

# EXPLORING



Photo - Steve Cook

## An Interview with Richard Carpenter

*Now that the second season of HTV/Goldcrest's Robin of Sherwood has finished and the third season is presently in production, the series appears to be a resounding success. Targetted at the youth market, and pre-sold to the US, the programme boasts superior production values, American styled pacing and a heavy dose of sword and sorcery. With its directors predominantly culled from the arena of TV commercials, Robin of Sherwood has considerable visual flair, but the strength of the series really originates with the mystic mythology provided by writer Richard Carpenter. He recently spoke to Richard Marson about medieval magic and a Robin Hood for the eighties.*

**R**ichard Carpenter started his career as an actor, working in repertory and television, before deciding to branch out and try his hand at writing. In this venture he turned to television scripting and was fortunate to receive encouragement from the head of London Weekend Television's children's programmes. He was commissioned to write two series of *Catweazle*, a delightfully whimsical series concerning a medieval magician transported to modern England which gained quite a cult following among children and adults alike. After 26 episodes the series was dropped, but Carpenter went on to write and create many of Britain's most imaginative and popular TV dramas during the seventies, including *Black Beauty*, *The Ghosts of Mottley Hall*, *Dick Turpin*, *Smuggler* and *The Baker Street Boys*.

Then came the idea for a series based on the legend of Robin Hood. Carpenter takes up the story: "It came from both myself and my partner Paul Knight, who is the producer on *Robin of Sherwood*. We've worked together on most of my stuff since *Black Beauty*, so we're known to be a reliable, bankable partnership. *Black Beauty* was, internationally, the most successful children's TV programme ever made. We got

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backing from Harlech Television, who also made *Smuggler*, and we found the necessary U.S. outlets. So it quickly became a sort of avalanche." Carpenter wrote the whole of the first two series on his own, and he explained the process behind his writing: "There are no new stories. Every story that's ever been has already been told. It's only the way you tell it. People tend to remember moments from what they watch, something the characters did, but unless they are film buffs they can't recall the name of the film or TV programme. I try to get three of those 'moments' into each episode."

*Robin of Sherwood* is imbued with a good deal of mysticism and mystery, two elements present in much of Carpenter's work, but brought to the fore in *Robin*: "I've always been interested in magic. All my work has either had magic or the supernatural in them because, basically, I'm writing for young people who are interested in that sort of thing. I don't think Robin Hood has ever had that slightly eerie, mystical element before. If you read the original ballads, they're just crude knockabout stories. Hit 'em on the head, lots of swordplay almost like mumming plays. Robin Hood gets up in the morning, meets a potter and has a fight. He kills the sheriff, sticks his head on a pole and everybody laughs. End of story. When people say 'why didn't you use the original





Usually though, they love appearing in it, and we've had some excellent guests. The main problem is writing fairly for the whole cast. It's like the plate spinning act at fairs, where you have to run around and make sure all the plates are spinning at the same time. You've got 54 minutes in which to tell a story, which is a luxury really. The mistake that you make if you've been used to half-hour format like me is to think that you've got to inject a lot more story. That's actually not the case. What you can do in an hour is to develop the characters a bit more, in other words, use tiny sub-plots. I try and pile in three interlinked stories in each episode. With the third series I'm too busy with my new project to do it all, so we've pulled in other writers, including one very young, very enthusiastic chap called Anthony Horowitz, who's about the only one that's latched onto this idea of developing the characterisation of the regulars in the show. We had hundreds of storylines in from other people, but they were all about visiting characters, not our resident cast. All the outlaws did was to run about a bit and perform a few action scenes. The stories weren't really about them or even Robin, they were about the guest villain.

"If you're in a long-running series, and I know because I was in one, you get extremely fed up just standing around with a couple of lines. You can't understand why, if you're under contract, they're not using you. So I deliberately write scripts with mainly the regulars in mind, and only a few other, smallish, parts. Nobody's complacent about the show, although I still think there's an awful lot wrong with some of it. I think that sometimes my endings are too sudden, and I

stories?', I say you tell me an original story! I suppose they mean more in the tradition of the Richard Greene series which they did way back in the fifties, and which ran to about a hundred and thirty episodes. They kept up an amazing standard and had some very good actors in them, but they weren't original."

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**"I had to create a Robin for the eighties. I couldn't have a man who said 'follow me men' and they would just follow. He had to be brave yet vulnerable, tough enough to live off the land . . ."**  
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The linchpin of the series is the enigmatic figure of Herne the Hunter, whose appearances are brief but highly important in the story's narrative. How had the Herne figure come about? "I'd always been interested in the Robin Hood theme, and I'd always said that if we were going to make it really legendary it had to have some element of fate in it. All myths are usually about children who grow up and discover that they're really the King's son, and have to go through hell and bullets before they can get their inheritance. I always saw Robin as a yeoman, a man of the people, at least for the first two series. That's how they describe him in the ballads. He also had some sort of mentor or guide, and I'd read somewhere else that Robin was the people's Arthur, so I decided he needed a Merlin figure.

"I created Herne to fill that space, and I wanted a character who was a bit equivocal, in that you weren't sure whether he was human or whether he was divine, or indeed who he was at all. After the event it's very easy to impose a pattern of logic on your thinking that sounds very well conceived but isn't really true. All you actually do is think 'What can I do to Robin Hood that's different?' - while at the same time keeping it justifiable. It's flashes of desperation rather than inspiration."

**T**he juggling of such a large regular cast must have proved a problem: "Well, with our casts we have two problems. One is availability - we can only use Philip Jackson when he's free to do it, and at first Nickolas Grace (who plays the Sheriff of Nottingham) was a bit diffident too.



*Far left: Rula Lenska as Morgwyn of Ravenscar in "The Swords of Wayland". Above left and above: From the same episode, the Hounds of Lucifer and the resurrected Baron de Belleme (Anthony Valentine). Below: Guy of Gisburne (Robert Addie) and Nasir (Mark Ryan) locked in battle.*



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develop only to cut off. I think I can improve on that, and the actors feel they can improve themselves as well."

Overall, however, Carpenter attributes much of the success of the show to its production: "The first series was all directed by Ian Sharp and it nearly killed him doing an episode every twelve days. He did it superbly though. Naturally I'm pleased with Clannad's music, which you know won a BAFTA award. They'll be placing more emphasis on chanting than instrumentals in the next season to make it more evocative of Medieval England. I'm also delighted with Johnny Briggs' art direction. He takes a stone courtyard and transforms it brilliantly. We used to use a barn at Bradford-on-Avon for the interior of Nottingham Castle



and it was a very awkward shape. He built all these extra bits into it and it looked great. Unfortunately we had to leave it because the Department of the Environment, who owned it, were getting fed up as filming prevented people from visiting. One gripe I had though, was that whenever Herne appeared, it looked as though Sherwood Forest was on fire!"

Carpenter plots out all the action sequences in great detail with the show's stunt chief, Terry Walsh: "For instance, that fight in the mud arose from me wanting to show the frustration of two people who hate each other but, because of the mud, are unable to hit each other. We got the absurdity of the situation out of that too. After I've plotted the sequences, I tell Terry to do what the hell he wants, and of course all our cast can handle themselves so it always looks good."

The series received a very good press and an excellent rating when it was first shown, but then Michael Praed announced he was leaving the show: "That was rather a large problem. I got this 'phone call from Paul (Knight) saying we'd have to stop at the end of the second series, but I said no way. If Michael goes that's up to him, but we're going on. The first suggestion was to use magic as the excuse and resurrect him in a new body, but I thought that would look too much like *Doctor Who*. It was too easy, a cop out. Surely, I argued, the most important thing is the legend and tradition of Robin persisting. Going back to modern day guerilla heroes like Che Guevara, their people claim they're still sleeping in the hills, they can't believe they're dead. Similarly, Robin of Locksley is killed, but the continuity is that Herne the Hunter knows there has to be a Robin, so he chooses another. The young man he chooses is the son of the Earl of Huntingdon, which is of course the second Robin Hood legend, which arose in Elizabethan times. The Elizabethans couldn't face the idea of a hero who was only a commoner you see! So I've worked both legends in, given Michael a wonderful exit, and now he's a clothes-peg in *Dynasty*.

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**"I've created a mythology, taking the legendary figure of Herne, the horned god of the forest, who 'chooses' Robin to lead his band of men. I don't believe a Robin Hood ever existed, but was really an amalgam of about twenty different men, outlaws who were anti-establishment and lived off their wits and petty thievery."**  
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"I'd never stop an actor leaving a show, and we didn't have him under contract anyway. I must say it shook us when he said he was going, but he gave us enough warning for me to write in hints that he was going to die before the last episode, *The Greatest Enemy*, which was, in other words, death. Michael had this rather fey quality, whereas our new guy, Jason Connery, is much more down to earth. However, Michael's prescience will be transferred to Marion, so that the mystical element is retained within the outlaw band.

The third series certainly promises well with plots involving love potions, an old corrupt outlaw brought face to face with the idealism he has lost, and a gruesome little story concerning the Blood Game, "which" Carpenter explains, "is like cock fighting, only with human beings, an idea I got from *The Deer Hunter*." With production nearing completion there is bound to be a fourth series in the pipeline too, although with the opening of Jason Connery's first episode as Robert of Huntingdon all is not well: "He goes back to Herne at the beginning of the episode and says 'Stuff it, mate. I'm not going to be Herne's son, I've got other fish to fry'. A whole year passes and the outlaws quarrel among themselves and eventually split up. Marion and her father are pardoned by King John so that her reputation as the Patty Hearst of Sherwood Forest is all that remains. She doesn't fall in love



with the new Robin at first, of course, and she only follows him into the forest when he is wounded and really needs her. When she hears people saying that Robin Hood is back in Sherwood Forest she gets extremely pissed off because she knows he's six foot under. However, the point is that Robert effectively becomes Robin while remaining himself. Robin is a legend not a single person – he is a principle and that is what is important.



***“People in medieval times believed in magic and superstition, just as today’s kids readily accept the modern equivalent – technology which produces robots, computers and lasers.”***



“Jason has to prove himself and win them all back – Little John from his farming, Will Scarlett from crime and so on. The opening episode is a sort of ‘Magnificent Seven’, with him re-uniting them, and I needed two hours to tell the story. These two-hour episodes which punctuate the series were my idea because they are good openers, and kick off a series well, while also being a nice length for video release. You see, two episodes joined together are never so attractive, as they look like what they are, cashing in on something.”

With *Robin of Sherwood* now an established success, Carpenter is moving on to new pastures, although he will still be heavily involved in the development of the show. For the future, he is planning an ambitious new science fantasy series about Arthur and the sword in the stone, with the basic premise of formulating some scientific validity for magic. The project will again investigate legends, and will require a large array of special effects for the creation of dragons and similar mythical creatures – hence the need again for American backing. Aside from this, Carpenter intends to write a movie version of his first, and favourite, work, *Catweazle*, on which he will begin work as soon as the rights to the show revert to him in September 1985.

*Far left: (Middle) Marion and Robin are married before the enigmatic Herne the Hunter; (Bottom) Stand and deliver! Locklesley and Co., Out Laws. Above: (L-R, standing) Will Scarlet (Ray Winstone), Little John (Clive Mantle), Marion, Robin, Friar Tuck (Phil Rose), Nasir; (Kneeling) Much and Edward the village elder (Jeremy Bullock). Below: The nefarious Sheriff of Nottingham (Nickolas Grace).*

