

Avengers Battle Evil, Bruise Shins In Canada

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Joanna Lumley of
'The New Avengers'



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Time Out!

Between karate chops, car chases and witty ripostes, the stars of 'The New Avengers' sit for a group portrait

By Gordon Donaldson

The New Avengers swooped down on Canada and—surprisingly—it was Steed who suffered culture shock. Not his new sidekicks, the beautiful-but-deadly Purdey (Joanna Lumley) or crafty Gambit (Gareth Hunt), the footman from *Upstairs, Downstairs* who has now made it *Upstairs*. But it was Steed, the impeccable, imperturbable British gentleman-actor Patrick Macnee.

Although the others had never been in Toronto before, Macnee had lived there for five years in the '50s. He got his real start as an actor in the golden years of early CBC television drama.

When the three stars arrived in August to film seven Canadian episodes of the revived British cult-series, they

checked into their \$80-per-night rooms at the classy Harbour Castle hotel. Then Macnee headed for his old Toronto roots—the Central YMCA on College St. He stayed there for six months in 1952 at \$1.50 per night, because that was what he could afford. The manager of the health club, Doug Miller, was still there to greet him after 25 years. Macnee shed his bowler, his umbrella—in fact, everything—and emerged from his cubicle to swim. (Until recently, the 'Y' banned bathing suits for males because the lint was supposed to clog up the drains).

"There I was, starkers," declared the Chief Avenger. "Suddenly I learned that the last male bastion had fallen. They

Left: *The New Avengers'* Patrick Macnee, Joanna Lumley and Gareth Hunt

were letting women into the 'YM!' Bathing dress was required. It was . . . upsetting."

Meanwhile, back at the Harbour Castle, the gorgeous Joanna, who kills men with a kick of a shapely leg, was washing dirty socks and T-shirts for her 9-year-old son James.

And Hunt, after a hard day of falling through windows, was preparing to take his 9-year-old son Gareth on the rides at the Canadian National Exhibition.

Aside from the discombobulation of Steed-Macnee, the Avengers find working in Canada, with Canadian directors, crews and supporting actors, much the same as working anywhere else. They've just come from France, where they did three episodes with a French cast. The series is on the road because it has to go where the money is (if Mammomon won't come to the mountain. . .). The Canadian shows are produced in collaboration with CTV and the Toronto Star-owned firm of Nielsen-Ferns.

The original *Avengers* began in 1961 and was killed in 1969. But someone forgot to drive a stake through Steed's bowler hat, so it lived on in the half-life of reruns. Like *Star Trek*, which is still floating around out there, it became more popular in death than in life. Now it's back, and the question trembling on everyone's lips is: How does Joanna stack up to that first *Avenger* girl Honor Blackman in her black leather gear (Macnee's idea)? Or Dianna Rigg who wore cut-outs in her catsuits, or even the less-successful Linda Thorson, a Canadian who, as Joanna elegantly puts it, wore "miniskirts up to here."

Well now. *Avenger* ladies are all well-bred, but they leap around a lot. Joanna was supposed to bring back the garter belt, but after one modest publicity still, she reverted to pantyhose. She told a London interviewer: "I don't care what the other girls do. I'm not walking about with my skirts in the air showing off my bottom.

"I'm not wearing leather gear and I'm not showing off my bosom. Aren't people bored with actresses licking their lips trying to be sexy? Surely TV has become so explicit now that there is no way we can compete."

Furthermore, she says, "Women and kids rule the home and rule the home viewing. While we still have them on our side, the show is secure. I'll never betray them.

"Fortunately, I like women as a breed and they like me. Other women don't feel threatened by me. They don't fear that I am after their man."

Joanna adds that *The New Avengers* is "a fun show. It's cartoon violence. We try to keep away from the sloppy love stuff. It bores me stiff. I can't bear watching love films. And I know the children say, 'urghh, kissing,' and turn the set off."

Every Avenger comes equipped with a definitive life history that often matches or overlaps the curriculum vitae of the actor. So Purdey (Joanna) is the daughter of a British Indian army officer, was educated abroad and a former ballerina. Joanna herself was born in Kashmir, the daughter of a British Indian army officer. Educated abroad, she wanted to be a ballerina but is too tall. Her real father was not, like Purdey's, shot as a spy but she has to fend off expressions of sympathy over the fate of dear old Dad.

Purdey is skilled in the martial arts, and has had commando training. So is Joanna—now: "I did an assault course for paratroopers that was a beast—really frightening. I never fall—I'm like a cat—but I had to leap off ropes and wings and things. It's a bit hairy because you have to do it with this look of extreme nonchalance on your face. You get black shins from bruises and great ripped bits on your thighs. I never get hurt in fights because we fight with stuntmen; I kick them and they go 'eeurgh' and crash over backwards. It's climbing over walls that does it."

Her costumes are fairly conven- →

tional—miniskirts are out now, although her below-the-knee dresses are slit up the front for easy running and swinging from helicopters. "It's no use being a complete freak," she says. "What I do is freaky stuff—guns and killing men with feet and always cool. If you make it bizarre by running around in a tinsel bikini, then it's completely unbelievable. So I try to make her ordinary in some ways, and fallible, which makes her more sympathetic."

As befits an Avenger, Joanna is an adaptable lady who went from an Anglican convent to the catwalk of fashion modelling, and sidled into television with hardly a blink of her big swimming-pool eyes. In the evenings she forgets the show and goes back to her son (she's divorced) and her washing.

"In studios," she says, "there's always a hum and always a strange smell, and you clatter up and down and suddenly go outside and it's nighttime. You've never seen the day. It's gone, and it's a pity."

Gareth Hunt, as Gambit, does a lot of

driving, and finds North American cars strange to handle. "We're in this hairy chase and we borrow a big one—the drag on them is incredible when you're whipping around a corner."

He does most of his own stunts. Only when the car has to be turned over do they bring in a stunt driver. He spent his first day in Toronto going through windows in a Rosedale mansion. "It's a fake window, of course. Sugar glass. But I still cut myself because it snaps and you get sharp edges. The first time I didn't go through quick enough and took the curtains with me. It makes an interesting day. Jumping about in keeps you reasonably fit, and you never know what they're going to invent next."

Hunt is a cheery 33-year-old Londoner with dark Welsh depths. He matches the international career of Gambit mainly because he floated around the world for six years as a merchant seaman. When not jumping around in general, he sings his own songs with a group—he's working on an album in Toronto—and →





On location: Toronto's South Humber Park masquerades as England's Kentish countryside

writes TV plays. He learned his acting craft in the painstaking British school of repertory companies—the Royal Shakespeare and the National Theatre—so the transition from footman to secret agent was as easy for him as a fast costume change backstage. But not for the TV audience. TV is as class-conscious as Hudson, the *Upstairs, Downstairs* butler. Footmen don't suddenly get up-pity and kill people. So the new Gareth Hunt may take some getting used to.

Hunt has no illusions about TV show-biz. He compares it to the killer whales he saw performing at Niagara Falls. "They're gorgeous, stunning, black and white animals. They pop out of the water and do what they're told. But you never trust them . . ."

A memo on the wall of *The New Avengers* Toronto studio says: "Fake champagne should be carried at all times for Steed."

One wonders: Is Steed fake champagne? The super-cool character in the Savile Row suit—is he plebeian underneath?

Well, actually, no. Patrick Macnee is an Old Etonian, great-grandson of a knight, a Royal Navy commander in World War II, the perfect Brit abroad. He's 55 now and ripening like Stilton;

mellow and sharper too.

"If you're a curious person, you're always prickly," he says (and it's hard to tell whether he's discussing Steed or Macnee because the two have become so blended that the TV character is almost real). "I treat the trivial as important and the important as trivial—things like wines, behavior and people's feelings are important, but world disasters and everybody blowing each other up, the enormities that happen, are trivial.

"It sounds slightly priggish, but in essence my own attitude colors what I do in this show. It's important that one keeps some aspects of humor and sardonic detachment.

"As Steed I try to illuminate an aspect of English life that is horrendous and terrible—the Black Hole of Calcutta, the Heights of Quebec, the loss of our colonies—but in spite of it all, like the *Scarlet Pimpernel* and the *Little Brown Jug*, one keeps smiling."

And champagne, you ask, that's the kind of triviality that keeps us all sane?

Replies Steed-Macnee severely: "To anyone who cares about champagne, it is hardly trivial."

Then he departs for the YMCA. This time carrying swimming trunks. (END)