



After 16 years, suave Patrick Macnee as Steed might finally stop being so "cardboard."

Toronto setting, personal life for stars of TV's Avengers

BY JENNY REES

LONDON — The New Avengers, one of Britain's more bizarre television series and a highly successful earner of foreign currency, is to shoot two episodes of its current 13-part run in Toronto this summer. If the project works, another five episodes will follow before the end of the year.

So suave bowler-hatted hero John Steed, played by veteran Patrick Macnee, his new boy gambit, played by ex-Upstairs, Downstairs actor Gareth Hunt, with the blond, delicious and deadly Purdy, played by Joanna Lumley, will be talking on Canadian villains in their fight to clean up international crime.

The invitation to come to Toronto was made to the series' independent production company, headed by writer Brian Clemens, who wrote the first Avengers story in 1961, from the Toronto documentary company Neilson-Ferns.

In his office at Pine Wood studios, just outside London, Mr. Clemens who recently resurrected the series with the equivalent in French money of 2.7 million dollars after the Avengers had been off the screen for six years, said:

"I'm very interested in the rich potential of the Canadian film industry. Over the last two years the Australians have become a major force in the film industry and the Canadians look like they're breaking through in the same way. He will use an all-Canadian crew and apart from the three major characters, an all-Canadian cast, under the terms of the Anglo-Canadian film treaty. Although slightly different

"We'll be writing two of the second series especially for a Canadian backdrop. If those work then we'll be shooting a further five episodes of the third series in Toronto," he said.

Clemens is currently producing three episodes in Paris. "We reckon that all three of the New Avengers are sophisticated and well-travelled people, so we will not be making jokes about frogs legs or foreigners or anything like that."

"What interests me in writing for the series in North America is the completely different police set up over there. The police are armed and have special powers of arrest. Gambit, for example, gets arrested twice by the same policeman in one of my Toronto scripts, which is an amusing situation we wouldn't get here in England."

Clemens, who works with his original producer Albert Fennell and the show's composer Laurie Johnson, all of whom were involved in the original series made for ABC television 16 years ago, also hopes to film in Australia and has tied up a deal to shoot two episodes in Germany.

Since its birth in the 60's, the Avengers has grossed pound sterling 17 million across the world. About one-third of that came back to Britain. Since production on the old Avengers series ended in 1970, dozens of episodes are still shown daily on television throughout the world. Even while the series was "dead" it has never been off the screen in the States.

In format, the New Avengers still has the kind of worldwide success that was a legacy of the old series. Clemens has sold it to 100 countries—it's the number 1 television show in South Africa and number 2 in Australia.

Clemens, back in 1961, when he wrote his first script, thought he was only committing himself to a series of 13. That turned into 85. This time he's committed himself to 39 with a production budget of pounds sterling 4 million. He's constantly reassessing the story line.

With Purdy, he introduced a totally new kind of Avengers woman, with none of the black leather aggressiveness of Honor Blackman or Diana Rigg. Purdy, who for a short while brought about a fashion renaissance in stockings and suspenders is he says "so bright and liberated she's been able to put her bra back on."

He puts the show's amazing track record down to "a happy knack: right from the start." He says "we were always at least two or three years in advance of our time. It was costume without being period costume. We even upstaged Bond with karate, mini skirts and women's lib, and we managed to stay ahead."

Now, naturally, being innovative is proving difficult. "I'm developing the characters to get a bit more humanity into them. They've always been a bit cardboard. We'll be learning a bit more about Purdy's past; she's been in love but never married." The dark secrets of Steed's past will also be emerging. Macnee, who has made nearly 150 episodes so far, is now 53.

MOVIES

Exorcist II: Voodoo stew served lukewarm

BY STEPHEN GODFREY

In the ads for Exorcist II: The Heretic, they've got Linda Blair looking worried and over her head is written: "It's four years later. What does she remember?" You'll make a great mistake if you think the film is going to tell you. If it represents the sum total of their knowledge on the subject, the filmmakers are probably dying to know the answer themselves. Maybe, God forbid, they're planning an Exorcist III to explain the clutter of past and present mumbo-jumbo they've put into this embarrassing stinker.

The producers must have been alarmed at the long train of demon possession-type pictures that followed the phenomenal success of Exorcist I two years ago. Some of them, like The Omen, have been very successful, and it was clear that a new contender in the field would need a new angle. The angle director John Boorman and writer William Goodhart have come up with is a witless mash of science, religion and voodoo which make the first film look like a brilliantly lucid essay on advanced theology.

Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair) is now what they call a "mature young woman" living in New York under the charge of Sharon (Kitty Winn). Her actress mother is supposed to be off on location, which is an unintentional reminder that Ellen Burstyn, who played Regan's mother in Exorcist I, has several more interesting places to be than in this picture.

Enter Richard Burton as Father Lamont, a priest assigned by Rome to investigate the exorcism of Regan by Father Merrin (Max von Sydow) which led to his death in Exorcist I. Between Lamont as Religion and Regan's psychiatrist Doctor Tuskin (Louise Fletcher) as Science, the heavy-handed battle for control over Regan's memory is fought.

A great deal is made of a newfangled type of synchronized hypnosis to summon up the past which makes everyone's eyeballs rotate. After we've had enough of that gimmick, the good father, for the feeblest of reasons, flies to Ethiopia. Even with a weird yellow sky, Africa has rarely looked more like a Burbank sound stage. There he hopes to find Pazuzu, which sounds like a new Parker Brothers game but is really the evil spirit of the air. He arrives just in time to witness some natives sacrifice the spitting image of the Pillsbury dough boy, but it doesn't really help him much.

By this time he looks as confused as the audience feels, and flies back to America to battle a locust swarm as the apocalypse comes to Georgetown. But in all his world travels, the one thing he never runs across is anything resembling a dramatic plot.

In fact, the occasional flashbacks to the scarred and cankerous face of the younger Regan that we all remember so fondly from Exorcist I remind us how little narrative drive there is in this sequel. Any novel taken from this film



Linda Blair and Richard Burton's pain would grow if they knew that the hiss of the crowd was louder than the demon locusts.

would never even touch the bestseller list.

The dialogue is unrelievedly flaccid and, especially during a cheap attempt to link the father and the psychiatrist romantically, drew loud hoots and gasps from the audience. Perhaps because she is allowed to treat her little peculiarity in a casual way through most of the film, Linda Blair comes off fairly well. Mature young woman or not, she still has those chubby cheeks that looked like they've been pinched too many times, but that apple-pie smile is a good contrast to the evil which is still following her around.

But poor Richard Burton. Saddled with lines like "I'm not obsessed! I'm not!" and losing a lot of potential friends with the frank confession as soon as he meets them that he's, you know, just looking for this demon he saw in a hypnotic trance, Burton plays with a manly conviction. He's too witty and intelligent an actor to be wasted in such a mess, and hopefully the upcoming film

of Equus will allow him the standard of role that has eluded him for years.

In a recent interview, Louise Fletcher alluded to the dearth of good roles offered her ever since her Oscar for One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. As she was speaking after she had already made this film, she was probably including her role as Dr. Tuskin as a part of that dearth. A wise inclusion. The press kit says the role was originally written for a man, and Fletcher was persuaded to play the part "with virtually no changes in approach or dialogue." Miss Fletcher has taken those words to heart; as Doctor Tuskin, she is tough and mannish, with the immobile face and expressionless voice she also displayed in Cuckoo. Maybe someday she'll get to play a real woman.

The pace of Exorcist II is uneven but slanted toward the leaden, and Max von Sydow, Ned Beatty and James Earl Jones are so completely wasted in their brief scenes that one can only conclude the editor went scissor-happy in the cut-

ting room. What with closeups of hearts being ripped out of living bodies, Burton stepping on a bed of nails in his bare feet with predictable results, two immolations and that locust swarm practically decimating Georgetown, the special effects department has emptied its whole bag of tricks to keep our attention. There was even supposed to be an elaborate colour scheme involving the total omission of the "comforting" colours of blue and green which was to leave us on the edge of our seats with visual tension. But even that is a botch; there are plenty of shades of both in several key scenes.

It might be the same kind of crowd that screamed and threw up so enthusiastically when they saw Exorcist I, but after only about half an hour the audience at the showing I saw start to get restless and remained fidgety thereafter. By the end they obviously felt cheated. The buzz of the locust swarm was nothing compared to the unified chorus of hissing that greeted the final credits.

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