



# Robin of Sherwood

# Jason Connery

## Interview

by Patrick Mulhern

**W**HEN arranging an interview, one always has preconceptions of the artist concerned, but more often than not that person turns out to be quite the opposite of what one had anticipated. With Jason Connery, one might expect a justifiably swollen ego: he is the son of two internationally celebrated film stars – Sean Connery and Diane Cilento; he was educated at Gordonstoun, the famous Scottish public school for the upper crust; at 23, he's already had a successful career as an actor, most recently landing the lead role in *Robin of Sherwood*; and he has very striking looks. However, Jason is totally without pretensions, and comes across as a charming and intelligent young man.

### Little Formal Training

He has done a huge amount of publicity for *Robin of Sherwood* over the last year. As well as many photo sessions and interviews in this country, he has been involved in lots of hype over in the US, where the show has just taken off in a big way. In January, Jason spent 21 days touring 14 cities in America, doing a total of 90 interviews – 40 over the 'phone! Yet, his enthusiasm and interest do not appear to have waned in the slightest, although he does admit, 'I ended up absolutely knackered.'

His acting career took off soon after leaving Gordonstoun. Remaining in Scotland, Jason successfully auditioned for the Perth Rep, where he stayed for six months. 'I did six different plays, including pantomime, *West Side Story*, a Tom Stoppard play *Night And Day*, and a Scottish play written by a woman who thinks she's the reincarnation of James I. Quite a mixed bag.'

He had little in the way of formal training. He turned down a place at Bristol Old Vic drama school in favour of the Perth Rep, where he could gain more experience. 'But I also went to a lot of classes at the Actors' Centre in London. It was very good, because you could just go in, book a time, and say what lessons you wanted to do. It was more in your hands than in theirs.' He got a lucky break very quickly, and won a small part in the film *Lords of Discipline* for Paramount Pictures. He played a young cadet who was put through the torturous plebe system and survived – although as Jason ruefully recalls, he did have to have his hair shaved off!

'After that, I didn't work for a while and I started to go a bit bananas. So I went back to the Actors' Guild just for something to do. I was hoping someone might do a film on the Falklands crisis, because I thought the shaved head might come in useful'. He didn't have to wait too long however. In the next few months, Jason was asked to play Nemo in John Boorman's French-made surrealist fantasy *Dream One*. The film never reached this country: when released in Paris, it received a panning from the critics, and lasted only a couple of weeks.

### Playground Antics

In August 1984, Jason did his first television work in BBC's *Doctor Who*. 'I was Jondar in *Vengeance On Varos*. It was good fun working on that. It was the first time I'd done anything on video, quite a contrast to film, which one does a shot at a time. We did a lot of rehearsal, and then recorded about 90 minutes worth of television in four days. It goes very fast. Ron Jones the

director was a really nice guy, and I enjoyed working with Martin Jarvis, Forbes Collins, and Colin Baker, who was a very funny man. I felt really stupid, because I had to shoot all these people with a ray gun, and obviously when I fired it, nothing would happen, but the guys would scream and fall dead on the ground. Every time I fired, I had to pause for three seconds, so the laser effect could be added later. It was like being a five-year-old again, and I ended up going "Pow! Pow!" every time I shot someone.' Jason illustrated this for me in a throwback to the playground antics of his youth.

### The Boy Who Had Everything

'There was a bloody good actor called Nabil Shaban who was made up as a little worm covered in slime, and he had a wonderful laugh, which went something like this . . . ' I was then treated to an amusing rendition of Sil's remarkable gurgling cackle. The character Jondar spent a lot of time tied up to a wall being tortured by laser beams; the sadistic scenario was being recorded on video cassettes and sold to other planets. Such gratuitous violence received several complaints from the Mary Whitehouse brigade – a fact Jason was delighted to hear.

After *Doctor Who*, he flew to Athens to film *The First Modern Olympics* – five hours' worth of television for NBC – in which he played a young American athlete called Thomas Pelham Curtis, a gold medallist of 1896. This was followed closely by *The Boy Who Had Everything*, which is to be released in Britain this spring. Made by Alfred Road Films in Australia, it gave Jason the opportunity to star alongside his



Best wishes  
Joan Connery





mother Diane Cilento. 'I'm often asked whether I get advice from my parents, but if they're not physically involved in what I'm doing, it doesn't happen. On that film though, I think I did learn a lot from working so closely with my mother.

'It's about a young boy I'd describe as being emotionally constipated. He excels at everything: he's a very fast runner, intelligent, comes from a middle-class family – it looks as if everything's going his way. Then he goes to a tough University, to a Halls of Residence, where the seniors' motto is 'Humble, more humble, most humble.' They build him up into a great hero, and then they smash him down. They say 'You're just the same as everyone else. Who do you think you are?' Only when he's been brought right down do they allow him to build up his true character. Apparently, it's based on director Stephen Wallace's own childhood.' Jason was nominated for the Australian equivalent of an Oscar for his performance in *The Boy Who Had Everything*. When it opens over here, it seems destined to be a hit, being rather conveniently timed to coincide with the start of the new series of *Robin Of Sherwood*.

## Robin of Sherwood

Finding a successor for the superb Michael Praed as *Robin Of Sherwood*, caused many headaches for the production team at HTV. Jason was 'one of many hopefuls' invited down to Bristol at the beginning of last year to test for the role, but it wasn't until five months later that he was called by his agent to be told he'd landed the part. 'I was mucking out the goat shed at my mother's farm in Australia at the time.'

He remembers how welcoming the Merry Men were the day he went down to Bristol to do the test. 'They were all really nice to me. They were shooting the end of the second series, and they all came up to me, and offered to do the test with me. So I did four scenes with them and one with Marion. I was shown how to use a bow and arrow properly, but on the test, I strung the bow on the wrong side, and proceeded to shoot the sound man. Fortunately the arrow was rubber-tipped, so he wasn't hurt, just a little surprised.'

The scenes Jason filmed at that time were then tacked on to the end of *The Greatest Enemy* episode, long before a final decision had been taken on Praed's successor. 'Even though I shot that, it wouldn't necessarily have been me. They were careful not to show my face, you'll remember.

'I did actually get to meet Michael Praed, and like everyone else, he was very pleasant to me. Because it was the end of the shoot and he was leaving, there were a lot of parties going on. So I thought I'd better disappear as I wasn't really involved, but Michael and the Merry Men asked me to stay, and in the end I was there for five days. I might have felt out-of-place, but they made me really welcome.'

I wondered if he had any trepidation about taking over from Michael Praed, but apparently once it was established that Jason's character Robert of Huntingdon

was to be quite different from Robin of Loxley, and that a plausible reason would be given to bridge the gap, he was quite happy. 'I realised that they would have to go for a completely new character because I am physically so different from Michael Praed. When Robin dies, I am chosen by Herne because he sees the same rebellious spirit in me, not a similar person physically. There are actually two legends of Robin Hood, one where he is the son of a peasant and the other depicting him as a member of

the aristocracy – the son of the Earl of Huntingdon. Quite convenient for us.

'What's so good about it is that the writer Richard Carpenter prevents Robin and his Merry Men from becoming cardboard cut-outs, just turning up, beating people up and taking off again. He gives us all very strong character lines, builds us up and puts us into interesting situations. There are also many sidelines which come to a head at the end of the series, but I can't tell you about those.'







Robin Hood and his merry(?) men!

Jason was away filming when the previous two series were aired, although he does remember a big hype campaign before it started. Once he'd got the part, however, he made a point of catching up with all the old episodes, 'partly because I enjoyed watching them, but mainly to see who the Merry Men were and how they worked. I was nervous about coming in with an established cast, but Clive Mantle (Little John) told me they were just as wary of me. It worked well, because you can see during the course of the programme that we get to know each other better as time goes on. A feeling of companionship and much more joviality filters through.

'Robert finds it particularly difficult to break through with Marion. She doesn't accept him for a long time, because she's still in love with the first Robin. But all the characters develop well. Little John slowly becomes my right-hand man. He's always there keeping an eye on me. Will Scarlett is like my conscience. He questions every move I make – not always aggressively, but to test me. Much grows-up and fends for himself a bit more. I think it's good that the characters can change.

'*Robin Of Sherwood* is glossy, but not at all in the glamorous way of the Errol Flynn-style movies. You get the real feel of the period – dirty, smelly, dusty – a time when the average life expectancy was about 30. All the villagers have to be dirtied down every day – designer mud all over the place. We try to be as authentic as possible.'

Filming started February last year, and went on until September, battling against typical British weather most of the way. It proved more difficult for the cast to keep themselves dry than warm. 'You just don't keep dry. A lot of the time is spent with a damp bum, sitting around in the woods. I haven't got piles yet though, so I'm not complaining. Rain doesn't show up on 16mm film, unless it's torrential, so we have to carry on filming. When it gets too heavy we just stand about under trees and umbrellas, hoping it'll pass quickly. Being on a tight schedule, we often ended up working Sundays as well.' Early on, he tried wearing a thermal top but it kept showing over the top of his costume. 'If I got cold, I had to run round the woods for a while.'

### Funny reel

The poor conditions led to several unintentional mishaps. Jason told me there was a particularly good 'funny reel' last year, with many instances of people slipping over in the mud and stumbling out of shot. 'We set a few up. There was one where someone was throwing arrows at me from out of shot, and it looked as if people were shooting at me and I was catching them as they flew through the air. After a while, one hit me in the chest and I died, but the editors had cleverly put in a shot of Michael Praed shooting it as a joke.

'In the third episode *The Inheritance* we had an accident with a morning star. In re-

hearsals, we'd used a real one, but on the take when someone had to take a swipe at me and smash a chair, we used a fibre-glass prop. Because it was so light, it moved about a hundred times faster, and the ball came off and hit me on the cheek-bone. It swelled up a bit so I had to play a lot of shots from the other side.'

He had another close call before the cameras, while charging down a hillside on horseback. 'Suddenly the horse freaked out. It stopped dead in its tracks but I kept on going. I felt myself going right over in slow motion, and somehow I landed on my feet, carried on running and then fell over. I didn't hurt myself at all.'

*Robin Of Sherwood* is renowned for its convincing and spectacular battle sequences. Long-serving stunt expert Terry Walsh is always on hand to advise the cast on what is and isn't possible – often embellishing a page of script to make five minutes' worth of action (viz. the fight between Robert and Will Scarlett in *Herne's Son*). Like all the cast, Jason had to undergo a two-week intensive course with Terry Walsh down in Hungerford where he was instructed in the use of the long bow and the quarterstaff, and taught how to fist-fight and sword-fight convincingly.

'I was allowed to do most of my own stunts. During the fights, the cameras kept coming on the face, so I had to be there. I can only think of two stunts I didn't do. One involved Robin swinging down from a tree and kicking a soldier off his horse, and that



had to be precisely timed and used a wiring system, so it was left to the experts. The other was a high fall, for which you needed to know how to land properly. I did get to fall off a bridge into a river. I loved doing that.'

The show has used a small number of directors in the past, but the new 13-hour series has called upon the talents of eight different directors, some of whom have come back to do more than one episode, like Robert Young, while others have just done one and then departed. 'In some ways it's good to change, to have different approaches, but then as soon as you get used to one director he packs off. You get some real characters. Denis Abey - a mad man! Sid Roberson who's done a lot of commercials and has his own company, he came down to direct the last double episode. Robert Young has done quite a few episodes. He is very secretive. He never tells you what he's going to do. He brought a crane down to the location in Wales for Clun Castle, and wouldn't tell anyone what he was going to use it for. For ages, we wondered what on earth he wanted it for. And then on the last day, he ordered it to be set up and used it for the scene where the portcullis crashes down onto Oliver Cotton.'

### Real bummer

Jason regrets not making it to the BFI preview of the *Herne's Son* episode last autumn. 'It was a real bummer, because they kept me on shooting, and I never made it. I would really liked to see it with an audience, who had had nothing to do with the show, and gauged their reaction.'

Jason's social life takes a nose dive when filming is underway, and that is how he prefers it to be. 'If I enjoy my work, I am happy to channel all my energy into it. I don't want to be anywhere else.' Getting up at the crack of dawn and shooting until dusk leaves little time for socialising, and last year, the cast were always on hand for publicity ventures and charity football and cricket matches. Jason was even invited to open a Robin Hood festival in Nottingham Forest.

'Now I'm not working on Robin, I can get around a bit more. I still go to the Actors' Centre every once in a while. I go to the gym, and try to do as much sport as I can. I used to play rugby, but I kept getting my face smashed in, and my agent went mad so I had to give it up. I've just bought an apartment, which is the very first place that I can call my own. I'm doing it out at the moment, but I'm going to have to wait ten weeks for my furniture! Should arrive around 5th April, when my first episode goes out. So I'll be able to sit back and relax in front of the tv. It's exciting to have personal things around me, and not rely on other people. If I want to, I can rip up the carpets or burn the place down, and no one can say anything - except the neighbours.'

For the future, he says his only desire is to remain as happy and enthusiastic about life as he is now. 'I would like to do just one more series of *Robin Of Sherwood*, to round it off. Then we'll have 39 episodes which is a fair number. I think if I did any



Jason Connery

more than that it would begin to take over my life. But at the moment, I'm enjoying it. They're a very young and enthusiastic crowd down there.'

In the immediate future, Jason will be starring in an episode of *Serenade For Dead Lovers* - a new series of half-hour plays along the lines of *Tales Of The Unex-*

*pected*. He was given the part on the strength of his performance in *Robin Of Sherwood*, without being asked to test. However, he was required to have his hair cut much shorter. As a parting shot, he expressed the hope that it will have grown again in time for the new series in June. 'Otherwise, I'll be wearing a wig!' ■