

Celia Gregory (Dr. Ruth Anderson)

"I think Ruth probably got lost on the motorway, going back to London to get some more soap!"

One of the salient features of *Survivors* was the plethora of strong women. One of the outstanding female figures of the second series was Ruth, who had been a medical student before the plague, and had blossomed into a key member of the community. Ruth was played by Celia Gregory, whose bandannas set a fashion among ladies at the time.

How did Celia embark upon her career in acting? "I was at a boarding school in Eastbourne where we did a lot of drama. After I left I had a very serious problem with my arm, which required several operations. I just decided to do acting because my father was a very creative man, and I wanted to do something like singing. Actually, I would have preferred to become a singer! Anyway, I went to Drama School and did three years and just got lucky, never stopping working. So that's how I became an actress."

Does Celia prefer TV or theatre? "I prefer film. Television or film. You get more focus with film. That silent moment when you're with the camera and you can really communicate. I've done so much theatre in the past that I've reached the point where I can't bear it any longer. When I was at the Royal Shakespeare Company we had eighteen weeks rehearsal, so learning your lines is not a problem! You get seven weeks rehearsal before a big production. If you're in a repertory situation, that's where I started out as a young woman, you have three weeks rehearsal and then you're performing another play in the evening that you rehearsed before you started that and you just get very used to it. Actors are incredibly disciplined people. The theatre has got certain rules; you're never late, you never miss a show unless you're dead or something like that! I grew up in the old fashioned style, which no longer really exists, which is rep. You had to do a year in rep. (You rehearsed for three weeks and then you had another three weeks of performing while rehearsing the next play). So you have to train yourself to be very disciplined. You learn to use your memory. It's very frightening when you first start acting. You wonder how on earth you're going to learn it all, you look at a play and you've got to learn an enormous amount of lines in three weeks and perform within that time. You just get used to it. When I was very very young and in rep and travelling all over England, I used to lie in my room at night with a candle on and read my script. I used to read and read and read about what it really meant. Then, when I woke up in the morning I knew my lines. It seemed to happen by itself because I'd looked at the script properly."

So how did Celia get the part of Ruth in *Survivors*? "I was offered a job! I was right for the part! I'd done a lot of work before *Survivors*. I'd worked with Lawrence Olivier and all sorts of people in the theatre, but I hadn't had a lot of television experience. So I needed to do something that would give me a lot of publicity. Quite simply, my agent put me up for the job and I got it. I can't remember who interviewed me for the part. It was a long time ago, I was only twenty four!"

Is it difficult joining an already established team, as in *Survivors*? "It's not that difficult. What they do, or did at the BBC at that time was to have six months of filming on location. Then you'd go to the Acton studios in London. So you'd just get to know everyone and work. As actors we are all trained at Drama School to be incredibly together. It's a bit like training soldiers, so we just don't give in to feelings of 'will I be accepted by the others or not?'. You walk into a room full of strangers, and you sort of sense out the people you like, and then you get on with the work. Then you go home, work on the script and go back the next day and of course you get to know each other better and better."

In many ways, Celia took over the role of a strong woman and leader which had been left vacant by the departure of Carolyn Seymour Was Celia happy with the character that she was given? "Yes, I loved playing Ruth. She was good and she wasn't frightened of people. She just got on with it. I watched a video of the series recently and it was really interesting to watch what I had done when so young. It was like looking at a child! Of course, over twenty years you change, but hopefully you change for the right reasons and not the wrong ones. You use your energy to learn; life is about learning."

The second series of *Survivors* was shot on video tape entirely on location using new German cameras. How did Celia find these cameras, as some, Eric Hills for example, have said that they were rather poor? "They used these new German cameras. Location is wonderful if you have the right cameras."

These cameras were all right I suppose, you could see yourself in the monitor to check yourself. Usually in British television you have ten or twenty days of rehearsal in the studio, they put big stripes on the floor and you work round that. You have to work out what your moves are, where your feet are etc, and then you get onto the set, which could be anywhere, in a field for example, but by then you know where you're going and how to position yourself with the camera. Like this you know exactly what's expected of you. But with *Survivors* it was very simple. We had rehearsals in London at Acton, and then we'd go down to Monmouth. We'd have maybe two or three rehearsals down there and then we'd shoot it. Companies like the BBC don't spend a lot of money on time. You've got to be ready, you have to know exactly what's needed of you. You have to be so disciplined. I used to spend every night in my hotel room in Monmouth just learning my lines and making it work. On set there would be endless amounts of time to wait while things were set up; lighting etc. I'd go through it all in my head then, waiting around on that cold chilly hill."

Did Celia wish to make Ruth a glamorous character? "No, I didn't want to make her glamorous at all, I wanted to make her someone who was believable, someone who got on with it, someone who had been completely obliterated by what had happened. Ruth wore very little make-up, just like me. I felt that she must be very natural. They had racks and racks of clothes that you could choose. You have certain things that you always wear as that character. Everything, of course has to relate as it's all very carefully done. There has to be continuity of scenes. You can't have somebody sitting down and drinking coffee and then suddenly walking around with a different pullover on. They were very careful and organised about that sort of thing. The make-up department at the BBC was the best around, the girls were magnificent. I remember that when I first started out on this project, the make-up girl showed me pictures of people who had been discovered in forests, corpses and things. It was just because they had to study the whole thing. It was ghastly. And they said to me that that was how your body looked after five weeks, this is what it looks like when you've been shot etc. So they had it all, they had to study the whole thing. Actually, *Survivors* wasn't terribly well written. Some of the scripts in fact were surprisingly poor, you had to make something out of nothing. There were some good actors on it however and we had to invent and make ourselves more than the actual script was suggesting."

Does this mean that Celia changed many of the lines? "Yes, I changed them all the time! They expect you to do that. The director is very busy and he hasn't got time to look at the script. You go up to him and say 'Can I change this line, it doesn't make sense?' or 'Can I say this instead of that?' You've got to be very organised about the way you work. That's what television is all about. Film is always very together but if it's video, and *Survivors* was video, you've always got a problem with the scripts. I suppose if the part were a minor one you wouldn't get away with changing the lines."

Was Celia disappointed at the relatively low rating gained by the show? "It was very low rated, they didn't get any good ratings at all at the time. We were all so disappointed. Ten million may seem good today but there was so much more going on at the time. There was a much wider spectrum of drama on television in those days."

Callow Hill seems to have moved everyone who had been there. How did Celia find the farm? "Everybody was moved by Callow, it's a beautiful place. It's got incredible power, it's a lovely, lovely place and we were so incredibly well looked after by the Davids. None of us will forget it I don't think!"

Callow Hill, even at the best of times, is a muddy windswept place. Did Celia find working up there a bit of a chore? "No, I don't mind the mud or the wind. We were given our expenses and we could go back and forth as much as we liked. I fell in love while there. We had our dressing-rooms in the stables behind the farmhouse, it was all very rough and tumble. Callow Hill is a very special place. I don't think anybody can go to Callow without feeling altered. Whenever you're sitting on a hill you get a lot of healing power."

Is this the reason Celia didn't carry on to the third series of *Survivors*? "No, not at all! I'd just had enough. I didn't want to do any more. When I left *Survivors* I went straight into the West End, playing with Paul Schofield. I just went from strength to strength. I got so much more work after that. You have to be quite ruthless as an actress. You really do have to be ruthless about your choices. I was only twenty four or so and I had to carry on and do other things. To be in a BBC production which seemed stodgy when you were doing it wasn't good enough. I just couldn't afford to do another year in that company. So I went on to do some more theatre and some films. It is true that I didn't like the scripts that they were writing and I suppose I was quite snotty at that age. As a young actress you have to be very careful and discerning. You have to choose carefully where you're going to be at any given moment in your life because you've got to get up that ladder. I think Ruth probably got lost on the motorway going back to London to get some more soap!"

One of the most memorable stories of this second series was the two-parter *Lights of London*. Does Celia have any memories of this? "Oh gosh, don't!! I remember that, we filmed till five in the morning. They were all over Denis' legs, everywhere! I hate rats, they're my phobia. What they did was to spray hundreds

of rats and they all died. Then we had to get other rats. They certainly didn't throw any at me; I walked out! I'm not very compliant about things like that. I think Denis had rubber trousers or something like that. These brown rats, which I think are the worst, climbed up Denis' legs. They also had false rats; I certainly didn't have any real ones on me! But I loved the story, I enjoyed making it very much indeed. The whole experience was a very good one for all of us, we all enjoyed doing it. Nobody was unhappy, it was a good piece of solid work for all of us. I think what really upset us was the reception of the viewers, which made us feel very disappointed. We got very disheartened. Other dramas at the time were doing much better, although ten or eleven million seems a lot today, it wasn't then. Ratings are important for the actors because you want your work to be recognised, you want to be taken seriously. We believed in the subject, we really did. We didn't have an obsession about it but we really believed it could happen. It was an interesting project and hopefully they'll do another one and make it more involved. There were some very inspired moments in that series."

Is Celia surprised that Survivors has acquired a cult following? "No, not at all. People have even been writing to me about the series. My generation of actors has given an awful lot to the profession, and now it's all coming back. We were so involved with our work. When you go to work in the studio now, or any theatre company, you always find actors who aren't

Totally involved, and we were, even if it was only a tiny role we'd find a way to make it sparkle. People like Diana Rigg really worked hard. People like Lawrence Olivier really worked hard at what they did. It's a craft, and if you don't treat it like a craft then what's acting?"

What would the routine of a typical day's work be like? What time would you be called? "Equity has certain rules, I think it's an eleven-hour day. You'd be collected in the morning and driven up to the hill, where they'd be setting up the lighting and you'd get dressed and have your make-up put on and then you'd sit around till they were ready. Just like any film set. But there were plenty of us up there so we kept each other company. It was very cold and uncomfortable but they kind of look after that as they give you huge amounts of food all the time."

If Ian McCulloch is successful in getting a new series of Survivors made, would Celia be interested in reprising the part of Ruth?" I might. It would depend on the scripts and whether they would use video or film. If you're working behind a film camera you've got real concentration. It's like having an eye that's watching you, it's absolutely brilliant and fantastic. You have such contact with the camera. You can't lie to the camera. But if you've got video you've got this loose, long three-dimensional thing which zooms around all over the place. Video just doesn't look right. With the newly devised cameras we had from Germany you just didn't get the right focus, so you couldn't make a proper picture. I know it's very easy to just 'film'. Anybody can do that. You can buy a video camera and film. But to get the three-dimensional essence, which is the actual atmospheric property of the story, plus the focus, couldn't be done with those cameras. The lighting didn't look right with those cameras. People don't look right, it's too flat, rather like looking at a painting instead of being drawn into something. Whereas if you look at some of my work that I've done on camera (film) you always get the atmospheric sensation which should accompany the story. That for me is what was wrong with the series. It doesn't look right. If you've got film you've got the shots which cut together and make sense and just look right, it's like making a piece of artwork, you put it together properly. To me the idea of studio cameras, even the videos which are very evolved nowadays, don't create the right three-dimensional sensation that I would require to touch people. I might do another series of Survivors just for fun. A new series should be done on film. If you've got the right lighting, camera-men, right script with actors who are happy doing what they are doing, with a good director you can literally make anything work. That's the magic of the camera."

But is there a place today for such a new series? "Yes, but what chance, how? I hope they write good scripts! If you're going to do this subject, which is a very difficult subject and very much to do with everyday life now, with all sorts of strange things happening with the environment, you've got to make sure the scripts are right, you've got to make sure you actually present it properly. Physically and visually it's got to be presented properly. But can they get the money to do it? They're not making enough stuff now, they're importing a lot."