

Coral Atkins (Penny).

"When you have 11 disturbed children to look after, you 'll do anything to get away - even wade through rats! I was so grateful to Terry Dudley for giving me the work!"

Better known for her part in Granada's Family At War, Coral Atkins graced Survivors with her obvious and exciting acting talent in two second series episodes, Jack Ronder's Lights of London, the only two-parter of the entire series. She has also achieved fame and respect through her concern for disturbed children, having taken many into her own home, to give them the love and warmth that they deserve. Her autobiography, Seeing Red, was extremely successful, and Granada intend to make a feature-length film based on it.

How did Coral start out on her career in acting? "I was at art school and I knew that I was going to fail my exams. My family ran a newsagents shop in Anglesey, North Wales, and a copy of The Stage was delivered. I flicked through it and found an ad saying, 'Actress wanted, no experience needed.' I answered the ad in order to escape from my exams. They sent me a telegram very quickly and asked me to come along at once. This was for daily rep in which you did a play a day having only one rehearsal. You had a cue-script, so you didn't really know what the story was about; you just read the cue-lines and went on and played it! My first part was playing an old woman of about seventy. I had to do my own make-up, but this wasn't a problem as I had been an artist before. I painted my face old with black and white lines and I must have looked terrible! The Welsh didn't seem to mind!"

Does Coral remember her very first television role? "That was on Emergency Ward Ten. A very handsome and young looking Richard Thorpe (Emmerdale) was in that too. There was also a very young actor with only a walk-on role. He had ginger eye-lashes and ginger curly hair. He used to say to me, 'I'll never ever get anywhere in this business because I don't talk posh.' That was Michael Caine! We all used to sit in this arts coffee bar all day and then go to an agent who offered small parts at about 4 pm. He had one eye which looked one way and the other looking the opposite way! He would come out and point at the room and you would think he was pointing at you. There would be a mad scramble to get the job!"

Coral is best known for her portrayal of Sheila in Granada TV's Family at War. "This was made between 1969 and 1973. The first episode was made in black and white and we had to redo it in colour and our salaries went up because we had to stand under these hot lights. Patrick Troughton was in that too. He was a lovely man. It's still very popular and is being shown in Denmark at the moment, for about the fifth time I think."

How did Coral get the part of Penny in Survivors? "I dare say it was because somebody knew me, I really can't remember. As the first part of Lights of London was directed by Terence Williams, it may well have been him as I already knew him. I had also worked with Terry Dudley the producer before. He used me quite a lot. After Survivors he used me in 1980 for Flesh and Blood. Terry had also done things like Z Cars and Softly Softly. I always got on with him very well indeed and he was lovely to me."

Does Coral have any memories of her two episodes in Survivors? "My recollections are of the rats, I literally had to wade through rats! the poor things had been dyed because they were the wrong colour but the dye kept coming off so they had to keep swapping them. I can remember somebody joking with me, I think it was Denis. He tapped me on the shoulder and when I turned round he held up a toy rat in my face. I was so scared I just punched him right on the nose. I also remember freezing to death on location with David Troughton and Nadim Sawalha. Nadim was so wonderful and so witty. He was such a funny man. He really kept me alive during the filming just because he made me laugh so much. I can see why his daughter Julia has grown up to be so lovely, because he is such a lovely man. As an actor or actress on location you're taken good care of. There were good caterers and make-up people and dressers."

Was it about this time that Coral started her work in looking after disturbed children? "No, this was while I was doing Family at War. I had been invited to open a fete at a children's home and I was so completely appalled at the predicament of these little children that nobody wanted. I never knew that there were people who didn't want children. One particular incident at the home just knocked me sideways and I just couldn't bear it. It seemed to me dreadful that staff clocked on and clocked off and nobody said 'the buck stops here'. I decided to get a big house in the country and look after all those children myself. So I tried and eventually I found the house where I am now. It then took me two years to get the permission to have children here and then I took ten very disturbed kids and brought them up with my own son Harry. It was hard on him but he was wonderful. They were all about one, two or three years old. They've all grown up to be so wonderful. This house has been ruined several times!"

What opinion does Coral have of television in the 1970's? "It was more primitive in those days. Having said that

Emmerdale is the hardest work I've ever done and was like going back to daily rep. You had no rehearsals. There wasn't really time to learn the scripts, you just cued it before you went on. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday you were filming and on Friday you were in the studio and recording three episodes a week. We didn't have rehearsals on Survivors, but on Survivors it almost seemed as if they were making it up as they went along! I do think that television in the 1970's was more exciting because everything was fresher and newer, especially when colour came in. I also think that you thought you were 'it' if you were on the telly but these days everybody's been on! I think though that the standards have always been pretty good, the British have always produced good drama. Today everything has to be formula written, rather like in America, though better. Only rarely does anything startling slip through. As a matter of fact I'm writing something myself. I'm a psychotherapist and it'll be about a trainee therapist. I want to make it funny however as most people think that therapy is so deadly serious. The therapist will be this not so saintly character who's having a relationship with the camera, rather like Lovejoy. Also Dick Clements and Ian Lafrenais are writing the screenplay for my autobiography, Seeing Red, which will be made into a film and directed by John Amid for a company called The Producers, although the money is being put up by Granada. It'll make you laugh and cry. It starts off with me as the starry figure in Family at War and then goes on to that fete, where my life changed so dramatically, rather like Saul on the road to Damascus. I became a psychotherapist because I was falling to pieces with the strain of looking after the children. One day the psychiatrist suggested to me that I would make a very good therapist as I knew so much about children. So I qualified after studying for four years. I don't however do therapy with children as I don't really believe that children need it. I suppose that over the years I've had almost as much therapy as Woody Allen! I think I was building up to my nervous breakdown as series two of Survivors came to an end. I fell to pieces in August 1976 and went into hospital and had my week in paradise."

Is Coral surprised that Survivors has never been repeated on the BBC? "I don't know why they haven't shown it again as I would have thought it would have been very popular. I always found Survivors to be riveting and I most certainly wanted to be in it. I used to rush home to see it and I wouldn't miss an episode! I would make the children shut up so that I could watch it! I thought it was wonderful. Celia Gregory was wonderful and so very good. She had a lovely quality of gentleness about her."