

Patrick Macnee

AVENGER

with A View To Kill

Somehow we expected him to trot out the party line on the latest Bond film. But Mr. Macnee seemed happier talking about the role that made him famous – John Steed in *The Avengers*. NEIL GAIMAN meets an American citizen who remains a most archetypal Englishman.

Meeting Patrick Macnee, my first impression was that in the flesh he looks younger and slimmer than he appeared on Wogan or in the new Bond film, *A View To A Kill*. My second was a realisation that, for me, even here in the flesh, Patrick Macnee was and forever would be John Steed, the suave and civilised male presence in *The Avengers*.

He looked the same; the voice was the same; the dress-sense was impeccable (although the steel-lined bowler and the brolley were missing); a

slice of English heritage, who was shaking my hand and asking if I'd seen the photos of Grace Jones in *Playboy*. (Would John Steed ask me that? Sure he would, I decided).

All the time London Summer season passers by passed us by. And as they did

so their reaction was identical, person to person. A glance at Patrick Macnee, then a glance forward, then an involuntary jerk of the head as they realised who they had been looking at, followed by an attempt to walk straight ahead, while still staring back at us and trying to look as if they weren't looking at Patrick Macnee at all. And I overheard the whispered comments. Nobody said, "Look, that's Patrick Macnee." Not at all. The universal murmur was, "It's Steed!"

I felt less alone. It obviously wasn't just me.

We sat down for dinner, Mr Macnee, the photographer, Lesley from the Bond film publicity, and myself.

He drinks Perrier. ("No alcohol. At my age, whatever brain you have you try to hold on to, and if I put alcohol into it I can't remember *anything*. I can't remember much anyway. But I don't particularly miss it.")

We begin with *The Avengers* — how, I wondered, does he feel about the recent repeats of the old *Avengers* episodes?

"I don't think I particularly care, you know. Diana Rigg doesn't care at all — she hates it. But . . . if you're in a TV show made 25 years ago, and suddenly after a





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twelve-year interval they suddenly decide to show it again, what are you supposed to think? Good or bad? I don't think anything, just that it's being shown to a whole new lot of people. I'd be interested to know what they thought of it. The great thing about that show was that we weren't repeating ourselves. Anything you do for the first time is intriguing, but afterwards I don't get any feeling. Except for the fact you have to have some kind of identity in this business. You have to be known for something, so it does help. I acted for twenty years, before *The Avengers*.

His voice is cool and calm and British, smooth as liquid velvet. He is probably the most English person I've ever met, in a lifetime in England. He has lived in California since the Fifties, and has dual English/American citizenship. He finds the paradox amusing. "I was playing the head of an American company in a series called *Empire*. An American actor said 'What are you limeys doing coming over here and taking work away from Americans?' I said 'My dear fellow, I've lived here for thirty years, and I'm an American citizen.' He said 'But you've still got a British accent,' so I told him I was closely related to George the Third. But they've got no sense of humour about it. I often tell people that I'm an American citizen and I'm British, then they really get angry, as you're not supposed to be all those things."

He's kept his accent impeccable, though.

"Well, why not? I should hope so — I'm not going to pervert it with all those things they say like 'your baaady' and all those things. They never say 'I' or 'it' or anything, it's always 'Your baaady'. I get so fed up with all these Jane Fonda exercise books and things, telling people how to twist this that and the other. You need a good chiropractor after that."

Does he think he's typecast, at sixty-three?

"I don't think I am. People tell you that you are, but what can you say? I work all the time, as a fat, middle-aged Englishman

playing those parts, and — you like to think that you do them differently, but you don't very much. It's when you don't work that you start to worry. And the only way that I can work is by being, not an expatriot, but by working all over the world. A good play followed by a bad dinner, or vice versa. It's all acting."

The dinner arrives, and the conversation drifts back to *The Avengers*, as it continues to do all afternoon. I mention that I wish that they'd repeat the Honor Blackman episodes, which (I blush to say it) I am too young to remember. He shakes his head.

"I don't think they'd stand up. The Di Rigg ones are the best, and the Linda Thorson ones really didn't work at all. What should have happened is Diana shouldn't have left, they should have let it go on a bit longer, and then put it to rest, completely. But it's very difficult when

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someone asks you to do something again. You do it again. And after a while it started sending itself up, and you can't do that."

"Did you know there was a stage version put on? The only trouble was that the man who wrote it had a rubber fetish, so everyone was dressed in rubber. If you are going to have fetishes you should have a few of them sprinkled about, but this was the most rubberised thing you've ever seen. It came off in two weeks. "Unfortunately I wasn't in it," he added wistfully.

There were a number of classic fetishes used in *The Avengers*; my personal favourite was Diana Rigg dressed in corset, spiked collar and python . . .

"Ah yes. That was 'The Hellfire Club' episode — very topical. People enjoyed the sadomasochistic thing, particularly with the amount of pornography coming out, and I think that kind of thing hit it dead on. The most highly male chauvinistic thing you could possibly have, really. That was about the nearest they got her to being a sort of a object, while the good thing about *The Avengers* was that the woman was in the driving seat. The man, in essence, was being rescued by the woman, rather than being macho."

She was smarter, and more lethal, than Steed.

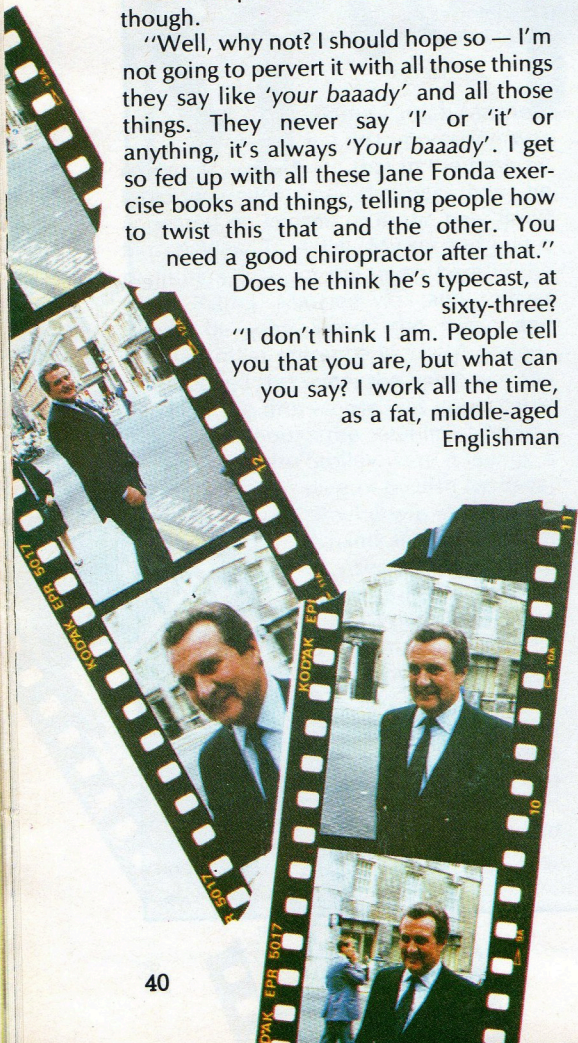
"Oh, much more. We basically made it up as we went along. We didn't actually rewrite the scripts, but when one gets an idea that is slightly ahead of its time, then they're caught with the problem of trying to keep up with the times, and the times,



of course, outstrip them. Real life is far more outrageous, and it always is."

We drift into real-life incidents that were more outrageous than fiction; despite having made his name in shows in which the violence was always present, he has very strong views on real violence and war, formed from his wartime experiences.

"We were just pushed into the thing, and expected to kill, kill, kill — and then they expected us to wind down afterwards. I wish . . . I think that the best way to do war would be to send only people over forty-five to war, and preferably send them naked, because the habit of sending young men to war I find obscene. Send the heads of state out and let them fight each other. I've always thought the morality of the old sending a great percentage of the population, most of whom are under twenty-five, off to a war that others have engineered, is obscene,





Clockwise from left: with Linda Thorson and roses; with Diana Rigg and pram (?); an unusual view (to a kill); Roger Moore (honourably mentioned) with Tanya Roberts; Patrick with Roger ("I've known him since he took in washing."); Grace Jones putting the squeeze on the old Avenger.

morally and logically. It's outrageous.

"But I don't think things like the Bond film increase violence, any more than pornography makes people go out and rape old ladies."

But doesn't the Bond ethic glamourise violence, and make people believe that it is a quick and easy solution?

"Well, bear in mind that Ian Fleming never went to war. We all went to war, and he sat in an office in the Admiralty, and wrote his books. Meanwhile, it all actually happened to us. It's always those people who are desk-bound and don't actually do it who work out these plots. And people think that it's for real, and it isn't at all. They are very snobby books, too. They imply that women, blacks, and 'other ranks' can be killed, while the officers just have a good time. I find them fairly repellent, honestly." He sips his Perrier. The tone is as silky-smooth and urbane, but he obviously means it. "Any form of hierarchy which implies that one

lot of people can slaughter another lot of other people because they're beneath them — socially or racially — and says that certain people deserve to live while others deserve to die, is wrong."

He changes the subject, wanting to know how I got into interviewing people. He wonders why I didn't want to do Roger Moore. I tell him that I don't think that Roger Moore has anything to say that he hasn't already said a few hundred times.

He shakes his head. "I went to a party at Robert Wagner's a few weeks ago and Roger turned up, looking like Flash Gordon, and we all got pissed, and my ex-stuntman, Ray Austin, reminded us of what we used to get up to at Elstree in the Sixties. Our, er, extra-curricular activity. It really went to Roger's head, and it has to have been the funniest and most outrageous evening that I've spent for a long time because his recall of things is perfect, and our American host looked at

us in dumb amazement as we recounted these stories. (You know, it was only those two series, *The Saint* and *The Avengers* that kept that studio open.")

Aha, I thought. The human side of Roger Moore . . . well, come on, Patrick; what were the extra-curricular activities?

Ever the gentleman, and the soul of discretion, Mr Macnee demurred. "I'm not going to tell you."

Not even if I turned off my tape recorder?

"No, but . . . there was a complete surprise on one thing, which I wouldn't have recalled if he hadn't got us going. We got onto Profumo — Stephen Ward and all that stuff that brought down the government. We said we knew all about it, and had attended all the orgies and everything (which we hadn't, but we pretended that we did just to see their faces, as we knew just enough about it to tell a very convincing story). But I only say that to illustrate that he is one of the most amusing people

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I know, Roger, and he's one of the best light comedy actors around."

He muses out loud. "It's funny to see what happens to all the old crowd. They either die or go into some form of dereliction or get married eight times or leave the country or leave this world. The few of us who are still going get together like old Chelsea Pensioners sitting in the sun on a bench," (Old voice) "Ooh, do you remember when . . ."

The concept of Moore and Macnee as Chelsea Pensioners was a hard one to grasp.

"It wouldn't be if you'd seen us the other night. No, Roger's one of the few stars to remain human, delightful, modest and pleasant. Wagner's one as well. But then again, one has known them since

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they took in washing, so it's hard to see them as stars."

The publicity girl left the table, and Patrick stood up as she left. *That, I thought, is manners.*

"You know, I was with a group of Italians, including Cubby Broccoli, and they asked me why I kept getting up when a lady came in or went out. I said it was an old English custom. They said, 'What do you do then?' I said, 'You stay standing up until they come back again'.

"Cubby Broccoli stood for twenty minutes . . ." He chuckled.

"You know, people come up to me and say 'Are you still working?' But what they mean is they haven't seen you in anything recently. And what they *really* mean is 'God! You're still alive!' and that irritates them, as you really shouldn't be, you should be dead. That's the problem. It doesn't worry me, though — I work all the time.

"People also want to know things which to you are trivial, but *aren't* to them. They find all sorts of things intriguing . . ."

As if to punctuate the fact that we are now talking about fans, the Head waiter comes over, and requests an autograph for the girl on the cash-desk. Patrick Macnee autographs a menu, writing 'The Avenger' under his signature. He can write 'The Avenger' under his signature in most European languages.

"You get to know a lot of people in a very short space of time, and you can do that all over the world, because they already know you — or think they do.



"They often don't even know your name. An actor called Pat Magee died a few years back, and I was in Australia at the time. They announced on US TV that Pat Magee, star of *The Avengers*, had died, so they rang up my daughter in Palm Springs and said, 'Sorry to hear that your father's dead'. She said, 'But I was talking to him 12 minutes ago in Australia.' They said, 'No, he's dead, it's just the time difference'. So she phoned me back and asked, 'Are you?' I said, 'No.'"

And once again we start to talk about *The Avengers*. He seems more keen on it now than he was at the beginning of the meal, as if he's loosened up somewhat.

"You know, we did a lot of work on the *Avengers*. Di Rigg said to me, 'The thing I love about you, Pat, is this tremendous obsession with detail.' Which we *both* had and have, which was why it worked. We'd set things up in *The Avengers* whereby you'd be doing things which you wouldn't expect people to be doing. But people *do* do really unex-

pected things all the time in real life. People do things out of a sense of perversity, and I think that's fun. And we'd do that in *The Avengers*.

"I used to call it *The Upside Down Show* . . ."

"No, actually I used to call it *The Arse About Face Show*, because we'd take a situation, and we'd tilt it. That's what we used to do . . ."

And it was just then that Lesley, the publicity girl (Hello, Lesley!), returned to say we'd run out of time. We made our goodbyes, and Patrick Macnee told us that he'd enjoyed meeting us in a way that made it sound that he actually *had* enjoyed meeting us. Then, half way across the room, he returned, and came back to our table again.

A woman had just come up to him. She wanted to tell 'Mr Magee' what a great fan of his she was. "It's so nice to have fans," said Macnee, "Even if they don't know your name."

And the last of the English Gentlemen left the restaurant.