

## *Anne Christie (Wife of Jack Ronder).*

*"Jack felt Survivors could have been a very powerful drama series if it hadn't relied so much on guns and violence."*

Together with Terry Nation, Jack Ronder was the most influential scriptwriter during the first series of Survivors. Indeed, Ronder, a scientist himself, left an indelible stamp upon this unique series. His wife Anne chaperoned their daughter Tanya (Lizzie) for two series and was often to be found both at Hampton Court and Callow Hill while the episodes were being shot. There is no better person to speak about her husband's crucial contribution to Survivors.

What does Anne remember about Jack's thoughts when the series was being put together? "Well, he was terribly excited when it happened. He was a scientist, a chemist by training and he thought that it would be a fascinating project. I think in the end we both felt sad there was such a lot of shooting in the episodes because we didn't really think it had to be like that. For us it belittled the series. Jack felt it could have been a very powerful drama series if it hadn't relied so much on guns and violence."

At what stage was Jack involved in the planning of the series? "Terry Nation came up with the idea and Jack was asked very early in the setting up of the series to do some episodes. He felt that Corn Dolly was one of the best things he'd ever written. He thought that this piece of telly had not been messed up. The writer has a pure idea and then the idea goes through this tremendous sieve of actors and directors and egos. Jack felt that in this particular episode what he wanted to say had gone through as he wanted it to. It was also very well directed by Pennant Roberts. They did however cut one small bit from it that he was worried about. Corn Dolly also saw the introduction of the character of Charles Vaughan, played by Denis Lill. They absolutely adored Denis because he gets on so well in company. He's a good company actor i.e. - not too temperamental. Jack was initially contracted just for the first series. He was then told that there would be a second series and asked to write more scripts."

One of the interesting facets of the first season were the different vistas given by Terry Nation and Jack Ronder, the latter going in for more character based stories while the former relied more on action adventure. "Yes, Jack felt that the concept was interesting in human terms of working out what people would do in this situation and he didn't think that they would all succumb to violence. Obviously you attract different sorts of audiences with the different styles."

Why did Jack leave Survivors in the second series? "There were problems between Jack and the producer Terry Dudley. Jack was a member of The Writers' Guild Committee, and you're not supposed to change scripts without telling the writer. I know that it's very difficult for the people making these programmes when they're under stress, but there were quite a lot of changes made to Jack's scripts and yet his name would still be on them. In fact, I believe he reported this to The Writers' Guild since he felt so uptight about it. You have to remember that he was putting his job on the line. He had a family to feed and a mortgage to pay and it was very alarming for him. There was also another reason for falling out with Terry Dudley: Jack had to write Hana-Maria Pravda (see also interview with Tanya Ronder) out of the series. Now Hana went on at him a bit, she kept ringing him up to find out what was happening to her character and whether she was going to be written out of the series. In the end, foolishly perhaps, but as a human being who knew and liked this woman, he confirmed that she wasn't going to be in the second series. This got back to Terry Dudley who went 'bananas'. It seemed to us both unnecessarily cruel that the actors concerned weren't told their fate when the decisions were made."

In a recent article on Survivors in DWB magazine, it was suggested that Jack Ronder had in fact subverted Terry Nation's original idea. Was there ever any personal conflict between the two? "I've never heard this before. As far as I know, there was never any falling out between them, in fact, I don't believe they ever even had any dealings with each other. Of course, Terry Nation may not have liked his scripts, I just don't know. I only know that there were problems with Terry Dudley taking it upon himself to rewrite scripts, and that is pretty insulting for a writer like Jack who was on The Writers' Guild Committee fighting hard for the authors' rights. I admired Jack's courage because there was a lot at stake. We had a very difficult time immediately following all this and he was unemployed for several months."

One of the most intriguing aspects of the first series was that it was headed by the strong personality of the character of Abby Grant, played by an equally strong and assertive Carolyn Seymour. Did Jack find writing for women difficult? "No, he was always good at writing for women. His first successful play, This Year, Next Year, that was produced in the West End was about two sisters. In fact he preferred to write for women."

Jack's second offering for Survivors was *Gone to the Angels*, which sees the introduction of Jack and Anne's daughter, Tanya. What prompted Terry Dudley and Jack to introduce the two children? "I think they had discussed whether they wanted children and decided that they would like them. The obvious choices were Tanya and Stephen. *Gone*

to the Angels also had Nickolas Grace in it who is very close to us.

So how did Anne feel about having her daughter so involved in the series? "It felt great because for at least six years before we had thought that there was no other way she was going to go. Almost from the time when she was a toddler she seemed a natural. She had an awareness of the effect that she made by putting on a hat for example. She had a good sense of timing and knew the effect of how she would come over. On the other hand we all felt rather sorry for Stephen. He wasn't happy doing it at all and often seemed quite strained."

There were drastic problems to be overcome in the first series episode *Revenge*, when one of the of the cast was forced to pull out due to a nervous breakdown. "Revenge was an awful one. Terry Scully, who played the character Vic Thatcher, had a nervous breakdown right in the middle and Jack had to re-write the episode on the spot so to speak. The episode was done almost as it was written, it was really horrendous! I remember thinking what a brutal thing the financial machinery of television is, because the man was so ill but they still wanted to get two day's acting out of him and it nearly did for him. They had made him go through the motions of the previous episode just to get it finished, and it nearly killed him. I remember being appalled by what happened to him. He was a very sweet man, but was obviously 'off his head' for about three or four days and I actually went to Terry Dudley and a couple of P.A.'s and said 'Look, this man is terribly ill and must have help', but felt that my plea was just ignored."

The second series of *Survivors* opens at Callow Hill, the original settlement having been razed to the ground in a fire. "Callow Hill was a wonderful and beautiful place. It was all very bohemian up there. I remember that Jack and I went up to see the location on recce, it was all great fun. Either I or a good friend would chaperone Tanya so she was well looked after. We stayed with some people called Cohn and Kitty Clarke, on Callow itself. They were quite independent of the others. They used to restore fabrics and Jack and I got 'pally' with them and they invited us to stay with them and became great friends. She was vastly pregnant at the time."

Anne is herself a writer, having had several novels published. How does she compare writing novels and writing for television? "Inevitably, novel writing is much freer than television writing. As Jack said when he wrote the novel of his television series *The Lost Tribe*, the liberty of orchestrating your own performances and set design after the strictures of television production are enormous. He felt he'd been let out of prison, artistically speaking. Jack suffered a lot as a series writer and was very pained on occasion at how far from his original concept the final product ended up. I should love to write a novel about the series sometime and may well do it eventually, and yes, of course I'd like to write for television some time."

Does Anne think that there is a place for a new series of *Survivors* today? "I think it would have to be different, but I do think that the idea is very pertinent, now that Aids and pollution have become such problems. I think that if the series had been repeated in the 1980's then perhaps it could be revived, but as so few people today are familiar with it a new concept would be required."