

DIANA



RIGG

Feature by Richard Hollis

It didn't seem to matter whether she was fighting robots, mad scientists or power crazy eccentrics, among tv audiences Mrs Emma Peel was the most popular companion for the debonair secret agent John Steed. And that's not so surprising when you stop to consider that the part was played with such gusto by Shakespearean actress, Diana Rigg. Patrick Macnee, who showed a soft spot for all his female partners from Honor Blackman to Joanna Lumley, often commented, when interviewed, that Diana's talent for acting had taught him a great deal about how to play his own character on screen.

It goes without saying that Diana Rigg is one of the most important of British actresses. Author of a book on theatre criticisms, she has never hidden the fact that through a multitude of film and television roles her greatest love is for the stage. "It keeps you vital, on your toes," she explains. "Anybody can act: what is required is the ability to believe in what you are saying, however unbelievable the situation or character may be."

Diana Rigg was born in Doncaster in July 1938. Her parents decided to return to India where they had been living for a number of years, and so Diana went with them and lived in Jodhpur near Bombay until she was seven. On returning to England for schooling she began to show an interest in drama and recitation. Aged 17, she left school to attend the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. After a short spell in modelling she appeared in her first repertory production,

"The Passing of the Third Floor Back", at the Civic Theatre in Chesterfield. Soon after she successfully auditioned for the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford. Her first television appearance took place in 1964 when she played opposite Harry H. Corbett in the ITV comedy *The Hothouse*.

Diana's first connection with *The Avengers* came when the production team invited her to take a screen test with show's leading man, Patrick Macnee, who had played John Steed opposite Honor Blackman's Catherine Gale for the show's past two seasons. (Ian Hendry co-starred as Dr David Keel in the first season.) The producers were searching for a suitable actress to replace Blackman as the new female lead, and after viewing a tape of the Armchair Theatre production, *The Hothouse*, on the advice of casting director Dodo Watts, they sensed that Diana Rigg could be the one. Originally, they had hired an attractive girl named Elizabeth Shepherd, but despite being an accomplished actress, the producers decided she didn't inject the right kind of light comedy needed for the character. But Ms Rigg's acting debut with Macnee was an immediate success, with the couple finding an instant rapport. Consequently she was given a long-term contract to play the part of Emma Peel in *The Avengers*.

"I auditioned for the part as a giggle," she remembers, "while still with the Royal Shakespeare Company". This was to be the turning point of her entire career. In *The Avengers* she was nominated Actress of the Year in 16 European countries and the series





developed into a cult with a worldwide audience, totalling 30 million viewers. Diana's first contract for *The Avengers* was worth £20,000. She was virtually unknown as an actress, but while she starred in the series (a total of 52 episodes) she was constantly in demand by the press, all requesting interviews and photographs. The show's producer Julian Wintle described her performance as possessing "—an animal like quality like no one else I know," and Macnee added, "I'm glad she's on my side."

Her fame allowed her to insist on more money for the second series and instead of £150 a week she found herself earning £450. Unfortunately television was not a media she relished. Yearning to return to the stage, she left *The Avengers* in December 1967 without any regrets. "It was the life of a mole—I rarely see daylight and I sleep on a camp bed during the lunch break."

The Americans, who had by now exerted a great influence over *The Avengers*, asked Diana Rigg to try her luck at a typical American sit-com series called, quite unimaginatively, *Diana*. Premiered in 1973 it only ran for a season. The stories depicted the home life of a beautiful young divorcee newly arrived in Manhattan from London. Her name Diana Smythe. "Quite frankly it was appalling," she remembers, "I really wanted to have a bash at something the Americans do incredibly well, and do it on their own soil, and do it under their own terms." Although the series paid her 23,000 dollars an episode it only ran for 13 weeks. As if to prove just how

Opposite page and above: A lively selection of shots displaying the many and varied fashions Diana Rigg wore as Emma Peel in *The Avengers*. Her wardrobe was designed by John Bates (during her first season) and later by Alan Hughes. Top right: A scene from the Brian Clemens scripted *Avengers* episode, *The Living Dead*. Right: Emma Peel in action.





This page: A collection of bizarre scenes from *The Avengers*, in which Diana Rigg usually found herself tied up as Emma Peel.



she detests the trappings of television, Diana Rigg recalls with some amusement that when she arrived in Hollywood, the studio sent a "three block long smoked glass limousine" to meet her. Six months later they sent her back to the airport in a "banged up studio station wagon". "I never stopped laughing on the plane home. You've failed, they were telling me, just in case you didn't know it."

She did go on to star in a number of films after leaving *The Avengers*, including *Theatre of Blood* with Vincent Price, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* with George Lazenby and *Hospital* starring George C. Scott. She told *Time* magazine that films and television were leading her down a path she did not wish to follow. After seeing a re-run of an old *Avengers* episode in New York City, she winced and commented, "It was like an early Joan Crawford movie. It had dated so fast."

Ironically the period look is part of the series' charm and Diana Rigg is still extremely popular in the role of Emma Peel among nostalgia buffs and fans of old television programmes. Even the Linda Thorsen episodes that followed only ever worked when re-using situations and ideas created during the Rigg series, madcap assassins and outrageous institutions, all of them terribly British. The writers were reluctant to lose that successful formula, and attractive though she may be, Miss Thorsen



This page: Emma Peel in action! For the required 'Kinky' image of her character in *The Avengers* Diana Rigg wore her famous leather cat-suit.

was really too young to carry off the part of Tara King with any conviction, and although it's easy to blame her for the demise of the series, it would be fairer to criticise the producer for the show (Clemens and Fennell were absent at the time) who mis-cast the part from the very beginning.

In 1972, Diana Rigg joined the National Theatre. She appeared semi-nude in Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers*, and very well covered up in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. More recently she starred in the award winning play *Night and Day* by Stoppard, and won an award herself in the highly underrated film version of Agatha Christie's *Evil Under the Sun*. Her West End appearance in 1983 was in Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, when she was in fine form as Rex Harrison's daughter. Not totally neglecting television she appeared as Clytemnestra in the 1979 BBC version of the *Orestia* trilogy.

As an actress Diana Rigg has moved on to other things, but although those days of "avenging" are far behind her she will perhaps be best remembered for her time opposite Patrick Macnee in the popular sixties show. As Dave Rogers points out in his excellent book on the series, "*The Avengers* was the first British made tv show to be screened prime-time on an American network coast to coast." And part of that success came about due to Diana Rigg's performance as Emma Peel. ■

