

Patrick Macnee ON



THE AVENGERS

It was sometime during the early 40s when Patrick Macnee was first acclaimed for his acting abilities. Theatre critic Harold Hobson commended the young thespian for his "striking" reading of five lines in the play, *The White Devil*. And the words that won the actor his first positive notice? "This is not true, madame!"

Born in London in 1922, into what the actor calls "a socially privileged background", Macnee found his early career influences torn between the world of horse racing, in which he had no interest and in which his father, trainer "Shrimp" Macnee, worked and public school where he first developed an interest in acting. After five years at Eton, young Patrick spent some time visiting racecourses with his father until a run of bad luck at the track caused the family finances to dwindle.

On the advice of actress Margaret Rawlings, he applied to the Webber-Douglas drama school in South Kensington where he won a scholarship but, as he recalls, "Not because of any special merit but because the war had taken so many of the younger men." But the stint at drama school lasted only a short time when he decided to go into repertory, where he not only found a variety of roles but also met his first wife, Barbara Douglas, during a run of *Little Women*.

In 1941 he joined the navy and was stationed at the 8th Gunboat Flotilla at

Dartmouth. Following his discharge in 1947 he returned to the theatre, finding an abundance of work (including the privident *The White Devil*) although not enough to support his family, which now had an additional two members—a son, Rupert and daughter, Jennie.

Drawn by the more lucrative rewards of the film world, Macnee took up the option of bit-parts in various features, including *Oliver's Hamlet*, *The Elusive Pimpernel* and *The Fatal Night*. He then took up the offer of a friend, director David Greene, to go to Canada and work in television "to earn the absolute fortune of \$100 a week."

The next eight years were spent building up a successful career in Canadian TV, although the station he worked for was limited to the Toronto area. Nevertheless, Macnee did get to work with several well-known actors—including Christopher Plummer, Kate Reid and Lorne Greene.

Then followed a year acting in various parts of the United States, including New York, where he worked with director George Roy Hill, among others, in the early days of live television. "Our famous one was a version of *A Night to Remember*, which was about the sinking of the Titanic. I played the designer in that. That was in 1956, and we did it live. We made the Titanic go down in a fish tank! Macnee would have a later brush with a





Left, top to bottom: On the trail of Aliens from outer space, Steed searches the apartment of amateur astronomer, Brigadier Whitehead (Jon Pertwee) in *From Venus With Love*. Steed and Cathy Gale (Honor Blackman). A portrait of John Steed; Steed and Cathy discuss latest developments. Below: Steed arrives at the journey's fair of *The Positive-Negative Man*.



Left: Steed (Patrick Macnee) and Emma (Diana Rigg) after their shocking encounter with *The Positive-Negative Man*, a crazed villain who stores electricity in his body and kills by merely touching his victims. Above: Steed to the rescue! The debonaire agent tangles with the crazed doctor Primble and his henchman Martin, in *From Venus With Love*.



Below: Steed (Patrick Macnee) on the set of *Vanish With Love*. Below: Steed and Mrs Peel (Diana Rigg) try to save Beresford (Peter Cushing) from his brother's invention in *Return of the Cybernauts*. Opposite top: Steed has trouble with the phone in *Mission: Highly Improbable*. Opposite below: Steed questions Martin (Glive Dunn) the toyshop owner in *Something Nasty in the Nursery*.



doomed vessel when he appeared in *The Twilight Zone* episode, "Judgement Night"

After roles in episodes of *Playhouse 90* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, he returned to England but found it difficult to find acting work. "I took a job with Edgar Peterson, a producer I'd known in America. He was in England producing a series about Sir Winston Churchill and was making it like a Western, which didn't please the English too much! I became his associate producer and we interviewed everybody from Mountbatten to Churchill's cook and parlour maid.

"Edgar Peterson sent a telegram to Richard Rogers, who was a chief shareholder in ABC (the company which made the series) which said, 'Too much music!' Rogers sent back a wire and fired him! I was left all on my own, with John Schlesinger, who was unknown at the time, helping me. We made a lovely, 26 part series called *The Valiant Years*."

While searching for more production work, Macnee was contacted by Sydney Newman, a British TV executive and co-creator of *Doctor Who*. "He asked me if I would like to help him out for a few months in a series, which was more or less the continuation of something else — *Police Surgeon*, with Ian Hendry." Macnee initially declined on the basis that he was now a producer rather than an actor, but later, "I asked for an outrageous sum of money, which they gave me." And so *The Avengers* was born.

The format for the show was a simple one involving the girlfriend of the Hendry character being gunned down in the street, leading him to avenge her death by hunting down the world's criminals. The girlfriend was played by Catherine Woodville, who later became Macnee's second wife — a marriage that was short-lived as several months later she moved to California and remarried.

Hendry and Macnee developed the character of John Steed over the first series of the show. "We took the ordinary cops and robbers theme and turned it upside down. For a long while it wasn't really made clear whether Steed was a goodie or a baddie. Peter Hammond, the director, gave it immense imagination. He used a stylised and Germanic technique that gave a strange, odd, Fritz Lang effect."

After the initial nine months, Hendry left the series and Sydney Newman came up with the idea of Cathy Gale — a female equivalent of John Steed. Played by Honor Blackman, the character was inspired by a combination of the late Margaret Bourke White (a *Life* magazine photographer) and anthropologist Margaret Mead. The idea was to have a strong, independent character who was something more than a wife, secretary or sex symbol, although there would be those who would argue that the latter was a serious consideration!

According to Macnee, the character of Steed was based on three people: The Scarlet Pimpernel as portrayed by Leslie Howard, a character played by the late Ralph Richardson in the 1936 feature *Q Planes*, and his own father. In developing Steed, Macnee designed all his own clothes and furnished him with exceedingly good manners, drawn from his own background. He also had a hand in the creation of Cathy Gale. As he recalls, "I suggested to Honor Blackman that she dressed Cathy in black leather, using the expression 'kinky'. But at that time I honestly didn't know I was hitting on a well-known subterranean deviation."

After two years, Blackman left *The Avengers* to become a James Bond girl — Pussy Galore, in *Goldfinger*. This left a gap and as Macnee recalls, "It took them ages to find somebody else and, when they finally did, they fired her shortly thereafter. She was

too womanly. She had a big rear... Well, it should have been the other way around, with big... shoulders! You had to be a hermaphrodite to be on *The Avengers!*"

A trial episode was shot with first choice, Elizabeth Shepherd, but when she proved physically unsuitable for the role, further screen tests were carried out. "Eventually, they chose Diana Rigg. The two of us just clicked, and it worked. When Diana took over from Honor Blackman, she was given the most frightful reviews. Now she's one of the great actresses of the world. After I'd been working with Diana for about five episodes, my agent asked if they didn't think they should give me a share of the profits. They said, 'Share of the profits! No, he's out. We'll get a younger and better man.' We were all very insecure in those days. Anyway, we finally agreed on two and a half percent of the profits, which I think over the years has garnered me maybe a little more than \$500! But the show became sort of a cult."

One of the greatest attributes of the Macnee/Rigg *Avengers* was the relationship between their characters. As Macnee recalls, "She was wonderful to work with and we shared a mutual obsession for detail. We deliberately set out to contrive a new and different relationship from the one I had shared with Cathy Gale. We used a sort of shorthand in our communication and we evolved a style of playing two-handed scenes for comedy. We put Emma and Steed in routine situations, like having a meal or playing a game of chess. They would casually discuss some mastermind's plan to rule the world at the same time as serving the soup!"

The question of a possible sexual relationship between Steed and his female partners was often a point of some controversy. "We took the sex relationship for granted. By the mid-60s, the Pill was part of life, so it was accepted that Emma and Steed slept together, but we simply didn't dwell on it. Because we didn't have to bother about sex, we could get on with the plot."

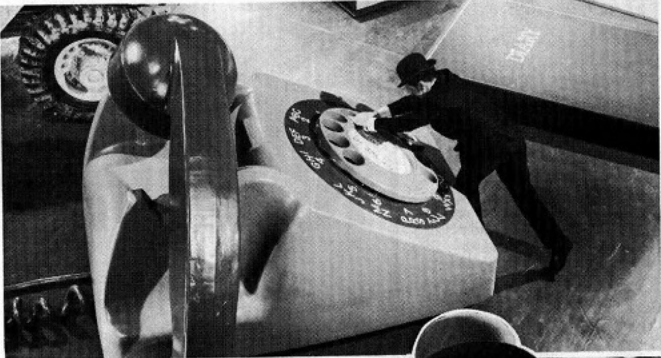
Oddly enough, Macnee disagrees with the general opinion that *The Avengers* is an example of good writing and clever dialogue. "There was no good writing, there was no clever dialogue. Di Rigg and I used to write all our own scenes because it was so badly written. They were written as rather ordinary thrillers, to be honest. The writers chose very clever topics, like having a robot man way before people thought of robots, etc."

"But what we really did, and I say 'we' advisedly, was to see what would happen if we took these perfectly straight stories and then made them ever so slightly ludicrous—because we thought that life was ludicrous anyway, which it is! To stay alive at all, you have to be slightly mad—but you also had to be basically cool. We used that, we tilted it a bit, we made it funny, and the show worked."

Macnee also has his own theory as to what made *The Avengers* such a success. "The only reason it became successful I think, is because it was different, although it wasn't that great. Also, the women were representative, in a comic strip sort of form, of women coming into their own. It was also very stylishly directed and the people who worked on it happened to be extraordinary. All those people contrived to make a show that was way ahead of its time. Of course, it's been imitated to death ever since."

In 1967, Linda Thorson replaced Diana Rigg. For the next 30 episodes she partnered Macnee, as Tara King—the black leather cat suits were gone but the toughness wasn't. In 1969 *The Avengers* came to an end.

Following the last episode, Macnee left to settle in California. He also toured Australia and New Zealand in a production of *The*



Secretary Bird. On returning to the United States he commenced a sixteen month run in the Broadway production of *Sleuth*. "I believe *Sleuth* was my personal turning point as an actor. I think it made me stronger. For the first time in years, I realised I could do more than lift a bowler and dash about as Steed."

In 1976, Patrick Macnee agreed to return to the character of John Steed in *The New Avengers*, although in this variation he was partnered not only a beautiful woman but also another male operative, played by Gareth Hunt. The series lacked much of the verve and inventiveness of the original, although Steed was his usual urbane self and Purdew (Joanna Lumley) managed to build something of a cult following. The new show, backed by French money, ran two seasons with latter episodes being made completely in Canada.

Since the demise of *The Avengers*, both old and new, Patrick Macnee, like so many actors who have become strongly associated with one character, has found it difficult to be considered for other roles. "I lost a part in the *Mississippi* TV series because of it. A director, who had directed me in 15 *Avengers* episodes, said, 'Oh no, we can't have Macnee, he's too identified with *The Avengers!*'"

More recently, Macnee has been involved in a half hour situation comedy for American TV, called *Empire*. He appears in six episodes of the show, playing the head of a company in a Watergate-type spoof. He has also appeared in several features over the last few years, although he views them somewhat negatively—with one exception—Joe Dante's *The Howling*, in which he played a werewolf/psychiatrist. "Television, I view as a living. Movies... that I am in, if you take the titles and the type of them, except for *The Howling*, have been mostly unreleased. But I made them purely because somebody offered them to me. The inception of cable

(TV) inflicts one's dreadful movies upon one!" Although Macnee is also experienced on the production side, it's not an area that particularly excites him today. "I did it once on a unique project. I don't want to do that, I'm just an actor. If you're an actor, you just act what comes along. That's really how it works. To be an actor, you're just on the end of a phone, you have to wait until people ring you up. It's the most humiliating job in the whole world. But, just to do it well occasionally is exciting."

His attitude towards his career and his involvement with *The Avengers*, today, is somewhat philosophical. "It was a thing of the 60s and we were ahead of our time. The thing that I gave to the show was the endurance to actually be there. When people talk to me about *The Avengers*, I'm delighted that they found it interesting, but to me, it's as if you suddenly said, 'Didn't you get a first in history when you were at college?' I say: 'let's do something in the 80s that is ahead of its time. If I'm going to do a series, I want it to be new.'"

Following his appearance in the *Empire* series, Macnee has returned to England after living and working for ten years in the United States. He will be next seen as Friar Tuck in a remake of *Robin Hood*. "You've caught me at a time when I'm doing some interesting things... if one's always trying to discover new things, then it's fun, but to just sit back, dwelling on the past... In the last ten years, I've spent a lot of time with my children—that's been good—because I didn't spend much time with them when they were young. I've lived a life rather than pursued a career."

Portions of this feature were taken from an interview with Patrick Macnee which was conducted by Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier in California, September, 1983. Grateful acknowledgement is extended to them for their kind permission to include them in this feature.