

It brought a new style to fiction

by BRIAN CLEMENS

IT IS unique for a television series to become a legend in its own time, but The Avengers has done just that. John Steed (and his nubile partners) is internationally known as Charlie Chaplin — or James Bond and (a sobering thought), has probably reached a wider audience than all the Bulldog Drummond books put together! Yet Steed has no literary roots, at all. He is a pure television creation, and the only one so far who could be resurrected, remade a hundred years from now, a worthy rival to Holmes.

Stories about legends tend to be apocryphal, and The Avengers is no exception. The title is attributed to Sydney Newman, "Call it The Avengers — I don't know what the **** it means, but it's a Hell of a good title!" "Mrs Gale was butch because Ian Hendry left the show, and the budget wouldn't run to more scripts, so she played a man's part".

Maybe those statements are true. I'm not sure. But I am sure that it all began in the early sixties with Police Surgeon. Ian Hendry created the character of a young doctor that someone liked enough to extend to one hour, hire myself and Richard Harris to write the two-part pilot — and call The Avengers.

That first show was all about razor gangs and there wasn't a kinky boot in sight. Hendry's fiancée was murdered by thugs, and he set out, following that well trodden path of talented amateurs, to "avenge" himself on the underworld, aided by a callow and rather scruffy youth wearing the traditional raincoat and vaguely attached to M.99. The young man's name was Patrick Macnee!

The series continued in this vein until Hendry abruptly left — and was replaced by two girls! One a nightclub singer, "Venus Smith" — the second to become immortal as "Mrs Cathy Gale"—played by hitherto English rose, Honor Blackman.

Everyone was a talented amateur at this time — including most of the production staff — and especially the brilliant Peter Hammond. "Style" was an enforced accident. The budget often limited, say, a general store to a few loaves and fishes and Hammond, following exceptional precedent, turned those loaves and fishes into multitudinous and stimulating foreground shots.

Mrs Gale was rarely seen except through the hole in the middle of a doughnut! Macnee, at a loss as to what to do with his part (then as paper thin as the sets, that frequently shook, and on one occasion actually fell down!), was told by Newman to "Play it like David Niven". Macnee bought a bowler, a

broolly, and asked Honor if she wouldn't mind wearing kinky boots and black leather ("Cos I like 'em") And why not — wouldn't you?

It was the height of the package holiday and the confident pronunciation of Beaujolais — and so the wine snobbery crept in. It was the final demise of The Empire, and so the jingoism reassured. It was the era of Kruschew and the Bay of Pigs, and Kennedy. (We learned of his death while taping an episode — and Pat nearly cried). London was swinging, and camp was suddenly permissive, and people needed to escape, to delude themselves that the Cold War and spying was just a lark really.

The Avengers offered a euphoric screen that denied harsh reality and promised the continuation of attitudes that had ceased to exist. It fed upon itself, the in-jokes proliferated, some of them very witty, and many of them straight from the pages of Freud and Jung and Masoch. Women (well, at least one woman) were liberated ten years ahead of their time. And we started to get letters from University dons (who liked the jape about the Woolsack), and dirty old men, and even one invitation to take sherry at the Law Society.

Just once television was ahead of the cinema, creating rather than following a trend pre-dating the phenomenal success of Bond by many months. It was inevitable that someone would eventually think of putting The Avengers on to film and thus securing a world wide market. Until that time I had been just a regular writer on the series, but now — as the only available person who not only knew the series, but also had a wide experience of film, I became associate producer.

With La Blackman lost to a Bond movie (another trend created) Elizabeth Shepherd was brought in and one and a half episodes shot with her playing Mrs Emma Peel — but then there were problems of interpretation, so shooting was suspended while tests were initiated.

From those tests — head and shoulders above the rest — emerged a new, virtually unknown young actress named Diana Rigg. She became Steed's partner and like so many people associated with this remarkable, indestructible show, captivated a world wide audience, and then moved on to other spheres. To be replaced by Linda Thorson.

I cannot accept credit for the casting of Miss Thorson because at this time, with the series reaching for an apex, I and my co-producer Albert Fennell were politely asked to

make way for a new producer fresh from tape-television.

Having devoted four years of my life to making the series a world wide success, I took a much needed holiday — but the phone pursued me — would Albert and I come back? Eventually we did. To make a further 30 episodes, grab a couple of Emmy nominations, and consolidate the position of The Avengers as being the most successful British series ever made.

The old Avengers finished production in 1969. Finished production — but not presentation almost continuously around the world (with the odd exception of Great Britain,

the country of its birth) — so it was no real surprise to find a French financier eager to back yet another series of . . . this time . . . the NEW Avengers.

The now familiar round of interviewing, testing . . . and finding Gareth Hunt and Joanna Lumley who are . . . But you will have to wait and see. Macnee/Steed of course are indestructible . . . legend . . . But that's where we came in . . .!