

# Steed's still that witty English gent

By Ron Base Toronto Star

Ian Hendry, a serious British actor who was the star of the original Avengers TV series once turned to Patrick Macnee in exasperation. "Oh, Patrick," he said, "do you always have to be so trivial?"

Whether he had to or not, Macnee always was, and therefore he could play the marvellously insouciant John Steed with the same naturalness with which he adopted the trademarked bowler hat and umbrella.

"When you have been through so much war and death, you tend to make light of things or you don't survive," Macnee said the other day when he arrived in town to star in a revival of *The Grass Is Greener*, which opens tonight at the Royal Alexandra Theatre.

"I was only 19 when I went into the navy, 26 when I got out, one of only four men still alive in our flotilla at the end. I don't believe I even started to think until I was 30. I gently shifted through things, and didn't notice much of anything. I caused a great deal of havoc to wives and family."

When his second marriage broke up after only six months (his first lasted 16 years), he sought psychiatric help and that "opened my eyes to what was happening." Now, he says, he has changed completely, learned to care a great deal more about life around him. "I am not a dedicated actor," he says, "but I am a dedicated human being."

## New movie

For that reason he finds it increasingly difficult to play Steed, the suave secret agent with whom he is irrevocably associated, despite the fact that the 13 episodes of *The Avengers* he made with **Diana Rigg** were recently shown successfully on the CBS Late Night Movie, and the network is discussing the possibility of a new made-for-television *Avengers* movie.

"I find I have to act Steed now," he said, "and that's not easy."

Would he do another *Avengers* series? "I don't know. I'm not really sure there should be another series. I think the 13 shows on CBS are popular because they were much like *Monty Python*, irreverent, violent, in many respects tasteless. I'm very proud of them now."

He is not proud, however, of the 26 episodes of *The New Avengers* he made a couple of years ago, four of which were produced in Toronto by Nielsen-Ferns. "Without them," he

says, "we couldn't have survived. But I don't think the show at the time merited continuing. Our creative people just weren't strong enough."

Macnee remains infinitely capable of playing Steed, though. Sitting in his suite at the Royal York Hotel, dressed in an impeccably cut dark suit, he is still, at the age of 58, the personification of the witty English gentleman.

Characteristically, he downplays his acting ability, but in fact he is one of a fast disappearing breed, the sophisticated light comedian. Like Rex Harrison, Cary Grant or his cousin, David Niven, he has developed the ability to make his lines float with a natural elegance, all but lost in a generation dominated by the intensity of the Pacinos, Hoffmans, and the Richard Geres.

## Successful tour

It's a touch he will undoubtedly demonstrate tonight in *The Grass Is Greener*, a two-decades-old comedy by Hugh and Margaret Williams that Macnee, despite a successful British tour, fully expects will be panned by local critics. "I think we'll get knocked heavily," he shrugs. "But I'm used to it. I don't mind because I think we'll entertain people."

At any rate, he'll be finished with the play after five weeks at the Royal Alex. Then he must hurry back to Britain to play the villain in a television movie of *Dick Turpin*. And then it's back to Hollywood where he plays yet another villain in a theatrical horror flick called *The Howling*. The *Avengers* never made him rich (in the mid-60s he was making 200 pounds a week starring with Diana Rigg), but it resulted in him being in continual demand.

Before bringing *Grass* to Toronto, he starred in *The Sea Wolves*, a World War II yarn that reunited him with his cousin Niven for the first time since they made *The Evasive Pimp* 30 years ago.

Over a glass of white wine in the hotel's Library Bar he casually lets it drop that Niven's late brother Max was once his mother's lover.

"She always spoke very highly of David," he says. "David said, 'Oh, we're not really cousins.' But I think we are. He's 70-years-old, but he's in marvellous shape. When we were in India making *Sea Wolves*, David insisted we walk four miles out every day, then four miles back. Then we had a lovely fish meal and a couple of whiskies. Last day of the war David was blown out of his Jeep. Lost half



**Impeccable:** The suit and bowler became Patrick Macnee's trademark when he played John Steed in hit TV series *The Avengers*. He opens at Royal Alex tonight in revival of British comedy.

his shoulder. Has a big scar. Still, he skips every day. Just incredible."

Macnee hasn't lived in Britain since he emigrated to Canada in 1952. He has lived in the U.S. since 1955 and now makes his home in Palm Springs' exclusive Rancho Mirage area.

After his second divorce, he never remarried. "I love the ladies," he says, "but I no longer want involved relationships." He lives with his daughter Jenny and her husband. "People say, 'how can you do that?' Well, I say, we're very happy together."

It is hardly the lifestyle of John Steed, but these days Macnee is hard-

ly Steed. "Actually," he concedes, "I don't think I played him very well in the last series. I no longer have his inconsequential attitude."

"Steed remains unconcerned. He reminds me of Mark Phillips, Princess Anne's husband. After buying a \$500,000 house, he announces that he and his wife are just two young people on a mortgage. Steed is an older extension of that."

For one awful moment, Macnee sounds as if he dislikes his television alter ego. Ian Hendry, the actor who so long ago thought Macnee could be nothing but trivial, would have been impressed.

# Entertainment

Toronto Star  
Monday, March 31, 1980  
Section D, pages D1 D8

## Death silences Mantovani's lilting strings

TUNBRIDGE WELLS, England (UPI) — Mantovani, the master of easy listening music for four decades whose distinctive string sound made him the first man to sell a million stereo records in the United States, died yesterday. He was 74.

Once described as "the man who could make a hymn out of a rock number," Mantovani had been ill for several years and died in a nursing home.

Born Annunzio Paolo, in Venice, Italy, he took his mother's maiden name when he started his stage career as a violinist, but it was from his father that he inherited his musical talents.

"Father was a great musician," Mantovani once said. "Leader to Toscanini, professor at two Italian conservatories, gold medalist, knighted for his music. It was he who taught me."

But it was a disc jockey in Cleveland, Ohio, who made Mantovani a household name in North America in 1951 by playing the Mantovani orchestra's version of *Charmaine* so much that a craze for his music started. The song was added at the last minute to a long-playing album of waltzes and it became his theme tune.

The craze lasted through the 70s, and it survived every music trend of the time. Mantovani never veered from his style, stressing the soft strings of the violin both he and his father once played.

"No matter what the fads of the moment are, a beautiful melody well played will always be appreciated," he once said.

"Perhaps 25 per cent of the people like the classics. About 25 per cent like the Beatles. I aim to please the 50 per cent in the middle."

He succeeded, becoming the first man in North America to sell more than 1 million albums in stereo and recording 18 gold discs between 1951 and 1966.

Mantovani, who became a naturalized British citizen in 1933, began his musical career playing



**Mantovani:** His lush musical style made him a household word in the '50s.

the violin with a restaurant band in Birmingham, England at age 16.

"I thought I had accomplished my ambition when I was in my teens," he once said. "I had played the Saint-Saens Violin Concerto at the old Queen's Hall (in London)."

"Sir Thomas Beecham sent me a note to say that he had enjoyed my performance. But musicians have to eat, you know. And a virtuoso concert artist sometimes doesn't have enough fodder for years."

He became conductor for the Hotel Metropole in London and began recording and broadcasting for the BBC in 1927 — two years after he made his first broadcast from a hotel in Manchester, England.

By 1932, he had formed his famous *Tipica Orchestra* and toured the British Isles.

During World War II he made scores of broadcasts for the troops and in 1945 he became Noel Coward's musical director — conducting for such musicals as *Pacific 1860*, starring Mary Martin.

# Flynn almost always with Nazi

By Charles Higham

On Sept. 3, 1939, when war broke out, Britain asked all able-bodied male British subjects in the United States to report to Washington or their local consulate for instructions by diplomatic officials. Of the Hollywood contingent, Errol Flynn was the only British star who flatly refused.

In October 1940, Errol — by then one of Hollywood's most electrifying movie stars — was almost constantly in the company of Fritz Wiedemann, the Nazi consul general in San Francisco. In vain, a local member of the FBI pointed out to his superiors that Errol would not consort with Wiedemann after 1939 if he were a loyal British subject.

Errol also began an intense love affair with a Nazi singer named Gertrude Anderson. She was dark-haired, slender, attractive and very young. She was also on the American government's list of wanted Nazi agents and had connections at the highest level of the Nazi party in Berlin. But every effort to pin her down on specific charges failed.

## Mysterious Austrian

Dr. Hierman Erben, the commanding and mysterious Austrian Nazi whom Flynn had met seven years before when shipwrecked in New Britain, had turned up in the United States and was told by the government that as a Nazi agent, no further courtesies would be extended to him. By 1940, even though America was not yet at war, security had tightened and Nazi agents were being watched, reported, or imprisoned.

A time-honored method of disposing of undesirable aliens was to revoke their citizenship on the grounds of false procurement. Erben had lied on numerous passport renewal forms between 1926 and 1930 (the year of his citizenship), saying that he had been almost continuously present in America, whereas in fact he had been frequently absent. The secretary of labor, Frances Perkins, ordered revocation of citizenship proceedings in San Francisco.

At that moment, Errol stepped in with perhaps the most diabolical action of his career. He used Eleanor Roosevelt, of all people, to protect Erben and — by extension — himself.

Errol had met Mrs. Roosevelt through his work for the March of Dimes, at parties at the White House, in New York and in Hollywood. He was a friend of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., who recalls, "Errol used to join me and the Whitneys in fox

## ERROL FLYNN THE UNTOLD STORY

"Errol Flynn could have been tried for treason. The world-famous star could have ended his life on the gallows. With this astonishing statement, bestselling author Charles Higham delves behind the magical movie career that made Flynn a symbol of sedition and patriotic adventure, and discovers a horrifying secret involving espionage and promiscuity."

## Last of three parts

hunting in Virginia. Knowing how he hated Jews, we used to call him 'Flynnberg' to annoy him."

It was election year and Mrs. Roosevelt was on a nationwide tour on her husband's behalf in the early spring. At the beginning of March she met Errol in Miami. It was easy to get to her by mentioning his fondness for her son.

He asked her to have the revocation case against Erben's citizenship called off. The exact details of the conversation will probably never be known. But the thrust of the plea must have been to Mrs. Roosevelt's legendary concern for the underdog. Erben had often used the conven-

tional Nazi spy's technique of claiming that his family in Europe would be murdered by the Nazis if he did not seem to be a Nazi himself. (This was an ingenious inversion of the truth. Members of Gestapo agents' families were often held hostage but not for the reasons given. By holding them, the Gestapo could make sure it was not betrayed.)

Whatever approach Errol took, it worked. Mrs. Roosevelt promised to do what she could.

Records show that she contacted J. Edgar Hoover, the attorney general, the secretary of labor, and the secretaries of the Navy and Army. In March 1940, the grueling investigation of Erben and Errol was suddenly suspended.

On April 3, 1940, with full government approval, Erben sailed on the Panama Lines vessel, *S.S. Panama*, as ship's surgeon, bound for the Panama Canal. On board, he openly expressed his Nazism. He filmed the Panama Canal installations and obtained entry to military installations by attending a Militia Day Ceremony, without interference by anyone. He returned to New York

and his pictures were not impounded.

But by midsummer of 1940, the effort to revoke Erben's citizenship began to be reactivated. War was getting nearer to America. Every month brought news of Americans going down on torpedoed vessels or being interned in Europe. Erben's protections had worn thin.

A federal warrant was put out for Erben's arrest on the grounds of his having attempted to leave the country illegally while on trial over his citizenship. With astonishing boldness, risking his career, Errol went ahead and took Erben to Mexico. In 1944, while in a prison camp in Shanghai, Erben told a fellow inmate that Errol had hidden him on his yacht, the *Sirocco*, and that from there he had gone ashore to Mexico. This certainly was the easiest way of aiding a spy to escape from America.

## Drove to border

In 1978, Erben said Errol drove him to the border, got him through immigration and customs with a Mexican transit card and embraced him in a friendly farewell. Which ever version is true, Errol committed an act of treason by giving aid and comfort to an enemy at a time when he was still a British subject. If caught by British intelligence agents, he could have been extradited and tried in England as a traitor. The world-famous star could have ended his life on the hangman's noose.

Had British intelligence been in charge of the Flynn matter, there is no question that they would have succeeded in arresting him. They had enough to ask him: why he went to Spain with Erben to help him spy on the anti-Fascist Germans there; why he paid Erben's legal fees, gave him succor and shelter when Flynn's country was at war with Germany; why he aided and abetted Erben by helping him get aboard vessels; why he invited Erben's Nazi sons to stay at his home; why he hid Erben on his yacht — in short, why he traitorously assisted Britain's enemy.

But because this was neutral America, Errol went on, smiling his flashing smile, to make a series of anti-Nazi propaganda pictures — the supreme irony of his career.

☆☆☆

Errol Flynn died in October 1959.

Excerpted from the book *Errol Flynn: The Untold Story*. Copyright © 1980 by Charles Higham, \$15.75, Doubleday.



**The late years:** Errol Flynn bares his teeth at mastiff-headed swordstick he found on movie making session in Africa. Picture was taken about a year before his death in 1959.



**Guess who** A rather plump Twiggy, obviously enjoying married life, arrived at Los Angeles airport on weekend with hubby Michael Whitney and daughter Carly. Former skinny British model's now a singer.

## Shakespeare in Halifax

HALIFAX (CP) — Shakespeare will return to the Neptune Theatre here next fall and so will the diminutive, dynamic British director, Denise Coffey.

John Neville, Neptune Theatre director, announced that two of Shakespeare's Italian comedies, *The Taming Of The Shrew* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, will alternate in repertory for five weeks beginning Oct. 24.

Coffey's spirited production of *The Shrew* has already made a name for itself as part of the theatre's 1979-80 program.

Also on next fall's schedule is Jan de Hartog's *The Fourposter*, a play

about a couple whose marriage and bedroom are dominated by a huge fourposter bed.

Neville said he has not made up his mind yet about three more plays to round out the coming season.

## What's on tonight

□ **Babes In Toyland:** Nostalgic fantasy for the whole family features *The Babes*, who lead a musical romp in show directed by Munson Hicks at O'Keefe Centre, tonight through April 6. Front and Yonge St. At 7.30 p.m.