

An Interview With

SYDNEY NEWMAN

BY DAVID CARUBA

Sydney Newman was born on April Fools' Day, 1917, in Toronto. As a child, Newman excelled at art and aspired to be a painter. By the 1930's his goals shifted to film and eventually television. Newman is credited as creating DOCTOR WHO for the BBC and, of greater interest to this publication, the AVENGERS for ABC (Associated British Corporation). With Umbrella, Charm and Bowler is pleased to present the following interview.

Was it always your goal to enter the television medium?

"Never. Well, who would ever think of it? Don't forget, I wanted to be an artist since 1930. Television didn't exist! I wanted to be a painter. I made a movie in 1937 with a little Bell & Howell camera for the Art Gallery of Toronto on their childrens' art classes. I don't remember the title of the movie but it was a little documentary on the work of the classes. I absolutely fell in love with film. In 1938 I went to Hollywood and tried to get into movies as a camera man. I couldn't make it. However, I got a

job, offered by Walt Disney, as an animator in the story and layout department, but couldn't get a permit to work in the United States. I was working as an artist when I saw a film made in Canada by the National Film Board. I went to the Film Board, applied for a job, met John Grierson, the father of documentaries and got a job with him very shortly thereafter in 1941. I worked for him for five years. I started as a splicer boy in the film business and became an editor, director and producer. I produced a whole series entitled, CANADA CARRIES ON, which ran in the Canadian movie houses. I was in charge of it from 1944 to 1952. In the middle of that period I became very fascinated with television. I got the Film Board to send me to New York and I worked at NBC for a year from 1949 to 1950. I learned about television in preparation for the introduction of television into Canada which took place in 1952.

It might amuse you to know that my Canadian passport was stamped 'foreign agent!' In fact, that was what I was. I was an agent of the Canadian government. It was all legitimate. I worked at NBC during its really golden period. It

was the time when Sid Caesar was doing the SHOW OF SHOWS. I did the Gillette fights every Friday night.

I came back to Canada and wrote reports on different aspects of t.v. I also returned to the Canadian Film Board for almost two years and then joined the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation when it started television in 1952. For two years I was in charge of outside broadcasting, what Americans call 'remote.' During that year I put hockey on the air and I did the first big football games in Canada. I did boxing and some documentaries. I did two shows with Marshall McLuhan and things like that. I became bored with it.

A job opened up as head of drama. They couldn't find anyone to do it so I volunteered, although I had no experience with drama except as a kid. I started in drama when I was thirty-seven years in age. I worked with drama for four years from 1954 to 1958 and I did a very, very successful series sponsored by General Motors, GENERAL MOTORS THEATRE. In that series the one memorable moment was that I produced

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the first play of Arthur Hailey (author of Airport and Hotel). The British Broadcasting Corporation were buying our Canadian dramas so they saw my name up on the screen every week. One of the four big commercial companies, ABC [Associated British Corporation] offered me a job as their head of drama and I went over to England with my wife and three daughters, establishing myself there. I inherited a series called ARMCHAIR THEATRE which was a one hour anthology drama series. I made a great success of this."

When and where did you first meet Patrick Macnee?

"Pat Macnee was one of those spear-carrying actors who came across to New York with, I believe, the Old Vic Theatre Company from England. On his way back to England, he came through Toronto where television had just begun. Patrick became a very popular actor in Canada playing very suave parts. He was a good actor. We met back then."

Would you talk about the genesis of the AVENGERS?

"Firstly, as you suggested in W.U.C.B., we did a series called POLICE SURGEON with Ian Hendry [as Dr. David Keel]. He was a new actor. Nobody knew anything about him. We decided he looked honorable. I made an interesting discovery when we did POLICE SURGEON. I discovered that Ian had just gotten out of national service with the British army. He was in a motorcycle corps and could do a lot of tricks on a motorcycle. He was a very adept person physically. This is very germane to the story of what later happened to Honor Blackman. I decided to use this. Here was a guy who was a gentle

"We did about a year (approximately thirty-nine episodes) on the air live. They were not being taped. Ian Hendry became very popular and was signed with a big film contract. The series was about to be killed when I decided I would change it. Here is the genesis of the character Cathy Gale or Emma Peel. At that time in Kenya there was a Mau Mau. This was tribal warfare in which horrible things were being done to the white settlers of Kenya. I had seen a news reel of this woman about forty with a baby tied to her back. She was a white settler. Around her waist was a belt with a gun in it. She was interviewed and she said she was in the kitchen making dinner when there were screams in the other rooms. Two black figures went running by [outside]. When she went into the other room there was her husband with his throat cut and her two children killed. I thought, my god, what a marvelous woman. I admired this woman very much.

When the series seemed to be going down the drain with Ian Hendry gone, I decided to transpose Hendry into a woman. I wrote the character having this real woman who I saw on the news reel in my mind. I made her an antropologist who was working in Africa and a widow of a settler. That's why she was always Mrs. Gale. I decided I'd give her every quality that Ian Hendry had. The interesting thing is that when Ian and Patrick played, they portrayed two diametrically opposed characters from a moral standpoint. This was the way that Cathy Gale turned out. She was highly moral. She disapproved very much of Steed, hating his quick violence and was a very decent, civilized sexy dame. Steed always tried to lay her. He was always thinking of

hired the most marvelous courturier we could to design clothes for her so she could fight without revealing her parts. That's how she ended up in leather. All the kinkies in England thought she was some kind of kinky dykey woman and she got an awful lot of really dirty letters."

Would you discuss Venus Smith?

"There was an interim period when we decided to have two women opposite Patrick. I forget the name of the actress but she was a lovely girl. We just couldn't make her work. It wasn't her fault. I did not conceive of her in a way that I thought was interesting enough to the public. This Venus girl was young, only about seventeen. So there couldn't be any sexual byplay between her and Pat. The sexual byplay that was always hinted at between Honor and Pat was so good that we just casually dropped the Venus actress."

Did she have any significance on the overall series?

"She appeared in hardly more than six or eight episodes. I'm sorry to say she didn't have any real significance, or rather, I'm happy to say so in the sense that the series worked so well without her."

What demographic audiences were the characters of Cathy Gale and Venus Smith aimed at?

"You're using language that one never bothered about then. I don't think there was any conscious awareness of the demographic audiences, market research or any of that. We did it by the seat of our pants."

Did you explore U.S. network

ly. This is very germane to the story of what later happened to Honor Blackman. I decided to use this. Here was a guy who was a gentle police doctor, an ordinary MD. The police call on him whenever they need a doctor. Here was an odd combination of a doctor, a gentle, warm guy with all the so called Christian virtues of a doctor, who was physically very very adept. He deplored violence because people got hurt, but he had to use it.

We did thirteen half hour episodes and decided to sort of hike it up and broaden POLICE SURGEON into an hour series. During the last half hour show we decided to have Dr. David Keel get married to his secretary and she gets killed in a gun fight. In that episode we introduced Patrick Macnee, who had just arrived back in England looking for work. We decided to call the hour long series the AVENGERS. I personally never liked the title, being kind of anti-religious. You shouldn't seek revenge as it were. It was the best we could come up with rather in a hurry. We teamed up Ian Hendry and Patrick Macnee and that was really the first success of the AVENGERS."

What was Macnee's original character like in POLICE SURGEON?

"You could have called him a kind of James Bond character. He originally worked for the MI5, the British secret service, looking after foreign espionage and things like that. He was a charming amoral killer who killed on behalf of the country. He was patriotic and a killer."

How was the character of Cathy Gale formed?

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The whole first two years that I had anything to do with the AVENGERS, it was always a conflict of two different reverse moralities. A highly moral, attractive woman and a highly attractive male who is amoral. This was the basis of the whole AVENGERS scheme. There is this constant battle of wits. This was also the time when John LeCarre, author of The Man Who Came In From The Cold, was emerging. His and Ian Fleming's writing were very popular and I decided I'd make fun of the secret service. The whole series of the AVENGERS was sort of capitalizing on the vogue of spies which was new at that time. It was to send off all that serious, deadly earnest world of espionage."

Would you discuss Honor Blackman and her need for a leather suit?

"Honor Blackman was a big girl. She had a big bosom and was very beautiful. She had short bobbed hair. She had been trained to 'say everything with a smile, luv.' When she came to us she was smiling and had that short hairdo. We did a dummy run before we went on the air live and it was terrible because she was always smiling. I insisted that we put a wig on her until her own hair would grow. She was a natural blond. Because I insisted that she have all the characteristics of Ian, including his physical prowess, we trained her to become a jujitsu expert. In that dummy run we discovered that when she threw a man, her skirt would go over her head, revealing too much of her body. We

Did you explore U.S. network sales for Blackman episodes?

"No. Maybe my company did, but that was of no concern to me."

Would you describe what it was like to tape an episode of the AVENGERS?

"Rehearsals would begin one day after the show went on the air. There was one day off a week. We would start rehearsing on a Monday and it would be recorded on Saturday. It was only later on that we started doing some of the fights on film because it was too tricky to make them really work live. Of course there were exterior shots of cars racing through night which we also inserted. They were run into the program while it was going on the air live. There was also a lot of bitching when Patrick and Honor used to come to me and complain that the scripts were no good. Indeed, a lot of them weren't, some of them were. A lot of it was ad-libbed in rehearsal. That's where Patrick and Honor were really wonderful and the writers were working against these fantastic deadlines. It became a team effort."

What effect did the James Bond films have on the format when it switched from the Hendry series to the Blackman/AVENGERS series?

"The Bond films had not come out yet. We went on the air six months before they came out. As a matter of fact, I suspect that it is possible that the first Bond movie was inspired by the Ian Hendry/Patrick Macnee form of the AVENGERS. This is possible..."

How well do you feel Honor Blackman interacted with Patrick Macnee?

"Oh, they were superb."

Was tongue-in-cheek humor utilized in the Blackman episodes?

"All the time. It was more truthful because Cathy Gale never really approved of Steed. The humor had the bite."

Were the first Honor Blackman scripts intended for Ian Hendry?

"Definitely not. They were definitely written for her."

How suggestive do you feel Honor Blackman's wardrobe and jujitsu were?

"They were never intended to be suggestive. We always wanted her to be very attractive. We never thought we were doing something that would be considered kinky and perverted. That wasn't in our minds at all."

Did you feel at the time that the series was suitable for children?

"Yes, I think so. We went on the air well before 9:00 [P.M.]. The original Hendry series, POLICE SURGEON, went on the air at 7:00 [P.M.] Saturdays. We had no fears of the series being immoral to children."

Did aspects of the series such as screen time, billing and emphasis of plots change when Honor Blackman picked up a cult following?

"Definitely not."

Were Honor Blackman's fight scenes lengthened on account of her

cult?

"No, we didn't cater to that. We were not calculating fight scenes."

Would you consider the Blackman plots realistic?

"They were fanciful versions of realism. For example, when she would get involved in a kookie religion trying to take over the world. Today we have Moonies and all that kind of stuff. The stories were always based on something real and you just sort of exaggerate it. That's what you do in drama all the time."

Were there any science fiction elements in the Blackman series?

"To my best recollection, none at all. I wouldn't have it. The purpose of the series was fundamentally a serious one. It was serious in the sense that it was a conflict in morality of two moral standards. It was a conflict of personal loyalty versus loyalty to the state. Steed was a very honorable public servant. His job was to kill."

Do you feel that Mrs. Peel was a revamped Cathy Gale?

"I think she was the same character reflected in Diana Rigg's own personality. A new chemistry grew up between Diana Rigg and Patrick Macnee."

What was your opinion of the NEW AVENGERS?

"I thought it was a dismal failure. I thought that they could have done very well between Pat and the girl they had [Joanna Lumley] but

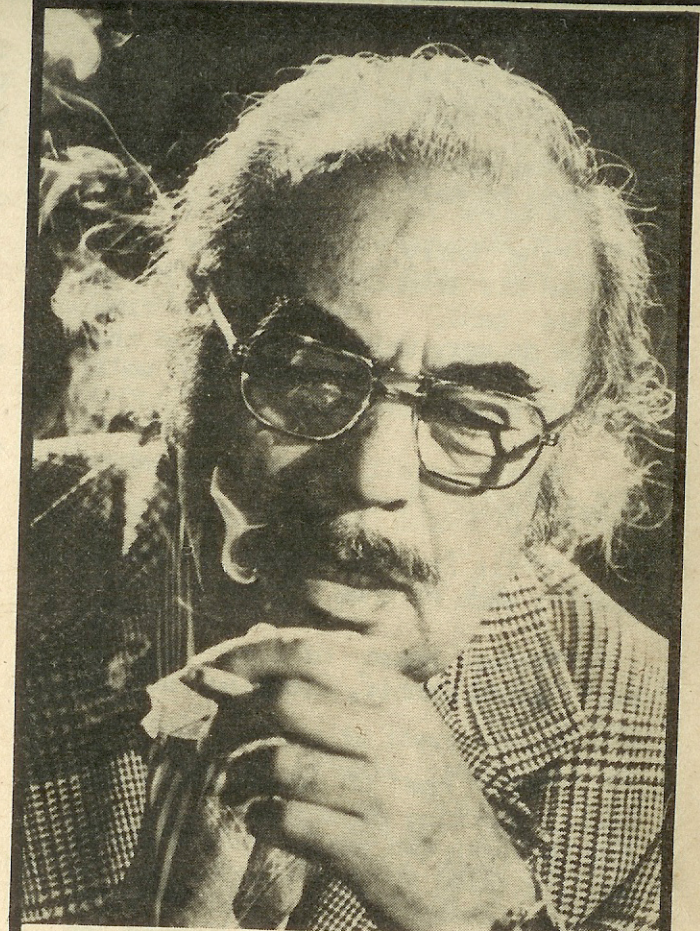


Photo By The London Weekend Television Ltd.

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Do you feel Mrs. Gale and Steed could be updated for a television movie?

"I believe so. I believe moral conflict is still going on in the world. With the womens' lib movement, I do not think it would be extraordinary. ^{Maybe the freshness} wouldn't be there. Maybe."

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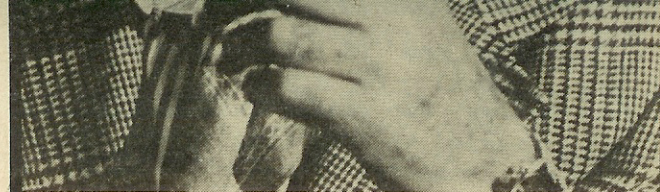


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