood. After I left school I thought I'd become a fashion model. The money was supposed to be good and the sort of life appealed to me. But I soon found out that it was a lot different from how I'd imagined it. My course of training was a real eye-opener, and that was followed by a series of low-paid modelling jobs. But gradually I became noticed and I ended up in top fashion magazines. I still kept my hand in acting, though, I moved into TV commercials and eventually began landing acting roles in TV programmes. From there, things just progressed.'

For Joanna it certainly has. Does she like the idea of sudden fame? 'Yes the idea of fame and success excites me, but I need some privacy. Everyone likes to go home, kick off their shoes and stick their feet up. I'm no exception. Even Purdey would agree with that!'

[Source: *TV Detectives Annual: Pub. Brown & Watson. 1979*]

THE NEW AVENGERS IN CANADA

On a rare sunny day in late September, two doughty British agents were attempting to thwart a Russian intelligence mission in a base near Ward's Island in Toronto Bay. Already a Canadian operative had been killed and the game had become deadly dangerous.

The two British agents were Purdey and Gambit, and the mission on which they were risking their very lives was an episode of *The New Avengers*, entitled 'Forward Base', the fourth of seven that will be filmed in Canada. Purdey is willowy, blond Joanna Lumley, 31, who borrowed her series name from a manufacturer of shotguns. Gambit is handsome Gareth Hunt, 33, who was Frederick the footman in *Upstairs, Downstairs*.

Purdey and Gambit had had a normally improbable day. The Canadian agent who had been murdered had dug up a Russian missile guidance unit which had been buried by a double agent, Ivan Halfhide. They had reinterred the missile - an advanced Mark VI device -- and staked it out, waiting for Ivan Halfhide to return.

Sure enough, Ivan returned and there began a chase that is probably the slowest in television history. Ivan flees in a large white swan which he purloined from the children's amusement area on Ward's Island. Purdey and Gambit follow doggedly in an identical swan. The pursuit careens through the island's lagoons at a giddy two knots, a pace roughly the equivalent to the cruising speed of one of the Canada geese which have set up housekeeping on Ward's Island.

Halfhide dumps the missile guidance unit into Lake Ontario. Purdey dives and comes up with an outmoded Mark V device. In the meantime, the doughty Steed, a role played by Patrick Macnee, has unearthed vital information which, when collated with what Purdey and Gambit have discovered, leads to the Russian base which is located in a submarine that slipped into Lake Ontario during a typhoon in 1969.

That, in essence, is the plot of 'Forward Base' an episode in *The New*

Avengers series which is now appearing on the CTV network. The series, which is produced in Canada by Nielsen-Ferns, Inc., now appears in 70 countries, including Cyprus, Gibraltar and Malta, as well as 83 cities in the U.S. 'Forward Base' and the other six Canadian episodes, will appear in 1978, beginning in January.

At a luncheon break on this September day, Joanna Lumley and Gareth Hunt sprawled on blankets on the grass and nibbled at grapes and apples and other exotic native foods which are fed to secret service operatives. Up close, they appear to be normal people, only much better looking.

They have ten days to shoot each episode. There is no budget for an extra day's filming and often the episodes overlap. Then, the cast is required to appear in two separate segments which eases the strain on the budget and increases the pressure on the actors.

So it was natural that, while they were working on 'Forward Base', Gareth Hunt and Joanna Lumley were discussing an episode which was scheduled to be filmed in Niagara Falls, Ont., several weeks hence.

'We'll probably be asked to go over the Falls in a barrel,' Gareth was saying.

'How about going over the Falls on water skis?' Joanna said.

'That would be better than a barrel,' Gareth said. 'I hate being shut up in a tiny space like that.'

'But just one take,' Joanna said. 'I don't want to hear anyone say: 'Let's see it just once more.'"

'Right,' Gareth said. 'I'm not all that good on water skis.'

[Source: Wessley Hicks, National Editor, *TV Times*.]

VENGEANCE IS THEIRS

On the road with Steed, Purdey and Gambit.

When the definitive histories of the 1960s are written, they will have to take *The Avengers* into account as a cultural and sociological phenomenon. No other television series of that time, not even *Star Trek*, now seems so char-

acteristic of the period. No other has inspired the same amount of following, either. The trekkies are more numerous and more visible, all right, but they're also faddish and claquish. Avengers fans, by contrast, are like members of some secret fraternity. Their passion is all the more intense because it is private. Unlike those of *Star Trek*, they have no formal associations and hold no conventions. Their contact with one another comes, if it comes at all, through advertisements in small American magazines and newsletters devoted to pop trivia and nostalgia.

In recent months, these magazines have been full of advertisements from fans in the U.S. wishing to exchange bootleg videotapes with their brethren in Canada. Such ads stem from the fact that the programme has been revived as *The New Avengers*, with Patrick Macnee once more playing John Steed and with two other actors as his new companions. So far, it seems, the resurrected series has been shown on only one North American network – CTV. Although it will eventually be seen in more than 70 countries, plans for its release in the U.S. have not yet been firmed up.

Impatience has been the reaction of American fans who will find, when the series is shown there, more twists than the simple addition of new characters. *The New Avengers* breaks with the formula of the original by setting much of the action outside Britain. Three segments (not yet released here) were shot in France this summer, and another four were filmed in Toronto this fall. The Canadian setting is the result of the fact that Canadian money and expertise are now involved. Even in the old days, however, individual Canadians and near-Canadians were instrumental in shaping the series.

Fittingly, for those who will write on 1960s pop culture, the show began very neatly in 1960. It was then that the character of John Steed, ever so dapper with his broly and lethal bowler, was introduced on a British show, *Police Surgeon*. Steed was then the sidekick of another character, played by Ian Hendry, who became an 'avenger' after thugs murdered his girl. The title of the show was changed

to *The Avengers*, and Macnee and Hendry worked as a team for the first nine months. It was when Hendry left the show that the first real Canadian involvement began.

Sydney Newman, then a successful expatriate in Britain, former National Film Board commissioner and now a special adviser on film policy to Ottawa, became the show's executive producer. He came up with the idea of replacing Hendry with a female avenger. 'Up to that time in such TV series,' Newman says, 'women were either wives or secretaries or sex objects, but not women who used their minds, made decisions, or took part in the action.' His response was the character of Cathy Gale, anthropologist and karate expert. The role was filled by Honor Blackman, the first of the show's four leading ladies to date. This marked the start of *The Avengers'* cult-appeal, the reasons for which are complicated.

It was, after all, the time of the Cold War. Espionage, not yet having fallen into disrepute in real life, was just beginning its rise in entertainment. The first James Bond movie was only a year away when *The Avengers* began.

... my understanding is that Blackman was dressed in black leather for practical reasons ...

Also, it was a time when Britain was on the brink of a cultural renaissance, when *The Beatles*, *Carnaby Street* and the mod look would for a time make anything English fashionable. But *The Avengers*, it cannot be denied, had one other thing going for it. It was, in a word, kinky.

'My understanding is that Blackman was first dressed in black leather for practical reasons,' says Ross McLean, the former CBC executive who helped produce the Canadian episodes. 'You see, the scripts called for her to be fighting a great deal. There was this problem – how shall I put this? – that the public might see parts of her anatomy not then permissible on British television. Hence, the leather pantsuits.' Says Albert Fennell, the co-creator of the series and now executive producer: 'It was live-to-tape in those days, you see. But it

wouldn't be a problem now because we use film and also because we can show more leg. Tights have won out over suspenders.' Macnee agrees that this was the difficulty but says the solution was his idea.

Leather, in any case, along with a little mild bondage, in time became the hallmark of the show. These elements were especially obvious in some of the 53 episodes with Diana Rigg, who, as Emma Peel (wealthy widow and karate expert), succeeded Blackman in 1961. When Rigg left in 1967, to be replaced for 33 segments by Canadian actress Linda Thorson (as Tara King, sweet young thing and karate expert), this sexual implication had pretty well been eliminated. It remained, however, a part of the mythos of the show. The lack of it is one of the most obvious features distinguishing *The New Avengers* from the old. This and the addition of Gareth Hunt (racing driver and karate expert Mike Gambit) and Joanna Lumley (as a ballerina and karate expert named Purdey) and, of course, the settings in France and Canada.

In another neat coincidence for cultural historians, the original show ceased production in late 1969. 'After that,' says Fennell, 'I spent four or five years trying to revive it. I was unable to do so because of a complication involving the rights and the nature of the networks in Britain.' All this while, of course, the show was playing in reruns around the world, as it still is. Different countries, it seems, have liked it for different reasons. In Canada and the U.S., Diana Rigg was always boffo, while in France, for instance, Linda Thorson was far more popular. So it was that, two years ago, Rudolphe Roffi, the largest producer of commercials for French cinemas, approached Fennell and his partners about doing a champagne commercial, using Macnee and Thorson as the Steed and Tara King characters. 'It made sense since the show had been known for its use of champagne,' says Fennell, who resembles one of the show's old stock characters – the timid Cockney shopkeeper forever being murdered in the opening scenes. 'But it was easier to do it in England than in France, so I got the old crew together and that's how I

came to discuss with Roffi a revival of the series.' Thorson made the commercial but was not available for the new series; she has since returned to Toronto to work in theatre and television. Macnee, however, was willing to step once more into the character of John Steed.

'I've been playing Steed now for 17 years,' says Macnee, who has the reputation of being one of the nice fellows of showbiz as well as a smooth professional. 'I based the character to some extent on my own tastes (Macnee is himself an old Etonian) but used two other sources as well. The smooth exterior mixed with determination comes from *The Scarlet Pimpernel*; the glint in the eye comes from my father (the son of the painter Sir Daniel Macnee) who always wore full suits with a *boutonniere*. Steed is a particular type of Englishman.

He's unconnected domestically; he treats everyone else as English, though one assumes that he knows at least eight languages. He takes seriously the trivial and treats lightly the important things.

'There are a great deal of my own attitudes in the show. It's a kind of comic strip television in which we suspend belief. Diana and I used to rewrite all her scenes together to aim for that. Even now, I look at a script and ask myself 'How can I change this around without actually changing the lines?'

Personally, then, Macnee, who returned to the show from a profitable stage career, is as English as Steed. ('I miss the kinkiness of the show,' he says. 'have always been kinky myself - in the sense of loving the bizarre.') Professionally, however, he is Canadian in all but passport.

Macnee first came to Canada in 1952 and points out that, though he'd already been on the London stage, 'I didn't become an actor until I came to Toronto.' That was the year CBC-TV began, when there were only about 800 set in the city. He had a part in the first-ever Canadian television drama. Before moving to California in 1960, he did about 600 plays here for radio and television, as well as a great deal of local theatre. He was part of that generation of Canadians now so prominent in theatre and film here and abroad. 'Barry Morse is an old friend from those days,' he says. 'So are Bill Shatner, Lloyd Bochner, Barbara

Hamilton and Chris Plummer. Of course most of us were very poor then. I lived in a rooming house: critic Herbert-Whittaker was on the floor above. Then I moved into another place run by Leslie Howard's daughter. You see, I'd left my children in England (his son Rupert is now a television producer in Totonto). I remember Lorne Greene saying one day in the CBC canteen that I should put my money into IBM. But I had no money and didn't know what IBM was.' When he did go to Hollywood it was at the instigation of director Arthur Hiller. Since then Macnee has continued to be

... I miss the kinkiness of the show ... have always been kinky myself..

regarded, by its other members, as part of the old-boy network of Canadian actors and directors. His Canadian ties are incidental to The New Avengers being in Canada, however, for this came about through Neilsen-Ferns, a high-profile independent Canadian production company.

'When we got the series started again,' says Fennell, 'we did some episodes in Britain and then did the ones in France. This only seemed fair and reasonable considering their share in the cake.' But there were some difficulties. 'The cameraman we had in France,' Macnee recalls, 'was the chap who had done *Emmanuelle*, the soft-porn classic. He kept insisting on putting four black stockings over the lens. Finally we got him down to just two. There were hilarious moments working in two languages.' These first 13 segments were already in the works when Neilsen-Ferns entered the picture.

Such Canadian involvement was desirable from the British point of view for other than simply monetary reasons. For one thing, Britain, like Canada, has a quota for the percentage of British-made programming that must be shown, and Canadian shows count as British for such purposes. Also, says Fennell, 'it's been our intention all along to take The New Avengers around the world if possible. We want to retain our identity but become international.'

The series has changed over the

years and is changing still. Originally, it was not certain just who the Avengers were or whom they worked for. Later, especially in the shows with Thorson, they were more clearly identified as British intelligence agents, sometimes battling evil Soviets. 'The secret service bit was a mistake,' says Macnee. 'Too realistic.' So now it has been dropped, along with the implication that the villains are in the employ of foreign states. Detente and all that. This leaves the question of what the Avengers are supposed to be doing here when, next season, Steed, Gambit and Purdey turn up on the screen with the CN Tower, Eaton Centre, and other recognisable Toronto landmarks in the background. 'Nothing is stated too clearly,' explains Ross McLean. 'in one episode Steed and the others are simply here on holiday. In

another, they are asked over to help with a security problem. Nothing is spelled out, though.' Most of the scripts were written by Brian Clemens, who did the majority of the old ones and is now among the producers, but were doctored in Toronto for added Canadian emphasis. The crew and such are 75 per cent Canadian and so qualify the shows as domestic films. The plots remain true to the spirit of the original programme by being fantastic. In one episode, a nuclear submarine is in Lake Ontario and threatening to destroy civilisation. In another, the computer in the Bell Canada building is masterminding a crime ring. A third has a clearly marked *Toronto Star* delivery van assume human characteristics and run down counterspies in the streets of the city. 'We were always trying to take The Avengers into the 1980s,' says Albert Fennell, 'but many people prefer it back in the 60s.' The times then have changed more than the show itself, which was recently voted the top family programme in both Britain and South Africa and is now unofficially regarded in the same light in many other countries. What to make of these honours given a once-kinky television series is, perhaps, a matter best left to those writers who, some time in the future, will try to explain the mood of the 1970s.

[Source unknown: writer Doug Fetherling]