

## *Carolyn Seymour (Abby Grant)*

*"I remember Corn Dolly because I actually got pregnant. So did Lucy and about five other women! The corn dollies we made worked!"*

For the first, and many would argue the most successful series of Survivors, the face of Carolyn Seymour, who played middle-class housewife Abby Grant, became synonymous with the series. A combination of excellent scripts, imaginative directing and Carolyn's obvious acting abilities made the series one of the most thought-provoking and innovative dramas ever produced by the BBC. Carolyn made the part of Abby very much her own, and with her 'lean and hungry' look, was perfectly cast to play the role of a woman who by default was called upon to lead the remnants of society.

Carolyn's true name is Carolyn von Beckendorf. what is the origin of this unusual name? " Oh, nobody calls me that! I'm von Beckendorf because my grandfather was Russian. He was actually Estonian but he was second chamberlain to the Tsar and they lived in Estonia and he was killed in 1917 during the revolution and my grandmother took all the children to the estate in Estonia. They lived in Estonia for a while and my grandmother then went to St. Petersburg where she lived with Gorky. In fact she was his mistress for seventeen years! In 1934 they came to England. What happened was that H.G. Wells went over to Russia to talk with Gorky about communism and he met and fell in love with my grandmother. Gorky, realising that Estonia and everywhere was about to explode, allowed her to come back to this country with H.G. Wells. She lived with him for eleven years.

"I became Seymour because I had to change my name. I remember going in to meet Ned Sherrin, who was about to direct a film and they wanted an au-pair style girl, whereas my name, von Beckendorf sounded like a terrific German dominatrix-type character and I knew then that I had to change it. It was too long and there wasn't anybody with a long name at that point. My agent wanted to call me Ally Seymour which I thought was going a little far, making me sound like an opera singer."

How did Carolyn start out in acting? "I wanted to act ever since I was three years old. I wrote my first play when I was four and I made everyone act in it! We got all the kids on the farm organised and made everyone take part! There was never any question about it, I always wanted to act.

"I did my training at the Central School of Speech and Drama. I think that once at the age of thirteen or so I wanted to be a probation officer. I told the aforementioned grandmother about this, who thought that the whole idea was ridiculous. I also spent a lot of time as a child on the London buses pretending to be French and also a deaf mute! I was always acting, always something tragic. I think I've always lived on the tragic side of life. I have Russian-Irish parentage so what do you expect!"

How did Carolyn get the part of Abby Grant in Survivors? "With a great deal of difficulty. They didn't want me. My agent and I had quite a time trying to convince them to give me the part. I don't really know why, nobody really knows why. In fact, I was talking about this with Lucy (Fleming) just last night. I suspect it was because I was a little rowdy, I worked hard and I played hard. I was emotional and I spoke my mind which I have always done."

Would Carolyn agree that she had a very strong personality, and that this was difficult for the BBC to handle, perhaps in the end leading to her not being picked up for the second season?" I had a very strong personality and didn't always want the character to go in certain directions. I thought that Survivors was the perfect time to start introducing real feminism. I think we desperately needed a strong woman. She was indeed strong on many levels just because of what she was doing but there were other areas where she was always deferring to the men and I didn't see why she had to do that. In those days, you see, women still had to be quiet. And that is when it showed. They cast me as a strong woman and then found that they couldn't handle it! Yes, I know that I misbehaved, but then again we all drank hard and partied hard, it was just one of those things. In those days we did that and I don't think that I was particularly out of order. For example, I pushed the beeb into providing adequate comfort and facilities for the extras because they weren't providing that. I remember one day saying things to them like: 'I'm not going to shoot the next scene if we don't get a coach for these extras. There's no need for these old ladies to stand around outside in the cold'. Herefordshire in winter was absolutely freezing! The puddles were all frozen over and they were expecting these people to just sit around! They hadn't provided chairs or cover or a loo or anything! So

I would push them a lot on this sort of thing. I was very opinionated! I had been given an awful lot really young and I just couldn't bear what they did. And that I think is the reason why they fired me in the end.

Also, I was the highest paid actress that they had ever employed. That wasn't exactly very much, around £240 or £320 a week or something like that. Some people are only getting that on the West End today!"

So how does Carolyn feel about Abby, the character she played for the first series? 'There were many layers to the character of Abby, but you show me anybody in the world who hasn't got all those different layers! She was very much me. Abby never really had any romance, but the idea was that she shouldn't show any of the vulnerability, inevitably however she just had to.'

Having watched some of the first series videos which have been released by the BBC, how does Carolyn feel that the series stands up in the 1990's? "Having watched a few of the episodes on video, I do think that they sort of drag a little bit. They are just a little slow in getting to the point. Perhaps that was just the style at the time. They were also quite strapped for cash. There are two high-budget movies of a similar theme out in the States at the moment. We couldn't afford, for example, to have lots of bodies lying around the place. Can you imagine what we would have had three months later!"

What memories does Carolyn have of the very first episode, The Fourth Horseman? "Well, it was chaotic. We would shoot one episode in the morning and the other episode in the afternoon. Luckily, because the episodes were evenly balanced, we all got equal amounts to do, every third one was mine and so forth, which made it much easier. Just occasionally we would overlap and so it would be an unbelievably long day which I wasn't used to while working for the Beeb, but now that I live in America I'm completely used to it. The usual routine was to have two days rehearsal at Acton and then we would travel and shoot. It was tough on all of us, particularly Lucy and myself because we had children and we would take them with us because they were too young to be left behind, so there would be this huge cortege of people arriving. Whenever I could and whenever it was possible I would take the children with me and Lucy would actually commute so that she was actually driving two hours after every day's shoot, which was naturally exhausting. I didn't commute, because I just knew that it wouldn't be worth it. Some of the time we ended up renting farm-houses or cottages."

The first half dozen episodes were made using a combination of studio work and film inserts on location. which did Carolyn prefer? "You have much more control somehow when you're in the studio, but I don't really mind. I rather loved the spontaneity of shooting outside, you never know what's going to happen. The studio work would have been done in London, all the work with George Baker was done in the studio. It was like everything else, it just required a lot of preparation, because whatever you were shooting in the studio had to keep continuity with what was happening outside, and as there were sometimes two or three days in between it sometimes got a little complicated."

Several people, both cast and on the production side, regret that the series was largely made on video, saying that it would have looked much better had it all been done on film. Does Carolyn share these reservations? "Yes, and it doesn't match and video doesn't hold up as well and all of those sort of things, but it doesn't really bother me. Star Trek: The Next Generation is done on film. Although this is very expensive they cut down on rehearsal time; you don't get the luxury of rehearsals! You have no rehearsal and you shoot two or three times. This is what happens when you work on film."

How would Carolyn compare working in TV today with twenty years ago? "It was slower, you had more time to prepare, more time for rehearsals. As with everything, with lack of speed comes more respect. I really felt that all of us contributed as a whole, that there was a lot of respect paid to everybody's input, within certain boundaries of course. We don't have that now, it doesn't exist."

Was Carolyn happy with the general quality of the scripts and did they become, perhaps, somewhat pedestrian by the end? "Well, some of them perhaps but by the end of it there wasn't time. They weren't being given the luxury of time. They were suddenly faced with having to finish them, and I think we all had complaints about a lot of them, but given the standards now and the standards then I think that the quality was very high. Everyone always complains, I mean, what's the point of this or that? And of course, we all wanted to change things so that we did bigger and better things than the others but of course you couldn't."

Is there any story in that first season which stands out more than any other in Carolyn's mind? "Yes, the one where I had to pass judgement (Law and Order). This was terribly difficult for me because I do not believe in capital punishment so it was a very hard story for me to do. I really fought against it. I wanted to stop it because I have a moral objection to capital punishment. I would have banished the man found guilty (Barney). I would have banished him to a Hebridean island, that's what I would have done. I really didn't want him to be executed. I realise that individual communities had to administer their own justice the best they could, in the absence of law courts and police to enforce the law, but it was absolutely the wrong kind of justice that I would have meted out had I been Abby Grant. If I was really her I would not have done that, I would have found a way of making people pay society back for those kinds of crimes."

The man responsible for Wendy's murder was Tom Price, played by Talfryn Thomas, who in the 1970's was constantly being used as a kind of professional Welshman. How did Carolyn get on with Talfryn? "We were poles apart on the personality scale. It wasn't just the physical attributes of the man being what they were, he had a really unattractive underbelly. There was an anger in that man that I found very difficult to deal with. You didn't see it on the screen, but it was just the comments about women and so on; he was very demeaning to us. He was very sleazy and made Lucy and me very angry."

Half way through the first series, the style changed drastically when a country mansion, Hampton Court, near to Leominster in Herefordshire became the focal point. Our wanderers had now found what they hoped would be a permanent home, somewhere to put down new roots. How did Carolyn feel about shooting in and around Hampton Court? "I enjoyed it very much. It gave us a permanence. That's when the children came up and we ended up being able to have a sort of life as well as the work. We had cottages close by, I had a farmhouse that I lived in. You tell me that Lucy found Hampton Court rather spooky. I never found it spooky. It never bothered me at all. I know that it was supposed to be haunted and we had lots of rumours flying around on that and I think that a couple of people even refused to work there! But Hampton Court was fine, not only did we have somewhere to sit down, rest and get warm, but mostly because you knew where you were going to be all the time, you weren't constantly running around and I find that that's the most difficult part about location work; never knowing how you were going to find it and so on. Certainly with Survivors you had someone to drive you wherever, but I like being in one place and I don't like moving around a lot. It was a great location."

The character of Abby was a dominant one, a leader by default. Yet as the lead character of the series she never had any romantic involvement. The nearest she came to this was in Garland's War and in the final episode of the first season, A Beginning. Does Carolyn have any memories of Garland's War? "Oh yes I remember Richard Heffer, who played Jimmy Garland, he was pretty stunning, wasn't he! He was beautiful. Of course, we all have many more wrinkles now!"

Twenty years after Survivors, Carolyn has changed very little. How does she manage to keep herself looking in such good form? "I'm slightly more wrinkled than then, but what do you expect after twenty years! I have put on some weight since then, I've put on probably close to fifteen pounds. I was very thin when we did the series. Certainly I've put on weight but I exercise and work out a lot and I walk my dog four miles a day."

In the final episode of the first season, A Beginning, Abby renews her friendship with Jimmy Garland, a friendship which is blossoming into love. Did Carolyn know at this time that she would not be picked up for season two? Did Terry Nation know? "No, I didn't know but of course Terry Nation knew. I think they decided half-way through that they didn't want me. It was always described to me that Abby Grant had become too strong, that she was top heavy and that she was unbalancing the trio at the top of the show. Well, that's what they told me and Lucy. I was in effect just fired. They knew that there was going to be a second series. Nobody ever told me why I wasn't picked up for the second series. Terence Dudley, the producer, is now dead so perhaps we'll never really know for sure."

How did Carolyn get on with the two children in the series, John and Lizzie, played by Stephen Dudley and Tanya Ronder ? "I think I got on with them fine. The boy, however, just couldn't act. He was treated cruelly. The whole thing was cruel. We all had enormous compassion for him but whenever he was in a scene it would take twice as long to do as any others because, for example, he used to get very scared and tended to cry a lot."

The favourite episode of both director Pennant Roberts and scriptwriter Jack Ronder was the latter's Corn Dolly. Do you have any memories of this ? "I remember the story of course because I actually got pregnant and so did Lucy and about five other women! The corn dollies we made worked! The fertility symbols worked and that was what was so eerie about it. Lucy and I ended up pregnant by the end of the show, Lucy with Diggory and I with Cornelia. It was a bit of a shock! As far as the story itself is concerned, I'm sure that in real life women would react the same way that Abby and Jenny did, they wouldn't wish to get pregnant like this, but I think they would have done what was required of them. It was a necessity to procreate and there weren't that many women who could procreate so we all should have done! Cornelia in fact was premature. I remember that when we finished shooting in July, by the end of November 1 went to a restaurant in the Fulham Road called LaFamilia and Lucy showed up the same time. I had already had my baby but Lucy's baby, Diggory, wasn't born till December 20th."

Does Carolyn think that a new series of Survivors would still be of relevance for an audience in the 1990's? "I think that a lot of it would, I really do. I mean, the 90's is about having to pull back, the 90's is about having to be self-sufficient on many many levels and the 90's is particularly about learning how to take care of yourself. One of the things that we all learned in Survivors was to be self-sufficient and it is

something that we will need to do. We could do without the waste that we allow ourselves under the guise of convenience and being modern and all of that; this is clearly ludicrous! if there was another series, Abby would have to be a character that would run the encampment and would become chamberlain to the group in the same way that the native Americans do; no decision is made until they have worked out how it would affect the seventh generation. I think that if we ran our countries and built our power stations according to that principle, things would be much better. The reality is that things are motivated by greed and power, and we have no respect for the world in which we live, none at all."

Survivors was not given a glowing review by the critics at the time. One of the early criticisms voiced was that the series was too middle class. All the heroes were middle-class people, whereas all the villains belonged to the old working

class! why does Carolyn believe this was so? "I don't think that that criticism was entirely unfair! I really don't. When you look at it, what we should have had is someone like Talfryn who knew how to live out there running the place with us. We were really all desperately middle-class, running about in our helicopters and so on! I don't think these things would matter so much today. I do however think that they had a fairly valid point. We could bring up racism as well. There weren't other people of a different race, no black people for instance and this really was appalling. when you think what a hotch-potch and a wonderful mixture of races Britain is, we could have had some extraordinary people who would have brought their own cultural advances and things into it. They would have had their own cultural points of view which would have been fascinating. But I think that would have made it too intelligent; it was very simplistic because it was the first of its kind."

Another criticism levelled against the series is that it is a bit like 'cowboys and indians', with two men in a landRover appearing in many of the scenes, and that the true issues were not squarely faced up to. "Yes, but otherwise you wouldn't have had any story. If everybody had banded together and there had been no factions you wouldn't have had any conflict, which you need for drama, and it would have been like Coronation Street. It would have been too cerebral without the conflict; you needed the action. It wasn't enough just to milk a few goats or learn how to harness a horse. Without the conflict you wouldn't keep people watching."

Carolyn is also very well known for her recent parts in Star Trek: The Next Generation and Quantum Leap. Did she enjoy these series as much as Survivors? "I invested much more in Survivors, I really invested so much in it and enjoyed it more than anything else I have done."

Would Carolyn be happy to reprise her role as Abby if a new series came along? "Yes, of course, as long as the scripts were good and I had some input. I would very much like to go in a much more environmentally-conscious way and I would love to make a statement in a way that would show people how to survive well and be kind to the earth. I think we really need to do that."