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# VENGEANCE IS THEIRS





# 'ON THE ROAD WITH STEED, PURDEY & 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 characteristic of the period. No other has inspired the same kind 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 the 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 in 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. 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 the 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 one 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, Rudolph 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 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 nicest 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 sets in the city. He had a part in the first-ever Canadian drama. Before moving to California in 1960, he did about 600 other 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

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 Trevor Howard's daughter. You see, I'd left my children in England [his son Rupert is now a television producer in Toronto]. 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 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 Nielsen-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 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 Nielsen-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 programmes 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 and 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 recognizable 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. It is simply understood that Steed has wardrobes and contacts worldwide." 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 civilization. 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 counter-spies in the streets of the city. "We are trying to take *The Avengers* into the 80s," 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, sometime in the future, will try to explain the mood of the 1970s.

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(Written by DOUG FETHERLING. Reprinted from a Canadian newspaper: date & title unknown.)

# A BLONDE IS A NEW AVENGER

John Steed hasn't changed. Urbane, debonair, suave and as British as ever with his bowler and broly. But Mrs Emma Peel, with her 'clever' smile and jumpsuits has gone. She has been replaced by a leggy blonde called Purdey, who wears a gun in her garter and packs a mean punch.

And to help Purdey is another newcomer to *The Avengers* team ... Mike Gambit, a handsome young man Steed refers to as "my number one".

*The Avengers*, the top series of the 60s is back. On February 9 at 8.30 on the ABC in all States we'll be meeting Steed again and watching two smash-hit newcomers - Purdey alias Joanna Lumley, and Mike alias British actor Gareth Hunt.

*The Avengers* which first went on air in 1960, has been resurrected after seven years. In 1976 the BBC, after requests from all over the world, decided to make a new series of *The Avengers*

Patrick Macnee, John Steed of the series, agreed to do the show. Gareth Hunt, who had just finished playing the footman Frederick in *Upstairs, Downstairs*, was available to play sidekick Mike Gambit. But a girl to follow in the famous footsteps of Mrs Emma Peel [Diana Rigg] as well as the footsteps of the first Avenger girl, Honor Blackman, and the last, Linda Thorson, was difficult to find.


More than 1000 hopefuls, ranging in age from schoolgirl teens to grannies, knocked on the audition door asking for the job.

The girl chosen as Purdey had to be upper crust, liberated, a girl with a sense of humour who came over as tough but with a touch of vulnerability. And the actress who played opposite Diana Rigg and George Lazenby in the 007 movie *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* is the girl who got the job.

Joanna Lumley, model and actress, landed the part after she coolly kicked a revolver from the hand of a stuntman, leapt over a couch and kicked the stuntman in the teeth. All part of the audition, it was carried out with a panache Mrs Peel would have been proud of.

Joanna describes the role of Purdey as a male chauvenist pig's dream ... chiffon dresses with sexy touches like suspender belts and garters.

As Purdey, Joanna will be playing the stepdaughter of a bishop and relative of people in high places. As scriptwriter, co-producer Brian Clemens puts it: "Purdey is really just an extension of Joanna herself. She's ideal."


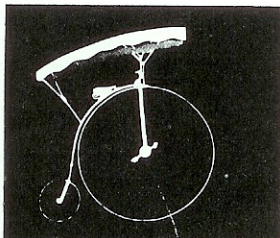


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Magnificent car that the AC was in so many respects; in lustrous maroon, a particularly handsome beast to look at, and a pure delight for 'shutting down' boy racers in souped-up Cortinas at the traffic lights; Tara soon decided that she would be better served with something just a little bit smaller, a car able to dart niftily in and out of the traffic, with lightning sharp reflexes, and steering effort not calculated to build up biceps like Charles Atlas inside a fortnight. Such a car was the Lotus Europa Mark I, a petite, two-seater closed coupe with a 1.4 litre Renault based engine mounted forward of the rear axle (commonly referred to as a 'mid-engine' design). Ah, now here was a machine that suited her zany, exuberant personality and daily driving requirements to a tee - with the result that she kept the sparkling red machine for several years, and over fifty-thousand delightful miles!

Being a resident in Paris when she eventually felt the need to replace the Europa, Tara opted for something almost as audacious, a three-seater Matra Bagheera. This car gave rewarding and trouble-free service until it was traded in for a Renault 5 Cordini Turbo, a tiny 'shoe-box' of a car with surprising performance (115 m.p.h. top speed, 0-60 m.p.h. in 8.9 secs.) and somewhat reminiscent in concept of the old Mini Cooper S (of Dangelman John Drake fame).

Tara's recent return to full time residence in London has seen her purchase a Reliant Scimitar SS1, a 'new generation' open sports car with a lively 1600 c.c. engine\*, dynamic roadholding,



superb braking, and a rakish, aerodynamic body shape. Miss King appears to be thoroughly enjoying this return to the exhilaration of 'top-down' motoring, if her performance in the recent rally is anything to go by.

SIDENOTE: It has recently been drawn to our attention that a new 'Avengers girl' has similar automotive preferences to Tara. At least, we think she's an Avenger girl, unless - hey, perhaps she's just a pretender!

\* 1300 c.c. and even 1800 c.c. turbo-charged versions of this model are also available.

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MIKE GAMBIT

While not a lot of background information concerning the two agents codenamed the New Avengers is presently available [perhaps because they are presently engaged in such super-sensitive work that any publicity about their private lives might be



deemed advantageous to the enemy - or possibly because so many of the cases involving them are still classified], it seems that our one-time racing driver Mike Gambit may still have aspirations in that direction. While neither he nor Purdey were able to attend the reunion, we have it on good authority that the irrepressible Gambit is now the proud owner of a brand new TWR modified Jaguar XJS - HE (keen Avengerphiles should not be too surprised by this, remembering his preference for the original version of the XJS around a decade ago.) This V12 powered machine is very similar in specification to the Group A racing machines which the fantastic ('flying Scot') Tom Walkinshaw led to victory in the European Touring Car Championship a couple of seasons back.

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### PURDEY

While, as in the situation with her colleague Gambit, we are not privy to many details surrounding Purdey's motoring (or other) background, we know that she ran an MOB, and later a Triumph TR7, in the years '75 to '78. Apart from a rumour that she once owned a special rally prepared TR7 equipped with a 3½ litre Rover engine, and the undoubted fact that she possessed a high performance motorcycle, we are not really in a position to venture much more information about the illustrious ex-ballerina, other than to include the following report from an observer in Buckinghamshire.

A woman looking remarkably like the beautiful Purdey was seen behind the wheel of a Lotus Esprit Turbo, in hot pursuit of a wide-wheeled, apparently highly modified, XJS Jaguar, along the ML, not far from the Newport Pagnell slip road. An Aston Martin Vantage, driven, according to our observer, by a handsome, distinguished-looking gentleman sporting a bowler hat, had preceded both cars by several minutes.

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### WHO WANTS TO GO OUT AND SEE A BAD PICTURE WHEN YOU CAN STAY AT HOME AND SEE ONE?

Reprinted from Barry Norman's 'SATURDAY NIGHT  
AT THE MOVIES' column.

Printed in the Blackpool Evening Gazette,  
Saturday, 17 October 1987.

The announcement that Mel Gibson is, apparently, to star in a cinema version of THE AVENGERS and there are also plans to film THE FLINTSTONES and DOCTOR WHO must give an ironic sense of satisfaction to the old timers in the movie industry. Some thirty years ago television killed off the 'B' picture by usurping its function on the small screen. The westerns and thrillers that had, previously, served as the second half of a double bill became redundant because you could watch a dozen of them every night on TV. And, as the great Sam Goldwyn said: "Who wants to go out and see a bad picture when you can stay at home and see one."

But now the wheel seems to have come full circle. THE AVENGERS, DR WHO and the like - the TV versions of old 'B' pictures - are, we learn, to be snapped up by the cinema.

Only this time, clearly, they won't be treated as 'B' pictures, but as full scale - and probably very expensive - productions. I can't help feeling, though, that this is something of a retro-grade step.

Surely the cinema, with all its advantages, should be able to do better than sink its fangs, Dracula-like, into the throat of TV and suck its blood. Where are the invention, the imagination, the enterprise that one might reasonably expect from the most important art and entertainment medium of the 20th century?

Well, wherever they are, they're certainly not visible to the naked eye at the moment.

In any event stealing - or, to put it more politely, borrowing - from TV is a petty dismal expedient. Very few film versions of successful television shows have ever worked, mainly because a TV idea is expressly tailored to fill 30, or at most 50, minutes. To extend it beyond that is to stretch it further than it can go without snapping.

THE AVENGERS developed a cult following because each slender episode was designed to fill half an hour, no more. To take the same kind of stylised plot and situation and pad them out - which, I imagine, is what the film version will do - can only serve to emphasise the basic absurdity behind the whole original concept.

Yet this, of course, is to prejudge what the film will do.

So, while noting the fact that the movies are now grabbing back their own 'B' picture ideas from their old enemy, the telly, it might be more entertaining to wonder what sort of role Mel Gibson could possibly take in a big screen version of the series.

Certainly he can't play the Patrick Macnee part.

Mr Gibson is not nearly smooth and sophisticated enough for that. And I think we might dismiss any idea that he could replace Honor Blackman, Diana Rigg or Joanna Lumley.

So what then? Will he be a kind of Gambit?

Hardly.

Gambit, after all, was a chief supporting player and Mr Gibson is much to big these days to support anybody else.

What I suspect will happen is that the film of THE AVENGERS will end up owing only its title to the TV series and that Mel Gibson will play, well, Mel Gibson.

One thing I'm pretty sure of. I bet he won't wear a bowler hat.

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### EDITOR:

I've reprinted the above article to allow me the opportunity to reply to the dozens of readers' letters that have dropped through the mailbox since Avengerphiles first got whiff of the news that a 1980's-style AVENGERS movie was in the pipeline.

Being aware of the facts - I was first informed of this as long ago as 8 June - allow me to set the record straight (or at least give you as much of the picture as I can, without betraying a confidence - or spoiling any chance I may have of playing a small role in the proceedings!)

Yes, it appears that a film version of The Avengers WILL be made in the not too distant future. Yes, Mel Gibson's name HAS been mooted as its possible star.

However, take my word for it when I tell you that although the people behind the new film are DETERMINED to push ahead with the product, a screenplay has yet to be written; a director has yet to be signed and Mel Gibson's has DEFINATELY NOT signed to play the role of John Steed! (Those are the FACTS, directly from the horse's mouth!)

Did I mention John Steed? Yes I did. How could it be otherwise. An Avengers movie WITHOUT Steed is unthinkable. That said, where, if at all, does Patrick Macnee enter the picture? Can the producers really get the product off the ground WITHOUT the man so identified as John Steed? Of course, they can - but it's extremely unlikely that they will. Without giving too much of the game away, it's 99.5% certain that Patrick Macnee will be playing 'Steed' (and possible that past Avengers will be offered large cameo roles). Providing they wish to, of course?

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