

THE AVENGERS

M. APPEAL

BRIAN CLEMENS, THE SERIES' PRODUCER/WRITER, RECALLS THE FEMMES WHO PARTNERED WITH JOHN STEED.

BY JAMES MURRAY

As both a producer/writer for *THE AVENGERS* and *THE NEW AVENGERS*, Brian Clemens tailored episodes for the franchise's female legacy. I suspected Emma Peel was a shoo-in as his fave. I was wrong. Anyway, Clemens opted to open our chat with—

The differences:

"Cathy Gale, in the persona of Honor Blackman [1961-'64] who's the one I fancied most, was the toughest. She had to be, she was breaking new ground as a strong female character who had to compete in male territory—without losing her femininity.

"Emma Peel [played by Diana Rigg, 1966-'68] had it a little easier since that type of role had already been established. She just had to carry on but in her own mode, which was with a lighter touch—almost tongue in cheek.

"Tara King? Well, I didn't cast Linda [Thorson, 1968-'69] for the role, having been fired at the time! Nor would I have for two reasons. First, she had no experience to fall back on; she was too young—not in years, but in



Cast as John Steed's sidekick in the final season of *THE AVENGERS* ('68-'69), Linda Thorson is active in the Canadian TV series, *EMILY OF NEW MOON* ('98).

living. Second, she was Canadian, so she did not properly appreciate the peculiar British sense of humour that permeated the series. I got around this, though not entirely successfully, by making a virtue of her naivete—giving her a kind of lovable new puppy persona. I also created Mother [Patrick Newell] to bring in some much needed humour, mostly between him and Steed.

"Purdey [played by Joanna Lumley in *THE NEW AVENGERS*, 1976] was easier still. It was a different age where women could put their bras back on again, secure in their new-found power. Jo Lumley is a very stylish person and she has an almost male sense of humour—a genuine wit. It was a pleasure to write for her, knowing she would not only understand the joke but actually plus up on it."

What about the story behind Emma Peel's name?

"Emma Peel was created by the late Marie Donaldson, a publicist on the show. M. Appeal. Man Appeal. I thought it a bit hokey, but liked the name, so we used it."

Why didn't Elizabeth Shepherd work out as the



T: Diana Rigg in *A Touch of Brimstone*: ABC declined to televise the episode during its first run. B: Rigg ("Emma Peel") & Patrick Macnee ("John Steed").



BRIAN CLEMENS

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first Mrs. Peel?

“Liz Shepherd, a good actress, just had no sense of humour, nor did she have much grounding in *THE AVENGERS*. I am not even sure that she had seen any episodes before she was cast. She was tough, beautiful, dour. She might have been Sigourney Weaver!”

And Diana Rigg?

“Diana had that great sense of spoofy humour. Maybe she never quite took it seriously which was okay, because the viewers were not supposed to either.”

And what other elements made those Emma Peel episodes into “classic” AVENGERS?

“Steed [Patrick Macnee] was at his youthful peak then. As the series wore on, so did he, and that didn’t help. Secretly though, I think it is because Diana was the partner he *really* hit it off with, and it shows. All our best shows were contained in the Emma Peel series although, arguably, some of the best scripts were in the Tara King/Purdey episodes. I think *Dead Men are Dangerous* was one of my best—ranking with *Joker* and *House that Jack Built*—but everyone has their favorites.”

Any thoughts about the Steed/Mrs. Peel team?

“The Peel series was not, per se, *Beauty and the Beast*, but rather, for me, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby—with Crosby/Steed always conning Hope/Peel into wrestling the alligator. It’s a time honored formula and has been working since Laurel and Hardy.”

What about the sexual tension in the series?

“I always thought that the Cathy Gale/Emma Peel relationships had the ten-

sion of “They have: Will they do it again?” I always imagined that they *had* been to bed together, had a terrific time and then, though not over, they were kept together by their work. With all the sexual tensions dissipated, they were able to relax into it more.”

Any speculation as to why the producers settled on Emma Peel for the AVENGERS movie?

“I think it is a case of first seen; the Peel episodes were the first seen really worldwide and especially in the States. They were like a

Honor Blackman, cast as Cathy Gale, is the femme whom AVENGERS producer Brian Clemens “fancied most.”

