



B Y D A V E M A T T H E W S

Although the original 1960s series *The Avengers* is already supported by several Internet sites and paper publications, a brief outline of the series' final years will provide a little background to the making of *The New Avengers*.

As is well known, *The Avengers'* mix of witty scripts, outrageous plots, megalomaniac characters, high production values and, of course, the eternally-popular characters of John Steed, Cathy Gale, Emma Peel and Tara King proved a spectacular international success, with perhaps only *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* matching its popularity across the world – the production

qualities applied to *The Avengers* easily outshining the often humdrum offerings from Lew Grade's ITC. (*The Champions*, the nearest ITC came to *The Avengers* format, though quite enjoyable, lacked much of the humour – and budget – of contemporary Avengers episodes.)

ABC-TV (later to become Thames Television), who funded *The Avengers*, wanted to break into the lucrative American market. Whilst this had always been a goal for ITC, who often used American actors in lead parts in an attempt to lure US viewers (and finance) the Grade company never really cracked it

until *Danger Man* (*Secret Agent* in the US) and, of course, later down the line, *The Prisoner*. *The Avengers*, however, pretty much achieved instant popularity in the States, mainly because the last thing the American buyers wanted (and *The Avengers* production team were loath to produce) – shades of Americana, *The Avengers* remaining 'British' through-and-through. This staunch anglocentricity is, I suspect, one of the reasons why Americans bought it, watched it and enjoyed it – their curious view of the 'batty' British way of life. The show achieved such marked popularity that it became the first Brit programme to be

- 19 Dec 77 *Dirty by the Dawn*
 9 Jan 77 *Targit*
 6 Mar 77 *Gnaws*
 13 Mar 77 *Paces*
 20 Mar 77 *no episode shown*
 27 Mar 77 *The Tale of the Big Why*

One point of interest I can vouch for is that due to a thunder storm, affecting the HTV Moel-y-Pare transmitter on 17 Oct 77, 'The Eagle's Nest' was not actually shown! You can imagine my disappointment, as I had hoped to see this new show five days ahead of the rest of the UK. In fact, if my information is correct, the episode of HTV West Wales didn't get to see 'The Eagle's Nest' until Sunday 5th April 1981.

Much as I would like to have it, I'm afraid I don't have a listing for the second season on HTV but I can confirm that each episode was trimmed by about fifteen seconds on first showing.

Have's book *The Ultimate Avengers* provides us with the production order chronology of *The New Avengers*. Is there any chance we could have the actual dates for the start and finish of the making of each episode?

B - Here are some sundry notes of interest to keep in mind during future screenings of the Avengers, old and new:

Both, 'Forward Base' and 'Emily' carry the credit 'produced by Hugh Marlow and Jim Hanley' (not Marlow and Handley as stated in *The Ultimate Avengers*). 'Complex' carried the Fennell/Clemens credit throughout screenings during the '80s, but the most recent prints now acknowledge Hugh Marlow and Ross Mclean as the producers.

Extra Emma

'K is for Kill' (part one) is memorable for containing a couple of clips of Emma Peel, but from where did they originate? Dave's books tell us that it was unused film footage, whilst Cornell, Day and Topping in their *The Avengers Dossier* say: 'Footage of Diana Rigg from *The Winged Avenger* and *'From Venus With Love'* was used.' My verdict: The scenes come from *'The Winged Avenger'* and *'The Hidden Tiger'*, respectively. Logie suggests that Diana Rigg must have visited the studios at Pinewood to do the voice-over for the telephone scenes. It's a wonder she didn't consent to do the filmed inserts in person and take a credit as guest star. I also doubt that the scenes with Steed telephoning Emma - complete with the Bentley in the background - are "unused" '60s footage. Patrick Maene stands with his back to the camera throughout, obviously to hide the passing of age. I am of the opinion that these scenes were shot for 'K is for Kill' in 1977.²

The book *The Avengers Dossier* uncovers several, previously uncredited members of *The New Avengers* cast. For example, in *'The Eagle's Nest'* we find: Sammie Winmill as 'Molly'; Maggy Maxwell as 'Dowager' and Raymond Mason as 'man with suitcase'. 'Molly' is probably the young woman seen polishing glasses behind the bar of the inn; glimpsed moments before Steed's imminent arrival on the island. The 'man with suitcase' is likely to be the henchman seen rifling

Steed's belongings. I thought I knew 'The Eagle's Nest' inside-out, but I'm not sure where the 'Dowager' fits in!

Another noncredit, that persists, is Analka Dubinska as 'pretty girl' in 'Gnaws'. Other than Purdey no other female appears in that episode!

Matty years ago I saw a photo of Purdey fighting a bald headed man with a droopy moustache, in what looked like a quarry for a background. Purdey's clothing and the balding, moustacheed man suggested a scene from 'Hostage.' Yet, the implied location doesn't appear in the finished episode. Could it be that scenes were shot and then later edited out, perhaps to prevent over-running?

Another (possible) alteration to the script during filming is to be found in 'Paces'. Having put pay to the villain wielding a bow and arrow, Purdey finds on his person a piece of card. Watch carefully as she removes it from his pocket. As the light shines on the card we can see through it and for a split second it becomes evident that she is actually holding a photograph of herself. Then the camera

...I saw a photo of Purdey fighting a bald headed man with a droopy moustache...

takes a different close-up angle and the photo has mysteriously changed to a card reading 'Mission for the Dressed and Needy.' This change of prop could indicate a radical turn-around in the storyline. In fact, according to *The Avengers Dossier*, Brian Clemens commenced writing the script, hit writers block half way through and handed the story over to Dennis Spooner to complete.

New Alternatives?

Perhaps if the facts could be laid bare we might find that there were all kinds of alternative ideas in preparation for *The New Avengers*. With the Canadian episodes, for instance, there was press talk about a Toronto Star delivery van with 'human characteristics' and locations such as Niagara Falls providing the scenery. Of course neither of these elements came to pass.⁴

Last minute script changes were definitely in evidence during the Rigg and Thorson seasons. According to the credits, Penelope Keith plays 'Nanny Brown' in 'Something Nasty in the Nursery'. Has anyone ever spotted her in this episode? No doubt the same cutting room fate befell actor David Lodge, (remember him as the policeman in 'Epic'). He was credited as 'Maskel' in the episode 'Fog', yet he is nowhere to be seen!⁵

Finally a cut of the most unkind kind, concerning 'Fog'. We were led to believe that Lamiere had rejuvenated the prints 100% intact. The C4 print however, has a cut of about 20 seconds, during the final scene between Steed and the dying 'President' (Nigel Green). Is this sequence now lost forever or were Channel 4 solely responsible for the cut?

I hope the above is of some use to you, and my quest to learn the facts about the Granada schedules will be forthcoming.

I wish you and your team success with all future issues of *Stay Tuned*. It's a favourite magazine of mine.

Dave Says...

- I'm working on this. Have been for quite some time. Trouble is, MRJ's production records are spread thinly between two locations and where the twain shall meet. I do have some production dates. To make you privy to these until I locate unquestionable details for all 26 episodes would only serve to complicate matters.
- The footage of Diana Rigg may well have originated from existing footage (shot for the episodes mentioned by Cornell, Day & Topping - or indeed, your suggestions). Twenty years-plus down the line, I guess we'll never know the answer. Logie is all very well but - Diana Rigg did NOT visit the studio to do the voice-over for the telephone scenes (at least, her name does not appear on any production info I've laid eyes on - as it MUST have done had she condescended to do the dialogue). An impressionist, perhaps? Someone who captured Rigg's voice to a T. It's a possibility - but I can't give you a definitive answer. As for Steed and the Bentley: Yes, indeed. The material was filmed in the Seventies.
- The names listed in *The Avengers Dossier* are (I suggest) the result of some keen-eyed observation on the authors' part. 'The Dowager' character remains a mystery.
- The pic is almost certainly from 'Hostage' and was no doubt edited from the episode for the reason you give.
- The Niagara Falls sequence WAS scripted. But permission to film this was (I understand) refused by the authorities. (Shame, really. They might have asked the Canadian director to double for Gambit when he took the plunge over the Falls - thereby saving us from further misery!)
- Fact. Penelope Keith did two days work on the episode (as a nanny). David Lodge visited the studio on three occasions during the filming of 'Fog'. Both sequences were left on the cutting room floor.
- Certainly the master-elements processed by Lamiere were (are) 100% intact, as governed by the original negatives. So, yes. Channel 4 might well have trimmed this for reasons best known to themselves.



awarded a Primetime slot in the US.

The American television network ABC (no relation to the UK company) were happy to inject considerable funds into the show, leading to a move into colour and all-round more expensive (though not always better) production values. As a consequence, the programme became somewhat dependant on American support which, some say, eventually led to its downfall.

Emma Peel becoming a national status symbol (not to mention another kind of symbol, of course!) but popularity has its downside. Finding filming the series physically demanding (often working over twelve hours a day) she was uncomfortable with the public attention. Patrick Macnee begged her to stay, but she had made up her mind and left after the end of the first colour season. Most people believed that things would never be the same again.

Shocked by her decision, the producers mounted a search to find a

replacement - a decision compounded when Thames Television (now holding a 51% stake in ABC-TV) expressed concern over the direction the colour series had taken. In their view, the show had become too extreme. (My own feelings are that the show had also started to become rather formulaic - too many episodes involving a scientist creating some cunning new weapon and using it to wipe out his enemies or competitors. *The Avengers* would then step in and find themselves subjected to the weapon though they always escaped, of course!)

Arguments between Thames and series producers Brian Clemens and Albert Fennell led to their dismissal and John Bryce, formerly a script editor-cum-producer on the videotaped series, was brought in to replace them. Quite why he agreed to cast Linda Thorson, a 21-year-old Canadian with no professional acting experience whatsoever, is something that has never been fully explained.

Filming of the sixth season began under Bryce - and soon ran into difficulties. His lack of knowledge of that precise, magical *Avengers* formula spurred two aborted episodes before Clemens and Fennell were humbly invited back. Aghast at the choice of Thorson, it was a decision Clemens was stuck with - there was simply no time to recast.

OUT WITH THE OLD

And it would seem that Linda was one of the reasons that this was to be the final *Avengers* season. UK and US reception of the new character was, shall we say, mixed. It was also felt that the overall quality of the stories was slipping. Certainly much of the subtlety in the wit was replaced by rather laboured 'comedy'. Ratings declined and due to unfortunate programme scheduling in the US *The Avengers* found itself battling against the hugely popular *Martin and Rowan's Laugh-In*. Even back then the US television industry

was all about ratings and ABC soon informed Thames Television that they would not be seeking further Avengers episodes after the current run of 33.

I think a lot of what has been said about the final season of *The Avengers* is quite unfair and/or inaccurate. It is true that the attempts at comedic banter were often unwelcome but many of the stories themselves held up very well against (and in some cases bettered) those from the Diana Rigg seasons. As to Linda herself, she has come in for much flak over the years. Considering her lack of experience at the time, I think that once settled in, she did amazingly well. (I suspect people are all too quick to compare her character to that of her 'irreplaceable' predecessor when in fact it was the studio's wish that Tara King should be vastly dissimilar to Mrs Peel.)

With American financial support stripped away and Thames unable to provide additional funds to keep the show in production, the announcement came that *The Avengers* would cease at the end of the current run.

Clemens and Fennell were having none of it. Far-thinking, they left the door open by filming a tag-on scene for the final episode 'Bizarre', one in which Steed and Tara accidentally launch themselves into space in a home-made rocket, leaving their boss, Mother, on the ground to announce, rather optimistically, 'They'll be back.'

FROM STUDIO TO STAGE

But it wasn't to be, at least, not for some time — and not on television.

In 1971 actor Leslie Phillips directed a West End version of the show. Pat Macnee was asked to revive his role but turned it down, considering *The Avengers* as unsuitable for adaptation to the stage. Simon Oates (best known for his role as Dr John Ridge in the BBC's apocalyptic *Doomwatch* series) took on the role of Steed with Sue Lloyd co-starring as his partner Hannah Wilde. The story, written by Terence Feely and Brian Clemens, concerned one Madame Gerda (Kate O'Mara) and her gang of leather-clad female students who use their Giant Computer Brain to invent a method of rendering themselves invisible

while they infiltrate the country's spy network. Hmmm..... maybe not such an original idea but one more suitable perhaps to the limitations of a theatre stage. The lavish detail of the show — which included the use of a helicopter and Bentley car — led to numerous production and prop problems and the show folded after six weeks. Most agreed it was just too ambitious for its own good.

REVIVAL

Whatever the viewers in England and America thought of Linda Thorson (true to say, most liked her performance) the French obviously took her to their hearts — the show being repeated in France seemingly without a break since it first aired (and is still being broadcast today).

Small wonder that in 1975 French TV producer Rudolf Roffi acquired the services of Linda and Pat Macnee to make a TV commercial for a brand of champagne. During filming, Roffi, a fan of the show for many years, asked Patrick whether he would consider doing another series. Expressing his view that although undoubtedly popular, a remake could never recapture the special qualities of the original, Roffi next approached Brian Clemens, who explained that, although he would like to do another series, he just couldn't get the financial backing. Roffi went away....

.... and barely a fortnight later contacted Clemens again with a deal worth £2 million. This sudden offer spurred Clemens into action and within just three months he and Albert Fennell teamed up with Avengers music composer Laurie Johnson to form Avengers (Film & TV) Enterprises Ltd, the first entirely independent television company in the UK. In association with the Paris-based IDTV, plans were drawn up to bring John Steed back to television in twenty-six new 50-minute episodes under the title *The New Avengers*. £2 million was a huge amount of money to spend on a TV series in 1976, in the end the production would actually cost nearer £4.5 million!

But of course, this all depended on Patrick Macnee's agreement. Without him, said Clemens, the show had no future! Quite right, too! Despite this being *The New Avengers*, Clemens understandably felt the series should — must —

acknowledge its roots. After examining a few proposed scripts Patrick changed his mind and declared his enthusiasm for the project.

TRIUMVERATE

One fundamental change with the new show was that *The Avengers*, previously two, would now be a threesome. Auditions were held in late January 1976, and Gareth Hunt was chosen to take the part of Mike Gambit. (Arguments have raged that there should never have been a third member. But Clemens felt that there should be a younger man to do Steed's 'legwork'. Seven years older, Patrick was suffering slight arthritis in his knees (noticeable in fact during the final two Avengers seasons, when an all too obvious stunt double was regularly used as Steed.)

The most difficult task when casting *The Avengers* series had always been that of finding the right female player. Hundreds of actresses applied for the much-coveted role of Charly (as Purdey was originally known) before, after dozens of screen-tests and much deliberation, Clemens and Fennell plumped for Joanna Lumley. Though Clemens subsequently admitted that he had wanted Joanna right from the start, this appears to fly in face of the fact that Joanna has stated on more than one occasion that, although she was not only desperate to get the part and always firmly believed she was the right choice, she never believed the producers would actually opt for her ('I really had to fight just to get an audition — they just refused to see me!' she told the media.) Whatever. It is now universally agreed that she was exactly the right choice! (And Charly? With a perfume of the same name on the market at the time, an alternative name was sought, Joanna herself coming up with 'Purdey' — after the world-renowned shotgun.)

At the time neither Lumley nor Hunt were established stars. Joanna, a 29-year-old ex-model, had appeared in a blink-and-you-will-miss-me part in the 1969 James Bond film *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (which, coincidentally, co-starred Diana Rigg), had done a short run in *Coronation Street* (as Ken Barlow's girlfriend) and had made the occasional appearance on the excruciating gameshow *Call My*

Bluff. Thirty-five year-old Gareth Hunt was still fairly new to television, having previously been seen in the *Doctor Who* story 'Planet of the Spiders' and as Frederick the footman in the final season of *Upstairs Downstairs*. Gareth, too, once said that he was surprised to have been awarded *The Avengers* role when 'Actors like Patrick Mower were in with a very good chance.' If it's true that Mower applied for the part, I'm surprised he didn't win it. With respect to Gareth, 'heart-throb' Mower was an established actor at the time and very popular with female viewers, so he seemed like a natural choice. (According to documents recently released by Brian Clemens, Mower doesn't appear to have attended an audition.)

A matter of interest here, is a list of the other actors and actresses who were given strong consideration for the roles: Tommy Boyle, Ian Charleson, Lewis Collins, Sara Douglas, Gabrielle Drake, Michael Elphick, Jan Francis, Prunella Gee, Lisa Harrow, Jan Harvey, Louise Jameson, Barbara Kellerman, Rula Lenska, John Nettles, Diane Quick, Carolyn Seymour, Malcolm Stoddard and Diana Weston. (Fans of the old series would, of course, have loved to have seen either Honor Blackman or Diana Rigg return to the show. Brian considered both of them to be too old - and it's extremely doubtful that Diana would have wanted to reprise her role, anyway.)

As the younger stars were expected to handle all the rough-and-tumble, both Joanna and Gareth were put through gruelling physical training exercises prior to filming (a fate that befell Lewis Collins and Martin Shaw when they agreed to play Bodie and Doyle in *The Professionals*. - Clemens/Fennell heroes being, always, at a peak of physical perfection!)

In traditional Avengers style the girl was to develop an efficient, nimble fighting technique. In Joanna's case this was to take on the form of balletic, but devastating, high-kicking actions - Joanna's stint as a ballerina coming in helpful here (as well as being written into the script.) Gambit was, natch, a martial arts expert. Incidentally, the stars themselves did all but the most dangerous action shots in the series - stunts such as rolling cars over, riding motorcycles at high speed

and high falls being left to professionals such as Cyd Child (who had previously doubled for Diana Rigg and Linda Thorson) and Joe Dunne and his stunt team. (This worked wonderfully well. When doubles were used, it was very difficult to see the 'joins'.)

The other immediately noticeable change was the show's title theme. Although opening with the familiar bouncy kettle drums and brass chords from the old series, this soon gave way to a more modern-sounding, punchy military-like beat orchestration, the result being a very catchy (perhaps quasi-disco?) theme. Much of the incidental themes Laurie Johnson composed for the show were equally memorable, always capturing the quirky and/or dynamism of the situations.

NEW AVENGERS - NEW FORMAT

Alongside the fact that there were now three players, Brian decided to make changes to the format of the actual stories - and thereby incurred the wrath of the fans of the old series who instantly felt alienated by the new show. Whereas the old series had been very much rooted in fantasy, this time there would be at least a hint of believability and 'gritiness' to the situations. Yet, as we shall see, *The New Avengers* retained many of the magical elements that had made its ancestor so popular, my opinion being that the humour - much of it made up from the witty one-liners or banter between Gambit and Purdey - and visual gags were much more successful this time round. And, by continuing in the tradition of the best episodes of the original series, the audience still didn't quite know who Steed and Co. were actually working for ... Avenging if you like.

Pre-production work got under way in January 1976. Pretty much in sole charge at the time, Clemens and Albert Fennell issued a document detailing precise guidelines on how stories should work (though, in fact, it was Clemens himself who would write most of the episodes, veterans Dennis Spooner and Terence Feely being among the other main contributors) and how the show should be filmed. Top of the list were stories with pace and good use of outdoor locations (early Avengers stories had been pretty much

studio-bound). In terms of actual filming, episodes were to have crisp, sharp editing (to reinforce the impression of pacyness) and absolute minimum use of extras. There was a suggestion that although Steed should remain as before, it would be interesting to explore his character further.

One of the biggest talking points about the Blackman and Rigg episodes had been the women's clothes. As is well-known, both these characters had shown a preference for leather gear - though as this proved impractical, later seasons had adopted mini-skirts and designer tops. This time round the lack of any innovative fashions was perhaps a disappointment. Although Joanna Lumley often wore some very attractive outfits (many of which were quite out of character for the 1970's!) and Steed retained his familiar Edwardian garb, Gambit was usually blighted with regulation brown flared suits. Unlike its predecessor, *The New Avengers* didn't have its eye set on fashion catwalks - a major factor being that costume-designer Catherine Buckley had been employed to fashion Purdey's clothes but just didn't have the resources to come up with four new outfits a week. (Of major concern to the French backers, we'll come back to this issue.)

CHARACTERISATION

In previous seasons of *The Avengers*, Steed's female partners each had their own individual characteristics and personalities. Joanna Lumley's Purdey was an amalgamation of the best elements of her predecessors. Her character had the sophistication of Cathy Gale; allure, athleticism, humour and venom of Emma Peel, yet also the softness, vulnerability and femininity of Tara King. Basically Purdey was an incredible creation and one which Joanna settled into from episode one.

The original idea was that Purdey was actually Steed's niece, though this was dropped at the early scriptwriting stages.

Gambit, on the other hand, remained much more of a mystery, bits and pieces of his background being dropped piecemeal throughout the series. Before joining Steed and Purdey he had been a Major in the Paras and had had a short-lived career as a racing driver. He now



resided in a high-tech, fully automated apartment in London decorated in ultra-modern (for the times) furnishings. A very tough but usually quiet man, Gambit enjoyed a good rapport with Steed and even more so with Purdey — whom he fancied! But there was something unfathomable about Gambit, something deeper that the viewer couldn't quite penetrate. Indeed, it could be argued that his character was rather curtailed in order to allow that of Purdey's more 'breathing space'.

As one would expect, Steed remained pretty much as before, though this time he had mellowed, become much less jocular (the wittiest lines usually being given to Purdey and Gambit). Although usually assuming seniority to the other two and delegating tasks to them, he respected and appreciated their skills and treated them as equal to himself.

STAR CARS

As with the old series, vehicles were to play an important role in the New. Although Steed retained his cherished Bentley, it was rarely seen

during the series (being safely stored in his garage). He now preferred more modern transport for tackling the villains of the new decade. He had acquired a Range Rover and, perhaps as a direct replacement for the Bentley, a beautiful hand-made sports Jaguar replete with flared (what else?!) wheel-arches and finished in British Racing Green. A truly gorgeous machine (but, in practice, a real brute to drive, as Pat and the production team soon discovered!) allegedly capable of nearly 200mph.

As Clemens and Fennell desired to uphold a British flavour, they had approached car giant British Leyland which, at the time, was controlling many of Britain's greatest motoring names: Jaguar, Rover, Triumph, MG, Austin, Morris, Wolseley to name a few. Another superb creation (on paper, at least) due for imminent launch was the Rover SD1 and BL were keen to lend the show a pre-production model for Steed's use.

Gambit owned a Range Rover but was more often seen in his sporting Jaguar XJS — for no other reason perhaps that it was easier to do hand-brake turns? (Both vehicles are still

in production today, albeit in slightly different forms). Purdey also enjoyed sports cars and initially used an MGB but later switched to a Triumph TR7.

As most UK readers know, British Leyland's reign had a devastating effect on all its 'children' companies and low morale and stupid in-fighting within the conglomerate often led to shoddy build and poor reliability. The Rover SD1 was a prime example of this (in fact even when this model came to the end of its run in 1986, Rover still hadn't got it sorted out!) and *The Avengers* team found that the one loaned to them often broke down, hence its very few appearances in the show. Similar problems also afflicted Gambit's Jaguar XJS (two of which were used during filming — each acting as a 'back-up' for the other!)

MAD MONKS AND NEO-NAZIS

Filming commenced in April 1976, with the sensational *The Eagle's Nest* which concerned a group of neo-Nazi posing as monks on a remote Scottish island — their ambition to revive Hitler. It can't be argued that this was classic

Avengers material – megalomaniacs, eccentric characters, strange locations, tongue-in-cheek humour, and as special guest star, Avengers-favourite, Peter Cushing. The first episode to be transmitted (in October 1976), most critics agreed that this opener was just as good as the original show and were, ironically, relieved that little seemed to have changed.

BAD TIMING

However, right from the start there were problems. Firstly, being an independent company, Avengers Film & TV had no influence over the day and time *The New Avengers* would be shown on the ITV network.

Ideally, of course, this would have been a Friday or Saturday evening at around 9pm. In the event, however, the various ITV regional companies could not agree on a common timeslot. So, depending on your own TV region, *The New Avengers* appeared on Tuesdays, Fridays or Sundays at either 7-30, 8-00 or 8-30 pm. Even after a particular TV company had chosen a slot, it was often changed mid-season! The early times and lack of network screening certainly resulted in *The New Avengers* never achieving the ratings it deserved.

FRENCH FARCE

There were also problems within the production company itself. IDTV and Avengers Film & TV seemed constantly at odds with each other over the style and direction the show was taking, the French insisting that Purdey's clothes should be of their own design, while Clemens was adamant (and correct, I believe) in upholding a firmly British flavour.

(Without evidence being submitted to the contrary) is said that the dispute led to the French backers withholding some funds. Indeed, some people (both performers and staff) have claimed over the years that they never got paid for the work they did on the show. Brian

Clemens once memorably described the French backers as 'a load of crooks. – I'd love them to sue me for saying that – they owe me a lot of money!' He claims to have lost £70,000 – a terrific amount in 1976.

THE NEW AVENGERS

One immediately noticeable effect of the lack of finance was that the idea of having a famous guest star in each episode soon fell by the wayside.

STEED STEPS BACK

On top of all this Pat Macnee felt that he was being pushed into the background as far as the scripts were concerned. Personally I don't believe that this was the case. Seeing as there were now three players instead of two, naturally 'Steed's' screen-time would be reduced – but his role was still substantial. This time, of course, he didn't always get to do too much of the 'meatier' stuff and was often witnessed delegating the action to Gambit (at least in the first thirteen shows.) But watch 'The Eagle's Nest'. He actually gets more screen-time than Gareth. This is not to imply that there was animosity between the two actors. All three got on very well – and remain friends to this day. Patrick discussed his feelings with Brian Clemens. Steed's role was beefed up. Patrick was (for the moment) happy.

Despite the tension, the thirteen episodes produced for the first season were, on the whole, excellent – a highlight being 'Last of the Cybernauts...?' a third outing for the metal monsters from the old series.

This time, however, the concept was advanced further with a man (played by Robert Lang) was given cybernetic limbs to replace ones he had lost during a previous encounter with our heroes. Now with his terrifying strength he is determined to avenge himself!

Other highlights included 'Target' in which a training ground for agents used target dummies which fired back! Though the targets are normally armed merely with ink pellets, enemy agent Draker (an intense but dry performance from Keith Barron) decides to sabotage the course using Curare-dipped pellets.

'Faces' was a clever, though a little too far-fetched, story concerning government agents being replaced by doppelgangers.

'Sleepers' was a rare foray into 'street-level' crime for *The Avengers*. A new form of sleeping gas is stolen and dispersed over London, allowing a gang to go on a bank-busting spree, while the City helplessly sleeps.

The final first-season story 'Dirtier by the Dozen' saw a terrific performance by actor John Castle as a mad commando leader deciding to lead his bored men into a war which they themselves have started (for financial gain, of course).

There were duffers, though. 'To Catch a Rat' had Ian Hendry return to *The Avengers* after fifteen years – but not as Dr David Keel! A disappointing episode that could have been written for any 'secret agent' series.

'Gnaws' (with its less-than-convincing giant rat) was a blatant stab at the mad-scientist creature movies, with a scientist accidentally dropping a growth serum down the sink. You can imagine the rest ... giant tomatoes inclusive!

FRENCH RESISTANCE

Overall, the series was welcomed by the critics and perhaps did better in this respect than Brian Clemens had dared hope.

With more money required, extra backing was provided by the Canadian firm Nielsen-Ferns and the triumvirate of companies embarked on a second series (again 13 episodes) in the Spring of 1977. Now the problems really came to a head. The foreign companies demanded that several episodes should be made in their own countries. Mark I was reluctant to agree to this but, the series was being financed with French and Canadian money, so Clemens and Fennell had no option but to agree.

Then came arguments over style and content. The French wanted an injection of glamour, sexuality and violence. Clemens and the cast (quite rightly) said no. However, with the prospect of the francs drying up, they did make one concession to the French – Purdey would don Parisian-influenced clothing designs in the second thirteen shows. (Bright and colourful, as one would expect, the success of these really depended on individual taste. I quite like them.)

As far as the viewers were concerned, however, the biggest apparent change this time round was the loss of a lot of the humour exhibited in the first season. The second block of episodes were (usually) darker, less light-hearted and the show leaned more heavily towards straight espionage. Despite all this the second season still managed to produce some excellent stories.

'Dead Men Are Dangerous' a tense, psychological thriller as a traitor (played with just the right amount of menace by Clive Revill) returns to England to systematically destroy Steed's being. Brian Clemens has cited this segment as being his favourite. (Mind you, he wrote it!)

'Angels of Death' concerned a health farm frequented by top Government and Military personnel. However the 'treatment' the nurses (the 'Angels') provide is actually a form of subliminal brainwashing which, when triggered later, causes the victim to go mad and die – apparently of natural causes.

'Obsession' while not one of the better stories is nevertheless interesting because of the pairing of actors Martin Shaw and Lewis Collins who, of course, went on to Clemens' next project, the hugely popular *The Professionals*. Towards the end of this segment Collins' Kil-

ner character says to Shaw's Larry Doomer 'Maybe we should work together again sometime, we're a good team.' (In fact this was a coincidence: although plans for *The Professionals* were well advanced by then, at the time Clemens was aiming to team up Jon Finch and Anthony Andrews as the 'Bisto Kids'.

The last episode to be filmed in England, 'Obsession' paved the way for a move to France. Despite a promising opening with 'The Lion and the Unicorn' – complete with a stunning car chase (originally made by Avengers Film & TV as a promotional film for the Rover SD1!) followed by a humorous interrogation of a renowned French assassin, the story rather fizzled out during the second half. 'K is for Kill' comprised two episodes, the first containing some unused footage of Diana Rigg in a flashback scene! While the plot itself is quite engaging, it struggled to fill two episodes.

Finally came the four 'disastrous' (Brian Clemens' term – he hates them!) Canadian stories.

By this time Clemens no longer had full control over the series. Involved with getting *The Professionals* up and running, he was forced to use Canadian directors, production staff and support actors.

While not as good as the previous stories, on reflection I feel that three of the four weren't as bad as Clemens makes out. We did see a return to the humour that had been largely absent from the second season.

'Complex', at first a routine story involving the threesome trying to discover the identity of a highly dangerous Russian agent, actually turned out to be anything but and was quite enjoyable. (A similar concept was later used in an episode of *The X-Files*).

'The Gladiators' found *The Avengers* on the trail of a KGB agent who was recruiting international muscle-men to enhance their strength and fighting skills with the eventual plan to smash Canada's security system literally bare-handed. Quite violent at times, this, too, was an entertaining story.

'Forward Base' is, in my opinion, the best of the four. The opening scenario showing a fisherman on Lake Ontario somewhat confused when his boat becomes grounded – on a piece of land that wasn't there

before, is typical of what we'd come to expect from Steed and Mrs Peel. Years later he is cycling across the same stretch when just as suddenly he finds himself up to his neck in water – the ground having vanished again! Add to this lots of humour (and a chase across Lake Ontario in a plastic swan!) and the story was certainly superior to much of the second season....

... But this was followed by what is surely the worst ever Avengers story. 'Emily' begins quite promisingly but quickly degenerates into one long car-chase across Canada – and includes some corny (very corny) scenes. Just dreadful, really, and all the more surprising when it was written by Avengers veteran Dennis Spooner. (The last episode to be filmed, depending on your television region 'Emily' was not necessarily the final one to be transmitted.)

Again, the season was handicapped by not being awarded a proper network showing across the UK. The slight changes in format and nature of the stories selected being two factors that seemingly lost the show many viewers.

BIG SCREEN – LITTLE SCREEN

The show fared little better in America – but was seen and noted by TV producer Quinn Martin (*The Fugitive*, *The Invaders*). Two years after *The New Avengers* had ceased production, Quinn Martin approached Clemens with a novel idea: would Clemens write a New Avengers-type pilot story for the US network? If the pilot was picked up, a series would follow. Keen to keep *The Avengers*-format alive (in some form or another), Clemens quickly came up with 'Escapade' (aka 'Avengers USA'.) But this version would not include Lumley, Hunt or even Macnee! Instead American performers Granville Van Dusen (who he?! played the equivalent of the Steed role (badly!) and Morgan Fairchild (who she?! took on a role similar to that of Purdey (badly – and without any of the saving graces of Joanna Lumley). Further, I suspect that the Americans must have tinkered around with Clemens story quite a bit: as what ended up on the television screen – an unimaginative story involving a lot of bed-hopping, a computer with a supercilious personality and secu-

rity secrets being sold off to enemy agents - is far removed from the sort of material Clemens would have written. Thankfully, perhaps, the project never got beyond the pilot, with Clemens and Martin agreeing that it just didn't have the right magic - that 'Avengers mix'.

And sad to relate, that was it. *The Avengers*, to all intents and purposes, ended there. While there have been several attempts over the years to produce further *Avengers*/New *Avengers* series, none has entered the starting gate.

During filming of the Canadian stories, Clemens remained in Britain heading up the production team on *The Professionals* - pre-production of which had been in hand BEFORE the second New *Avengers* season commenced shooting.

Gareth Hunt recalls being considered for one of the lead roles but, as mentioned earlier, production on *The Professionals* was scheduled to commence while Gareth was still in Canada.

By 1979 the worldwide success of *The Professionals* saw the powers-that-be at London Weekend Television making an offer to part-fund a third run of *The New Avengers*. (Despite the failure of the Quinn Martin effort, there was apparently still interest within the American network CBS, to finance a new 'Avengers' TV film. Joanna, Gareth and, surprisingly, Patrick Macnee all expressed their willingness to return. But given the cost and lack of outright success of the previous series, Clemens still had to find additional financial backers. No-one seemed interested. A new series, therefore, failed to appear.

1980 brought new hope. Clemens tried again. This time he had a two-



hour television film in mind (there had, of course, been abortive attempts to make an *Avengers* film in the sixties). Trouble here, insofar as the fans were concerned, though Patrick Macnee and Gareth Hunt were confirmed as having roles, the 'Purdey' character was dropped from the idea and a new female partner was being sought. (Whether Joanna had simply not wanted to be part of it, I don't know, but I wonder if this is further evidence to back Joanna's claims that Clemens had been very reluctant to use her in the TV series?) Whatever. The film itself (scripted by Clemens and long-time *Avengers* associate Dennis Spooner) was to be called 'The First *Avengers* Movie'. As ever, financial problems led to the project being abandoned before it ever got before the cameras.

The next attempt to revive the format came in 1985 when Clemens

struck a deal with the American Taft Entertainment Group to create a new TV series. This time, however, he adjudged that the show would have a better chance if it returned to the something akin to the format of the Diana Rigg era. (At the time many of her episodes were being screened across the States and the UK and were proving as popular as before.) Amazing, then, that the proposed new series (which would still retain Patrick Macnee) was awarded little interest from other American TV stations. The deal fell through.

To this day, perhaps partly due to the fact that television has become so bland, interest continues in reviving the series. In 1987 a story began to circulate that Mel Gibson was considering an offer made to him by American TV producer Jerry Weintraub (who had acquired the rights to *The Avengers* film library) to take on the role of Steed. However Gibson (himself an *Avengers* fan) immediately turned the role down, stating that the only person suited to the part was Patrick Macnee. Weintraub Entertainment went bust soon after, but Jerry Weintraub wisely retained the rights in *The Avengers* title. (Incidentally, Brian Clemens nor any of *The Avengers* 'old guard' had been approached to take part in this project - and Clemens had certainly not given his approval to the idea.)

We know now (via much publicised news) that a film version with Ralph Fiennes and Nicole Kidman snapping up the highly-coveted roles of Steed and Emma, is now in post-production. Word has it that popular UK actor Sean Bean was a contender for a while (my vote falling to Pierce Brosnan - Patrick Macnee's choice too, as it happens - but he's busy playing the other guy

of course!) True to say so much time has been allowed to pass that Patrick Macnee is now certainly too old to play Steed. Even Clemens, who still wishes to bring the show back, agrees that he would have to recast the part of John Steed. But, hey. Good news. Patrick does have a cameo in the film! (As what? Don't know - and Dave's not saying.)

AFTER THE NEW AVENGERS

After filming the Canadian episodes, the three actors went their separate ways.

Patrick returned to his home in Palm Springs, California (where he still lives today.) Over the years he has appeared in numerous films and TV shows. Notable appearances include Michael Sloan's 1983 revival of *The Man from UNCLE*: 'The 15 Years Later Affair' - replacing the late Leo G Carroll as Solo and Kuryakin's boss. (Sloan, of course, being one of a number of people to express interest in remaking *The Avengers*.) In 1985 Patrick starred in Roger Moore's final James Bond film, *A View to a Kill*. Today he remains very active in American television, his most enjoyable role coming in 1984 with the lead in the *Dallas*-spoo *Empire*. (As regards to *The Avengers*, he does seem to have been a little inconsistent over the years. As discussed earlier, he had expressed his keenness to make another season in 1979, but since then has had little positive to say about the show.) Still working, Patrick has recently guest-starred in *Nightman* (both the pilot and series), and *Diagnosis: Murder*, with Dick Van Dyke.

Joanna went on to star in the popular weird sci-fi series *Sapphire and Steel* (1979 to 1982) alongside David McCallum. Like many actors, Jo provides much support for various charities and this led her to co-present the BBC's annual *Children in Need* for several years. Television roles continued throughout the 1980's, though usually low-key. In 1993 Jennifer Saunders asked her to star in her new sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*. Right from the start this was a huge success with Jo playing Patsy Stone, an eternally-inebriated, domineering and shallow 'fashion advisor'.

Gareth has had a much more difficult time. He seems to be chiefly

remembered for his series of coffee commercials from the early 1980's and, indeed, TV appearances are extremely rare, though he has secured several minor film roles in the years since *The New Avengers*. He did return to TV in 1993 with the (dire) sitcom *Side by Side* in which he played a builder and is regularly seen playing the stooge of the host of the Carlton TV series of *An Audience With*. He now combines acting with business interests.

TAPED

The New Avengers story continued in 1994, when the small company Video Gems released several episodes of the show on video.

To celebrate this Jo and Gareth teamed up for a small press conference and were both interviewed on the *Big Breakfast*. It was hinted at that time that the two might get together again in further adventures as Purdey and Gambit but, as usual, the idea came to nothing (despite the fact that a script was commissioned and written, *Avengers* composer Laurie Johnson having a hand in the screenplay.) Video Gems only managed to release eight episodes before going bust in 1996 (with Dave among their creditors - owed ... well, I'd better not say.) French company Lumiere then took up the reins and released a further four episodes before being taken over by UGC and seeing their video operations shut down.

Over the years most of the ITV stations have played reruns of the show (often edited) at roughly five-year intervals. But, again, *The New Avengers* does not achieve a proper network showing until it switched to the BBC in 1995 when, with the strange exception of 'Obsession', the Beeb thankfully opted to show full-length episodes. (Good news for Joanna and Gareth, who commented that this was the first time they had received any repeat fees!) The Beeb showings proved quite popular, attracting an audience of around 2 million. By coincidence Channel 4 Television were rerunning the colour Diana Rigg and Linda Thorson episodes at the same time, though these were gaining just 1.5 million on average.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Talk to most fans of the old *Avengers* series and they usually

say that *The New Avengers* wasn't a patch on its forebear. In fact some of the 'old guard' try to pretend the New series never existed! Unfortunately this is exacerbated by no less than Patrick Macnee who, it seems, doesn't have a single good word to say about the show - particularly the second season which, to him, seemed to be trying to emulate *Starsky and Hutch*. Hmmmm not sure where he gets that impression from. Look again at episodes such as 'The Eagle's Nest', 'The Midas Touch', 'House of Cards', 'The Last of the Cybernauts...?', 'Cat Amongst the Pigeons', 'Faces', 'Angels of Death', 'Complex' and 'Forward Base'. I would challenge anyone to deny that these stories uphold many of the elements from the old series and would have thought older fans would have delighted by these segments. The biggest problem the 'old' fans have seems to be that of Gambit - for them the third character somehow 'upsets the balance' (a case of 'one too many cooks?') Whilst I sympathise with their comments, I can't actually agree with them (does that make sense?) Gambit, I think added an extra facet to the format in terms of the relationships between the characters. Now whilst Purdey and Gambit's feelings towards one another were quite obvious (and sometimes comically handled), what of the relationship between Purdey and Steed? And Gambit and Steed? Similar to the sixties series, these elements were never fully explored and left for the viewers to decide, which is no bad thing in itself don't you agree?

It is certainly true (as discussed earlier) that some episodes were pretty lousy ('To Catch a Rat', 'Gnaws', 'Trap' and the execrable 'Emily') but it can't be denied, even the sixties show had plenty of duffers. So, putting things into context, I don't think the New did so badly in this respect. Comments, please

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