

# The Man Who Killed Robin Hood

As this Sheriff of Nottingham, Nickolas Grace sings, dances & actually slays Robin of Sherwood.

By JEAN AIREY

In the play *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, he's a hunch-backed, wooden-legged lecherous servant; a werewolf; a slightly dipsy, virtually virginal ingenue; a vampire; a less-than-ethical Egyptian guide (male); and a busty Egyptian princess. It would be with great difficulty indeed that any STARLOG reader would recognize this same performer as the Sheriff of Nottingham in *Robin of Sherwood*. From hunchback to princess is a stretch for any actor, certainly, but Nickolas Grace carries it off in stride.

"Let's pretend" is one of the best parts of the job!" he says. "It's the 'let's pretend' side I adore, but that's not the most important. The most important thing for me as an actor is when the performance has a profound effect on the audience. What I like most of all is affecting people, I hope, for the good. I can only say that subjectively, but I hope for the good."

"I want to send people away from the theater, or from having seen me give a performance on television or in the cinema, *uplifted* so that, for a while, I might have taken them out of anything that's dire and awful in their lives—to give them some escape. I think it's really important that people can escape and have a good time, to get away from the mundane side of life."

For Grace, the opportunity to play the Sheriff of Nottingham came after already being well-recognized by TV viewers for his *Brideshead Revisited* role as Anthony Blanche, a somewhat less-than-savory character. At the time, he was performing in *The Mikado* at London's Sadler Wells Theater. He confesses that he was excited at the offer.

"When I heard they were casting it, it certainly appealed to me right away. I couldn't forget Alan Wheatley in the black-and-white Robin Hood TV series and," he laughs, "I *thought* Basil Rathbone

[in the Errol Flynn movie], but of course Basil Rathbone didn't play the Sheriff; he played Guy of Gisborne."

The actor insists that he was never interested in playing the heroic lead. "I never wanted to be Robin Hood. I've never been a romantic actor; I was never a handsome young man," he shrugs, "so I wasn't offered those glamorous parts. But, in all honesty, I never wanted to [play them]. I would rather play the baddies or the kings—more meat. There's much more to discover than to be the hero; there are more dimensions to your character."

"I just loved adding layers to the Sheriff—when he washed, he would just splash water over his face and that was that. When he finished his wine, he would just throw the glass on the floor and someone would have to pick it up. And I would have so much fun because [series creator] Richard Carpenter and the rest would always encourage me to improvise—if some extra wouldn't bow, I would stop in the middle of a take and say, 'Bow, scum,' because that was the Sheriff of Nottingham! He was the King's representative in the land; therefore, people had to bow to him. Dimensions of myself I never knew existed—as the Sheriff—were wonderful!"

"The designers all loved me because they could design frocks for me," he laughs. "The tunics and tights [the others wore] were wonderful and heroic, and I was in the frock all the time! But that was all right; I got the best clothes."

## The Crazy Sheriff

Of course, all these events occurred after he got the part, never a sure thing for any actor. "The producers asked me to meet them for an interview," Grace recalls, "so I







Rather than be a classical Sheriff of Nottingham, Grace wanted "to be absolutely ruthless" towards *Robin of Sherwood*.

went, and the director [Ian Sharp] and the producer [Paul Knight] said, 'Well, we just think you're marvelous; we think you're wonderful.' Ian asked, 'Would you like to play the Sheriff?' and I thought, 'This is so easy I can't believe it.' So, I said, 'No, I would *love* to play the Sheriff. You want him to be a bit off the wall, a bit mad? Great! Terrific!' And then I [asked], 'Who's playing Robin?' and they said Michael Praed. I didn't know him, so I went to see him in *Pirates of Penzance* at Drury Lane. I loved the show and went backstage to meet him. We chatted for hours and he said, 'Come on, let's do it for fun, let's do it together.' So, we did it because we thought it would be fun.

"What they meant by off the wall was, 'We don't want him to be the classical actor Sheriff of Nottingham' which they might have been worried about with me being a Royal Shakespeare [trained] actor—that that would be what I would want to do. But I said, 'I want to see him ripping bones apart when he eats!' He eats badly, you know. He's a schoolboy; he's one of the brats. He's a Norman. They've been

brought up as one of the elite. I wanted to be absolutely ruthless, have no scruples at all. As soon as he sees something he wants, he *grabs* it, takes it. So, as far as he's concerned, Robin Hood is just a thorn in his side—get rid of him; do anything. That's what they wanted, and that's how I wanted to do it.

"So, he wouldn't be perfect and camp," Grace continues. "I wanted to get away from the very peacock-like elegant side of Anthony Blanche, which they had seen me do in *Brideshead Revisited*. I wanted to be very decadent and off the wall—I mean really *crazy*!"

The actor feels that he got to create the character, but he says emphatically that he couldn't have done so without Kip Carpenter. "It was his idea, with mine. He wrote those lines, and then he would say, 'If you've got any ideas, please tell me,' and that was great."

One of the points Grace complained about early in the series was that the Sheriff was always stuck in the castle. He pleaded, Grace relates, " 'Please, get me out—let me get in the forest too.' So, they wrote one episode where I—in disguise—get out of the castle, because I think [no one else] can capture Robin Hood. Then, I get captured by the Merry Men, and the only way back into the castle is to use the

Merry Men and for them to use me. So, that was great fun."

Obviously a man who takes great enjoyment in his work, Grace continues with glee. "And then there was another one: 'I must get married; come on, the Sheriff ought to get married,' " he mimics his plea to the writers. "So, we got a little girl called Mildred—I loved the word 'Miiiiiiiiiildddddrrrrred,' " he drawls it out to an impossible length. "It was so wonderful to say. And the Sheriff was just about to marry Miiiiiiiiiildddddrrrrred when the Merry Men attacked and saved me from my marriage."

## The Dancing Sheriff

Grace recalls one particular sword fight between him and Praed. "They wanted a great duel scene like Basil Rathbone and Errol Flynn. There was no room to have it, but we still wanted a fight."

The problem of space was compounded by the shooting schedule. "There was never any time. The first series was shot on a fortnightly turnover, no overrun at all, so we never met. We met in the evenings for dinner, but Michael would be shooting his scenes and I would be off [shooting mine]. For us both to practice the fight together was impossible. So, Terry [Walch, the stunt director] taught me the fight and taught Michael the fight, and ne'er the twain shall meet.

"On the day we actually met, we were both doing what we thought we were supposed to do, and it became a hysterical fight. Most of the time he would simply pin me, because I hadn't fought since I played Hamlet in 1975 and I had never bothered to fence after that. He would be doing everything, and, suddenly, I would find the sword out of my hand and he would have his blade against my throat. We kept doing this, and at one point I came at him and he turned me around. We got face-to-



Nickolas Grace adores the "Let's pretend" side of acting, but hopes his performance leaves the audience with a profound effect.

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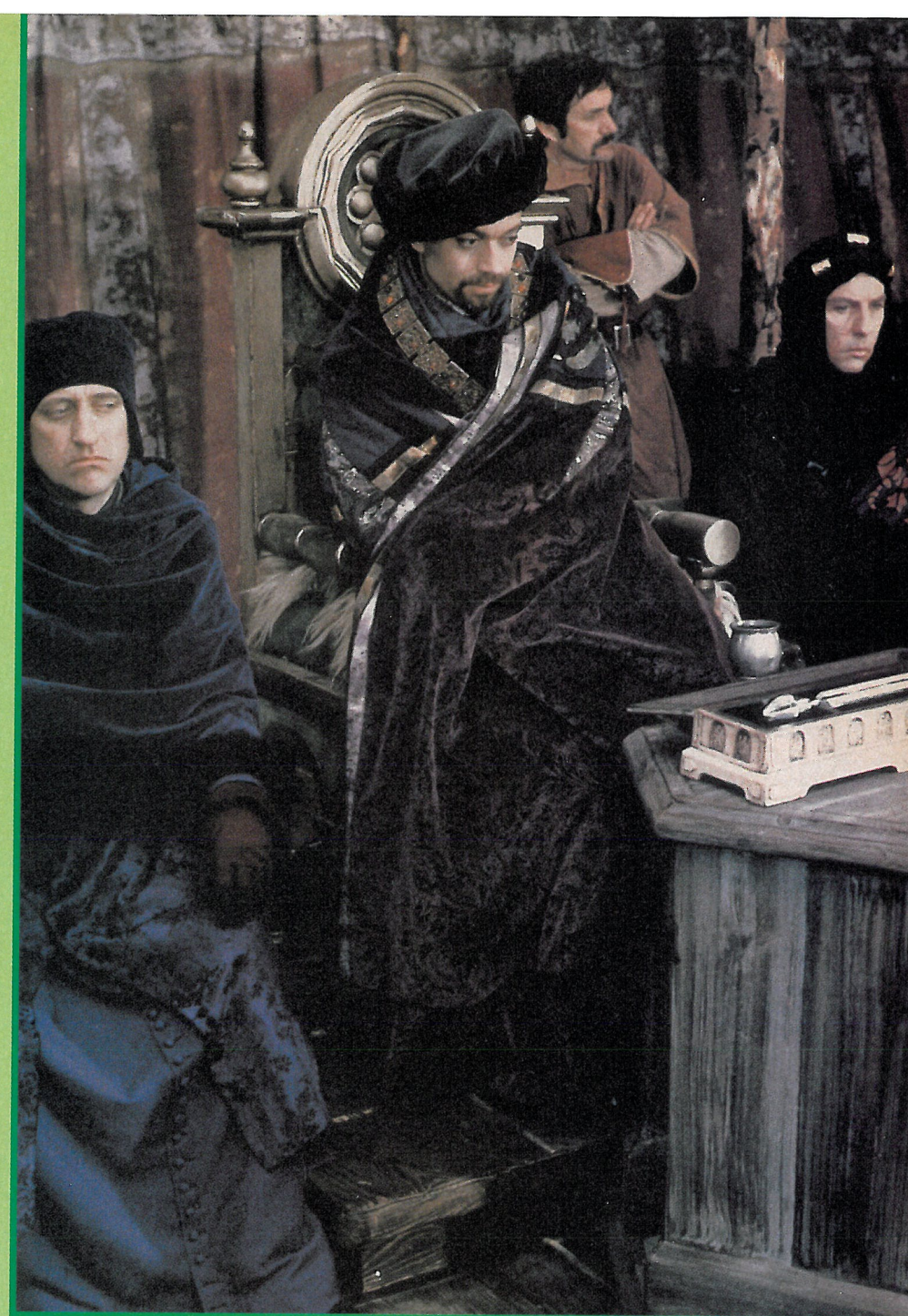
face, so I just kissed him," says Grace, giving a wide-eyed look of 'What else was there to do?' It was an effective way, he admits, of stopping an attacker.

"There were other times when you were doing things very, very seriously, like running along the walls of Brent Castle doing an exterior shoot of Nottingham Castle," he adds. "You would be running along the walls and suddenly see all these fans—*hundreds* of them!—running along the walls underneath you. The cameras wouldn't see [them since] they were shooting the other way. On the one side, you would hear, 'Nick, Nick, can I have your autograph,' and this other lot would be going, 'Good, good, Nick. Now look more harassed, more aggressive.' And then I said to Robert Addie [Guy of Gisburne]—who didn't always appreciate my sense of humor—'Next time we do it, when we go along the walls, let's sing "Joshua and the Walls of Jericho." ' He said, 'No, I don't think we should do that.' And the next time we came out—" Grace gives a quick look around to make sure the London restaurant is still largely deserted, then starts snapping his fingers and sings, "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho." He then laughs and continues, "We all went into a big dance routine and *kicked* our way along the wall.

"I always thought that the Sheriff should add a bit of levity to the proceedings because he was so vicious and nasty. Another time, I was coming down the stairs with these huge mastiff dogs, and Gisburne was at the bottom—he had failed on yet *another* mission. I said 'What is it, Gisburne?' He [corrected me and] said, 'Guy, Guy,' and I went—" without a glance around this time, he bursts into song—" 'When you see a guy reach for stars in the sky...' I did this kick routine down the stairs, did the whole song from *Guys and Dolls*. All the extras were gobsmacked, the cameras were running and I thought, 'Pretty good.' I got down to the end of the stairs to see the American producers standing there," he says, imitating their look of absolute disgust. "Not only did they think I was wasting *their* money, but that I was also sending them up because it was an American musical. So, it took a lot of explaining that I was only singing that song because it suited Guy of Gisburne. It was the *best* musical..." Shaking his head, Grace drops into a nasal American accent. " 'Oh, if you say so, but we can't waste time like this.' So, I apologized."

## The Victorious Sheriff

Replacing Robins between the series' second and third seasons changed the Sheriff's relationship with his adversary, Grace feels, as well as bringing in an actor with a different style. "The relationship with Michael Praed was much easier and more established from the word go because we started the thing off together and grew together. When Kip had the idea that we had to have a new Robin, [he also thought] it must be a different storyline, which I think



Grace didn't care whether the townspeople hated the Sheriff. The show's designers loved him, and "I got the best clothes."

was brilliant on his part—one the aristocratic one, Robert of Huntington and the other, Robin of Locksley, which was Michael.

"It put us on a different level because

**"The amount of hate mail I got was phenomenal."**

Jason Connery's character was of our class, of the Norman class. Therefore, he was on much more of a level with the Sheriff of Nottingham. It may sound silly to talk about class, but that was important in

the series. The big difference was that they were totally different actors and I loved them both. Jason was less experienced than Michael and had a totally different attitude. Michael was always very flamboyant—flicking his hair and doing a lot of this stuff with his hands. Jason was much, much stiller, and knew much more about camera technique. I think he learned that from his parents. [It was good] that they were both very, very different."

The change resulted in what Grace describes as some rewarding moments for an actor playing the villain. "It was wonderful at the second season's end; the Sheriff of Nottingham actually *won*! That has never happened before in Robin Hood, that the Sheriff of Nottingham actually

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# Grace

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beat Robin Hood. For an audience to actually see the Sheriff *kill* Robin Hood was quite extraordinary. The amount of hate mail I got was phenomenal, really phenomenal," he says with great delight. "You know, they went on and on about 'Why did you do it?' All the chat [talk] shows picked it up, and it was marvelous. So, you can imagine the Sheriff's frustration then when he thinks he has won and, suddenly—since there was another season, thank God—there's *another* Robin Hood! But, he knows he killed Robin Hood!"

Unlike *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, in which the Sheriff (Alan Rickman) relies on black magic, Grace believes his portrayal was more pragmatic about the means to an end. "The Sheriff was so unscrupulous, he would use *anything*. If there was some magical form, some equation as opposed to Christianity, he would use it. He would be as devious as possible to insure that he would beat Robin. What I always said about the Sheriff was that he was fascinated by the black magic and sorcery side, but pooh-poohed it *unless* it was going to be useful to him. So, Herne the Hunter was always a joke to him. A man with a deer sitting on top of his head didn't really exist; otherwise, he would be smothered!"

Reflecting on *Robin of Sherwood*, Grace describes the series as a period of "some wonderful times, really wonderful times. My major sadness is that we haven't made the movie of it—which has been in the cards since 1986. I think Paul Knight has procrastinated so long that we can't make the movie now—there isn't room for ours. The only possibility would be to revive the series and—" his voice trails off and the ebullience dies out. "I think the moment's past; as much as I would like to say it hasn't, I believe it has. Jason and I would love to do it. Jason and I did so much. I wrote to people for money, I wrote to people to be the guest villain, and still nothing happened. So, there's no point now in going back over old territory. On to new things—that's the only way to be."

Among the new things Grace has moved on to include portraying a multitude of rather strange characters in *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, a play that could hardly be considered a Shakespearean classic. Each evening's performance leaves him exhausted, but exhilarated. Why did he select this show? He grins, "I thought it couldn't be done." He has also appeared in a BBC production of Noel Coward plays with Joan Collins and just filmed an episode of *Sherlock Holmes* for Granada TV.

Further in the future, Nickolas Grace looks forward to doing "the one thing I've always done—been lucky enough to do—in my career: Take on challenges. I like things that are dangerous. I *like* a sense of danger." ❀