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Daily Mail (London)

February 26, 1994

When Joanna left me; (1) We had such great chemistry, says former Avengers star (2) BOD IMAGE

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SECTION: Pg. 27

LENGTH: 1907 words

ALL ACTORS like to think that they're Peter Pans, but there comes a time when we have to accept we're not. You wake up one morning, look in the mirror, and think to yourself, good God, where did the time go?

Since they've released The New Avengers on video, I've been looking at this person who is a stone lighter than I am now and has black hair instead of grey.

It's a strange jump to have to make. I'm still the same person I was when we made those programmes 16 years ago, but they are a constant reminder of how I've aged. Still, my little lad saw one of the videos the other day, and he recognised me, so at least I'm still in front.

I had a lot of fun with Joanna Lumley and Patrick Macnee making those series. Originally, I didn't see my character, Gambit, the way I was asked to play him. I thought it would be nice to get away from Patrick's character who wears suits all the time.

I'm totally different to Patrick. He went to Eton, while I was born on the wrong side of the Thames, so I thought Gambit should be less smooth. Besides which it's very difficult diving through windows and fighting people in a three-piece suit. Still, it was wonderful to get one's suits made at Savile Row, and I did get to keep one which I'm trying to get back into. But I need to lose a stone and a half first.

Jo and I are still great mates. I'm delighted that she's had so much success with Absolutely Fabulous. Suddenly everybody is going on about what a great actress she is, which I knew she was all the time.

That's the great thing about our profession. As long as you can still stand up, there's always a chance that something wonderful will happen. If I do have any regrets, it's that nobody thought to pair us together immediately after we finished the Avengers. We work well together, we like each other and I think we have a chemistry.

NOW THAT The New Avengers is out on video, it has been mooted that we should bring back the characters of Purdey and Gambit. Jo is willing to do it if the script is right and so am I, so we'll see what happens.

When I stopped playing Gambit everybody saw me as Mr Smoothy, which is an image that is a million miles away from me. Then I did the Nescafe ads, so for ten years I was known as the coffee man.

People do like to put you in boxes. With any part you play for any period of time, people think you are really like that.

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So I did suffer a bit from typecasting, but I can't really complain about it.

I have worked quite a lot since The New Avengers in theatre, panto and television, but now my life is much more geared to keeping things level on the home front. I have a five-year old son, Jason, and I'm determined to be as much a part of his growing up as I can be.

I have two great children from each of my two marriages. Before I became an actor, I acted out everything I did - even my marriage. When I got married, I was just acting a role. My first wife, Carol, was a hairdresser and I had a job as a salesman. But I gave it all up to go to drama school, which wasn't fair on her and the marriage didn't last much longer.

I think it was very unfair on my eldest son, Gareth, because when he was growing up I was battling to get a career and he was young when I left his mother. And my middle son, Oliver, suffered from the break-up of my second marriage (to Swedish model Annette Walter-Lax).

MUCH LATER on in my life I realised what my two older children went through. It's very difficult to explain that you are away all the time working so that you can afford to pay the bills and the school fees. But I do accept that I wasn't a good father for the simple reason that I was concentrating more on my career than my family.

I even remember being interviewed on television during my early days in

rep and saying that I would give up my family for my career, which I meant to qualify but then the interview ended.

That attitude has completely changed now. I'm more committed to my new family. My second son, Oliver, who is 14, went to live with his mother in Sweden for a while, but he's back living with me now. I admire him a lot because he hasn't had it easy, and I feel very bad about that. But he is a shrewd lad, so I have no fears for him.

I'm very proud of my eldest son, who is 25. He's a concert pianist now. He didn't start playing the piano until he was 14 and out of nowhere has come this person who plays the piano beautifully. He's just got his own flat and we've become very good mates.

I feel very fortunate. I feel that my two marriages were a mistake and half a mistake, and now I've been given a second chance with my children. I wasn't a good dad. I didn't put in the time with my children that fathers are supposed to put in, but I've served my time as a nanny and now I'm very conscious of wanting to be there as a proper father for my children.

Jason's mother, Amanda, and I aren't married but we are very happy together. She is much younger than me, and I am aware that people look at us and think what's a man doing with a woman less than half his age?

We were on the golf course the other day and somebody said: 'Oh, you've brought your daughter with you', so we just looked at each other and said 'Yes'. The age gap doesn't bother me. We get on and the relationship seems to work, so I don't want to question it or tamper with it. My feeling is that it's happened, so enjoy it while you can. What does it matter if you are happy? HAVING Amanda and a young child definitely keeps me young. And I no longer feel that I have constantly to battle to get my next job so that I can pay the bills. I suppose I will always have that working-class fear of not knowing where the next job is coming from, but I am learning to take it easier.

Part of that is due to the fact that, a couple of years ago, I was pushing myself so hard that I very nearly had a nervous breakdown.

I was doing a play with Fiona Fullerton and three days before the show was due to open I was driving to rehearsals, and I suddenly felt as if I was very drunk. I had to pull the car over to the hard shoulder and then I just broke down and started crying. I made it to rehearsals but I couldn't remember anything or do anything.

I just wanted everything to go away. They called in the doctor who told me that if I didn't go away on my own and have

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a complete rest I would have a nervous breakdown.

My stepfather had just been knocked down and killed in an accident, and I suppose I hadn't really got over it. And I had been bottling up a lot of other things that had happened over the years, and then suddenly it was as if a pin had pricked through and I just collapsed.

I felt as if none of these things was really happening to me. I felt as if I was in a dream, acting everything out. It really frightened me. Fortunately, I had a doctor who could see what was happening and he told me that if I didn't have a rest there and then I could be in serious trouble later. So I pulled out of the play and the next morning I went to stay with a friend in Cornwall and spent a week fishing. Then I brought the family down and took about six weeks out until I felt all right again.

Now, at 51, I feel great. They say that life begins at 40 or 50 but I think it can start again at whatever age you choose, and I certainly feel that my life is beginning all over again.

* The first two volumes of The New Avengers are available on the Video Gems label, price £12.99 each.

LOAD-DATE: February 28, 1994

LANGUAGE: English

GRAPHIC: (1) Gambit and Purdey: **Gareth Hunt** and Joanna Lumley in the New Avengers (2) **Gareth Hunt** today: 'I spend more time with my family'

PUB-TYPE: Paper

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