

# THE WRITE STUFF

## Brian Clemens, sentenced to manual labour Part Three

Determined to pursue as many avenues of interest as was possible (we were now, approximately, four hours into the head to head), I jumped sideways and reared the old chestnut *The Avengers [On Stage]*. This was an odd choice, surely, given that the confines of the stage are miles away from the vast open spaces of the studio sound stage. I knew that the idea didn't originate with Brian. Who actually put forward the idea? "John Mather, who, I suspect, loved girls in black leather with whips and things. (Ed. Hardly surprising when one looks at the outfit worn by actress Gypsy Kemp – Wanda, one of Madame Gerda's gang in the stage show.) I think that's why he put it on. He got all excited about it – and Alan Jones, the artist who made chairs that looked liked women lying down, designed all the kinky black leather." Did Brian have a hand in the casting? "No, not at all – but I suggested Kate [O'Mara], because Kate had been in a play of mine. I suggested her for the role of the villainess. And I'd always liked Simon [Oates]. He was going to be my Captain Kronos at one time. I said that Simon Oates had turned in a remarkable job as Steed. Brian nodded. "Oh, yes. The trouble with Simon is, he is a very nice guy -a very funny guy, with a lovely sense of humour – but when you get him on screen in close-up, he's got this weak face. It's not a very good screen face." Dan asked if Patrick Macnee had been asked to play Steed? Brian said yes, but Pat didn't want to do it. What then were the problems when adapting a successful television series for the stage? "Well, I actually wrote the story and Terence Feely did the script. It was a very funny script . . . the thing is, the play floundered on money. If it had been done like Phantom of the Opera, it would have run forever. It was too ambitious for the time. They had this helicopter on stage and it didn't work! I went to the first night in Birmingham and the helicopter came down and they lowered this rope ladder [which Kate O'Mara was supposed to climb] and as she did so, it descended and she ended up flat on her bottom!" And the prop settee, which gobbled up anyone who sat on it? "Oh, that was marvellous. One minute she [Sue Lloyd as Hannah Wilde] was sitting there, the next she had gone! The critics liked the idea, but not the execution. It should have played out of town for about six months to get it right, iron out the difficulties with the props. It was a very funny show. There were no difficulties when writing the show, it was just the

way they did it. It was some years ago and people didn't do things like that on the stage. Now they do it all the time, the sets move and things go up and down – it's a whole new art form. It was way ahead of its time and they hadn't worked out all the bumps. It really wasn't the play and it wasn't the cast. The only thing I didn't like was Sue Lloyd. I thought she was wrong."

Back to *The New Avengers*, I quoted the following (edited) passage from Joanna Lumley's memoirs *Stare Back and Smile*. "Word was around that *The Avengers* were to be brought back to the screen: Patrick Macnee would still be playing John Steed, the compleat Englishman, but there would be a new woman. Hungry eyes all over Britain lit up: it would be a plum part. My name was put up but rejected at once. Only when I heard of a fat woman of fifty and sixteen-year-old weaklings auditioning did I have the courage to try again. By some jiggery-pokery I managed to get onto the list, and drove down to Pinewood where they were seeing people. The average interview took about eight minutes. In the inner sanctum were Albert Fennell, Brian Clemens and Laurie Johnson: three kind, courteous and reasonable men. They didn't want me. 'Please! Please at least test me!' I cried, slamming back theatrically against the door. 'I've done nothing yet, I've got nothing to show you! You must test me!' The kind men sighed and rubbed their chins and agreed. I read from a script and was put on the short list." Jo did a screen test and flew back, "exhausted, stiff and unhopeful" to Naples where she was working on a shoot for the Grattan Home Catalogue people. Brian beamed at this. "That couldn't be more wrong! I interviewed something like three hundred girls -and I've got the list of names, I keep them with all my little notes – including Pierce Brosnan's wife [Cassandra Harris], who recently passed away. (Ed. Brian shipped me a copy of this. Decidedly interesting, expect to see this incorporated into a *New Avengers* feature in the near future.) From that original list I produced a short list of about twenty names. We tested about ten (Ed. 19 actresses screen tested for the Purdey role, 8 actors for *Gambit*.) About a year or two before that, Jo had been in one of the *Dr Phibes* movies, a tiny part, playing a nurse. I'd gotten to know her on the set and I thought that she was a very entertaining lady, brilliantly funny with, as



I've said before, a male sense of humour – and most women don't have a sense of humour that I can relate to. When we started interviewing the girls for *The New Avengers*, I told Albert that I would like Jo Lumley – *this was before I interviewed the others* – but we agreed to test all the girls just in case. John Redway, my agent, had sent down a girl called (Ed. name withheld for obvious reasons) and Albert sort of liked her. She was very good, but we found that she had the most terrible laugh. So in the end we settled for the person I'd wanted at the beginning: Jo Lumley. *I had always wanted Jo.*" Referring to reports printed in the American press, Dan asked if they had ever considered Diana Rigg? "No. Di was too old . . . Honor Blackman was certainly too old. We encouraged all that publicity, of course, because the great thing about *The Avengers* – which they didn't exploit with Linda – was that our publicity machine was ever so good. We always had a huge launch of looking for the girl. A launch when we had found the girl, then, after letting a little bit of time go by, *dress*ing the girl. So *The Avengers* – at least in this country, before it came on screen – was always in the ether, it was always in everybody's mind. They were all waiting to see the first episode. We handled that very well. And then, of course, when we launched *The New Avengers* over

here *they didn't network it!* Well, they networked it, but at different times and on different days across the ITV regions. So it was just thrown away. Having built this thing up into a volcano, it erupted at different times in different places. So it you see Jo, you can tell her that I *always* wanted Jo Lumley."

And Gareth. Was he already cast when Joanna did her screen test opposite him? "No, no. At the same time, I interviewed about a hundred young men and whittled this down to a short list, then we tested them, tested some of them. I think we had Oliver Cotton opposite Diane Quick etc.. I wrote a scene and we just put their names into a hat. The scene had a little action and a bit of dialogue for both of them because we needed two people this time." Was this the scene that sometimes appears in the 'alternate' *New Avengers* titles: the live-action montage sequences in which we glimpse Jo Lumley, with shoulder-length auburn hair, hiding behind a door when Gareth Hunt bursts into the room carry a gun? Brian said no. No test material would have been used in the opening titles, the lighting would have been all wrong. Then what was the explanation for Jo appearing with long, auburn hair? "Because we shot those scenes first, for the title montage, *and then she went off and cut her hair into*

that bob . . .” And consequently gave the series a million dollars worth of publicity? “Well, yes. It did. But I think that if she had kept her hair long, as it is now, she would have been far more attractive. It was the Farrah Fawcett-Major look that I was after.” I threw in the comment that had Joanna been around in the Thorson days, as she looks now [in that exotic (kinky) Muller yoghurt TV ad] then she could easily have stepped into The Avenger girl’s boots. Brian nodded his affirmation. “Oh, yes. She could have. But at that time, of course, she had no experience. She looks very good today. The interesting thing about those auditions is that we put a boy and a girl opposite each other and it was purely coincidental that Gareth tested opposite Jo: their test was together – and we took both of them . . .” Just like that? “No. Not just like that, because then we did another test. Once we thought that they were the two, we then did a little more filming.” Dan asked the obvious question. Did they know at this point that Patrick Macnee was going to be there? “Oh, yes. There was never any doubt that Patrick had to be there.”

Cyd Child had told me a nice story about visiting the studio with Jo Lumley. As she remembers things, at the time neither Albert nor Brian had decided who was going to stunt double ‘Purdey.’ Joanna wanted Cyd, so she took her to her dress designer, borrowed a Purdey bob wig from hairdresser John Frieda and turned up at the studio side by side with her lookalike. Is that how Brian remembers it? He pondered this for a moment, attempting to recall if he gave the green light. “Well, I didn’t. But someone must have done. I’m not aware of that, but it’s probably true. It’s a good story – keep it in.”

And if Brian could do it all over again – *when* he does it all over again – would he do it the same way? “Once I was in it I would. Now I wouldn’t. But once you’re in it you’ve got to run with it. I really do think that if the last eight episodes or so [of The New Avengers] hadn’t been made outside our jurisdiction, it might well have run longer. Unfortunately, in terms of production, the worst episodes are at the end. Who knows?”

Dan wanted to know if the second-unit team had actually filmed in Scotland for the locations to *The Eagle’s Nest* episode? If so it was a long way to go just to whistle Dixie. “Oh, yes. It is the same castle that they used in *Highlander*. We thought that the first one ought to have a little bit of panache about it.”

And the olive-green fighting suit that Joanna wore in that episode: the first and only time she did so. Was this meant to be the equivalent of Di Rigg’s Emmapeelers? “Yes, to a certain extent. We never

used it again because it looked appalling! We knew that we could do better than that. We had got stuck with Catherine Buckley, who is a smashing designer, but, as we soon found out, didn’t have the capacity to turn out four new outfits every week – *and had Jo climbing over wire fences in high heels!*”

Putting Brian’s head firmly on the chopping block, I confirmed that he more than anyone else had been the man responsible for the publicity machine that had everyone believing that “This time around, Purdey will be a stockings and suspenders girl – giving lots of glimpses of thigh.” It didn’t happen! “No. But only because we got a lot of fightback from Jo, who didn’t want her stocking-tops seen!”

Dan steered the subject around to Laurie Johnson’s Avengers’ music, The New Avengers theme in particular. Why had the music changed so much? The New Avengers music was more like Seventies hip stuff and totally unlike the original Avengers compositions. “He couldn’t use the original Avengers theme because that was copyrighted to that series. So there were problems there. It’s very difficult to control Laurie because, for one thing, he’s not a man who rewrites. He comes in and spends weeks or months doing this and it’s a fait accompli. And it’s very difficult to change him because he doesn’t charge – he only takes the PRS. You can’t really fire a guy if you’re not paying him.”

We talked about the numerous attempts to revive The Avengers, in one form or another, *The Avengers U.S.A.* [Escapade] being our starting point. Who’s idea was this? “Quinn Martin, who wanted an American-type Avengers show. We did the pilot and it just stopped there. As I’ve said earlier, the Americans aren’t very good at doing that kind of thing – and certainly not Quinn Martin, who I happen to like very much cause he was like Lew Grade. He said let’s do it and it was done.” (Ed. Due to The Avengers’ copyright, The Avengers U.S.A title had to be changed to Escapade. Brian wrote a second story *Illusion*, which never got made.) *The First Avengers Movie*, written by himself and Dennis Spooner. What became of this? “That was written for Gerry Perencio. It wasn’t made because that’s the way of the film business.” I’d read somewhere that the difficulty lay in funding the product. The technical tricks required to have the cast flying around on Kirby wires (a la Peter Pan) would have cost a fortune. “No, no. It was down to Gerry Penencio, who has since gone broke, I think. He ran a cable TV network and he hired us to write the script. (Ed. The script was about ants. Brian had John Cleese in mind for the role of a scientist, a miniaturization specialist, who lived in a hot air balloon so that the ants couldn’t get at him. Brian presented me with a bound copy of the script some time

ago. It's a cracker. Perhaps this will be made – some-time?) And *Reincarnation*, the pilot script for *The Avengers International*. What happened there? “That was for Michael Grade and his wife Sarah Lawson. That wasn't made because it all comes down to money. People say ‘That's a good idea. Let's do it!’ They scrape together enough money to pay me to write it – then nothing!” And the Gerry Weintraub proposal? (I mentioned my meeting with Gerry Weintraub – and his comment to me that ‘Fennell and Clemens were past it.’) “I never put any credence in that Mel Gibson as John Steed nonsense. I mean to say, Gerry Weintraub has not been very successful. It's funny really, that remark that we are past it, because Gerry Weintraub – the Weintraub Organisation – went broke because of exactly that. They made about seven pictures – seven dodo's – and they were all made by young whiz kids, none of whom had any guiding experience. All seven movies went down the tube. I think that E.M.I. were ridiculous when they sold off their library. They should have at least held on to *The Avengers*. I've heard that, in fiscal terms, *The Avengers* made more money than *The Dambusters*. There's nothing else in the whole E.M.I. output that has made any more money than that – except *The Avengers*. But you see, the people who took over [the Cannon Group] didn't know what they had. I think that one could have bought *The Avengers* off them quite cheaply, but it [the Cannon bankruptcy fiasco] all happened so quickly. I reckon I could have floated enough money to have owned *The Avengers*, cause E.M.I. did absolutely nothing with the show when they had it!”

After a glass of wine, served by Brian's wife Janet (Dan settled for fruit juice!) and a cigar (from Brian's humidor) I returned to the subject of the day-to-day working on *The Avengers*. Were Brian or any of his writing team ever required to visit the studio set or locations. Say, to do rewrites to overcome any unforeseen eventuality? “Yes. They used to call me down a lot if they ever had trouble. But then mine was a dual role, I was the producer by then. I had a great deal of input into the creative side: the casting and particularly the sets, because I often found ways of saving money by simplifying the sets while at the same time making them more interesting.” So he was personally involved in suggesting location sites? “Sometimes. I favoured weird locations. They would bring in photographs and say ‘Which do you want, guv?’ If I wanted a castle, they'd bring me five and ask which one I liked the look of. It would be an instant decision. I'd say I like that one, or this one. When you're producing, you really have the veto, or otherwise, on everything that happens.”

The *Avengers* never had any shortage of name guest stars queuing up to appear on the show. Why? “Because *The Avengers* was like the *Morecambe and Wise Show* or *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*. Everybody wanted to be on it. We paid well and they worked with charming people and top directors. Roy Ward Baker, who worked for us, was a big Hollywood director . . .” Dan interjected that Roy Ward Baker had been interviewed by *Starlog* magazine recently and said [of *The Avengers*] “*The Avengers* was a constructed myth. There was no contact with reality. But, there still had to be a plot scene in every episode. The game I got up to with Patrick Macnee and Diana Rigg was that we would fudge it in such a way that the audience couldn't possibly follow it. We made it a leg pull, to distract the audience's attention. We used all sorts of mad ideas, to dress the scenes up. Once, I even had Diana sitting on a sofa, playing a tuba. *None* of that material was in the script. It wasn't the sort of thing that would be written. We worked it up while we were shooting . . .” “That's right,” said Brian. “We did anything that made it ‘not standard.’ We'd always attack the cliché. We never had a straight dentist, or a straight anything really. Everybody was slightly twisted.”

Despite its popularity, *The Professionals* format never seemed to progress from the basic premise that Brian had put down in the production bible (i.e. as scripted in the episode *Old Dog, With New Tricks*) and he saw fit not to stick around on the series. Why was this? “I never wanted to. I wanted to create it, set it on its way and sit back. I had come off *The New Avengers*, where I was working eighteen hours a day *all the time*, and I thought to myself, this is not good producing. Being a good producer is like being a good General, and good Generals should never pick up a gun or be anywhere near the battlefield – good Generals get the Colonels killed, don't they. So I got it on the road and it took off and was successful – but then we got into this pain in the arse of actors. (Ed. A reference to Martin Shaw refusing to let the series be repeated on television.) Why they stood for that I don't know. Had I been in sole charge, I would have just got rid of the two and had another team . . . cause the whole point of having ‘the professionals’ was that it was a big organisation *so why stick with them*, we could have easily have brought in someone else. It's very sad that one artiste can stop you from re-showing an entire series. They [London Weekend Television] wanted to re-run the series, which would have brought in a great deal of money. But Martin Shaw stopped us from showing a second run, which to him would have been worth about \$100,000, worth the same to his co-stars, and would have been worth a \$100,000 to me and to lots of other people. He stopped it. *ACTORS!*”

It was time to take in other avenues of Brian's career, like his involvement on *G.S.5* [Ghost Squad, season Five]. What could he remember about this? "It was done for Rank, with Connery Chappell as producer. It was done on tape, I think, and made at Lew Grade's studio. I was employed as script editor on the series and wrote a couple of scripts. The one thing I do remember is that I met a stuntman on the series, Ray Austin, and took him with me when I went on *The Avengers*." And *Blue Blood*? Made some time ago, this has never played on British television. Why? Brian was ingenuous with his reply. "*Because it's so inept!* The stories were good and the series has wonderful production values, but the dub is *terrible!* The lip-syncing of the dialogue is pretty disastrous, not a total write off mind you, but pretty dire nevertheless." Leaving us for a moment to visit his office, he returned with a videocassette of *Blue Blood* and popped it into his VCR. We viewed about ten minutes worth before, muttering under his breath, he flicked the off switch. The dubbing *was* bad (but nowhere near as awful as Brian made out). Conscious that the series had been filmed in and around the Mediterranean [by Tele-Munchen] and that the cast had spoken English throughout, I couldn't understand why the series had been dubbed in the first place. Brian explained. "They had this production manager, Manfred Klauber, and made him the producer and, well, it was just unbelievable what they did. I telephoned Klauber when I'd seen it and said 'Look. Give me enough money to re-dub it and I'll sell it internationally.'" He is still waiting for Klauber's response! For Dan's benefit, he explained what the series was about. "It has this young, impoverished German baron who, by accident, becomes a detective. He has a girlfriend, an ex-wife and all that, and they filmed it in and around the Med. The series could have been very good. Tele-Munchen [Tele Munich in Germany] put up the money – and blew it!" Earlier, by way of explanation while we were watching the show, Brian kept picking fault with the on-screen action. Having advised us to look out for the 'jacket scene' in particular (he was quite animated about this), his commentary ran something like this when the suspect scene, the show's opening title sequence, arrived. "Look at that!" (referring to a German Chateau in the background.) "I wanted a castle." A sun-tanned, beautiful, bikini-clad girl appeared in the titles. "See what I mean, lots and lots of beautiful girls. Here it comes." The jacket scene had arrived. Brian screamed at the television. "That's the *framing* shot of the titles!" The hero was framed in a long shot. The camera zoomed in, Brian prepared us for the worst. "Look at that! Isn't that terrible!" It was. "*They've got his jacket creased all up his back!* "True enough, the actor's

jacket was creased – and hardly befitted the well-dressed requirements of a TV hero. "Now what kind of producer would do that?" Brian asked. Neither myself nor Dan could reply – we were, I have to confess, grinning like Cheshire cats. Brian wasn't offended. He is not impressed with the product, not at all – which goes a long way in explaining why *Blue Blood* has played in Germany and nowhere else. (Brian loaned me a tape of three episodes. The out-of-sync dubbing aside, the show isn't really that bad. Indeed, my missus loved it: a true test of quality if ever there was one. Brian thinks otherwise. As he told us. "These things have a way of turning up on late night TV. *They comeback to haunt you.*". (Ed. The original pilot for *Blue Blood* – a second one was filmed with a different director – is already a thorn in his side. [Released on video in America as *Scandalous*, this is appalling.] I mentioned this. Brian had little to say beyond the fact that he cringed whenever he saw it. The director was given his marching orders.) *Loose Cannon* came next. "That was very good actually – the series isn't all that bad – I don't understand why this didn't go. He's sort of quirky, but you get used to him after a time." Dan, who had only read about the show, asked Brian if this was like a TV version of *Lethal Weapon*? "It is, really. I didn't create it. Dean Hargrove and Joel Steiger created it. But it's fun and it moves – and it enabled me to do some Avengerish stories. They did a pilot [Max Munro – *Loose Cannon*]. This was done when I got there and they wanted six more episodes. That was the big springboard that led to me getting on well with Dean Hargrove, who produced the very first *Columbo*." And Quiller, for the BBC in 1975. I thought this was excellent when it began, but rapidly went down hill when they decided to spoof James Bond. "I'll tell you a story about that. They said that they wanted a script and I said that it had to be set in South America. They said they could handle that, so I wrote this episode, a kind of *Mission-Impossible*-type thing. I had to ring the director some time later and they told me that he was on location, doing my story. I asked where? I thought they were going to say Chile, and they said Hastings! They were doing South America on the south coast of England!" (Ed. Brian did three stories for the series.)

We broke off here. I wanted to photograph the areas outside Brian's home that were used as the location for the convalescent home in the Thorson episode *Noon, Doomsday*. Despite the fact that twenty-five years have slipped by, the location has changed little – but you won't be able to compare the then and now: my camera was kaput and no pictures were taken! Grumbling at my misfortune in purchasing a faulty b/w film (that was the reason, folks: the

sprockets on the film didn't align with the take-up cogs on my camera! I asked for, and received a refund.) we went back indoors and talked about several movies that Brian had scripted, plus things that can, and do, happen in the movie-making business.

His first anecdote concerned *Timestalker*. "We had discussed this idea and I told them 'Let me go home and write the script. You're gonna love it.' They were doubtful, but I wrote the script anyway. Right up front, I had this scene where the Cherokee Tourer [a USA vehicle similar to the Land Rover-but much, much bigger, of course] drove into the shot where all these kids are drinking beer and one of the boys drops his beer can. Now I've got a close shot of the wheel of the Cherokee crushing the can as it drives past - it was sort of like a 'menace' thing. And I got so many comments back. They were saying 'I loved the script, and the way you set up the scene with that can - wow!' I can't tell you how many people mentioned this, including my agent who said 'It's terrific the way you set up that scene with the wheels crushing the can.' When they shot it, they'd left it out! It wasn't in the picture!" I asked him about the Spiderman movie that he was asked to write the screenplay for by the Marvel Comics Group. What went wrong there? Why wasn't the movie made? "That was Stan Lee. I met him - and this was years ago, when they weren't doing these comic book

things, it was before Superman was made - I met Stan Lee at Pinewood and we got very close and discussed the idea. I also came very close to doing the Doctor Strange movie. I knew of Spiderman, of course, but I'd never heard of Doctor Strange, but Stan promoted the idea and I nearly got involved with that. But that didn't happen either, because Stan couldn't get the money together." So he never actually wrote the Spiderman script? "I did something. I don't think that I was paid for it, but I started knocking out an idea. If I'm interested in something, I go straight home and get a shape, an idea, down on paper." I jokingly advised him to root his summary out, dust it down, knock it into shape and get it off to Hollywood immediately: there's talk of a big-budget Spiderman movie being produced by James Cameron of Terminator fame. He surprised me by saying that he didn't like those kinds of movies - movies like Batman. "Well, I didn't like *Batman Returns*. I took my kids to see it in America - they were under age and couldn't see it here - and they didn't like it. They never got a take on the film, it just didn't appeal to them at all. It didn't have any 'jazz' in it. It was dark and depressing." Dan suggested that perhaps Brian himself didn't like the subject matter - or did he? "I loved Superman... but I thought that the great thing about Superman was



them making his dad Marlon Brando, cause I believe him, it was something to hang on to. But Batman, for me, wasn't one thing or the other. It wasn't a jolly spoof and it wasn't . . . well, we were invited to take it as a real thing and I couldn't accept that. The special effects were quite minimal too. There was nothing that I remember tremendously, like Superman zooming through the sky."

We'd spoken about Captain Kronos – Vampire Hunter earlier, but Dan wanted to pursue the subject a step further. If Brian had the opportunity to go back and do the film again, would he do things differently? "Oh, yes. There's a famous quote from a filmmaker, it may have been Billy Wilder, who said that there was no film that he'd ever made that, the minute it was finished, he didn't want to go back and do it again. That's true. You learn by your mistakes – I think? I was pushed into casting Horst Janson. I don't think that he was perfect, he was probably too talky." Dan indicated that these days Brian would have access to the Industrial Light & Magic SFX for the visuals. "Yer. I did those with the Elstree Special Effects department, which was really non-existent. By that I mean, if they had to blow someone up, they blew them up and they had to be taken to hospital. (He was joking, of course.) Another thing, and this annoyed me enormously, was that the climatic sword fight was set on this particular stage – the blue-screen set-up which occupied the whole stage at Elstree – and I had story-boarded this with about a thousand-and-one drawings. The sword fight was to be very spectacular, and when I got onto this set I shot for a day and they came along and told me that I had to vacate this set by 12-noon the following day because they needed to build new sets for another movie. So, next morning, I had to change things around to accommodate this – and nobody moved into the set for about 8 weeks! That's something I learned. I produced that as well you see. I'd never produced and directed before. If I'd have been just the director, I'd have told them to bugger off and continued shooting. I came in under budget, under this that and the other, because I do believe in first takes: I hardly ever went beyond take three on almost anything. You get an immediacy that way. A lot of directors work that way. John Huston only did one or two takes. So does Eastwood. Bump: get it right first time!"

Taking his cue from this, Dan steered the subject back to scripts. Would Brian have liked to have scripted a Bond movie? "I nearly did. I got to meet Cubby Broccoli and Harry Saltzman, and it was very curious because Cubby liked my ideas and Saltzman didn't. Within weeks they had split up and curiously enough, Harry Saltzman telephoned me some months later and wanted me to work on something else. So

I think that I was in the middle of a political situation and I was being stretched one way and the other . . . By that I mean, if Broccoli said 'I see it red,' Saltzman would say 'I see it blue.' It's very difficult to work like that. I couldn't understand this then, of course. I did when they split up." He confirmed that the script would have been for a Roger Moore Bond picture. In which case, I said that I doubt that even Brian would have been able to rescue the situation. A Connery fan from day one (who, like tens of thousands of others, places the Lazenby outing *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* as the best of the non-Connery pictures) I considered the Moore Bond movies to be 'lightweight' – more akin to Hitchcock's Gary Grant romantic thrillers than Fleming's character. They had become too jokey, the exception being *Live And Let Die*, which I did enjoy – but then Roger had to strut his stuff and prove himself. "I don't absolutely think that that was Roger's fault. They suddenly jumped on the bandwagon and sort of said, how many stunts can we put in – more often than not at the expense of the plot. They became something like a television series of stuntmen playing stuntmen. There was no guts in it . . . the fight on the train [*From Russia With Love*] still holds up today." Dan and I nodded our agreement. And the Timothy Dalton films? Brian didn't like them. "I don't like him. You see, Timothy Dalton had his chance about fifteen years ago, when Bob Fuest directed him in *Wuthering Heights*. Now, if you play Heathcliffe in *Wuthering Heights* and you disappear without trace – you simply haven't got it! I don't think that he's got any balls as Bond. I mean, even Roger's got balls!"

How does Brian approach a script? Any script. Does he start with a blank piece of paper and go from there? "Yes. I always sit in front of a blank page. The Danziger Brothers always said to me that the mystique of writing was arse to chair and pen to paper . . . and if somebody tells me that they want to be a writer, I say, then why aren't you at home writing?" Dan attempted to make things clearer. This was the Nineties and Brian had been writing from the Fifties. He surely couldn't be writing in the same way. What's the difference now? For instance, Dan had the impression that audiences are less sophisticated now. Movie dialogue has changed. It was all one-liners now. "Yes, the dialogue has become less important now, to the image, so that has to be borne in mind. But you can still write things like *Dead Poets Society*, which breaks the rules. Well, there are no rules . . . the only rules are that you can break them. By that I mean, people say that you can never make a western. Now Eastwood's *Unforgiven* has come out (Ed. This was before Clint Eastwood walked away with the Oscar.) so we'll get two or three west-

erns until there's a bad one – then that will happen again. And so on. I think there's a trend at the moment for hardware pictures, like *The Terminator* and *T2: Judgement Day*. But they are difficult to get off the ground because you're asking people to invest so much money."

On a general note, whose work does Brian admire? Say, in TV. "Stephen Bochco. You've got to say him, Bochco has broken some good ground. Stephen J. Cannell, Dean Hargrove . . . I like professional people, 'cause you know where you stand with them. But the trouble is, lots of professional people now have become what A&E [The Arts & Entertainment Cable channel] is: professional means stripping the asset without any care for the asset itself. I said this earlier: the great thing about people like Goldwyn and Cohen is, they may have been monsters, but they actually cared about making good movies. And I think that the Cannells and the Bochcos want to make good television. There doesn't seem to be anyone in this country doing that." His reply went a long way in explaining Dan's next question: Why is it that the majority of television series and movies seen on American TV are American? What happened to the British Film Industry? Was it a shortage of money? "There's money, but people prefer to invest it in Robert Maxwell, don't they? Or give it to a South American country. There are no great entrepreneurs anymore who not only want to make money but to be associated with something special. As I say, if it was worth more money to burn it, they'd burn it! America has always had a great tradition of film-making and lots of good film directors. I think that Peter Weir is a wonderful professional and witness one of the great movies – and *Dead Poets Society*. They're professionally made. A lot of the films that are coming out today are really directed by computers, aren't they? James Cameron makes good movies, but he's not a great director of them – you can't say let's do it again to a piece of tin, can you? It's all done with digital effects. I'm amazed and impressed by what comes out, but you must have a very special mind to want to direct that. I'd get ever so bored just shooting a bit of tin, knowing that you might have to do it eight times, then merge it with a blue background. It's like being a mathematician!" And gangster movies, I asked, aware that Brian enjoys this genre. "I'm a great gangster movie fan. I enjoyed Billy Bathgate, liked it better than *Goodfellas*. I get fed up with the language now, though. I'm not offended by it, just bored by it – and it's very curious, really, because the BBC frequently show a film with all the F-words made 'frigging' or whatever, and it doesn't diminish the film at all!"

Dan steered us back to *The Avengers*. It kind of

broke his heart, he said, that *The Avengers* was never made into a film, with the original team of Patrick Macnee and Diana Rigg, or, for that matter, Patrick and Honor Blackman. If this had been produced for the big screen with, say, Bond-type production values, it would have been a marvellous movie to look at today. Why wasn't a movie made? "Because back then, they didn't know that it was a successful product, otherwise they wouldn't have p\*ssed it away and given it to Cannon, who left it lying on the shelf doing nothing – making no profit. They didn't really know what they had until much later – and they still don't know, otherwise the people who now own it wouldn't allow its reputation to be sullied with bad, cut prints or whatever. They still don't know! It's like the guy who bought up the R.K.O. library [Ted Turner]. Rudolph Roffi was offered that for one million dollars. Turner bought it, cleaned up the prints, and the films are going to run forever!" Dan expanded the theme when he explained, to his utter dismay, that A&E transmit *The Avengers* in any condition: they show bad prints, awfully bad prints, and then slash them to ribbons to accommodate more time for commercials. "That means that the people who are running A&E don't care about television films or anything. It's like *The Avengers* are nothing! They don't know about these things because they're just money men. As I've said, if they could make more money burning them, they'd burn them!"

Picking up on the fact that when I'd interviewed Brian previously he had made reference to the fact that several big name writers had loved *The Avengers* and would have written for it if they could have done so, Dan asked Brian to qualify this. Just who was he talking about? "Well, we did have writers who expressed their interest in writing a script for the show. Kingsley Amis was one . . . it was the same as when I nearly wrote a movie with Ken Russell, which is digressing I know, but it's a nice story. I went to his house and he said 'God, but I've enjoyed those thrillers of yours.'" (Ed. A reference to the ITC Thriller series, not the genre). Dan piped up that it was funny that Kingsley Amis was one of the writers because he had written the *James Bond Dossier*, which mentioned Steed quite a few times, so he was obviously a fan of the series. "I think that Steed is now in the mould of Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, Richard Hannay and Bulldog Drummond. He's a character that you can resurrect a hundred years from now. He's almost like a living literate character."

He has done so much. What does Brian consider to be his best work? His greatest achievement? Something that has given him enormous pride. "I'm really fond of *The House That Jack Built*. I like *Blind Terror* [See *No Evil in the USA*]. One of my best pieces





progress reports (the daily shooting reports, made out at the close of each day's filming by the director, giving details of how much film had been shot, who was late on set, who was ill, etc.) that the production team were regularly filming two episodes back-to-back. "Always – but we weren't being extravagant. If you have two main units working together and they only work for the time as one unit, you save money. The system we employed was that we had the main unit which did all the main stuff, the studio work etc., and then they'd move off the set and the second unit would come in and pick up all the inserts, like a hand picking up a gun, or turning the pages of a book and so on, which worked very well and got us into a very good production rhythm. It's true to say that the crews were overworked – and they wouldn't have been overworked if they were doing a Saint episode – because if we saw a scene that could be improved, we reshot. The Saint team didn't. The ITC series' never reshot unless an actor died during the shooting or something. We were *constantly* going back and saying we can do that again, do it *better* – and sometimes, for a small part, if the boy or girl wasn't very good, *we'd recast and do the whole thing again!* But you do that on a movie and I keep stipulating: *we were making movies!*" He used *The House That Jack Built* as an example. "That one took about nineteen days to shoot. It was only one set and Diana really, so we weren't spending a lot of time or wasting money on it. But the next one, which was scheduled for a ten day shoot, came in at eight. So you'd balance it."

There must have been some. Would he name the directors who ran over schedule? "Peter Sykes went over on *Noon, Doomsday*. Gordon Flemyng was pulled off *The Winged Avenger* and replaced by Peter Duffell – not because Gordon was a bad director, he just wasn't an Avengers director. There was over-schedule, but never over-budget . . . well, there was never over-schedule, really. We sometimes spent longer shooting on one episode and less on others. We were always tailoring it. We never, *ever*, failed to deliver in America on time – and that's all that mattered. If it took four years to put together and the Americans wanted it on April 1st 1994 and it turned up, you were home free. It didn't matter too much over here. You could tell them we're not ready yet, cause it didn't run on that sort of system. But in America, once you were on the treadmill, they wanted it on that date. And we met those dates and at the end of the day we weren't over-budget. You must remember that people always wanted to do it like an accountant – which was just stupid! All we said was, if at the end of the day we keep to the delivery schedule and *we haven't spent any more money than we said we would*, then what are you worrying about –

let us do it our way. And our way was to do it *right!* We were always finding ways to accommodate the scripts. When Bob Banks put in the script for *The Master Minds*, that had about forty-two sets in it. I sat down and rewrote it and brought it in at about ten sets. I was always doing that. I had a great rapport with Bob Jones [the production designer] and his staff. I'd say to Bob 'Don't bother to build the whole set, we only want to see that bit . . . In the beginning, if there was a scene in here (he waved his hand around the room) they'd build the whole room – well, three walls of the room. I'd say to Bob 'Look, I'd play the scene over there. Let's move the radio from here to there and that does it.' So he'd then build just the corner, which saved hours of time." So, the main set, that is to say Steed, Emma and Tara's apartments, were free-standing sets, built in the corner of the studio, with just two walls. "Oh, yes. They were standing on Stage Five, I think it was. The thing is, you don't have four-walled sets anyway. You always had to lose a wall to get the camera in and out. So there was always three walls at best." Dan felt that some of the locations they had used [when they went to colour] lost some of the flair and mystique of the black-and-white episodes. They regained some of the momentum when they reformed with *The New Avengers*, but the Rigg colour season had lots of interior shots and weren't as expansive as the Rigg black-and-white stories. "Mmm. That may have been because of the time of year when we were shooting them. At that time of year [the Rigg colour series were filmed between January/May, September/November] we'd try to get in as many location shots in the can as was possible, then come into the studio for our interiors. It all comes down to practical things. It's no good writing a beach scene in November. For a start, you start to lose daylight at three o'clock, then you have to get the brute lamps out. With *The New Avengers*, I consciously wanted to get into more locations because, in the interim, lenses and film stock had improved and you could do things that you couldn't do in the Sixties. Everything comes back to practicality – making use of the best possible time . . . and anyway, *The Avengers* should be basically an interior show, because the real difficulty in doing *The Avengers* is, *it is not real*, so you have to light it differently. To do a cop show like *Cagney and Lacey* – who are pretty ugly anyway, there's not much you can do to improve them – you just shot it; the lighting man does his job and it's fine. *The Professionals* was shot on 16mm film, mostly with hand-held cameras, because the two guys were rugged enough to take it. But when you're dealing with a woman like an Avengers girl, you've got a better chance of getting the right shot if you're shooting indoors because the lighting man is

in control of the environment, instead of being 'out there.'"

As far as Dan was concerned, The Avengers worked best when it was grounded in reality, when it was intellectual. Shows like *Death At Bargain Prices* were the kind of episode he liked best. Brian's face cracked into a huge grin. "I love that, *grounded in reality*. In that episode *they were standing in a bomb!*" He knew what Dan meant however, and conceded his point. Dan pushed his comment home. The things that he liked best was the fact that all these crazy things would happen but at the end of the show they would always be realistically explained – no matter how weird the happenings. That's what he enjoyed most about the 'fantasy' type stories. When they did things in *From Venus With Love*, the answer was 'But it's only a laser beam.' In *The Hour That Never Was* it was just a drill. All had been explained and that appealed to him. Then, for some reason, they decided to have them switch minds. He wouldn't have been surprised if Brian had have had The Avengers go into outer space. (Ed. He did, of course, in the tag scene of *Bizarre*. But that's another story.) Brian clarified this – to some degree. "The reason for *Who's Who?* was because we'd promised Pat a holiday and Di was ill. So we had to make a show *without our leads*. So we did this thing in which they didn't appear, except in a couple of little scenes to make it work. We *had* to do that. Okay, I know that it's not going to be the best episode you've ever made, but they're going to get an episode – and someone might like it!" So he didn't apologise for the totally fantasy episodes? "Not really. Because my view – some people's view – is *why* didn't they have *more* like that. On The New Avengers I had more time to think about it. And also, being stuck as it were with a new format, it was difficult to do stories in which we involved our three leads and try to keep Pat happy. He thought that he was always being shunted off into the sidings, when actually he's got as much screen time as the others. All shows are shaped by problems that you don't see, ultimately. There are always problems and when people say 'Why did you do that?' there is, *always*, a very pragmatic reason." Dan accepted this. But shrinking people? This surely was scraping the barrel. Why did they go in that direction? "I don't honestly know. I suppose that it was a virtuoso thing – we just wanted to do it . . ." I injected the view that they had wanted to do it [*Mission – Highly Improbable*] a long time before that. Indeed hadn't Brian considered a script called "The Disappearance of Admiral Nelson" some years earlier, when considering scripts for the Rigg black-and-white series? Brian Tesler took exception to this and it sat on the shelf before being rewritten as the miniaturisation story. Brian challenged this. "Mission Highly Improbable most certainly *wasn't* a

rewrite of that script, or any other script. It may have been a similar script, but 'Improbable' was a Phil Levene original. I can remember building this from the ground up, with no knowledge of the 'Admiral Nelson' script." I expressed my doubts that this was really the case. Perhaps Phil Levene had discussed this with someone and had drawn the conclusion that it was a sound idea? "I really don't think so. It's not all that strange really. When you go through all the permutations of a script, you're eventually going to hit on that one: can we shrink them etc."

Cars played a major role in The Avengers. Did they have many problems with say, the vintage roadsters breaking down? "Not really. Not very often. When we did, we'd get round it. The vintage cars were rarely used in chases because they were such a cow to drive. When Pat drove up in them, or played a scene in them, they would be pushed into shot." (Ed. See header pic to the Graham P. Williams piece on page 15, Vol 2 #2.) Were the vintage cars hired when needed or booked for the entire shooting schedule? "We would hire them for the whole series, but if their owners wanted to use them for something else, that was okay." Pushed onto the set by studio hands or out on the open road, someone still had to drive them, usually Patrick Macnee. Did he receive any training? "No, not really. An old banger is quite easy to drive. You might have to double the clutch once in a while, but for the most part we found them comfortable. They're really only 'difficult' because they're not *new*. The brakes aren't as good, the steering is a bit positive and they bump. The worst thing about the vintage machines is the sound they make. So again, we used to reshoot for sound. We had to. I mean, we used to stop production if an aeroplane flew over the studio! At Elstree we often picked up the sound of the birds on the soundtrack: the studio was so old that they were nesting in the rafters."

The penultimate question. What has Brian Clemens, the scriptwriter been doing recently? Say, during the three years since our last interview? "I've just finished the *Highlander* TV script, that's a one hour story. Before that I did three two-hour *Perry Mason* television movies. Prior to that I was script editor for and wrote six *Father Dowling Investigates* episodes, and before that I did six episodes for the *Loose Cannon* TV series – and again worked as script editor on that. That takes us back about three years. In between I've written two screenplays which may or may not get produced – *but they were paid for!*" I reminded him that he had written several scripts for *Remington Steele*, scripts for which he received glowing accolades from the producers of that show. "That was Michael Gleason. When I went to work on Remington Steele, I went over to Hollywood to meet them and they handed me the bible."



On the front of this it said: 'This is a very individual show and we warn you that *you will be rewritten.*' They had never had a script that they didn't have to rewrite. They didn't have to rewrite mine!" he said proudly. Not a boast. Simply a fact. Michael Gleason is on record as saying: 'We had these scripts from Brian Clemens. They were so good that we didn't have to change a word – not even the punctuation, they really were *that good.*'

Finally – well almost. Dan asked if he waits for the telephone to ring or tries to solicit work? "Oh, both. Tomorrow I will continue working on an American thriller I'm writing, I've got about thirty pages finished. As soon as I finish that I've got another idea that I want to follow up." Dan asked if he had any desire to write a *Star Trek: the Next Generation* episode? "Well, one of the things that I've done in the last two years, is that I was commissioned to do a treatment for a thing called *Cyber Force*, which is about a police force in space. They liked this very much and are trying to set it up. I like to 'change channels' as it were. I've written everything. I've written children's stories and I've written love stories."

Earlier in the day, I had asked him, supposing that he could write his own tombstone inscription, what would it say? Asking for time to consider this, he answered it now – in true scriptwriter style. "*Don't worry. I'll write my way out of this!*" I should have known!

And the sub-title of this piece: "Sentenced to manual labour." Why this choice of words? As amazing as it sounds, since day one, when his father presented Brian with a manual typewriter, the man who has spawned hundreds of television scripts, dozens of film screenplays, a handful of stage plays etc., has typed every single word on his trusty portable. Amazing isn't it. In this age of technology, the man behind *The Avengers* finds word processors cold and anti-septic. "It's a lonely job writing – I like the clatter of my steam typewriter. I like looking at the paper and tearing it up. It's all part of the physicality of writing for me." Pray that he continues to find the spares, which are becoming increasingly scarce these days. Life without the Master somehow wouldn't be the same.