

# STEED + GAMBIT + PURDEY

## THE NEW AVENGERS



In your last issue, you state that from issue# 5, THE NEW AVENGERS will be featured in On Target. The only reason I can see for this, would be for the sake of completeness, as this

series seems to me to have had only the slightest link with THE AVENGERS proper.

Apart from FACES and CAT AMONGST THE PIGEONS, the true atmosphere of THE AVENGERS was sadly lacking. Joanna Lumley as Purdey, was the ideal choice for a new avenging heroine. In solo action, for example in TARGET, she was able to shine. But the Avengers world with its madcap villains, eccentric characters and oh-so-British way of life had gone. The move to France and Canada for filming only carried the shift even further, with the amusing car jaunt in EMILY the only ray of light on a distant horizon.

Even Steed was no longer the Steed of THE AVENGERS. His parade of lady friends was totally out-of-character. True, he had always flirted with the attractive women he met during his investigations, but he always remained faithful in a platonic sense to his earlier female colleagues. There was no greater age difference between Steed and Purdey than between Steed and Tara, so why change the format?

In 1967 Patrick Macnee said Steed "can't have great depth ... he has character limitations, and if I should develop these I would change him into a completely new character, which would be quite wrong." Sadly,

this was what happened. Another great loss, was the vintage Bentley or Rolls Royce, which were as much apart of Steed as his bowler and broly. The Steed driving the sleek new Jaguar was not the Steed we all knew and loved.

The use of a trio of agents, also led to a confusion of character interactions. We lost the brilliant two-way dialogue of the earlier series and gained only car chases and scenic foreign backdrops.

I feel therefore, that perhaps On Target might feature an occasional article on THE NEW AVENGERS, but hope that it will not become a mix of old and new, as they were virtually seperate entities and are, I believe, best kept that way.

On Target ... The Avengers, let's not change course.

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EDITORS COMMENT: Whether the inclusion of THE NEW AVENGERS does, in fact, constitute a 'change of course', is debatable.





However, whereas Paul Thomas is, of course, entitled to express his own opinion and comments, it would appear that they are those of the minority! Over 80% of our subscribers have, in fact, requested that THE NEW AVENGERS should be featured on a regular basis so, being of the opinion that one should accede to readers requests, your editor is only too happy to oblige.

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One fact the preceding letter clearly indicates, is that there does appear to be a certain amount of apathy among AVENGERS purists, to accept that THE NEW AVENGERS should be viewed as part of THE AVENGERS 'family' and indeed, many aficionados of the original, actually refuse to acknowledge the very existence of the later series!

So, is there a case for 'linking' the two shows? Or should each series be viewed as a separate entity?

The answer, depending on your own personal viewpoint, is arguable. I personally take the view that any series bearing the name THE AVENGERS in its title, and starring Patrick Macnee as John Steed, should certainly be viewed as being part of THE AVENGERS family tree - albeit among its lowermost branches!

Certainly the new show wasn't an exhumation of its predecessor! As its title proclaims, this was THE NEW AVENGERS, a series made in and for the seventies, and set against a background of the 'real' world; a world populated by everyday people used to modern technology and scientific advances.

THE AVENGERS, was set in its own surrealistic and 'imaginary' world. A place in which 'reality' was never allowed to intrude for, had it done so, it would have made the cardboard cut-out figures of Mrs Peel and John Steed, with his eccentric behaviour, bowlers, brollys and vintage vehicles, appear completely absurd.

THE AVENGERS was both flamboyant and outlandish. A spoof of the thriller format - escapist 'nonsense'. But done in such a way that the 'nonsensical' plots never detracted from its main aim - that of entertaining the viewer.

As Brian Clemens was quoted as saying in 1976: "THE AVENGERS was a humorous spoof with dramatic overtones, THE NEW AVENGERS is dramatic with humorous overtones." And there, I'm afraid, is where the show 'failed'.

If we are to accept his comment that THE NEW AVENGERS was set in a real environment, (as witness the episodes that were



shot on location in France and Canada) and was played 'straight', then how does one justify the inclusion of such an anachronism as John Steed (?) - a character once described by Clemens himself as "a pantomime prop" and "someone whom alongside a bus queue of ordinary men-in-the-street would become a caricature!"

The answer is, of course, obvious! Clemens and co knew full well that without Patrick Macnee's presence as John Steed, their chances of obtaining financial backing to produce the show or, once the series was completed, interesting the major television networks in taking the show, would have been slim indeed for, as Clemens as so rightfully stated on many occasions: "Avenger girls can come and go, but if Patrick Macnee fell down a manhole tomorrow, it would be the end of The Avengers for good."

However, I feel it fair to add that the production team of Fennell, Clemens and Johnson, should be congratulated for attempting something new and vying away from simply remaking the original, and believe that had they done so, the series wouldn't have fared any better than it did. Times change, and what was right for the mid-Sixties wasn't necessarily right for the mid-Seventies.

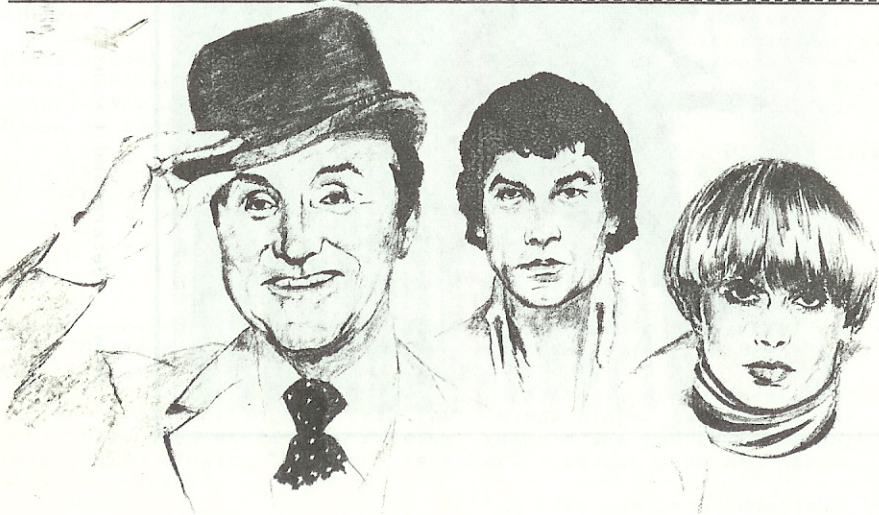
The everlasting appeal of THE AVENGERS lies in its quaint sixties-flavoured style. Avengerland can be compared to Peter Pan's 'Never-Never Land' - a place where ANYTHING is possible if one believes their eyes.

The appeal of THE NEW AVENGERS - however limited it appears to be, lies in its portrayal of fast-moving, escapist entertainment; one packaged in a well-produced format - and I, for one, enjoyed many of its stories.

( To be continued: )

NEXT TIME: Steed, Gambit and Purdey - a character assessment.

Plus: a full episode guide and choice of stories.







## 'A THREE-HANDED GAME'

'AVENGING IS EVEN BETTER THAN BEFORE' boasted the Daily Mail headline. Shaun Usher, the Mail's tv critic, reviewing the episode THE EAGLE'S NEST, added: 'Pay no heed to that title. The New Avengers are, thank goodness, the old Avengers, in fact the very old ones in their 60s heyday before the show declined in a noticeably wan and shabby final season.

My heart sank when the revival was announced, since it seemed bound to be more in the nature of an exhumation. Surely the programme would be a victim of its own success, all the best tricks long since copied and worked to death on TV and in the cinema?

Somehow, though, the aged ex-champion made a highly respectable comeback, ducking and weaving and sparring away like mad.

All nonsense, of course - but then, flamboyant, wilful nonsense, mocking the basic thriller format, is a hallmark of the programme.

Avengerland, like Ruritania, is complete in itself, with its own laws and logic. So the omniscient criminal organisation can strike anywhere in Britain, yet manages to run out of ammunition for its firearms. A trip from the Home Counties to Scotland takes about half an hour.

It's difficult to discuss the opening episode, since most of the nation will not see it until the end of the week, and I'm damned if I'll spoil the fun by giving the storyline away. (That's a joke in itself, come to think of it - for when did the plot ever matter, except as an excuse for frolics in Avengerland?)

Sufficient to say that writer Brian Clemens took a chesnut of a situation, as if challenged to wring one more variation on the theme, and just about succeeded.

Patrick Macnee, apparently unchanged by time, remains the

urbane and unflappable Steed, giving the entertainment a wry flavour with his hint of being a bachelor uncle and man of the world indulging his young relatives by taking part in sophisticated melodramatic outdoor charades at a country house weekend.

Joanna Lumley, as The Girl, is pretty, vivacious, and jolly well-spoken. Gareth Hunt, as The Boy, is dark, handsome and terribly dominating, and should play havoc among impressionable young persons just beginning to outgrow the Bay City Rollers.

Escapism is the name of The Avengers' game, and as pure escapism with outlandish, sub-Hitchcock flourishes, there is nothing quite like it. We've been there before, but the same complaint could be made about most television programmes. At least The New Avengers are professional, glossy and knockabout - rather than viciously violent - and the show doesn't take itself seriously.

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Other critics echoed this view: 'The New Avengers are indeed sparkling super-active form' (Sunday Mirror) 'It's far fetched but great entertainment' (News Of the World) 'It's Wham! Bam! Pow stuff!' (Daily Mirror) 'Back with a Vengeance' wrote Sunday Express critic, James Murray: 'There's this bunch of Nazi bigwigs who escaped from Germany at the end of the war and crashlanded in the Atlantic.

The survivors crawled ashore on a remote Scottish island, wiped out the populace and took over the local monastery covering their Gestapo uniforms with monks' robes.

So far, so good. A daft bit of Highland whimsy.

The new "Avengers" plot got better and better last night, though, when it became clear that the wicked Germans had been keeping their fanatical leader on ice for 30-odd years waiting for the new science of cybernetics to restore him to the world.

I mean, I say, only a calamity like the rebirth of Hitler would bring Steed out of retirement.

And a triumphant return it is with the old debonair do-gooder putting down the baddies with his usual droll humour. "I haff news. You are to be executed," he is told by a captor.

"Thank goodness," murmurs Steed, "you broke it to me gently."

Patrick Macnee carries the whole show effortlessly on the end of the walking-cane.

Newcomers Joanna Lumley (as Purdey, a lethal lady) and Gareth Hunt (as Mike Gambit, male sex object and Steed's muscle) dovetail neatly into the "Avengers" formula.

There's a naughty bit of sex talk between them - "One of these days," she keeps on saying vaguely. "When?" he asks - but they never actually get between the sheets.'

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Not all critics held this view, however. The Observer, reviewing the third episode screened, LAST OF THE CYBERNAUTS...?, said: 'In a retreat of 'The Avengers' called The New Avengers, the Mrs Peel character is now





played by Joanna Lumley, the possessor of an amazing pair of legs which go all the way up to her mouth, which in turn goes all the way across to each ear. Apart from her, the show is the standard tat. There was a lot of newspaper coverage about the re-launch, the key question being whether the new series could live up to the old. In fact the old was no great shakes: just arch and gimmick-laden like the new.

Bionics, the archest gimmick currently around, inevitably showed up in 'The New Avengers.' No sooner had I switched it on than a semi-human heavy started ripping doors down with his bionic hands. A Genius of Crime toolled around in a wheelchair, thereby arousing echoes of 'Ironside' to blend with the bionic reverberations. It was a yawn a minute!'

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So, was Avenging really better than before?

Any attempt to answer that question obviously invites a comparison between the 'new' characters and their highly successful predecessors - three beautiful and talented actresses who, during each of their tenure with the series (and depending on one's personal viewpoint, of course) were each regarded as being the superlative Avengers girl. Certainly all three would prove a hard act to follow.

High praise, then, to Joanna Lumley who, not only accepted the challenge, but soon proved that she was a more than worthy successor for the coveted role of Steed's new female colleague.

Described in pre-publicity handouts as: 'Purdey, a girl for the 80s. A girl who packs ultra-femininity with a fighting style that is as effective as it is unique. A girl who can shoot the pips out of an apple at twenty paces. A stockings and suspenders girl - giving lots of glimpses of thigh. A man's woman - a male chauvenist pig's dream.' it's not too surprising that male viewers waited with baited breath (and eager anticipation?) for their first glimpse of Steed's new Girl Friday.

Reality, however, isn't always that simple or - in the case of television hype - is seldom what we've been led to believe, and though it soon became obvious to the more-discerning viewer that Miss Lumley was, indeed, wearing 'single hose', views of stocking tops and suspender tabs were all too conspicuous by their absence - with only the rooftop-climbing scenes in TARGET and the titillating close up of 'Purdey's' black stockings in TO CATCH A RAT allowing the onlooker a clear (though all too brief) view of Miss Lumley's shapely thighs. Mind you, in fairness to Joanna Lumley, she did go on record as saying: "I resent being sold as sexy. I'm certainly not a sex symbol, so anyone who expects to find something kinky, will be disappointed."

The much lauded Purdey 'fighting style' (described as 'Panache' - a technique based on the French art of self defence) though excuriatingly mishandled in THE EAGLE'S NEST story, soon became an added highlight of each episode - with the beautiful and athletic actress delivering shoulder-high kicks and straight right blows to a succession of hapless opponents.

In short, there's little doubt that Joanna Lumley's portrayal of Purdey ranks high on my list of favourite Avengers girls and was an inspired piece of casting by producers Albert Fennell and Brian Clemens.

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'Mike Gambit, or so rumour has it, was a major in the Paras. Served as a mercenary in the Congo. A man who has clawed his way up through courage, determination and ability. He

can be quiet and deceptively still - until he flares into action, when he can strike as fast as a cobra.'

This was how the media introduced the second newcomer, Gareth Hunt, to the series and, like many other Avengers loyalists, the announcement left me with a feeling of unease.

How, I wondered, would this association affect what had previously been seen as a winning format? Indeed, why change the format at all?

I had reservations that the introduction of a third member of the team, (particularly that of a male) would relegate Steed's character to that of a 'Mother' figure - a kind of 'Mr Waverly' to Gambit and Purdey's 'Solo and Kuryakin' - and leave Steed delegating the action to his younger proteges'. (Though the first few stories did, indeed, tend to follow this line, thankfully the situation was soon remedied and Patrick Macnee was once again given a fair percentage of the action).

However, the inclusion of Gambit did, as expected, occasionally stretch the storyline at the expense of the action.

As to Gareth, himself. A fine actor, he handled the role with complete conviction and his Patrick (Danger Man) McGoohan-style of 'clipped' dialogue added an extra dimension to an otherwise stock character, while Gambit's action scenes were among - if not the best? - of any series of The Avengers - new or old. (For further proof of Gareth Hunt's acting prowess, I draw your attention to his role in the marvellously-funny and action-packed 007 spoof LICENCED TO LOVE AND KILL - a video of which is urgently needed by your editor. Any offers?)

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And so to Avenger-in-Chief, Patrick Macnee's resumé as John Steed.

What can one say about someone who has been the kingpin of The Avengers throughout its twelve-year lifespan?

Certainly if one considers that Patrick Macnee was 47 when the original Avengers ceased production in 1969 and a seven year gap seperated the new series from its predecessor, it's hardly surprising that Sunday Mirror columnist, Pat Boxall, posed the following question in the issue dated 11/1/76:

'CAN STEED MAKE IT AGAIN?'

'As a one-time Avengers fan, I'm chuffed that television has plans to revive and revamp the series and is casting eyes over candidates to follow Honor Blackman, Diana Rigg and Linda Thorson.

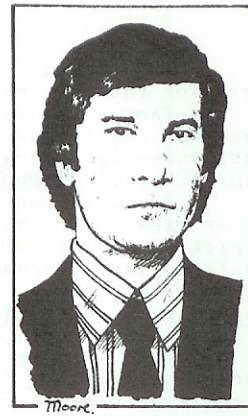
But I'm a bit alarmed that Patrick Macnee is still being booked to play the sophisticated John Steed.

A dear, sweet, competent actor he might be. And I have certainly got nothing against him.

But let's be practical. He's got to be 53 if he's a day, and having seen off three glamorous Avenger sidekicks, I reckon it's pushing his luck to put a fourth on his arm.

Or does somebody up there in those ivory television towers think that time doesn't tick-tock on for men?'

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Surprisingly, it appeared that time had, indeed, stood still for the ever-ebullient Mr Macnee.

Though the media led us to believe that: 'Steed has mellowed and has now retreated to a large country mansion (Steed's Stud) where he spends most of his time breeding horses and entertaining beautiful women' Steed had hardly changed at all.

True, he was slightly heavier - though only in the first few stories. (By the time the second thirteen were produced, Patrick Macnee had slimmed down and looked every bit as suave as the 'slimline' Thorson series model).

True, the much loved Bentley and Rolls trademarks were no longer in evidence and Steed now drove a wide-wheeled, highly-polished Olive green Jaguar racing coupe - or a choice of two Range Rovers, ( I realise, of course, that a 'reference' to the Bentley was made in DEAD MEN ARE DANGEROUS and - courtesy of some unused Rigg colour series footage - was 'seen' in K IS FOR KILL) but Steed's character hadn't changed.

He still believed in honour and duty. He still retained his olde worlde charm. He still sported the world famous broly and bowler - and still looked as immaculate as ever. In short, Patrick Macnee was back as Steed and Avenging - though certainly



not better than before, was well worth the seven-year hiatus and I have no reservation in urging anyone who missed the series first time round, to keep your eyes peeled for any repeat transmission date - you're in for a pleasant surprise.

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My decision to include The New Avengers in O.T. has certainly brought some much needed feedback. Witness the following from:

Tod Ellsworth:

It is comforting to find that Paul Thomas' dissatisfied view of The New Avengers is held by the membership minority - the series adds onto the foundation of a phenomenon.

Granted, a sense of realism largely replaces the bizarre atmosphere so prevalent in the original series, but it remains nevertheless. A feel of The Avengers can often be found during the first season of The New Avengers. It is particularly evident in THE EAGLE'S NEST, TO CATCH A RAT, THE MIDAS TOUCH and LAST OF THE CYBERNAUTS..? The second season also utilizes the proven mixture of cleverness and finesse, as seen in THE THREE-HANDED GAME.

Character interaction is the centre of The New Avengers - the witty, two-way dialogue which became an Avengers trademark does not disappear in the later series. One needs only to view the Purdey and Gambit scenes from TO CATCH A RAT, TRAP and THREE-HANDED GAME, to name a few. Combined, these help develop the characterizations.

When Brian Clemens likened the characters from the original series to cardboard, he saw The New Avengers as comprised of thicker cardboard. To that end, Clemens delivered.

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And ... from:

Andrew Twitchett.

I feel I must agree with the editor concerning The New Avengers. Of course they should be included in O.T.!

THE AVENGERS and THE NEW AVENGERS are different in many ways, (I have been an ardent AVENGERS fan since the beginning) but this does not deter me from enjoying them both. Surely, it it stars John Steed, it can't be all that bad! (Bad? It's hardly that.)

Full marks to Clemens and Co for THE NEW AVENGERS production, especially the first 13 stories, which were truly British. Filming in France and Canada for the



second series was unfortunately a necessity - simply because they financed the series.

I know for a fact that, if John Steed and THE NEW AVENGERS were to return to the screen tomorrow, I would be one of the first to switch on the television! (Put on the tea, and I'll join you.)

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And ....

Steve Eramo:

First off, let me tell you how impressed I am with both your organisation and the newsletter. (Thanks, we aim to please) I think 'On Target' is very well done and very imformative. (We try to please.) I've been an 'Avengers' fan for the last ten years, and always wondered why there weren't any organisations or newsletters devoted to the series. Now with both 'On Target' and



the American newspaper 'With Umbrella, Charm & Bowler' I'm quite content. (We do please!) (Incidentally, W.U.C.B. is well worth a look. Printed by Dave Caruba, a lifelong fan of the series, copies of this can be obtained by sending a S.A.E. to S & J.Curry, 39, Guildford Park Road, Guildford, Surrey. GU2 5NA.)

I'd also like to comment on your AVENGERS book. (All comments welcomed.) The entire text filled in a lot of gaps for me and the photos were like icing on the cake. Along with never seeing an Honor Blackman episode, (Few people have Steve.) I've never had the opportunity to view a Linda Thorson story (with the exception of "The Forget-Me-Knot"). (What?! Where've you been hiding? Iceland? You don't know what you've missed!) Your well-detailed reviews made me feel like I'd seen these episodes! (Glad to have been of help.)





Getting back to 'On Target', I'd like to pass comment on the inclusion of The New Avengers in the last issue. I have to agree with many of the comments raised in the article. The New Avengers did not contain the flavour of the old series. Only a handful of episodes (THE EAGLE'S NEST, TARGET, FACES, CAT AMONGST THE PIGEONS and perhaps THE LAST OF THE CYBERNAUTS..?) contained facets of the 'Avengers'. These 'new' episodes were just that new, up-to-date, more in the vein perhaps of THE RETURN OF THE SAINT (but better. So much better!) and THE PROFESSIONALS.

Steed's character had also been changed. In my opinion the flashy cars, the stream of girlfriends, the country mansion etc., just were not Steed. (I'd have to disagree - nay, I have already done so. See the New Avengers piece this issue.) I would have preferred a redecorated Stable Mews flat and, if at all possible, the Bentley - though on reflection, this would have been out of place in the new series. (The Bentley, 'out of place'? I doubt it. Perhaps the high cost of renting a vintage vehicle played a major part in the Bentley being dropped?!)

I did, however, thoroughly enjoy the characters of Purdey and Gambit. Joanna Lumley and Gareth Hunt did a fine job and created to memorable characters. Granted, having a trio instead of a duo spread out both the dialogue and action, but I wouldn't have changed the team in any way.

Despite any reservations, I enjoyed watching THE NEW AVENGERS. This series will always be thought of as, well, 'new' while The Avengers will always remain ... THE AVENGERS.

I welcome the occasional feature on The New Avengers. It is, afterall, part of 'The Avengers' world and should not be forgotten. (Though the series won't be a regular feature of these pages, I assure everyone that it certainly won't be forgotten).

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