

# TRUE (RED WHITE AND BLUE) AVENGERS

S I M O N R E I D

*The New Avengers* was the fastest, stylish, most absorbing hour of television that a generation of viewers, too young to have seen the classic original episodes, so their judgement was fresh and unbiased, had seen.

Nor were many of them comparing the series with contemporary shows such as *The Sweeney*, which, 'strictly for adults.' was given a late night screening. In the London region, *The New Avengers* was screened early in the evening – reaching a new, younger audience.

Unrivalled for its impact, the opening sequence was especially powerful due to the energy of its music – an emotionally dynamic and glorious fanfare for the Pandora's box of adventures to follow.

Tension was heightened by the advertisement break motifs: the fantastically patriotic Union Jack lion emerging to fill the background as, simultaneously, jagged bars of title music swelled to a rapid crescendo. One's mind continued to race, pre-guessing how the escapades of Steed, Purdey and Gambit might be progressing as they were temporarily and tantalisingly concealed behind a curtain of commercials. Then it was back, with seemingly intentioned dramatic contrast to the untimely distraction of brash, gaudy colours, to the real world of our new heroes and the more subtle, carefully chosen colours of the New adventures. (Was the lion flashed up before and after the break?)

The colouring chosen was noticeably different – and very effective. Chosen with an artist's skill, it was pastel as opposed to fluorescent, fired earth as opposed to felt-tip pen.

Paint peeled and flaked beautifully as old buildings decayed with dignity, perhaps to symbolise the fading splendour of Britain's lost empire. Swirling litter was not ugly or messy (view the warehouse scene in 'To Catch a Rat' or the test range sequence in 'Target'.) The locations were real places, not faked studio sets.

Steed was never better attired. Gambit was as smart and casual as good fashion taste dictated, and no-one ever had a more appealing (or trend-setting) hair style than Purdey. Three lead characters, instantly acceptable, working perfectly, dramatically together.

To those who had never encountered him before, Steed was instantly recognisable as the central figure – the personification of dependability, invincibility and style, a man with an indomitable determination to counter unfair play – a Boy's Own idealisation of Englishness.

Gambit was wild, untamed and as such not in competition with, or a young pretender for, Steed's throne, but there simply to complement the skills of his senior. At his most impressive when doing karate, Gambit appeared to be superhuman. His name suggested that here was a man who would always make the right move on the chessboard, or gameplan of any problem presented to him – a move always within the rules of decency (just!), but so unusual and unpredictable as to catch his opponent off guard. Then – watch the sparks fly.

Purdey – a consummate name (the double-barreled fire-power of the finest hunting gun in any armoury) combined brilliant intelligence and physical certainty. Her upper-class accent but down-to-earth demeanour suggested early rebuttal against the fussiness of her upbringing. She answered back. She spoke her mind! She was the most desirable of Tom-boys – every young boy's dream!

For schoolboys especially *The New Avengers* seemed on one level to serve as a dazzling, startling introduction to the adult world that lay ahead – the insight it offered being through the heightened reality of the realm of industrial and military espionage and sabotage rather than the more prosaic world of office politics! (But then any self-respecting schoolboy aspires to a life more challenging than 40 years of 40 hours a week spent sitting behind a desk! Only the dreariest resign themselves to submitting to such conformity.) It was to them with their lust for real life adventure that *The New Avengers* appealed, the series giving a glimpse into the myriad dangers of an adult world (albeit one full of duplicity and treachery!)

*The New Avengers* wasn't just more escapist fantasy (one or two episodes excepted) like, say, *Doctor Who*. The show was uniquely realistic and earthy for its time, with characters being portrayed as real people – not caricatures.

Above all, *The New Avengers* possessed that elusive 'X' factor: it worked on a subliminal level, many of the episodes encouraging the viewer to read between the lines, to intellectualize and philosophize at the same time as following the plot progression. Incidentally, the chases, the fights and the stunts were probably better staged than in any previous television series.

There are several good examples. The first episode 'The Eagle's Nest' boldly heralds the fact that the three heroes are crusaders against forces of evil as epitomised by the Nazis. In 'The Midas Touch' the corrupting greed for gold serves as the underlying moral and later the dangers of science and computers out of control come to the fore. 'Faces' philosophically asks whether we can judge people by their physical appearance – close friends included. Or can we really only recognise their personality?

On another level the mystical and atmospheric 'Sleeper' hints at one of life's most fundamental questions: will the world really come to a standstill one day?

Many episodes possessed this enrapturing intensity. 'The Midas Touch' was horrifying as innocent partygoers were lethally poisoned by a plague-ridden figure merely dipping his fingers into their drink.

'Forward Base' featured two of the most remarkable of all Avengers scenarios: Steed, hunting for a submarine with a toy magnet fishing rod and land that could rise magically out of the water leaving boats high and dry and miles from the sea!

No heroine had ever seemed more vulnerable and imperilled than Purdey when in 'Cat Amongst the Pigeons' she is faced with a thousand pecking beaks threatening to chip her makeshift shield to pieces!

The defining episode was 'Target'. Set within what was, after all, supposed to be their own safe playground, each in turn has only themselves to blame if they fall victim through errors of judgement. What a cruel twist of fate – a metaphor for life perhaps? Above all others, this episode encapsulates the tautness of style, scriptwriting, originality – and sheer ingenuity so frequently on view in *The New Avengers*.