

THE NEW AVENGERS

By James Murray

With financial backing from France, the core of the old AVENGERS team (producer Albert Fennell, writer/producer Brian Clemens, and composer Laurie Johnson) had formed a company in 1976 to produce THE NEW AVENGERS.

Said Fennell, "We wanted to reach the audience we missed before; the audience in America that didn't quite know what we were doing with THE AVENGERS."

Sitting in his office across from an oversized poster of Alfred Hitchcock, Clemens noted at the time, "THE NEW AVENGERS are more real. The series will be humor added to drama, rather than vice versa."

And, Clemens promised, THE NEW AVENGERS will bring heat into it. It's the end of the anti-hero era. People want to get personally involved. We've had a lot of tough police dramas and people want something so that they can put their feet up and be entertained.

"With feature films, you have a captive audience," he continued. "They've paid their money and they're willing to wait ten minutes to get into the story."

To hook television's impatient viewers, Clemens wanted THE NEW AVENGERS "to start where most TV series end in the States—start it with a car crash and then go up from there—don't end with it."

At the time, Clemens had already written 11 of the first 16 scripts for THE NEW AVENGERS. "I am trying to take extraordinary situations and make them believable," he said. "If we have a bizarre plot we try to sell the idea rather hard. But it's rather difficult when you're competing with some realities like the CIA plan to poison Castro's beet polih."

Though financed out of France, the series had targeted the American network market. So Clemens was planning to "open up" the series and make his storytelling more "international" in flavor. "Maybe the

Steed and company give it a second go in the '70s.



THE AVENGERS production team formed their own company in 1976 to relaunch the series, teaming Patrick Macnee as Steed (left) with a new team of talented amateurs Purdey (Joanna Lumley) and Mike Gambill (Gareth Hunt).

world is ready for it," he hoped.

When Patrick Macnee was called back to revive the John Steed character, Macnee wasn't certain how many episodes he wanted to commit to. He was 54 at the time and wouldn't be able to handle the fight scenes as easily as he had ten years earlier. Not having a firm commitment from Macnee that he would stay on, Clemens and Fennell had created a younger Avengers duo to do the "dirty work."

The plan was for Steed to be used as a transitional character and then for the younger Avengers team to take over. But Macnee told me that while at first he "was having trouble getting back into character," by the fourth episode he was starting to feel more comfortable with Steed. Eventually, Macnee decided to stay on with THE NEW AVENGERS and Steed's character provid-

ed the "brains" behind the operation.

Joanna Lumley easily won out over the 11 other women being tested for the part of the female lead. Her character was to be more feminine than the earlier Avengers women. In the early scripts for the series, the character name is "Charly" but because a perfume with that name had just come on the market, it was changed to "Purdey," the name of a well-known shotgun.

Proving to be extremely athletic, Lumley performed most of her own stunts. "Joanna scared me to death," said special effects coordinator Mike Collins. "She'd do anything." Consequently, for several weeks early in the series she had scratches on her legs from climbing over a chain-link fence.

Gareth Hunt (already seen by American audiences as Frederick in UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS) was chosen to play the strong, macho male lead, "Mike Gambit." Gareth good-naturedly explained his own difficulty making the transition from playing Mike Gambit back to his own private life. When his car broke down on holiday,

he felt exasperated, certain that "Gambit wouldn't have to deal with this kind of thing."

Off in a little strip of Pinewood offices outside of "K Stage," casting director Maggie Cartier said, "Part of the show's appeal is its essentially British nature." Cartier thought they probably wouldn't use American actors. She said she found working on THE NEW AVENGERS was unique because "they left casting totally up to me." Almost never was an actor brought down to see the producers. After reading an episode's script, Cartier spent some time with her copy of Spotlight, a catalog of actors and actresses, and then met with the producers to discuss how they saw the character. She made suggestions which they accepted or rejected.

THE NEW AVENGERS was production

"These cells. They're identical to the human brain cells."

—Mrs. Peel (looking through microscope)

MAN-EATER OF SURREY GREEN ★★★

1961. *BBW* film series. Written by Philip Lawton. Directed by Sidney Hayers.

Four horticulturists have disappeared. Posing as a member of the Tree Preservation Society, Steed solicits a donation from the eminent horticulturist, Sir Lyle Peterson (Derek Farr). While there, he finds in his employ one of the missing horticulturists, Laura Burford (Gillian Lewis), who previously despised Sir Lyle. She also discovers an oil derrick on the property and, hidden in his car, an unusual seed pod. In the courtyard, Steed and Emma discover the remains of a lost spaceship which had re-entered the earth's atmosphere a year earlier after crashing into something in the upper atmosphere—a large plant-like organism with tentacles. Dr. Sheldon (Athene Seyler), a colorful minor character, explains that the plant will rapidly double in size to take over the Earth and that its growth depends on an essential enzyme—found only in humans.

There's an interesting scene where Mrs. Peel (under the influence of the plant) and Steed fight one another. Eventually, getting the best of her, he soaks Emma with herbicide just before the plant drags her away. A few parallels to the '50s sci-fi class, *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*.



Dr. Sheldon (Athene Seyler) explains the phenomenal growth needs of the alien in "Man Eater of Surrey Green."

"Supposing a group of people, each of them telepathic, thought as one. Wouldn't that increase their powers?"

—Mrs. Peel

TOO MANY CHRISTMAS TREES ★★★

1961. *BBW* film series. Written by Tony Williamson. Directed by Ray Brierley.

Steed is having recurring nightmares involving Christmas images. One foreshadows the death of a fellow agent suspected of leaking state secrets. The morning paper reports the death; the autopsy reports he died from the excessive electrical energy of a "bratoniatus." Mrs. Peel spontaneously invites Steed to a Christmas eve party at the estate of publisher Bradford Sneyer (Mervyn Johns). Arriving at the estate, they find Christmas images lifted right from Steed's dreams. Jeremy Wade (Barry Warren) is delighted that Mrs. Peel has brought Steed because, as an experimenter in telepathy, it was he who played in her mind the idea that she should invite him. But Jeremy's colleagues have a more sinister one for his telepathic talents. Feeling compelled to sleep, Steed dreams of Madame Guillotine placing the basket to catch his head and awakes to see her arrive at the estate as Justice Chase (Jeanette Sterke). Justice demonstrates her telepathic powers, using Steed as an assistant. When the act goes too far, Mrs. Peel shatters a glass to break the spell. Then, Jeremy is

"It's rather difficult [to sell an idea] when you're competing with some realities like the CIA plan to poison Castro's boot polish."

—Writer/producer Brian Clemens—

designer Syd Cain's first TV series and he felt it was "somewhat like going back to school in that it makes you do a lot with just a little money—and quickly." Cain designed *FRENZY* (1972) for Hitchcock, *LOLITA* (1962) for Kubrick, and the second Bond film, *FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE* (1963). He took the job on *THE NEW AVENGERS* to work with Albert Fennell who was the first to hire him in the film industry 32 years earlier. "Brian is good to work with," said Cain, "because he will rewrite a scene, if necessary, to make it work."

As art director, Cain was trying to design in bold colors "so that they will translate well into black and white for television." Generally, he was designing the sets for three episodes ahead of whatever was currently in production. It took about two weeks to film each episode.

Three sound stages were at his disposal: one contained finished, permanent sets for Steed's living room as well as Parley's and Gambit's flats; the other two were used for temporary sets built for specific episodes.

One obvious advantage *THE NEW AVENGERS* seemed to have was its use of feature film directors and crews, including many who worked on *THE SPY WHO LOVED ME*. Fennell and Clemens said that working on *THE NEW AVENGERS* was more like "family." It was a smaller crew with a smaller budget.

The producers "cast directors" the way they cast actors. Two or more episodes could be in production at any one time on different sound stages or out in the countryside.

While on location, the unions made certain there were catered lunches and breaks every morning and afternoon. "Elevenses"—around eleven o'clock—which were elaborate tea breaks with pastries, sweet rolls, sandwiches, and other tasty treats.

One American actor working on *SPACE 1999* told me that, at first, he was mildly annoyed with all of the catered breaks and the "laid back" nature of the British film crews. Later, he realized they were getting more filming completed in less time, with fewer takes, and with less stress than they had experienced in Hollywood. And the overall quality of the finished product was better.



Gareth Hurl and Joanna Lumley as Gambit and Purley were introduced to fate over the show from Warren, who decided to stay.

While watching the uncut "rushes" or "dailies," I ran into director James Hill (*BORN FREE*, 1966) who had directed the celebrated "A Touch of Brimstone" episode from the old series—the episode featuring Emma Peel as the "Queen of Sin." After talking with Hill and others I came to realize that, yes, British film crews were easy to work with and, yes, *THE NEW AVENGERS* crew had a particular enthusiasm for the finished product. Because *THE AVENGERS* had a good track record, everyone seemed proud to be working on the new series.

In Pinewood's plush screening theater, composer Laurie Johnson and assistant Paul Clay worked on "spotting sessions"—watching an episode's rough cut to make notes about where it would need music, how long it should last, the tone of the scene, where the music would start and end, and so forth.

After the spotting sessions, Johnson had about four days to write 20 minutes of original music for each hour-long program. Then, in a four-hour recording session at Denham Sound Studios, he would conduct 20 musicians while watching the scenes on a theater screen.

The job of the music is "to help drop the Avengers characters into the Avengers world" as quickly as possible, explained Johnson. "If people notice the music, we weren't doing our job."

Other crew members felt that they treated *THE NEW AVENGERS* more like a motion picture rather than just a television series. Most television series simply recycle the same background music week after week. But original music was scripted for each episode of *THE NEW AVENGERS*.

Producer/writer Brian Clemens said that the writing and the editing stages were the most important parts of production. In fa-



The new crime-fighting triumvirate at headquarters. Though tailored for the U.S. market, the new series failed to make a prime-time sale and was later picked up for late night airings by CBS.

...e films, of course, the director serves as a major creative force and generally has more say in the editing stage than the producer. ...t because different directors are used for different episodes of a television series, it's the producer who needs to have overriding creative control to make sure there's a consistency among the episodes. ...Dubbing editor Peter Lennard put in the sound effects. Having worked on the old *Emma Peel* and "Tara King" series, he explained that Albert Fennell spent "more time with the final cut than most producers. As producer, Fennell was the one to write the scenes. And while he sometimes wanted things changed, "almost always his suggestions were valid," said Lennard. ...Some sound effects were lifted from the thousands stored on audio tapes in Lennard's library. But others were recorded live. In the final dubbing studios, he demonstrated how footstep ladies "added the sound of footsteps to scenes, but also were responsible for providing all kinds of other sound effects to the episode. For this chore he usually hiredancers "because they're good at timing" and at moving their bodies precisely. (As much as 60% of the background sounds

heard in most films are dubbed in, including the actor's footsteps as they walk in or out of rooms, race across concrete parking lots, or stumble through the underbrush of a forest.) In the dubbing studio there were doors outfitted with half-a-dozen locks, knobs, bolts, and chains. There was also a closet full of shoes, bells, bottles, belts, hammers, wine glasses, umbrellas, bows and arrows, telephones, and other noise-makers.

In the darkened theater, one or two women stood in front of a microphone and watched a brief loop of film over and over while trying to mimic the actors' motions in order to create the subtle sound effects needed to bring each scene to life.

For their specialty, footsteps, they'd put on men's or women's shoes and walk or run "in place" on appropriate surfaces—switching from bags of dried leaves or straw, to slate, to dirt, to gravel as they watched the actor race across a varied landscape up on the screen. It took them about two days to put in the sound effects for a single episode.

But what made *THE NEW AVENGERS* and other British productions different from American television programs? For one thing, American sound tracks on TV series

are "cleaner" and have less realistic sound. For example, as a woman walks across the room you may hear the swishing of her dress "dabbed in" on a British program but not on an American show.

Film cutter Bob Dearberg observed that "The quality of *THE NEW AVENGERS* is somewhere between that of a television production and a feature film. They spend a little more time with it than many series do" perhaps because they were planning for extensive international distribution, he explained.

killed. There's an attempt to drug Steed and, while he's sleeping, the late-Jenny's three telepathic colleagues combine their powers in an effort to pry Steed secrets from Steed's mind.

Early in this episode, there's a reference to Honor Blackman's role in *GOLDFINGER*. Receiving a Christmas card reading: "Best wishes from future, Cathy," Steed exclaims, "Mrs. Gule. Oh how nice of her to remember me. What can she be doing in Fort Knox?" As with many episodes, this one includes veiled sexual references: Bouncing on his canopy bed, Mrs. Peel tells Steed, "You know, I've always rather fancied myself in one of these." "So have I," replies Steed.

"I give you the Queen of Sin, Mrs. Peel. She is yours to do with what you will."

—John Cartney, President of the Hell Fire Club

A TOUCH OF BRISTOLNESS *****

1966, B&W film series. Written by Brian Clemens. Directed by James Hill.

Dignitaries are being humiliated by a series of publicly-staged practical jokes: exploding cigars, whoopie cushions, mooring powder, plastic spiders, and toilet-visit chairs. But things turn deadly serious when a ribbon-cutting ceremony is sabotaged so that a high-ranking official falls victim not to rubber snakes, but to a fatal electrical shock. There is a suspect: the floorless John Cartney (Peter Wyndham). While soliciting a donation for a home for wayward girls, Mrs. Peel resists Cartney's sexual advances, though she does find him "handsome, dynamic, and interesting." Cartney invites Mrs. Peel to be his guest at his secret Hell Fire Club, the re-creation of an 18th century organization. The death of a gull-ridden gasoliner-turned-airliner also prompts Steed to apply for entrance into the club. It means, not period costumes, debauchery, boxing matches, and head-oners are just surface traits of the club; its real goal is to topple the government.

With its overt sexuality and kinky imagery, this classic episode pushed "The Avengers" well beyond the rather tame standards of acceptability during the '60s. Few will forget the image of Mrs. Peel being whipped by Cartney, or her entrance as the Queen of Sin, dressed in black around her neck, spiked collar, and a snake wrapped across her arm.



Diana Rigg as Mrs. Peel, playing the Queen of Sin in "A Touch of Bristolness," a celebrated episode that exceeded the standards of decency at the time.

"You see, Mrs. Peel, the mind of a machine does not reason. Therefore it can't lose its reason. That is the machine's ultimate superiority. Its mind has no breaking point. But your mind... when the experiment is concluded, the machine will continue to function perfectly. But you, Mrs. Peel, you will be quite, quite mad."

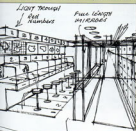
—Professor Keller

THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT *****

1966, B&W film series. Written by Brian Clemens. Directed by Don Lewis.

While inspecting an isolated manor house left

Production designer Epi Galm's sketch of the radio-filing room in "Catch a Rat," shown above, feature film production values.



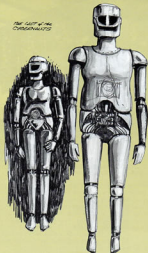
to her by Uncle Jack, Mrs. Peel becomes the intended mouse in an electronic mouse trap. In addition to defending herself against an escaped prisoner (and fellow inmate) who's been driven mad, Mrs. Peel must keep her wits as the mouse house scavengers itself into an elaborate, computerized "fun house" complete with music boxes, mirrors, tigers, and a giant, spinning "radiometer"—all part of a vengeful legacy intended to drive her insane.

More than any other episode, this one helps define the character of Mrs. Peel. An exhibition dedicated to "The late Emma Peel" offers a glimpse of her early childhood and her former life as Emma Knight, when she took the helm of her father's industry and dismissed automation enthusiasts, Professor Keller (Michael Goodfellow). And the storyline demonstrates her use of intellect and reasoning abilities to maintain sanity and to devise an escape from her computerized nightmare.

Typically AVENGERS in style, the story contrasts the charm of the old manor house and its historical artifacts with the cold, op-art, futuristic settings meant to throw Emma off-balance so that she'll surrender herself to the suicide box. Creative cinematography, minimalist music, and a judicious use of sound-effects help to expand the imagination in this meticulously designed production for the black-and-white medium.

This episode, depicting a strong woman, no-quit-alone, trapped in a strange and threatening environment, is writer Brian Clemens' favorite.

THE GIFT of the CYBERNETICS



Production designer Syd Cain's robot design sketch for THE NEW AVENGERS episode "Return of the Cybernauts," a sequel to two of the original series' most popular shows.

Paul Clay had worked on the old series with Laurie Johnson. ON THE NEW AVENGERS he also served as post-production supervisor.

Clay explained some of the post-production problems created by international distribution. In England, films shown on television are projected at 25 frames-per-second instead of 24 frames-per-second. Unfortunately, speeding up the film four percent raised the pitch on the sound track and made the music on THE NEW AVENGERS more "tinny sounding." That bothered composer Laurie Johnson, but there was nothing to be done about it. Other countries heard the program the way it was meant to be.

Another technical problem was that the sound studios at Pinewood were being used primarily to produce and mix the sound for feature films. That meant that THE NEW AVENGERS might sound great over the elaborate sound systems in the preview theater, but could end up sounding awful when finally heard at home. The little speakers built into home television sets couldn't handle the lower frequencies. Clay worked with the sound technicians on a formula for mixing the sound so that it would sound good on TV (but not necessarily as good in a big theater).

Clay liked to view the rough-cuts of each episode on a Steenbeck flat-bed editor. That

saved lots of expensive theater time but also, the little screen on the Steenbeck is closer to the size of a tv screen and "seeing things in the theater can be misleading."

Because THE NEW AVENGERS was made for American prime-time TV, the post-production crew was careful to make each episode exactly 52 minutes, 39 seconds: the network prime-time requirement at the time. Ironically, the U.S. was one of the few countries that didn't buy the series early on. By the time a finished print finally went out the door, someone from post-production or from the marketing office had seen an episode about eight times.

THE NEW AVENGERS had already begun showing in England by 1976. Unfortunately, its impact was diluted because the network wasn't running it on the same night throughout the country. Paul Clay said the first few episodes were not well received by the British public: "They had apparently forgot that it was fantasy," he speculated. "They've been so used to KOJAK and other detective shows that they didn't remember how to relate to THE AVENGERS."

Clay said people talked about how silly it was that in "Eagle's Nest" (the first episode) they had discovered another Scottish isle. But after a few episodes it became more apparent that it was fantasy and people warmed up to the series.

But very early on, THE NEW AVENGERS was a big hit in South Africa and Joanna Lamsley was suddenly the third most popular tv personality there—after Carol Burnett and Bob Newhart. Unfortunately, while THE NEW AVENGERS did well in the rest of the world, American prime time viewers never saw THE NEW AVENGERS. Fennell and Clemens fell victim to poor timing.

Under pressure at the time to tone down programs like STARKY AND HUTCH, the networks claimed THE NEW AVENGERS was "too violent." Bob Norris, who handled the marketing, explained that since ABC had run the original AVENGERS film series, it was the logical network to air the new series. Unfortunately, that year ABC was already doing great in the ratings and didn't see any reason to take a chance on a new series.

NBC? They didn't want a "warmed over" program which used to be aired by their competition. CBS eventually picked up THE NEW AVENGERS for late night programming in some of its markets. □



Drawing an "X" on the plexiglass, Peel uses her intelligence as a weapon in a war on her sanity in "The House That Jack Built."

"I loved you, you know. You knew I had a plane to catch. You and that man Steed, you betrayed me."

—Fredderick

THE JOKER

1967. Color film series. Written by Brian Clemens. Directed by Sidney Hayers.

After her article on "Better Bridge with Applied Mathematics" secures an invitation to spend the weekend at the estate of a famous international bridge player, Emma takes the bait and is lured into a death trap. Steed, conveniently incapacitated after tripping on a wire strung across his stairs, later discovers that the elderly bridge player is actually abroad; the house empty.

At the isolated estate, Emma is welcomed by Ola (Sally Newby), who claims to be the niece of the host and says he's been called away. A staged phone call gives Ola an excuse to go into the village: "You won't like it here, all alone," she warns Mrs. Peel. But, of course, that's the problem: she isn't all alone.

Reminiscent of "The House That Jack Built" (also penned by Clemens), this episode shares several motifs: women lured to an isolated house; assistance to a crazed stranger who becomes an unwitting victim; and, to challenge Emma's intellect, a variety of puzzling events staged by a compulsive and vengeful individual who felt betrayed.