

"Nothing is ever Forgotten"



Every so often a programme emerges that is head and shoulders above the remaining mediocrity in both quality and style. **ROBIN OF SHERWOOD** was one such example...

It is now over ten years now since **ROBIN OF SHERWOOD** was first screened, in April 1984, but as Robin was fond of saying, "Nothing is ever forgotten". It was certainly something different – a new mystic reality slant on the Robin Hood legend.

This adaptation was created by Richard Carpenter and his writing partner Paul Knight, who was also the producer. They'd already had successes with *CATWEAZLE*, *DICK TURPIN*, *THE BAKER STREET BOYS* and *BLACK BEAUTY*, and backing for the new series came from Harlech Television (HTV) and Goldcrest. It was such a visually-striking package that it was sold to America before any completed episodes were in the can.

Previously, the long-running Richard Greene Fifties series had dealt with the political oppression of the time almost as a minor inconvenience, and Errol Flynn in the movie was all acrobatics, thigh-slapping and belly laughs. In contrast, this new Robin was more earthy and realistic. Michael Praed's character was based on the myth of a peasant from Locksley whose village was burned to the ground by the Normans whilst searching for the boy's father, in this case the keeper of a symbol of great power – the Silver Arrow.

Unlike his more action-orientated predecessors, this Robin rarely erupted with verbal outbursts; instead sitting back quietly summing up the situation while the outlaws argued among themselves before calmly announcing his decision. They regularly questioned his course of action, which was

invariably so extremely bold as to be foolhardy, but they never questioned his authority as their leader and guiding light. As the Lady Marion put it in *Cromm Cruac*, "He's more than a leader, he's the reason we stay together." In these

stories the legend preceded the man, and it is this that the peasant people revered. Nevertheless, the peasants lived in fear of their villages being burned by the Sheriff's soldiers and their families killed before their eyes as a lesson in obedience, and so were reluctant to shelter the outlaws. The band were often turned away from villages that simply refused to help themselves by helping Robin.

The central characters, particularly the outlaws themselves, were completely different in their mannerisms, reactions and background. The oppression of Norman rule and their shared experiences kept them together as a unit and they went to any lengths to help one of their own. In the 100-minute pilot episode, *Robin Hood and the Sorcerer*, Robin and Much (Peter Llewellyn Williams) were imprisoned in the Nottingham Castle dungeon where they met Will Scarlet (Ray Winstone) and two other men and formed the initial nucleus of the outlaw band. Much was an almost perpetually afraid young man but was far from being a coward, prepared to constantly enter the most dangerous of situations. Scarlet was the most interesting outlaw aside from Robin himself. He wore a brash, angry and argumentative exterior, but nevertheless proved to be a good and true man, although his heart invariably ruled his head.

new angle

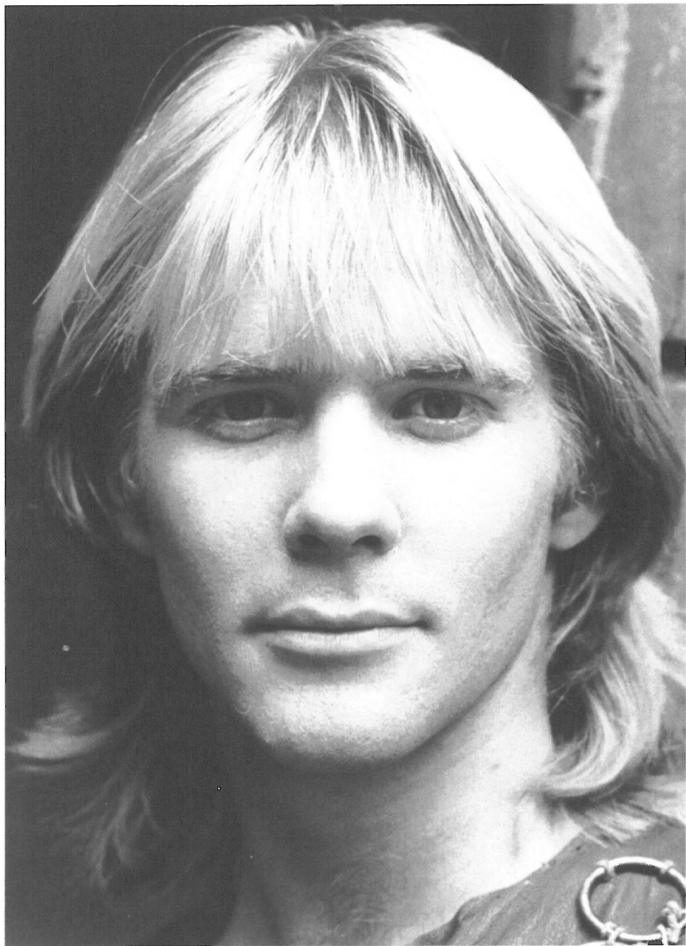
There was a new angle on the established legend of Robin encountering Little John (Clive Mantle) on the log river crossing. The big man – bewitched by the dark sorcerer, the Baron de Belleme (Anthony Valentine) – was fighting in an all-out attempt to kill Robin. Once the spell was reversed, Little John emerged as a gentle giant, calm but powerful in battle. As a brother at Nottingham Castle, he saved the Lady Marion's (Judi Trott) life when he overheard the sheriff and the baron planning to take her from the abbey and wed her to the sorcerer when she would then be sacrificed to the dark god, his master.

Tuck was fat and greedy, like all the legends tell, but also at times serious and solemn. It was never established for certain whether he still considered himself a valid servant of God after adopting a life of violence. In fight sequences he was often seen to cross himself immediately before or after striking out, as if absolving himself from guilt.

Although the Lady Marion was of the gentry, she was also made of stern stuff, allowing her to easily make the change to forest life. However the character seemed to exist only as a love interest for Robin and to look concerned when he



Left to right: Peter Llewellyn Williams (Much), Clive Mantle (Little John), Michael Praed (Robin), Phil Rose (Friar Tuck), Mark Ryan (Nasir), Ray Winstone (Will Scarlet)



embarked on another perilous escapade. Nasir (Mark Ryan) was a renegade Nadir warrior employed by the baron. When the sorcerer was seemingly killed with the recovered Silver Arrow, Nasir joined the outlaws. Alan A Dale, the bard of legend, appeared in only one story, coming across as a pitiful love-forlorn creature.

The Sheriff of Nottingham (Nickolas Grace) was a man with a temper and general lack of vision. He was made to look increasingly incompetent when each plan to capture or kill the "wolf's head" failed. Sir Guy of Gisburne (Robert Addie) saw himself as the intelligent one, trapped under the wing of a fool who possessed the power to have him killed with a word, and simply awaiting his chance to prove his worth.

The most innovative twist to the legend was the introduction of Herne the Hunter (John Abineri), the spirit of the forest. Herne was revered as a god by the commoners and dismissed as superstitious mumbo-jumbo by the nobility, and in particular the Sheriff and Gisburne. Although the other outlaws had all seen him, he usually appeared to Robin himself, chosen as his spiritual son to lead the fight against oppression. Spectacularly garbed in the skins and antlers of a stag, it was never quite established whether he was a supernatural being or merely a man. Whichever, he garnered sufficient respect to be taken seriously when he popped up to tell of a premonition or to issue Robin and the outlaws some perilous task. Albion, one of the Seven Swords of Wayland, was presented to Robin by Herne. Although it was imbued with certain mystic powers, including the inability to be used against him, his prowess with the bow didn't transfer to his sword arm and he was forced to undergo swordsmanship tutoring courtesy of Scarlet, displaying a vulnerable side of the hero. The magic and mysticism was ever-present but generally understated, making it appear a regular occurrence of life with one or two exaggerated exceptions, such as *The Swords of Wayland* and *Cromm Cruac*.

Richard Carpenter worked closely with Terry Walsh, the

stunt co-ordinator, to achieve the realistically choreographed action sequences. A Bradford-upon-Avon protected barn was used for the interior shots of Nottingham Castle, until finally the Department of the Environment withdrew permission, explaining that tourists were being prevented from visiting the historic site. The majority of location filming took place in or around the West Country. The period atmosphere was captured beautifully; you could almost feel the dank chill of the castle and smell the cloying smoke and the stench of death when a peasant village was put to the flame. This realism was further fortified with the addition of Clannad's BAFTA award-winning theme and incidental music, which turned to chanting rhythms more fitting to medieval times with series III.

At the conclusion of series II, after thirteen episodes, Michael Praed announced his decision to leave the peasantry and join the nobility of the big budget American soap, *DYNASTY*. Praed was given an excellent send off with *THE GREATEST ENEMY*, arguably the most outstanding story of

the serial, in which the outlaws were captured and Robin sacrificed himself to save the lives of Marion and Much.

Robert of Huntingdon

After much deliberation, Carpenter and Knight decided to continue with the programme. It had received rave reviews and was even praised by then Controller of BBC1, Michael Grade, who stated that he would like to see the same production standards used for *DOCTOR WHO*. But how to write in another actor as the same character? Finally they decided to add an alternative existing legend. In Elizabethan times they found it difficult to accept the notion of a peasant as the people's hero, so Robin Hood

became Robert of Huntingdon, who abandoned his titles and lands to take up the cause. Enter the fair-haired Jason Connery, son of Sean. Hooded to hide his identity, he freed the outlaws from captivity and then disappeared, even shunning Herne when the spirit of the forest made the man his new spiritual son. Believing the quest for justice to be over, the outlaws disbanded. Series III commenced with Robert returning to his fate after a year, and therefore having to seek out the regular characters and convince them that what they were doing remained worthwhile. Marion, initially reluctant to become too closely attached, quickly came to love the new Robin, which suggests that maybe she loved the legend and what it stood for rather than the man behind it. (This change of actor attracted the attention of Mary Whitehouse, who complained about Robin's rebirth taking place at Easter!).

Although his acting was near faultless, Connery failed to convince in quite the same way as his predecessor. Still, it was a small price to pay when all other high standards were maintained. Guest villains included the aforementioned Anthony Valentine, resurrected for a sequel story in *The Enchantment*, Rula Lenska and Richard O'Brien, whose portrayal of Gulnar, the evil sorcerer in *Herne's Son*, *Cromm Cruac* and *The Time of the Wolf*, was outstanding.

Carpenter was already heavily involved in scripting stories for series IV when Goldcrest suddenly withdrew its half of the financial support, leaving HTV £5m down. The programme was shelved until 1990, when there was another attempt by Carpenter and Knight to continue with Michael Praed again in the lead role. In the autumn of the same year there were rumours that a \$10m film of the series was due to enter production. Subsequent news of this project quickly became conspicuous by its absence.

Would another series be a good idea? There were 26 episodes in all, each lovingly constructed with a serious and professional attitude. In this adventure the heroes did not always win. Comrades died and missions went awry, forcing the outlaws to compromise on certain issues. In *The Time of the Wolf*, Gulnar constructs a copy of Robin to kill the real legend. When the copy is dispatched, Marion discovers the body and, thinking she has lost her love for the second time, returns to the abbey and takes her vows. An unusually unhappy ending, proving that, when all is said and done, a hero always stands alone.

Ty Power

All three series of ROBIN OF SHERWOOD are available on Video Gems spread over four twin-tape sets for only £21.49.



Left to right: Jason Connery (Robin), Oliver Cotton (Owen of Clun) Judi Trot (Maid Marion)