

● By JEAN AIREY



Originally, he was supposed to die. And it wasn't going to be a quiet death.

He was, after all, originally a villain, an assassin named Edmund, working for an evil sorcerer. His task was to slay Robin of Sherwood. But just as he was about to commit that dark deed, the heroic Little John put an arrow through him.

Or at least that's how it was in writer Richard Carpenter's original script. And that was the intention during the initial filming of the first *Robin of Sherwood* episode. But everyone liked actor Mark Ryan and the character he played, Nasir. "The character Nasir didn't even exist at all, it was called Edmund the Archer," Mark Ryan recalls of the first day's filming. "I arrived on the set and Ian Sharpe, the director, said to me, 'It's not Edmund the Archer anymore. It's Nasir the Saracen, and we want you to fight this guy with two swords.' It just happened that I had done a bit of swordfighting with two swords. They were going to kill me in the second hour.

"But the producer decided to keep me on. Having made that decision, they gave themselves a problem: There was absolutely no background material for this character! So, [Richard] 'Kip' Carpenter, the writer, who's a very, very clever and talented man, an actor himself, said to me, 'Look, go away and research this stuff and come up with some ideas and I'll stick it in.' That's how I ended up in the series. I went away and researched the whole Arab background. Obviously, Kip used that material and stuff he researched himself. And it worked very well. So, I thought I was going to do two hours and ended up doing 26."

### Foreign Forests

Nasir, Ryan explains, evolved from close cooperation between Carpenter, himself and the costumes and props departments. "In the first six episodes, there wasn't any background. So, if you haven't got much to say, you can concentrate more on building up the costume, the props, and the things you can do with the props. As I was going about on the



Photo: Courtesy ROS/NAB

# Saracen Sentiments

As a warrior far from home, Mark Ryan fought alongside "Robin of Sherwood."







set in the first episodes, I was just playing with the costume, playing with the idea of the knife throwing and the sword playing.

"That's basically how that side of the character evolved. If you look at the episodes in order, you'll see that happening. I had a very strong idea of what this character should be, right from the word 'go.' Kip had said to me, 'Look, I'm going to give you some dialogue. Don't get worried if there's not much, it works with the character.' And he's absolutely right. When he did write dialogue that I thought I could do without, I cut it. I cut," he says emphatically, "most of the dialogue I had. The only dialogue I *couldn't* cut was the Arabic because," he laughs, "I didn't understand it! I didn't know what I was

**Though unable to continue with *Robin of Sherwood*, Ryan has teamed with Mike Grell for this year's *Green Arrow Annual*, which features familiar faces.**





Photo: Showtime

saying half the time.”

Not only did Ryan not know what he was saying, he found that although he worked very hard on the pronunciation, one time his verbalization of what should have been “None shall pass” came out, according to one listener, as “someone has stolen my rowboat.” The single line he ever added, however, wasn’t in English. “In the last episode with

**“There are seven archetypes there,” explains Ryan as to the enduring Robin Hood attraction. “People can associate with any of those seven archetypes.”**

very emotionally charged by it because we knew it might be the last time. We were losing Michael. The camera crew were crying. There was one point where the cameraman had to stop because he had tears running down his eyes. It was very emotional.”

As disappointed as the cast and crew were with the departure of Praed, who originated the role, the series continued as Jason Connery assumed Robin Hood’s mantle. Meeting their new “leader” was a pleasant surprise for Ryan. “It wasn’t that difficult because Jason is a really nice guy. We knew what we were doing. We had done a lot of it by then so we as a unit were tight and it was more difficult for Jason. With him, it was a different kind of energy, but I think it still worked.” Ryan hesitates. “What endeared Jason to me was the fact that we were very cruel practical jokesters on each other as well as anybody else that came onto the set, and Jason took it all with good part and listened to us. He integrated into the group. Obviously, when he was acting, he was the leader, he was Robin Hood, but amongst his peers, he was our equal. He wasn’t the *star*. That helped a lot. He’s one of the nicest guys I ever worked with. If my dad were James Bond, I would be a complete bastard,” Ryan grins.

### Arabian Archery

Making the show proved to be a learning experience as well. “I was born in Doncaster in south Yorkshire and I was brought up as a kid romping around Sherwood Forest playing in a hollow oak tree something like 1400 years old which they say was Robin’s meeting place. So, I knew of the Robin Hood legend because it was something I lived with. Obviously, I had seen all the old films, but I thought Robin was just a vagabond in the forest. The idea of the old Celtic god romping around in the woods never occurred to me at all.”

Ryan believes that part of the attraction of any Robin Hood series is the appeal of its characters. “There are seven archetypes there. People can associate with any one of those seven archetypes. And a group mind. People either connect with one of the archetypes or with the group mind. And,” he continues, “it’s good against evil.”

He also believes their series was unique. “It was the closest presentation of what life was like in those times. They did a lot of research to try to get it right. People weren’t clean, they were dirty, and grotty and cold.”

getting an arrow through them, you should show it gory and nasty. People will go, ‘That’s the *last* thing I would want to happen to me.’ Because on the whole, arrows don’t kill instantaneously. You die through gangrene and it’s nasty and grotty and horrible. And that would have been *truthful*. But then, you get people going, ‘You can’t show that kind of stuff because no one’s going to accept it.’ Well, no one *is* supposed to accept it—violence is quite nasty. So, they sanitized that. I don’t believe TV violence affects people so they want to go out and shoot people. They either want to go out and shoot people or not.”

Although working with the humans on the series was enjoyable, the livestock weren’t

**Mark Ryan shows off why he was one of the Merry Men as he exposes “the highest paid eyebrows in television.”**



Photo: Jack Svetlik

always as cooperative. “There was this one episode where I was riding a horse and I had to nock up the arrow, loose the arrow, miss the stuntman who’s behind me and then stop the horse. But in those particular situations, the horse gets charged up and it’s very difficult to rein them in. And I had, obviously, to let go of the reins to put an arrow to the bow and besides that, no stirrups—in case I had to bail out, I could just roll off the side of the horse.” Ryan started the run to find out that the horse quickly developed its own ideas about what the stunt should be. “The horse was so charged up that I couldn’t get hold of the reins, the horse was charging down the track like a lunatic. One of the horse guys stepped out into the track, went, ‘Stop.’ The horse stopped, and I went 14 feet through the air and he caught me!” Another time, Ryan’s horse developed its own script altogether. “The horse decided it was home time and decided to head back to its stable with me on it. Because

**“If my dad were James Bond, I would be a complete bastard.”**

Michael Praed when we were in the hut and I said, ‘Salaam al laikum, Robin’—that’s the only line I added in the entire series.”

That particular scene was difficult to film, Ryan adds. “We were all crying, we were all

But the series was also criticized for some of its realism. “There was a lot of upset about some of the violence in the series. Life is violent. I’m in two minds about that. I do believe that if you’re going to show somebody



When Ryan took up the mantle of Nasir, the character was a blank slate.

It was dinner time. It got bored. It just decided, 'I'm off!' I couldn't stop it. It just went all the way back and got in the back of the truck and started munching its oats with me screaming and shouting at it."

### Emerald Endings

At SF conventions, Ryan has worked up a whole repertoire of wacky topics for discussion: worldwide guinea pig farms, flashlights up the nose and, most importantly, dueling eyebrows. He attributes this unconventional convention style to his first con experience at a Chicago-based SCORPIO.

"I was in culture shock. I was jet-lagged and culture shocked." He shakes his head, remembering. "I had never seen anything like this before and I was just overwhelmed by the sheer weight of emotional input that people had. For an Englishman, it's sort of shocking to find all these different emotions: love,



Photo: Jean Airey

question—I went on for 25 minutes about my eyebrows, about why I had the highest paid eyebrows in show business. And that was a fact," he says seriously, "because at that time, I *did* have the highest paid eyebrows in television. Per episode, I was getting paid more money per eyebrow movement than anyone I could think of.

"But the thing about the eyebrows having a limo each and the ego battles they would have about who would do what line," he chuckles, "then got completely out of control and became a legend. About two years later, I went to a convention and there were girls there wearing 'Spirit of Eyebrows' T-shirts. They were having eyebrow conventions."

Ryan is disappointed and upset that the on/off *Robin of Sherwood* spin-off movie is now completely off. "I felt that the film *should* have been made, could have been made and needed to be made to finish off the whole thing—a logical conclusion for us and for the fans," Ryan says. "And it *could* have been done. We fought and pushed and tried to get this thing going, but it's just not going to get done and it's not my fault. I won't name names."

His frustration with the projected film's dissolution led Ryan to try to fulfill what he sees as his obligation to the fans in a different way—by writing a *Green Arrow* comic book with Mike Grell for DC. It is a project, he admits, "which I'm very proud of, very bullish about. It's going to be something I'm quite happy about. It'll come out this year. It's not *Robin of Sherwood*. *Green Arrow* goes back and meets a gang of guys and he becomes the dark man of the sacred oak—very similar to the Son of Herne. And there is a gang in the forest."

Another project Ryan has been working on for some time is a film based on the Arthurian legend entitled *Pendragon*. "It's a big project with some very interesting people interested, important people involved. We're calling it science-sorcery because it's some of the stuff now in quantum mechanics and holographs—time and multi-dimensional universes. So, there's all kinds of stuff in it. I can't talk about it too much except to say it's in development."

However, Ryan believes that he has already seen one dream fulfilled. "If I had a dream of immortality, not being egotistical about it, but just in a sense of—well, I made a stamp on *that*. It would be that in 200 years'

Photo: Jean Airey



"I don't understand people who aren't into talking to the fans," says Ryan here with an admirer and Michael Praed. "You have to treat them with respect and realize that to them, you are an important part of their life—I feel honored."

excitement...You could overdose on the atmosphere. It was ridiculous. You could stick an aerial up and fry eggs on it with the power. I was a bit taken aback."

This is clearly an understatement, as he continues, "I was almost going home—getting

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**"If you're going to show someone getting an arrow through them, you should show it gory and nasty."**

on the plane and leaving. But Michael Keating [a fellow guest, from *Blake's 7*], God bless him, said to me, 'We're going to the bar.' And so, we consumed some quantity of various American beverages." He grins. "I felt fine. The second panel we did, Michael launched off into some weird direction when he was asked a question. And I thought, 'I've got it, I've got it, that's it.' So, when someone asked me a question—which was quite a serious

time when Robin Hood is talked about, with Little John, Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet, possibly there'll be this Arab character that may be called Nazim or Nasir or Rassir or whatever, and he has become an accepted part of the group. And it didn't take 200 years at all, it took 18 months for the new version [*Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*] to have this character. And," says Mark Ryan, "I'm quite pleased about that." ✪