

Mike Gambit

The man, the myth...
the flared trousers!

by Simon Reid



IN THE VAST panoply of fantasy that was 20th Century show business a tiny few actors epitomised the archetype they portrayed so as to have become synonymous with the role.

Over time, the performers and their performances have transmuted into unified icons: Raquel Welch as the ultimate sex symbol of *One Million Years B.C.* Sean Connery, her male equivalent as James Bond. Patrick McGeehan championing the defiance of authority as *The Prisoner* and Patrick Macnee and Diana Rigg as sinister conspiracy-fighters John Steed and Emma Peel.

While indisputably unique, a number of fans might justifiably rate Marilyn Monroe — white-pleated skirt billowing up around her thighs in *that* classic publicity picture — as the sex symbol supreme. Others might choose later entrants in the 007 canon. Aficionados of Honor Blackman might well insist that she was the pioneer role model for feminist television heroines, while a younger generation would register their vote for Joanna Lumley's contribution as the culmination of the concept. One can't argue their cause.

But where does this leave Gareth Hunt's role as Avenger Mike Gambit?

Consider the fact that Timothy Dalton's role as Bond in *The Living Daylights* has recently been critically reappraised as *superior* to many of his predecessor Roger Moore's unpalatable over-stuffed turkeys and perhaps there is room for manoeuvre in the gameplan of critical approval for Steed and Purdey's fellow Avenger.

charmed

Behind the scenes the 35-year old actor undoubtedly fitted in perfectly with his colleagues and — equally important — the production crew. As director Desmond Davis is quoted [in *The Avengers and Me*] "We chatted, enjoyed the work and became good mates... friends." In the same volume Patrick Macnee records "We hit it off from the beginning, which simplified matters," specifying "Gareth... treated me as though I was a fellow rating off a ship. Not in a cocky way, but jauntily, the way that one treats a colleague." And, after a few weeks' filming: "Jo, Gareth and myself had developed a strange rapport. The more we worked as a team the better we became at it... and, though I say it myself, we were quite superb together" — this a rare expression of overall satisfaction with the production from the usually dismissive star.

By all accounts Hunt is an exceptionally good-natured person — a trait he successfully transferred to the screen in light-hearted bantering with his co-stars, especially Joanna Lumley's Purdey, thereby adding one of the series' most enjoyable ingredients. In a *TV Zone* interview conducted in 1994, Gareth declared "I can only say that the atmosphere on set was brilliant. There was no animosity, nobody asking who had the most lines, whose jumping out of the plane this week. We all got on and hopefully that showed on screen." He concluded: "The Avengers is a bit like a family — Jo and I are still mates. Patrick's a long way away but we're still friends, as I am with Brian Clemens and Laurie Johnson."

Off-set he is famous for his deft delivery of amusing showbiz anecdotes and voice impersonations including Cagney, Bogart, Patrick McGeehan, Richard Burton... even Steed himself — an ability he brought to bear to create an original, markedly different character in the theatrical heroism genre.

Meanwhile, Macnee's previous carnation-sporting incarnation had subtly subverted the ruling aristocratic establishment stereotype who masqueraded as one of their number while simultaneously working to expose their decadence, greed, megalomania and corruption, a task completed by 1969. By the time *The New Avengers* came to be in 1976, he had forged new angles in his quest to undermine and expose, such refinements of character being required to engage a new audience and establish contemporary relevance.

More riff-raff than toff, Hunt's newcomer acknowledged, in a popular cultural form, a (previously absent) working-class representation as a consistent theme of the revived format — that of the duplicity and double-cross inherent in the ruling elite's secret service complex, a thread of treachery echoing sentiments voiced by the Sixties counter-culture. The evident failure, despite valiant efforts of this movement to overthrow the traditional system, was acknowledged to have made at least some advances by the presence in the team of a common man. Long-haired, fashionably dressed, plain-speaking and brutal when needs be, Gambit stood for the ordinary man — a "real man" — in the previously polite bespoke gentility of Avengers wonderland, thus epitomising the shift in mood and intent. In his book *The Avengers*, Toby Miller defines this change: "In effect, Gambit was the viewer brought into the action; the younger man in thrall to Steed and taken with Purdey, he is that most mundane of viewers, the straight white male... without any element of fantasy in his character." (Depending on your interpretation there was, in fact, quite a pronounced streak of the fantastical there, of which more later.) Essentially, Hunt's portrayal was of an everyday guy, albeit fortified by extraordinary skills, who had somehow contrived to infiltrate into the highest echelons of an unspecified secret service from the lowest of backgrounds — a truant at school, a tearaway, wild and untamed at heart. Very dangerous! Along another life-path it would not be hard to imagine him in ragamuffin garb, sporting an earring, pursuing a gypsy lifestyle. Picture him flicking-up a shiny brass three-penny bit and rolling it around his fingers to dazzle a clustered crowd at a fairground while a raven-haired female partner dipped into the pockets of the distracted throng, a wry smile playing across his lips.

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unpredictability over and above the caddish Steed. Furthermore he harboured none of his colleague's foibles about damaging priceless works of art or smashing vintage bottles of wine during the pursuit of villainy. (Sure, Steed would have defeated a foe in his own inimitable style, anyway, but Gambit could be depended upon to strike hard and fast at the heart of any situation regardless of other considerations, without hesitation — and certainly not make a quaint Steed-style quip in the doing.)

To the show's teenage lay audience, Gambit was the idealised elder brother. An athlete, effective fighter and unashamed ladies' man — macho aspects which, somewhat remarkably, were combined with an aura of



mysticism, the sort of intelligence and understanding that, say, first year pupils at secondary school sense sixth formers have somehow achieved. The fact that this secondary aspect was expressed physically through his optimised mix of British right-hook and upper-cut knockdowns — with an even more deadly eastern combat technique — served to confirm the respect he commanded in young male viewers.

Compared to the honest, dependable, father-figure Steed, there to provide a staunch, solid, stalwart operations base, Hunt's Gambit was a distinct enigma. The actor contrived this quite unconventional persona as much by what he didn't do as what he did. "I tried to bring a very deadpan, tongue-in-cheek style... I tried to make you feel that you never fully knew what he was up to," he reflected to *TV Zone* magazine.

So why has his performance so often been attacked and ridiculed? Toby Miller's somewhat overly academic dissection of the Avengers calls him unwieldy — but surely that was a deliberate part of the character's appeal. Miller also reports that *The Evening News* described Hunt at the time as "bovine", possessing animal-like qualities. Yes, undoubtedly, but surely more of a lone wolf or mountain lion. Elsewhere he has been accused of putting in a Paul Michael Glaser (*Starsky and Hutch*) impersonation — certainly not a part of his impressive impersonation repertoire, as the actor himself would acknowledge, so not really a very effective jibe.

Indeed the whole programme, while equally as smart and well-produced as its contemporaries, artfully undercut the popular American cop shows by deploying British self-effacement and eschewing one-dimensional glamorisation of its stars.

Hidden behind its smoke-screen fantasy, Hunt's



performance ensured that the New Avengers were grounded in reality — effectively earthed to allow lightning to rip through and electrify plot lines to precarious voltages — Gambit's role to be there to disperse the charge convincingly through a devastating display of English pub-brawling prowess and Eastern martial arts; Hunt having no doubt gained proficiency in the former whilst visiting dock side bars during navy service, his competence in the latter being evolved through specialist training.

His most vitriolic critics accused him of appearing stilted or "permanently constipated"(!) which indicates failure in both perception and interpretation on their part. For Gambit was purposefully designed to throw into relief Steed's effervescent cheerfulness by exhibiting the extreme opposite demeanour: the absorbed reserve of a professional who knows what it is like to be under attack — and that such could happen at any moment! His concern is for his fellow agents, especially Purdey, who he is at constant readiness to defend.

Thus Hunt's supposed "same, fixed, expression" in fact captures his alter-egos hard-faced determination. To interpret this otherwise (as 'stilted') betrays more about the critics than the subject: never having confronted such dangers themselves, they obviously have no appreciation of the response it invokes. Gambit's more subdued moments are but an opportunity to sense what thought process might be running through his mind — possibly of love, intertwined with preparedness for violent defensive or offensive action.

Simple envy could, consciously or unconsciously, explain these attacks. Hunt had, after all, landed a plum role second to only Bond himself in popular culture. He got to drive fast cars, play cops and robbers/cowboys and Indians, have his own automated bachelor flat, work

alongside the legendary John Steed and flirt outrageously with the girl who rapidly established herself as the decade's foremost female British sex symbol.

Other contemporary reviews report that he was quite a success with the female audience and since the styles and fashions of the Seventies have recently been reassessed (for the better) remarks about flared trousers appear less clever. Indeed it is likely that much of the criticism of his attire sprung from the critics' own embarrassment at recalling having dressed similarly themselves, although they would hardly have been as likely to have looked so good.

who else?

It is hard to picture any other actor carrying off the portrayal of Gambit as convincingly. Hunt's sense of controlled menace interspersed with blistering intensity sprang, presumably, from having faced crisis and danger in real life. (Comparable contemporary actors gave the impression of being limited by the range of life experiences confined to the comparatively undemanding travails of drama schools and repertory theatre. Ian Ogilvy just barely carried *The Return of the Saint* — lacking entirely any convincing physical strength of conviction. Similarly, Patrick Mower. While a popular ladies' man at the time he, too, lacked the robust presence required. Lewis Collins did an audition for the part but lost out despite possessing more Action Man good looks (a weakness that lay in a certain effete over reliance on weaponry to depict power enforcement judging by his co-starring role as Bodie in *The Professionals*.) In stark contrast, Hunt had spent six years in the Merchant Navy, starting at age 15 and culminating in three months in prison for jumping ship in New Zealand — a trait entirely in keeping with Gambit's persona.

Yet at the time the producers' selection of Hunt seemed almost preposterously absurd. For the actor had previously been best known to the television audience as Frederick the footman, in the Victorian costume drama *Upstairs, Downstairs*, sporting a natty waistcoat and breeches and behaving positively deferentially to his betters. To transform from such a wimpish role into an action hero seemed impossible, but even his detractors appear to have been sufficiently impressed by his radical new direction to have no difficulty in distinguishing the two performances, most acknowledging this by making only passing reference to his previous TV role.

So there he was — controversial, but successfully established playing alongside one of the small screen's all-time greatest heroes. Importantly, Macnee shared an experience of a naval career (albeit a wartime one) which must have influenced the ease with which he accepted his new partner — on screen and off — as a more or less equal counterpart despite Steed's long association as king-pin of *The Avengers*, and the elder statesman's much greater status as a veteran thespian and star.

Hunt had originally entered the acting profession by accident — liking what he saw while working (in one of a string of odd jobs) as a sweeper-up in a theatre. "Until then the nearest I'd ever come to a stage was at school or mucking about on the bomb sites with my schoolmates playing cowboys." (*TV Detectives Annual* 1979) He hadn't gone straight from the classroom to drama school and it showed.

Like his co-star Joanna Lumley, he famously

performed the overwhelming majority of his own stunts — fighting, climbing, jumping, driving, crashing through glass (sometimes not entirely cleanly.) As producer Brian Clemens elaborated to *Stay Tuned's* editor: "Gareth learned karate from one of the country's top exponents of the art. All his gestures in his fight scenes are totally authentic."

The pre-filming production brief to writers and directors outlined: "The new man should be shot — from great stillness — into a blur of close shots — a blur of fast movement — and out again to the stillness we will come to associate with him before and after vigorous action."

Asked why a third member had been added to the previously dual team relationship, Clemens explained (in 1986): "The Avengers has always changed — moved forward. Because also — Patrick Macnee was that much older — we needed a younger man to handle at least some of the action. Don't forget this WAS called the NEW Avengers, so we had to be true to that. Otherwise the critics would have hammered us for just serving up a new batch of the OLD Avengers."

Contrast this to director and stunt-coordinator Ray Austin's recollections of the New Avengers (as told in *Stay Tuned*) "It's downfall was, I think, Gareth Hunt... it's Gambit I'm talking about. Unfortunately at that stage the network was calling the shots. They wanted a third person there, another guy. As I say, he wasn't needed. I think that Brian knew that, and Albert knew that... but *they* wanted a third person. Wrong call. The public loved Steed's relationship with the younger girls. It was very good the way it was — but *they* insisted on having Gambit there when it would have worked with Joanna and Pat equally as well. Truth is, you were always looking for things for Gambit to do... you know, you had to manufacture things in the script — which, in my opinion, slowed down the script."

clearly defined

Indeed the Chambers Dictionary definition of the word "Gambit" reveals: "... the offer of a sacrifice of a piece for the sake the sake of an advantage in timing or position in the opening stages of a game." Could it be that the producers introduced 'the third man' as an initial concession to network demands in order to get the project off the ground — perhaps with the intention of later easing him out once the show had been established? In practice this strategy got no further than Macnee bemoaning his 'Mother-style' role in the first series while Hunt won most of the action sequences — a factor due to Macnee's lack of fitness as much as anything. Once Macnee was fit again (he's quite startlingly impressive when sprinting about in the terrific opening scenes of "Trap") Gambit's role was diminished to allow Steed to reassert his dominance.

Whatever the motivation for the introduction of Gambit, Hunt indisputably carved himself a comfortable working niche. Chambers adds "... an initial move in any strategy or battle of wits, especially one with an element of trickery (from the Italian gambetto, a tripping up, from gambra, leg.)"

Additionally, Gambit contributed a pivotal gravitas to the shows new realism that perhaps Macnee alone with his gift for a light touch amid mayhem could not have achieved. After all, the naivety of the Sixties counter-culture, of which *The Avengers* was a part, was long over by the Seventies — superseded by a worldly weariness.

The long haul had begun towards a gradual realisation that fantasy world domination conspiracies, however implausible, were actually mirrored and exceeded in reality. (Anyone who doubts this and is serious about gaining an understanding of the disturbing reality of how the world actually works, should check out the more recent books by — the now discredited — David Icke.) Gambit epitomised this emerging new, sober mentality and without him the show could easily have drifted into a fantasy out of reach to the more subdued Seventies public imagination.

This move from light-fantasy operatives to heavy realism manifested itself partly in Gambit's readiness to deploy the most appropriate and up-to-date resources compared to the previous comedy-prop formula. For instance, in one of the New Avengers' admittedly more unrealistic — not to say preposterous — scenarios, that of fighting a giant rat in "Gnaws", Gambit comprehensively trumps Steed in the armoury stakes by producing the most outrageous, outsize handgun seen on screen — an armour-piercing rocket gun! When clay-pigeon shooting for sport in "Faces", Gambit lets loose with a distinctly non-gentleman-like pump-action shotgun for which he is reproached by Steed — "you can't help your background!" Such lack of constraint by old fashioned conventions of gentility was central — essential — to the New Avengers' success.

three's company

Adding a third character gave an invigorating complexity to the plot construction and character interplay. As director Johnny Hough told Dave Rogers for *The Ultimate Avengers*: "The difference for me was that there was a certain kind of magic that bounced between two people and, when directing three people, that magic was triangulated. It came in three parts; it wasn't a one to one situation. So the relationship between Purdey and Gambit wasn't the relationship between Steed and his earlier partners. You now had this relationship between Gambit and Purdey, the relationship between Purdey and Steed, and the relationship between Steed and Gambit. One had all these different relationships to consider, so that was the main difference, it was no longer a one on one situation — and it's debatable whether that diluted the action of the series or whether it enhanced it."

This fragmented relationship was, I think, an important advantage to the series' core audience — the notoriously critical and discerning adolescent and pre-adolescent schoolboys. The triangulation brilliantly averted the previous romantic distraction of, say, the Steed and Emma, Steed and Tara partnerships. While never actually all that pronounced in the Avengers, it could nevertheless have been the kiss of death for the New Avengers to have pursued the concept any further, especially as the show was often scheduled that much earlier in the evening to reach a younger audience. Nothing is more unpopular with schoolboys, I suggest, than soppy romantic antics, so the show gained extra popularity by eschewing this facet of the relationship and actively enhanced its appeal with a far more satisfactory theme of sexy — at times positively erotic — flirting exchanges between the two younger leads, with Joanna Lumley's resolutely raunchy tom-boy style adding a further sense of mystique.

For the more intellectually inclined student, Hunt's exposition of Gambit's unspoken philosophy of modus

operandi — mean, moody and magnificent, if you will — was precisely what the character needed to retain the viewer's conviction that the new team was invincible whatever the foe, however impossible the circumstances. Steed, the style notes stipulated, was to remain untouchable and he consummately exuded an aura of implacable invincibility. But it was Gambit who added that extra edge of threat to the proceedings, his presence ensuring that the dynamics of the storyline would not be stalled by conventional constraints of politeness and decency or ordinary human limitations with his unique combination of David Carradine's *Kung Fu* mysticism and Steve Austin's *The Six Million Dollar Man* supersonic physical prowess. And when you can't even trust your own side, when straightforward unquestionable loyalty isn't enough, he would be there to tie-up the threads through the maze of deceit and double-cross — a vital personality trait and one subtly conveyed by the wry smile

of an operative who is all too familiar with the absurd paradoxes of his profession. A man of outwardly reserved demeanour, Gambit is the agent who always keeps his guard up, both on and off duty! Similarly, Hunt could not have portrayed such self-assurance with consistent conviction lest he was drawing on experience. As Macnee once observed, only someone who has had experience of military service — which presumably extends to Hunt's tenure in the Merchant Navy — can have any idea of the stupidity and senselessness that sometimes prevails in the institutionalised world.

In the final count, beneath the glamour, stunts, eccentricities, and way-out plotlines that in essence is what *The Avengers* and *The New Avengers* is about — that of agents subverting and subtly exposing the corruption, secrecy and downright madness that inhabits a significant part of our society's structure — only a down-to-earth real man like Gambit could confront these monsters

