

# CLIVE MANTLE

## SHERWOOD FOREST'S GENTLE GIANT

**A**T SIX FEET and 16 stone, actor Clive Mantle has no problem standing out. Whether he is playing lofty and loyal Little John in HTV's **Robin of Sherwood** or master medic Mike Barratt in BBC's **Casualty**, the actor always brings a mixture of sincerity, passion and humour to his performances.

Born on the 3rd June, 1957 in Barnet, London, Mantle grew up with ambitions to become a sports journalist. "I was pretty good in English at school and I've always been keen on sports, although I'm a much better spectator than participant. I thought the best possible compromise would be to travel the world, watch major sporting events for free, write about them and get paid for being there," he says smiling.

In 1964 Mantle's career changed course after he spent the summer with the National Youth Theatre and, thus, he was fortunate enough to find his professional niche at a very early age. "After this experience it was pretty obvious to me that I was with the sort of people I enjoyed being with and doing the type of job I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I was very lucky to have found my calling so early on in life," he says.

Mantle trained with the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and then appeared in two films, **The Orchard End Murder** and **The French Lieutenant's Woman**. "I did a special action stunt sequence in **The French Lieutenant's Woman** which no one will ever see. You can see only my silhouette on the wall as a

fight erupts in a pub in which Jeremy Irons is looking for Meryl Streep. I really thought I was on the road to glory with my first two jobs being films but then reality set in, so to speak."

### Casting Contact

It was casting director Esta Charkham, also one of the producers of **Robin of Sherwood**, who first contacted Mantle about working on the series. She was familiar with his work at the National Youth Theatre and thought he was the right person to fill Little John's large shoes. "I always envisioned Little John as a headstrong individual who sometimes acts before he thinks. He's totally loyal to the people around him and



*Robin of Sherwood* The Merry Men keeping warm during rehearsals: Much (Llewellyn Williams), Tuck (Phil Rose), Little John (Clive Mantle), Nasir (Mark Ryan) and Scarlet (Ray Winstone)

Photos © HTV

would lay his life on the line for them. There's a rather wonderful quote on his tomb in Hathersage Churchyard: 'Friend and lieutenant to Robin Hood.'

"The real Little John was certainly a bigger man than I am," muses the actor. "His thigh bone was dug up and it is 32 inches long whereas mine is only 22 inches. I think his grave is over eleven feet long, so, he must have been something like nine or nine-feet-six if all of him is in proportion to his thighs.

"Whenever I have worked up in the Sheffield area I've tried to visit his grave and over the years have made my peace with him. If I've got my geography correct, Hathersage is just southwest of Sheffield, out in the Peak District of Derbyshire. The area is an absolutely wonderful place to visit and Little John's grave is in the churchyard between two beautiful yew trees. It's a rather moving experience, especially for someone who has pretended to be him, just to stand there and sort of apologize if you've got it wrong."

## Robin

Set towards the end of the 12th Century, HTV's **Robin of Sherwood** starred Michael Praed as Robin of Loxley, a man persuaded by an elemental woodland spirit named Herne that his true destiny is to lead his band of followers to free all men and women from Norman treachery. Creator Richard Carpenter adapted the basic premise of the programme from established Robin Hood lore and then took it one step further by making viewers sit back and ponder the question, 'Just what is true and what is fiction?'

"We were all terribly excited when we started filming the series," recalls Mantle. "We didn't know whether or not it was going to be a success. None of us had earned proper money before in our lives, so, it was a thrill just to have regular work.

"All of us got on well together and quickly became very close. We trained at Pinewood Studios for a couple of weeks before we started filming the series. By the time all of us turned up in Bristol for the first day's work we were already a fighting unit and a squad to be reckoned with. The banter had already begun, led very much by Ray Winstone [Will Scarlet], an amazing character who was a fantastic influence on all of us.

"Ian Sharp, who directed many of the episodes, made the unit roar with laughter and then settled everyone down to work. He would yell, 'Cut!' and you would double over with laughter again. It was a fantastic way



Clive Mantle and cast with Robin Mark II, Jason Connery

of working – a perfect balance between enjoying yourself and doing serious work and being adequately recompensed and filming in some of the most beautiful locations in Britain. Everything really clicked and, hopefully, that sense of fun comes across in the series and makes it that much better."

## Difficult Episode

Throughout the first two seasons Robin and his band of freedom fighters battled numerous threats including the witch of Elsdon, a group of warrior monks known as the Knights Templar, and, of course, the Sheriff of Nottingham played by Nickolas Grace. Looking back over these first 12 adventures Mantle recalls *The Greatest Enemy* as not only his favourite episode but the most difficult one for the entire cast to film.

"This was Michael's [Praed] last episode," says Mantle. "All of us were very

deeply upset that he was leaving and thought, to all intents and purposes, that the series was ending. We couldn't imagine how on earth they could keep it going with someone else, so, thinking this was it, everybody really poured everything they had into the episode."

The series did continue, with a new leader, Robert of Huntington, played by Jason Connery, the son of actors Sean Connery and Diane Cilento. "Jason had a tough time coming in and taking over from Michael," says Mantle. "Needless to say, we really laid into him and gave him a hard time during that first week. At one point he turned around to each of us, looked us squarely in the eyes and gave us a hard time, proving once and for all that he was the new Robin. Jason's a terrific chap, very level-headed and a good friend."

When **Robin of Sherwood** ended in 1986 Mantle put his acting abilities as



The aggressive rogues pose

well as his towering appearance to good use in several major motion pictures and worked with many international talents including the legendary Clint Eastwood in **White Hunter, Black Heart**. "A genuinely friendly guy," says Mantle. "He's not only a very good director - he covers everything from every angle - he's also a great listener."

"Long after we came back from filming in Africa there was a wrap party in London. I asked Clint what he was going to do next and he said, 'I'm just going to drink a little wine and watch a few sunsets.' Now, if I tried to say that to somebody they would look at me and think, 'What on Earth are you talking about?' but coming from Clint it was absolutely the perfect line said in the perfect way."

The actor also was marooned in Space with Sigourney Weaver in **Alien 3**. "A fantastic lady," says Mantle. "She literally was one of the chaps and really joined in with our banter and leg-pulling. It was great to watch a very talented actress both working and handling the pressures of heading up a movie."

### Nuclear Man

One role Mantle is particularly proud of is that of Nuclear Man opposite Christ-

opher Reeve and Gene Hackman in **Superman IV: The Quest for Peace**. Unfortunately, due to script changes, the majority of the actor's work ended up on the cutting room floor. Despite this setback he enjoyed his role enormously. "It was a lovely comedy part to play," he recalls. "I had a six-million-dollar fight with Superman. We started crushing a row of cars - him at one end and me at the other - and

we'd push them together until there was a little ball of metal in the middle. I'd throw huge waste bins at him and we'd hit each other with lampposts. It was absolutely fantastic! It took us a month of night shoots just to do the fight.

"Christopher Reeve was a very pleasant man," he continues. "We used to sit around playing word games while waiting for them to set up the next shot. As for Gene



Sherwood rogues Little John, Scarlet and Nasir

Hackman, I have to say it was a thrill just to be in the same room with him. When he saw my work in the film he told me that due to the strength of my character I should get my own series on American television. It was lovely of him to say but he needn't have said things like that. He was a very kind, supportive man and I can't say enough about how much I enjoyed working with him."

When Kevin Costner decided to take on the title role in **Robin Hood: The Prince of Thieves**, it looked for a time as though Mantle would be standing alongside him as Little John. "I'd heard about the film and was sent a copy of the script. I was really excited about the project because I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to flesh out the character a bit more than I was able to do in the television series.

"I did a very good reading at the audition and the director said to me, 'Yes, that's very interesting. What was that strange

accent you used?' I explained to him that I used a Derbyshire accent from the area of England that Little John was from. The director just looked at me and said, 'Little John lived?' and I then proceeded to tell him everything I knew about Little John. He sat there and stared at me with his mouth open. I could hear myself talking myself out of the job because I knew more about the character than he did.

"When they finally reported back I was told that they were looking for somebody to give a new interpretation of the part rather than having me come in and do what I did in the television series. In the end an old pal of mine, Nick Brimble, was offered the part and I was very happy for him."

Along with film and television work Mantle has also played theatrical roles such as Lenny in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. His performance, which the actor says was one of the most difficult and challenging of his career so far, won him a Laurence Olivier Award as well as the 1984

*Plays and Players* Most Promising Newcomer Award.

## Casualty

In recent years Mantle donned a white smock and took on the role of doctor and resident heart-throb Mike Barratt in **Casualty**, finally leaving the series in November 1996. While still in the series, he said, "Each episode revolves around three major stories interwoven among the regulars of the casualty department of a big city hospital," explains the actor. "I play a consultant and it's a wonderful challenge to play someone with a skill. My character isn't just standing there spouting lines at somebody; he's also performing intricate medical procedures.

"One-third of all the television sets in Britain are tuned in to us every Saturday night, which works out to about 16 million viewers. The National Health Service is very proud of the series. In fact, there are several real-life examples of people having saved the lives of their relatives or friends after having watched the series.

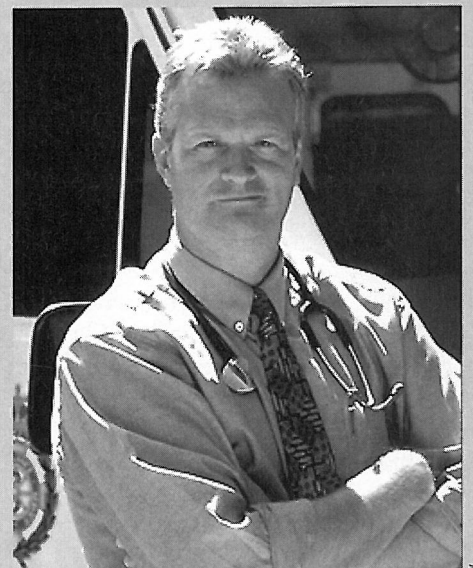
"I must admit that **Casualty** spoiled me rotten for the next job that comes along," continues the actor. "I'm definitely having a little golden patch at the moment but I am realistic enough to know that one's career goes up and down and I'm probably due for a fall," he laughs.

"Very important decisions have to be made when I elect to leave the series," said Mantle thoughtfully. "I can either disappear, move on to something similar or try to take another step forward. I'll just be happy to keep on working but now is the time either to capitalize or to disappear."

*Steven Eramo*



Will, Little John, Marion and Much



Clive Mantle as Mike Barratt in *Casualty*

Photo © BBC/N