

# Return of the Wolf

Tim Munro considers the future for Robin of Sherwood following renewed talk of a revival.

On Monday 11th November 1991, viewers of TVam's Good Morning Britain, had the pleasure of seeing Robin of Sherwood's Michael Praed and Nickolas Grace reunited, and speaking with both optimism and great enthusiasm about their hopes for the proposed revival of the show as a mini-series which, all being well, should enter production this summer. Veteran 'Robin' fans could be forgiven for treating this project with a fair degree of scepticism. After all, there have been more abortive attempts to resurrect the 'Hooded Man' than there have been false starts on Greenlight's Doctor Who Movie. But judging from Praed and Grace's statements, this time it's actually going to happen. The cast want it. The show's creator, Richard Carpenter, and its producer, Paul Knight, are working towards it. All that remains, in the words of Michael Praed, "is for the money men to do whatever money men do" — which, alas, is the rock upon which all previous attempts to revive the show have floundered. However, assuming the forest gods are smiling on Robin and the merries this time, let's take a look at the case for Robin of Sherwood's return to television, and the possibilities open to such a project should it go ahead.

Certainly, there's no series more deserving of a revival, in fact crying out for one, than Robin of Sherwood — no, not even Doctor Who, and I'm sorry if that's considered blasphemous in some quarters. Robin was one of the most original, innovative, richly imagined and strikingly realised drama series ever made for television. It boasted breathtaking production values, with consistently high standards of writing and (most of the time) acting to match, and the passage of time has done nothing to diminish these attributes — indeed, as the recent video releases and satellite screenings have demonstrated, amidst the shoddy and substandard fare of nineties television, Robin shines out even more brightly than ever. Its consistent excellence in all fields have lent it a timeless aura, making it a true classic of the medium. It is television of a quality all too rare on our screens these days, and its return would enrich ITV's drama output no end. (Here, I am assuming that any new series would maintain the high standards set by its predecessors, but with the original cast and production team back in place, and Richard Carpenter overseeing the project, I can see no reason why this should not be the case.) If that were not cause enough for a return to Sherwood Forest, such a revival would also see British television facing up to one of the most shameful pieces of unfinished business in its history; for Robin of Sherwood was one of those infuriating series that never really ended — it just stopped.

It's no secret that the series was not supposed to finish when, nor in the manner that, it did. At the time the final episode was made, plans were well advanced for a fourth and final season, which

would have culminated in the second (Connery) Robin's marriage to Marion, and a "happy ending". (Incidentally, Richard Carpenter has since changed his mind about this, feeling that such an ending would be dishonest, and now expresses a preference for an apocalyptic finale in which Marion is murdered by Gisburne, and which ends with Robin and Gisburne killing each other in battle.)

Unfortunately, though, this shining example of poetic justice is no compensation for the results of Goldcrest's action. Unable to finance the fourth season on their own, HTV were forced to axe it, and Robin of Sherwood ended prematurely and most unsatisfactorily with *Time of the Wolf*.

Ever since, Richard Carpenter has made clear his unhappiness at the show's fate, and his anger and disgust at the manner of Goldcrest's withdrawal, often stating that if they had announced their decision just a few weeks earlier, then he could have rewritten the final episode to provide a more satisfactory conclusion to the series. Instead, the decision came too late, and the show was left with a downbeat, open-ended "final" episode which, Carpenter has explained, had been deliberately designed to lead into Season 4, and which left many messy loose ends unresolved, notably the relationship between Robin and Marion (which has reached a crisis point at the end of *Time of the Wolf*) and that of Robin and Gisburne, who still has not discovered that his hated adversary is also his own half-brother (presumably his discovery of this would be the trigger for the bloody show-down Carpenter now envisages as the show's conclusion).

It's unsurprising, then, that almost as soon as the last episode had gone out, attempts began to get Robin of Sherwood back on the screen. The original plan was to make a movie, starring Jason Connery, the profits of which would hopefully pay for production of the fourth season, and a screenplay was duly written. Sadly, it was not to be. Several times the project came close to fruition. On each occasion it fell through at the last minute, most famously in 1988, when production was to take place in Hungary, the cast were reportedly all set to fly out, only to see the finance mysteriously vanish just before the project was due to roll. After that, apart from a brief moment of hope when Hollywood went Robin Hood mad for a few weeks, everything went quiet, and it looked as if even the persistent Mr. Carpenter had finally admitted defeat.

Then, last year, the rumours began; rumours that a new television series of Robin was on the cards — and most astonishingly of all, that Michael Praed would be returning to the role of the Hooded Man. After a while, another rumour went round, that Praed had put on considerable amounts of weight during his time in America, and had lost the role because he refused to diet! For some time, this prompted speculation that the new series might feature a third Robin. Thereafter, the project

seemed to disappear again, and most people finally wrote it off as just another silly rumour.

However, it now seems that the idea of a Robin of Sherwood revival is very much alive and kicking, and with Jason Connery unavailable (apparently he's booked up till two years hence) the intention is indeed for Praed's Robin of Loxley to lead the merries into this four-part mini-series. (Incidentally, set your minds at rest; the rumours were false, Praed is as slim as he ever was.)

Now I've no doubt that this news has delighted the many fans who regard Jason Connery's portrayal as a grossly inferior Robin, and who point to the show's plummeting ratings during his season as proof of this. Certainly one can see the rationale behind HTV's decision — with Connery unavailable, the show's great popularity worldwide still built largely on the Praed episodes, and Praed himself more than willing to return to the role that made him famous (perhaps not realising that he was pretty stupid to quit in the first place!), it makes perfect sense for the series to re-enlist its original, more capable and more popular leading man. But this also throws up terrible problems for the series. Firstly, with Praed back as Robin, it becomes impossible (short of dying Praed's hair blond and trying to pass him off as Connery's Robin!) for the show to pick up where it left off, and resolve all those irritating loose ends which are surely a major reason for doing the new series in the first place! Secondly, whoever writes the opening episode (and I do not envy them, whoever they are) now faces the tricky task of resurrecting Robin of Loxley from the dead in a way which is both credible and does not undermine *The Greatest Enemy*, the Season 2 finale which sees Praed's death and Connery's arrival, and which is the finest and most moving episode the show has to offer.

There are, of course, a couple of obvious ways out of this dilemma. One of these was mentioned as a possibility by Nickolas Grace during his aforementioned visit to TVam's sofa, and would involve Herne the Hunter using his magic powers to bring the first Robin back to life (presumably after Connery's Robin has been killed, probably by Gisburne and as part of the first episode teaser sequence — this could be achieved quite convincingly with a double for Connery). The full extent of Herne's powers has always been a matter for debate, but magic and sorcery have been an integral part of the series from the start, and



Michael Praed as Robin and Judi Trott as Marion © HTV West

there is the precedent of the Baron de Belleme, who most definitely returned from beyond the grave, so it is quite conceivable that Herne could do such a thing. Unfortunately, the intelligent viewer would surely feel bound to ask, "Why on earth he didn't do it in the first place, and save himself all that mucking around selecting and breaking-in the second Robin?" I can't help thinking too that such a miraculous resurrection would be somewhat of a cheap cop-out, precisely the thing Richard Carpenter was seeking to avoid when he devised the idea of the two Robins — after all, as he's said, it would have been a lot easier to just have Praed magically regenerate into Connery. Furthermore, one has to worry about the psychological effects on Marion of having lost two Robins in violent fashion, only to see the first one return from the dead within hours of his successor snuffing it! This is dangerous territory indeed — one recalls a fan cartoon of Herne standing over a dead Robin and declaring, "Not again! That's the third this week!". It would fatally undermine *The Greatest Enemy*, so much of whose effectiveness is due to the fact that Robin is really dead, and that would be criminal.

Another possibility is simply to forget all about explaining Robin's return from the undiscovered country, and to present the audience with a previously untold adventure of Robin of Loxley — in other words, to set the new series before *The Greatest Enemy*. The problem here is that the cast have visibly aged since 1985, and to try to pass them off as the ages they were then would surely strain credulity. It should also be said that however much the fans will happily accept Praed's presence without explanation, Joe and Jean Public will remember his death, and will want to know why he is suddenly alive again. If they don't get an explanation, they are going to be rather bewildered — say the least.

Which brings us to the Dallas scenario. This involves sweeping everything after *The Swords of Wayland* into the dustbin, and establishing that *The Greatest Enemy* and the Connery season never happened. Mindful of Bobby Ewing's return from the 'dead', some fans have joked that this episode should begin with Marion awakening from a dream to find Michael Praed showering under a waterfall! Such a move, though, would surely be unacceptable, since although it would at a stroke solve all those niggling loose ends from *Time of the Wolf*, it would also mean dispensing with not just the show's single finest episode, but also with some of the series' strongest points. However much one may dislike the execution of the Connery season, and particularly the casting of the lead, there's no denying that it does contain some of the most exciting and dramatic ideas in the entire series, such as the aristocratic new Robin's incongruity amongst his men, his troubled relationship with Marion (who, terrified that he will meet the same fate as his predecessor, tries desperately to stop herself falling in love with him) and above all the dark secret of his blood relationship to Gisburne, which becomes like a time bomb ticking away at the heart of the series. These aspects of the Connery season, together with Richard O'Brien's magnificent Gulnar, are far too good to be casually dismissed as "all a dream" (and let's not forget, Season 3 did have its fair share of classics, despite its many failings).

It would seem then, that whoever writes the mini-series has a problem — how to bring Praed back, without undermining or betraying what has gone before, and in a manner which enables the loose ends and tantalising, unresolved relationships of the Connery episodes to be tied up satisfactorily. It's difficult... but I think that there might just be



a way of doing it.

I should state here that this is not wholly my idea. It was first suggested to me by a friend, and subsequently kicked about between us during a drinking session. I like to think it's an interesting concept, and a broadly acceptable solution to the show's problem, but I'd be fascinated to know what others think, and what ideas they have.

Basically, the idea is this — Robin of Loxley isn't really dead. Whatever did happen atop that rocky outcrop in *The Greatest Enemy*, Robin didn't die. Now I know this appears to contradict my earlier statement that *The Greatest Enemy* relies for its effectiveness on the fact that he is dead, but I don't think this theory detracts from that episode in any way, because even if he isn't dead, the merries and Marion believe he's most certainly gone from their lives. The tragedy of their loss remains as strong as ever.

But suppose, just suppose, that he didn't die. Suppose, in fact, that Herne had other work for him to do; that the Forest God had decided the time had come for his protegee to leave Sherwood, to go out into the world, and to do his work amongst the poor, the weak and dispossessed, while another man assumed the mantle of Robin 'the Hood'. Thus suppose that during the Connery season, Robin is still out there somewhere, travelling the world, doing the work of Herne.

Of course, this does appear to conflict with Robin's farewell to Marion, and with the implication that it is his spirit which leads his successor to Herne ("I heard a voice," says Connery. "So... he is free," muses Herne), but apart from that it's quite amazing how much evidence there is for this theory once you start looking for it... in fact you begin to wonder if Richard Carpenter, even then, might have been writing himself an escape clause in case Praed changed his mind.

Firstly, of course, there is the surprising fact that we do not actually see Praed die. Secondly, there is the Sheriff's conspicuous failure to transport Robin's corpse back to Nottingham — thus we never see the body, and indeed, de Rainault's whole manner after Robin's 'death' is mighty suspicious. When Gisburne challenges him on the whereabouts of the body, his excuse is lame to say the least. "It was unrecognisable, Gisburne". and

Robin (Michael Praed) and his outlaws

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later — when Gisburne pursues the point — he becomes noticeably defensive. Note also the sequence where the Hooded Man rescues the merries. De Rainault's guards are paralysed with fear, believing that they face the ghost of the man they slaughtered earlier... but de Rainault, somehow knows that the ghostly figure is flesh and blood. "Kill that man," he snarls. Thinking about his uncharacteristically rattled behaviour throughout the episode's final act, one begins to wonder whether there was a moment when the Sheriff was left alone with Robin's 'corpse'... and if there was, whether de Rainault witnessed something rather shocking — like, perhaps, a man skewered with arrows casually getting up and walking away, or even disappearing. If you want more evidence, it's worth looking at Robin's parting words to Much — "I will be with you again — later" and remembering that Robin never made a promise to Much if he knew he wouldn't be able to keep it.

Working from this idea, a new series could begin several years after *Time of the Wolf*. Marion has finally succumbed to Robin II's charms, left the nunnery and returned to Sherwood... but Gisburne has discovered that Robin II is his half-brother, and in a fury tracks him down and kills him. The Sheriff is jubilant, but in the forest Herne the Hunter vows that it is not over yet — the Hooded Man is returning to his people. Even as Marion sobs over her second husband's corpse, several miles away, a tramp-like figure is entering Nottingham through the main gate. His face is hidden by his hood, but as the first notes of Clannad's *The Hooded Man* bring up the titles, he lifts his head, the sunlight falls across his face... and we realise we are looking at an older, more weather-beaten, but still unmistakable, Robin of Loxley.

You can have this for nothing, Richard Carpenter. Certainly I can't think of any other route which would enable the series to bring back Praed and deal effectively with the legacy of the Connery shows.

Of course, there are also other loose ends to be tied up, such as the Baron de Belleme, last seen alive and plotting revenge at the end of Season 2's *The Enchantment*. He was so obviously due to