

For Ray Winstone, the psychopathic Will Scarlett on *Robin of Sherwood* was "probably closer to the way things really were."

By JEAN AIREY

Forest Psychotic

As Will Scarlett, Ray Winstone was the toughest outlaw in Sherwood.



Get Back Photo: Copyright 1993 BBC-TV

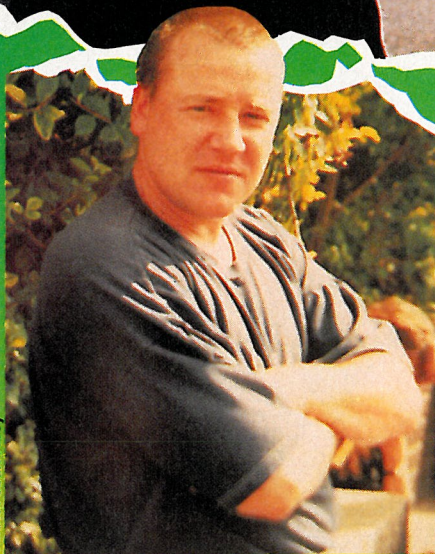


Photo: Jean Airey

Demonstrating "the funny side of tragedy," Winstone's new series, *Get Back*, has his family move back in with his father (John Bardon, left).

"You have to play a role a certain way to get them to see you differently."

"Ray is a gentleman," says *Robin of Sherwood* creator Richard Carpenter. "He's a creative actor, and you can't tie them down."

Former boxing champion Ray Winstone was concerned about being cast as Will Scarlett in the *Robin of Sherwood* series. His reason for concern? "I've got the most dreadful legs!"

He needn't have worried—as series creator Richard "Kip" Carpenter envisioned Winstone's character, no one would worry about the shape of the actor's calves. Carpenter had decided that he wanted the Will Scarlett character to be "an outlaw with a revenge motive." Carpenter went to the real world for characterization and gave the traditionally somewhat-colorless character a new life.

"I wanted to present somebody who had actually lost his family as a result of the cruelty and oppression [of the times]," Carpenter explains. "In Northern Ireland, for instance, the reason the conflict goes on and on is because people have lost someone who's near and dear to them. It isn't an abstract—it's a personalized hatred. If you've seen your wife and children shot in front of you by either an IRA man or a loyalist, your revenge is personal. It has *nothing* to do with being a Catholic or a Protestant."

The concept took on life as Carpenter began to explore the character he was creating. "Will Scarlett has so much hatred—it's sort

of an open wound. He's festering; there's a psychopathic factor. That's how it started, how it grew, because I didn't want him to be a nothing character. I wanted him to be a strong character, the toughest of the outlaws. He wanted to kill, and by killing, he hopes to exorcise his wife's death, but he never can, because the only way you can is to forgive. That's something that poor Will can't do."

Casting Winstone as the toughened, traumatized Scarlett was, Carpenter feels, "brilliant." Prior to *Robin of Sherwood*, Winstone had exhibited his ability to display "an explosive, physical, enormous animal power," as Carpenter and others saw him perform in *Scum*. *Scum* was, Winstone says, "about the British prisons for kids. It was a very violent docudrama—the original TV play was never aired, but we made the film three years later. It was still banned in parts of Britain, but became something of a cult hit in America." Winstone played the part of Carlin, an "anti-hero. He was a fighter and a survivor. The moral was that you've just got to beat the system until you can do something about the system."

So far, the actor has been able to beat the system in its tendency to typecast. "It goes in stages. You don't get cast for your acting ability, as such; you get cast for what you

were playing in your last job. I went through the stage of playing the hard man—the skullduggery and all that. Then, I got a job in a comedy show called *The Factory* and then found myself for a few years playing comedy roles! And then, *Robin of Sherwood* came along, where I played the psychopathic killer who changed as the series went on and became a member of a so-called family. You actually get cast as you are. You have to play a role a certain way to get them to see you differently. You always look for something different; otherwise, you're playing the same character all the time and you're becoming more of a *personality* than an actor."

Robin's Hood

Winstone felt that Carpenter's view of Will Scarlett as a tough psycho was "probably closer to the way things really were. In one episode, I spot this kid, and I should mug him, because, literally, that's what Robin Hood's people were—medieval muggers. You know, the word 'Robin' means robber and the whole thing develops. And I always thought this whole thing about the rich giving to the poor was a bit of rubbish, let's face it, whether we're fighting for a good cause or not. So, in that episode, I sat down with Kip, because we were allowed to put a lot into the show, and I said that my character, when he goes out mugging on his own, keeps half for himself and gives half to Robin. And in this episode, I kept the money, but," he sighs, "Robin makes me give it back in the end because we're the good guys."

"Kip always tried to make my character the one who argued against what Robin was doing, as a balance to the show. They weren't all just goody-goodies; there was an element. I quite like the anti-hero."

He also found himself liking his work with the cast and crew on the set. "What's unusual is that you [normally] make friends from work, say, 'I'll see you again,' and they're gone and you don't keep contact. But I did with the guys from this show; for a couple of years after [the series ended], we used to meet on the first Monday of every month. I think it was because we were all different; none of us clashed."

Even with the camaraderie, the tough guy doesn't hesitate admitting he was "terribly homesick. I mean, there was one time we were about 200 miles from London. I would be sitting there after work, and I would get in the car, head up to London—just for the night—come back early in the morning and not tell anyone about it, because they wouldn't let you go."

There were times on the set when some of the other cast and crew might have wished him elsewhere. If there was a Phantom of the Opera, Winstone was the Joker of the Forest. One assistant carrying a load of supplies for the tea break was once tipped into a nearby stream. "I couldn't resist," Winstone confesses. "He was just walking beside the river bank, and a quick nudge from me was the ultimate temptation!"

Winstone also set up a running joke when Jason Connery joined the cast. At dinner one

night, Connery found an unusually-tough bit of gristle in his meat. After trying valiantly to chew it, he gave up and, removing it from his mouth, placed it on the side of his plate. But like a beast from a horror movie, the gristle wouldn't go away. Over the next two weeks, Connery would find the somewhat-deteriorating piece of grub in his soup, his beer, his water—and whenever he had disposed of it, it would return! Animating the bit of fodder was Winstone, with the connivance of the cast and crew.

It could be said that Connery had asked for the creeping gristle episode. During his test for the role, he managed to fire an arrow not at the tree in front, but into Winstone's arm. And as for Winstone's skill with the longbow, he wasn't terribly good either. "I wasn't brilliant, but I could hit things," he says. "I hit a camera. They had set the camera up about 200 yards away. They put the target right next to it and said to fire at it. The arrow went straight down the camera lens and smashed it! I did about [\$100] worth of damage. It wasn't a bad shot, really!" he laughs. "You can see it on the film—see the arrow spinning towards the lens. They ran it on all the news shows."

Sherwood Prankster

Despite the joking aspect—and possibly because of his ability to project the tough guy image—Winstone has, Carpenter feels, something of an undeserved reputation. Carpenter comments, "Ray is a gentleman, an absolute diamond, but he comes from a very rough background. He has a reputation that isn't warranted—that he gets into fights and things." Carpenter shakes his head in disbelief. "Boxers are taught, because of their strength and skill, to keep *out* of trouble. Ray tends *not* to get involved if someone starts being silly. Ray's going to walk away from it—not because he's scared, but because he knows what he can do to the other bloke!"

Carpenter adds that that same background the actor brought to the part was valuable. "In a sense, Will Scarlett became Ray Winstone and Ray Winstone became Will Scarlett, and you can't see the joining. Ray builds the character from inside. He's very clever; he thinks it through. He's a creative actor, and you can't tie them down, particularly because you write something in the quiet of your study, and they're acting it out in the pouring rain or the howling wind. Things happen that are spontaneous and they're going to cover it with a line. If it's good, it'll stay in. If not, it winds up in the blooper reel."

Winding up in the blooper reel were several scenes that couldn't have fit into the series by any stretch of the imagination. Instigated by Winstone, the cast once burst into a stalwart, though off-key, version of "You Are My Sunshine." In another scene, Winstone responded to Judi Trott's remark about a comment Robin made with a Gablesque "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," followed by the whole cast breaking into a choral rendition of the *Tara* theme.

All joking aside, Kip Carpenter believes

Will Scarlett was always "the one who argued against what Robin was doing," notes Winstone.



Ray Winstone is underrated as an actor. "I admire him enormously, because he's an actor's actor. He'll do a job, not particularly because it's enormously well-paying, but because it's an interesting part. I saw him in a club theater playing very obscure German drama of the '20s—an enormous part, twice

"This whole thing about the rich giving to the poor was a bit of rubbish."

as long as *Hamlet*. He *held* what was quite a small audience in the palm of his hand, and he didn't need wonderful lighting or marvelous music or big close-ups. He was just there and focused, and he was wonderful."

After a cameo role in the long-running BBC situation comedy *Birds of a Feather*, Winstone was contacted about a role in a new series, *Get Back*, by its creators. Projected as a "Recession comedy," *Get Back* deals with the adventures of a family fallen on hard times and returning to their working

class roots. Although told in the preliminary interviews that he was "just what they wanted," and that he had the part, Winstone remained skeptical. "Yeah, yeah," he says he thought. "I had been told that a million times."

Since *Robin of Sherwood*, he has done "lots of *different* stuff," including theatre, a pilot for another series, even what he describes as "romantic roles—well, sort of the boy next door," he laughs. But one thing he kept in mind was avoiding playing the same role over and over. He felt he had to continue to demonstrate his versatility even if it meant taking on small parts. The result paid off, as he's the first from the *Robin of Sherwood* series to get his "own" show. He is, he says, very pleased with the new series. It has "real characters, people living in desperation—not all smiling with white teeth." Yet Winstone also believes the series will "demonstrate the funny side of the tragedy."

He has been there himself over the last few years. "I've made money and I've lost it! Sure, I would like to have a big house, but I'm happy." If continuing employment can give an actor happiness, Winstone should be well off. The BBC has requested additional episodes of the series. ❁