

Far from his Robin Hood days, Michael Praed is not exactly sure that life has changed.

By JEAN AIREY

Michael Praed, the "innocent" and vulnerable Robin of Sherwood Forest, has changed. It's not just that his hair is shorter, it's just that by the third day of the Visions '92 convention, he's no longer blasé or even particularly polite when the fact is pointed out to him. "My hair," he says somewhat sharply, "is a little shorter—as everyone constantly reminds me."

But as to other changes since STARLOG last interviewed him (#126), he shrugs, "I mean, hopefully one has changed for the better. My friends could probably answer that more succinctly for you than I possibly could. I don't know that there has been any drastic change."

He's certainly much more straightforward in answering questions. "Acting is a crock," he says bluntly. "It's something that people learn, and if you watch enough of the right people—or even the wrong people—you can learn."

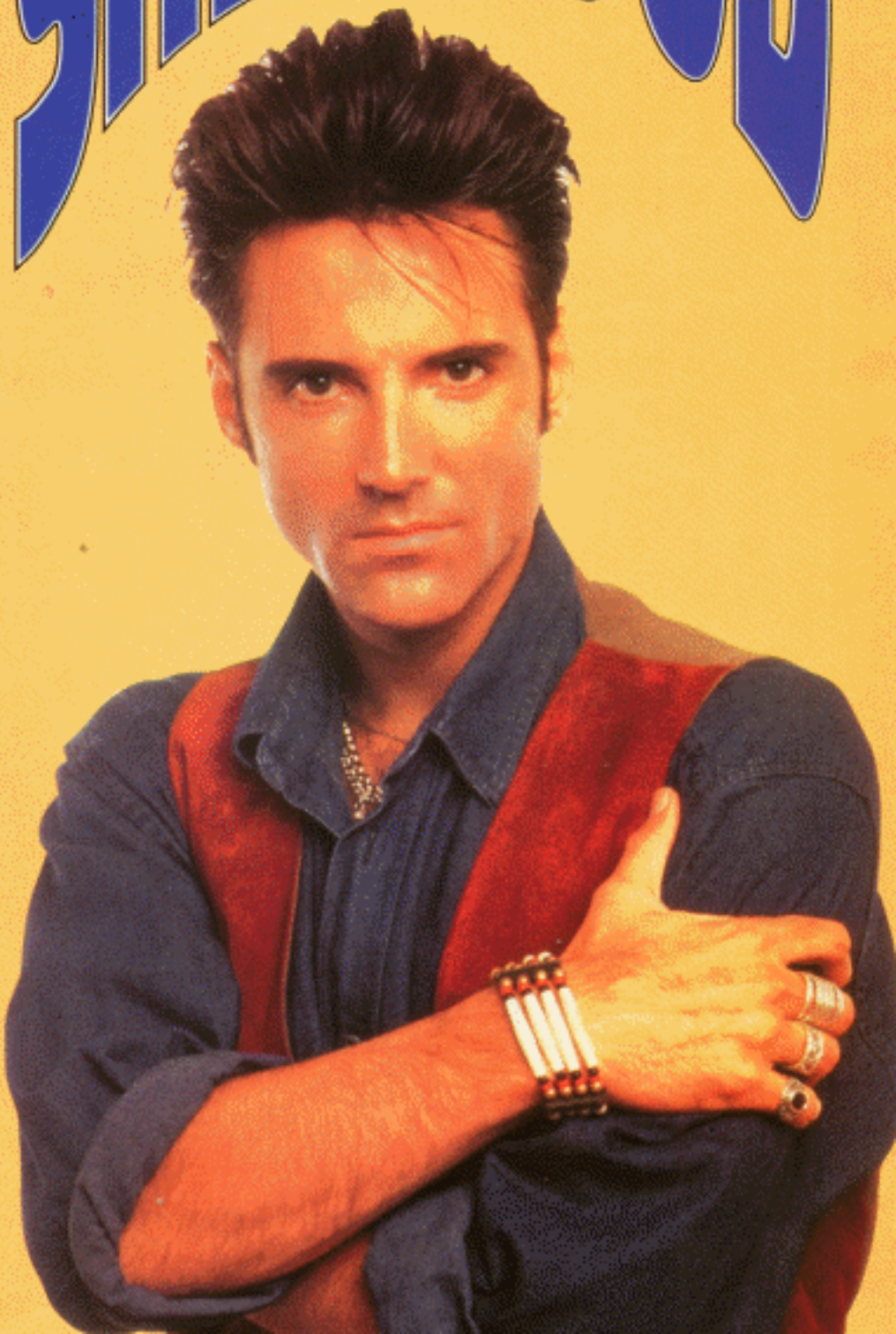
Praed had some learning to do as his career began. In an early performance in the musical *Godspell*, "I played Jesus—very badly—as I recall one of the reviews said something like, 'The disciples are a bunch of Muppets and Michael Praed as Jesus heads the cast as Kermit.' Most extraordinary review I've ever read. It was an absolutely dreadful production. We were all, to a man, absolutely dreadful," he notes.

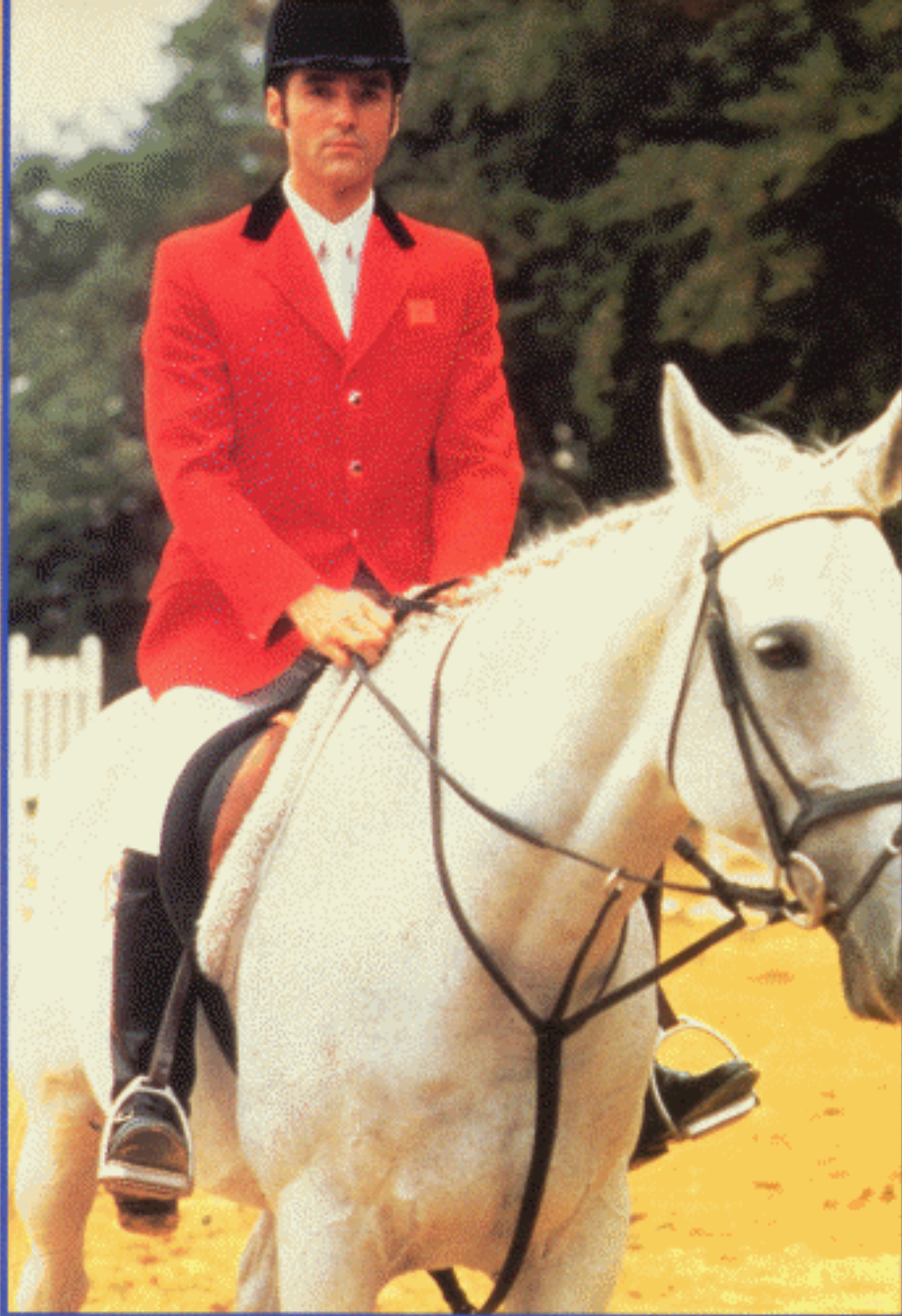
Forest Frenzy

Today, as an actor, he finds himself classified as a leading man, although he says with a laugh, "I'm not sure I'm a 'young' leading man anymore!" It's a form of type-casting he finds essential in the acting business because "it makes the job of casting much easier. [So although] the juicy parts—the comic or the character parts—are often more interesting to play, it's actually quite difficult to do leading parts because leading men always win, they always get the girl."

It would seem that "getting the girl" would come easy to him, but Praed points out that his early schooling experience meant that he had no contact with girls until age 16 when "there were 500 boys and 100 girls and every guy there [was] looking at these girls and putting them on a pedestal. (Which isn't a bad place for a woman to be put, I admit.) Nevertheless, after so many years of putting women on a pedestal, when you actually meet women for the first time, it's a very difficult thing! I made a series of catastrophic mistakes," he says ruefully.

STUDENT of SHERWOOD





He may have done a bit of riding on *Robin of Sherwood*, but Michael Praed was in for a few hooved surprises while filming *Riders*.

place with dark spirits and dark forces! Where the truth of it was that it was a place you got lost in. I didn't want to see too many other people [as Robin Hood in other films]. Apart from reading some of the history, I just followed the script. Get the script right, because if you arrive on the set and the scene isn't right or the structure isn't right, then it's too late."

For Praed, one thing that wasn't right about *Robin of Sherwood* was his costume. "I didn't do anything to my costume to make it fit my character, to enhance my character. But I did many things to my costume to make it fit my body a little better. My costume for Robin Hood was essentially a green skirt-like thing which came down to my knees. The trousers were fashioned very badly and I had these boots," he shudders. "When I had the whole thing on, I looked like a tent. I'm not the biggest guy in the world. I'm not built like Arnold Schwarzenegger. I had to cut it so it came up higher, and take in the back so it fit my body a little better."

Alterations didn't make everyone on the production happy. "Lynnette Cummings, the costume designer, had a fit, because essentially I was taking a pair of scissors to her creation! She didn't really understand at the time that her costume looked very good on paper, but on me it looked like nothing! That's an interesting problem when it happens, because you get presented with something and you want to change it in some way. The problem was that Lynnette couldn't divorce the fact that I liked her

"Hopefully, one has changed for the better," Praed remarks as to the years after *Robin of Sherwood*.

"But I think I've worked it out now—inasmuch as one is able to work these things out."

Working things out with the opposite sex turned into a challenge, as Praed had to do a nude scene as a vampire in *Son of Darkness*. The director told him, "We'll put you on the bed and the rest is up to you." Praed watched *Body Heat*, and noticed that the love scenes were very strongly choreographed, which, he believes, "makes it about the choreography rather than the lovemaking." So he worked with his co-star and choreographed the scene. "It was rather like a five-year old, 'Now you put your hand here and I put my hand there.'" They worked for three weeks preparing for the scene, and on the night of filming, the director sent them a large bottle of wine. "Now," he says earnestly, "I don't believe in drinking while I'm working, but

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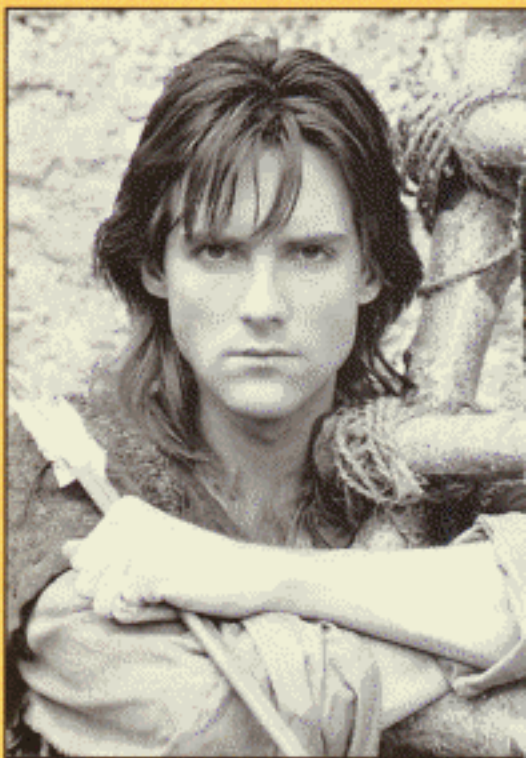
we polished off that bottle and another one." He pauses, "It took the edge off."

Forest Fantasy

His *Robin of Sherwood* adventures taught him many things that he has carried into his present career. An early conversation with Richard "Kip" Carpenter (*STARLOG* #151), the series' writer and creator, prompted his acknowledgement of how characters are really created.

"Everything comes from the script," he says emphatically. "That's the starting place. I read as much as I could about the legends [of Robin Hood]. I read about the history because when I read the script, I realized how much mysticism and magic were going to be involved. That thought had never even crossed my mind. I just thought it was going to be like Errol Flynn.

"Kip explained to me that forests were very dangerous places. One of the reasons they were so feared is that people would walk into them and get completely lost and not come out. So, they were viewed as a



costume, but needed to change it. She thought I was attacking her costume—we had a bit of a difficult time. As actors, it's very important to feel good. If you feel uncomfortable, you just *are* uncomfortable. If you're wearing something you don't think is flattering to you, you don't feel as good. So it was vanity, really," he grins. "She was forever designing things for me that I felt didn't really look good. They were horrible."

Forest Fancy

In filming *Robin of Sherwood*, Praed got all mucked up in what he refers to as "the mud scene. It was shot by the side of a river that was infested with mosquitoes and things that live in the mud. It took all day to shoot that sequence. We couldn't get cleaned up, we just had to dive back in. When you're up to your knees in mud, you can't move. It was terribly silly. I was two feet away from Gisburne [Robert Addie] and I couldn't hit him! Then, the labs made a mistake and destroyed all the mud stuff, so we had to redo it! Then afterwards, I had to swim like hell. I tried and I couldn't, because the costume was weighted down with mud. My strength failed and I could only call for help very weakly. I was going under when a stuntman came and rescued me. There's a lesson there: Always be sure there are stunt and safety people around."

An experience with the dangers of action sequences—as well as a mud-soaked costume on *Robin of Sherwood*—was echoed in Praed's recent work on *Riders*, a mini-series directed by *Next Generation* veteran Gabrielle Beaumont.

Starting into *Riders*, Praed knew he might be facing a problem with some of the riding sequences. "I had done a bit of riding on *Robin* and you'll notice when I ride, I've got a hand placed here." He motions to where the saddlehorn would be if he were riding. "Not for any Freudian reason—I'm holding on to the saddle 'cause I really don't know what I'm doing on the horse. It didn't really matter, though; Robin might not have been a very good rider," he laughs.

"*Riders* was a completely different kettle of fish. They had the English army train us



"It's actually quite difficult to do leading parts because leading men always win, they always get the girl," Praed notes. In this case, that's Judi Trotter.

they're used to. They test you, get tired and fed up, and don't want to play. Now, the riding part I can do, but the jumping part fills me with trepidation.

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to jump horses. The problem was after you shoot a 15-hour day, the last thing you want to do is go to a stable and jump. The whole series took three to four months to shoot, and we did the bulk of the jumping scenes in France at the end. And we were all really tired, coupled with the fact that I never really quite got the knack of jumping. Riding was very tough, it's not something I was naturally good at. I defy anyone to become instantly familiar with these beasts; they're big, they're unpredictable. They're taught in a certain way, and they like you to drive them in a certain way because that's what

"In shooting, you had this pressure of time, and my horses on this damn thing were jinxed. My main jumping horse injured himself on the boat over to France—not bad, but he was out of action. My stunt double got appendicitis. One of my other horses did something to his shin and he was out of action. So it left me, an inexperienced rider, having to jump horses I had never seen."

A popular convention guest, Praed is also supportive of his fan club. "It's encouraging to me to know that there's a group of people there."





Well remembered for his Hooded days, Praed has successfully moved on to other endeavors.

a bit and got cut up."

His pre-planning wasn't completely successful. "The ambulance was there, but the French paramedics weren't." He laid in a trailer for 45 minutes. He says grimly, "I think they got into trouble because of that. They had to take me to the hospital for a couple of days to make sure I hadn't done anything really stupid. Then, I had to get out of the hospital and jump horses again."

Forest Fandom

He has found over the years that most fans are pleasant to meet and talk to. "Particularly my fan club. They give a lot, and they derive a great joy out of what you do, which is very pleasing. It's nice to be able to meet fans face to face and get to know them a little bit. It's surprising really that there are other people who really care about what you're going to do. It's encouraging to me to know that there's a group of people there."

Praed says this despite the fact that not all fan contact has been pleasant. "It has been a problem for me a few times. It's very frightening when it gets completely out of hand, but hopefully those were really isolated incidents. There's a difference between a fan and somebody who stalks you. When you start receiving letters [in which] instead of wishing you all the best, they wish you all the worst in many colorful ways—sure, you can start to hear things in the night, but one has to put it in perspective."

There has been talk over the last few years about the possibility of doing another *Robin of Sherwood* series. Would Praed be interested in "reviving" the role? He smiles, "It would all depend on what the script was like. We tried to get it [made]. Everyone wanted to do another *Robin*, but it all came down to finance—you know it's terribly expensive. There's a problem because I died in the last one," he laughs, "so something would have to be done there. I would have to be presented with the script. It's an intriguing idea to do another one. Whether it would be any good or not, who knows? And one day it might happen, but it revolves around the bucks."

With a revival of *Robin of Sherwood* questionable, Praed's future plans are equally in doubt. He shakes his head ruefully. "It's impossible to plan for life in an acting career. You just don't know what you might be doing in two years' time, because the business is such a curious one. You might be doing nothing or you might be winning an Academy Award. I don't like to think too far ahead, largely because it doesn't make any sense. If the reality of what's happening is far short of what you want to be doing, then in fact you're setting yourself up for failure."

With successful appearances in musicals (*Carousel*, *Aspects of Love*) as well as film, TV and even a music video, Michael Praed certainly seems set for success. ★



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Praed insisted that an ambulance and medical staff be present during the jumping sequences. Good idea.

"There was a sequence we were filming right at the shoot's end. It was a very important sequence, and the horse had jumped all day, and he was really tired. By the time I had to get on him, he had had enough and was fed up. I got on him and couldn't get him to jump. So, the stuntman took him around and he was fine, and I took him around and it was great. Well, there was a hair in the gate [a technical problem with the camera], so I had to go again. And the horse had a problem when it jumped. On the last jump, I set him up OK, but when he jumped, he really jumped to the right. He realized that, so he did a major left hand jab and I went over the side and unfortunately caught my foot in the stirrup, and I was dragged for

Praed originally thought *Robin of Sherwood* "was going to be like Errol Flynn" until he read up on the hero.