

Reflections of a P.A.

(N.B. This chapter has been very kindly written by Adele Paul, who was Pennant Roberts' P.A. in the second series. Her frank writing gives us a glimpse of what it was like putting this eccentric series together.)

I did the job I did because I loved it; because it was fun. And although the independent TV companies all paid more money - lots more - only at the BBC could a P.A. work solely on drama productions; also, we tended to believe in public service broadcasting. We travelled quite a bit - attending rehearsals, and filming or taping on locations world-wide - most often, naturally, within daily travelling distance of Shepherd's Bush!; we worked with different people from show to show; and we believed in what we were doing.

Survivors was the fourth series I worked on for Terry Dudley and I looked forward to it. Terry's previous series had been great to work on. First Lady starred Thora Hird, and I remember very happy times; during breaks in rehearsal we would listen to LPs (remember those?) of her then son-in-law, Mel Torme'. At parties after recordings, Thora would sit at the piano, smile sweetly, and entertain us with monologues she'd written for herself; nobody else could write them like our Thora..

Then Terry had this huge hit with Doomwatch. An immensely popular series about scientific trouble-shooters, it brought Robert Powell sacksful of fan letters from youngish teenagers. Our sex symbol, Simon Oates, stayed for the duration, 3 seasons, and with John Paul and Toby Blanchard made sure that all newcomers, both actors and crew, felt part of the Doomwatch family. The BBC rehearsal Block in Acton hadn't even been thought of in those days; we rehearsed all over London in any draughty, dusty old hall the Beeb could rent.

Terry then produced the second series of The Regiment; scripted scenes took our regiment from the Boer War to India - or was it the other way round? - and the entire unit spent three months staying at the magnificent Ledra Palace Hotel in Nicosia. (Very shortly afterwards, Cyprus was partitioned, and we all feared for the safety of the many friends we had made during our stay - Greek, Turkish, and of course the soldiers of the Blues and Royals). Our filming took us all over the beautiful island, and we still have fond memories of our trip. While we were in Cyprus there was a total communication strike - no post, no phones, no contact with the outside world. Our enterprising fixer, Jackie Willows, simply visited the local school to track down the nearest ham radio, and we were back in business.

Looking back, I'd always casually assumed that the reason Survivors was such a miserable show to work on was its subject matter, but the merest reflection tells me that that isn't it. After all, I worked on a series about the Samaritans, the name of which mercifully escapes me; two actors who played Samaritans, Michael Culver and Peter Armitage, were determined that we'd all have a good time, and somehow or other, in the face of scripts which necessarily contained non-stop misery, have a good time we did.

But not on Survivors. This wasn't the fault of our h6tel and h6teliers, who were friendly and kind - and this was not always the case. Hotels generally welcome film units, because we aren't there, getting in the way of the chambermaids, much, as we work long hours, and when we are there we're very good for bar takings. But it wasn't always comfy. Near Chichester, about 25 years ago, well before Survivors, a newly-retired officer and his wife had opened a hotel in which they treated their unsuspecting guests like new conscripts; they shouted at us, and anything, but anything, was too much trouble.. They also had nylon sheets. All a bit too close to Fawltly Towers for comfort!

But the Survivors unit in Wales was cosseted at our h6tel, The King's Head; I remember being fed fresh elvers as a special treat. My window overlooked a delightful market square. In those days, Wales was still 'dry' on Sunday, but the hotel bar was always welcoming. I seem to remember that the weather was wonderful. Old mates Eileen Mair and Janet Tharby were in charge of make-up and costumes. The director for whom I was working, Pennant Roberts, was - indeed, is - talented and terrific.

What went wrong? Well, for one thing, some of the locations were truly disgusting. The buildings were filthy and we would pussyfoot about trying not to touch anything. Also the producer's son, Stephen, was cast in an on-going r6le as a small survivor, playing scenes with another child, Tanya Ronder, whose father Jack had written some of our scripts. Unfortunately, though Tanya was there because she wanted to be - and she is now a grown-up actress pursuing a successful career - Stephen was clearly wretched with misery. Nothing could get me to criticise an actor's performance in print, but as Stephen is now a naval officer I feel at liberty to say that, fond though I was of him, he had no talent, and as Tanya was very good indeed, their scenes together looked odd.

Child actors have chaperones; Stephen's was his mother. By the time I arrived on location, this seemed to have been

a bit of a mistake. Hilde Dudley is German, and every time she turned her back, they'd be a member of crew behind her raising his arm in salute. She was deeply unpopular. For one thing, she was quite horrible to little Tanya, who was giving a splendid performance. These sorts of tensions can quickly sour a whole shoot.

But what was really the matter was, the company as a whole somehow didn't gell. Somehow, the atmosphere wasn't right. Perhaps this filtered down from the top; in Cyprus, Terry Dudley had cast a lot of old friends in the company, and regaled us with tales of early days in rep. He was a very witty, avuncular chap. Certainly, he could be eccentric - for instance, he often came to the door of his hotel room stark naked, which must've been quite a surprise to the uninitiated. In Cyprus he was clearly having the time of his life. By the time we got to Wales, his son was miserable, his wife was haranguing, and perhaps that set the tone.

Anyway, I remember how cheerfully I packed, when location taping was done and I was on my way home. My current boyfriend, who looked a bit like Yves Montand, was waiting to take me out to dinner. When *Survivors* was transmitted, I intended never to watch one frame of it.

The London locations followed; I remember hilarity as Nadim Sawalha struggled to ride a motorbike; and our cherry-picker accidentally uprooted a lamp-post. We were down by the deserted docks very early on a Sunday morning, and my biggest problem was finding inhabited premises, to plead for the use of a loo.

Probably the biggest source of my 'bad vibes', when I think of *Survivors*, is the way in which I remember being treated by Terry Dudley. We were working inhuman hours, and Terry tried to bully me into not filling in overtime sheets, in order to help keep his programme within its budget - to put it bluntly, he wanted me to do double the workload without being paid for it. As he was doing very well out of the series personally - every member of his family was on the pay-roll, after all, this was mean behaviour. With distance comes compassion - perhaps I'm wrong about this but I seem to think after *Survivors* he was 'demoted' to directing, and felt the loss of status keenly. Was this possibility the reason for his behaviour? Anyway, I believe he went on to direct *All Creatures Great and Small*, filming up cows' bums. And serve him bloody well right.

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