

Denis Lill (Charles Vaughan).

"I can imagine that Charles has become a hermit, thoroughly disillusioned with trying to set up a federation!"

Denis' character, Charles Vaughan, was originally called Charles Brecon in the camera-script, but director Pennant Roberts, being himself a Welshman, and Welsh-speaking at that, decided that there was no such Welsh surname in existence, so Brecon became Vaughan! Although only appearing in one first series episode (Corn Dolly), he was a regular from the second series onwards, and quickly became one of the show's most popular and well-liked characters.

How did Denis become an actor? "I think I had always wanted to be an actor, I just didn't know that the word for it was actor. Also, I was born and brought up in New Zealand, where we didn't have a theatrical community as such, so at the very early age of leaving school, I was parcelled off into the Royal New Zealand Air Force, where I spent nearly seven years but during the course of my time there I got involved in amateur dramatics, and I thought 'this is it, this for me beats working!' .I remember going to a career guidance office of some sort and sitting down and doing one of those psychological-type profiles, tests and so on which were pretty primitive at that time, at the end of which the guy said 'what do you want to do?' and I said 'I'd either like to be a musician or an actor', and he said 'I'd give up any idea of being an actor if I were you, and I thought that that was a bit early in my career to be rumbled, I asked him why and he said that there weren't any actors in New Zealand, so I thought, 'I shall be the first then!' I was eventually discharged from the Air Force on the grounds that I was psychologically incompatible with the service, by which time I really heavily ploughed myself into amateur dramatics in Christchurch in New Zealand. The theatre there had its own professional director, its own professional staff, so it was pretty well run on semi-professional lines. So, when I got out of the Air Force I got a job with The New Zealand players, which had dwindled from a major theatrical company to four, two actors and two actresses touring schools. We drove ourselves from one end of New Zealand to the other, spending the summer in the south and the winter in the north, so we never really got any winter. We played three hundred and something performances over a nine month period and travelled thousands of miles. With often two or three performances a day, it taught me such a lot about maintaining standards, it was a very good sort of rep training. We had potted versions of about nine plays and we just sort of trotted them out according to the age group we were playing to.

"The question that actors always get asked is how they manage to remember so many lines. But remembering the lines is really the least of your problems, the whole point of it all is to discover for yourself why you are saying the lines. Learning the lines is just a chore that's got to be done, some lines are easy to learn, Shakespeare is easy to learn. Other authors are difficult to learn, Pinter, for example, because of all the pauses and non-sequiturs which occur in the course of the speech. It's something you just knuckle down to and learn. After a couple of years touring the country I came to London in 1967."

Is it difficult for an actor to change the lines given to him? "It depends how much clout the author's got! Sometimes we would take a look at the script and say, 'This is crap, I can't say this, this is absolute rubbish! My character wouldn't react in this particular way'. And then the lines would be changed on the spot. But there were some pretty death-defying lines like 'Hubert's lighting another fire!'

So how did Denis get the part of Charles Vaughan in Survivors? "I'd heard about it. I was very much a part of the BBC rep of actors and I was one of those actors used almost exclusively by the BBC, mainly because my agent at the time had contacts with the BBC, so most of my work was in fact with the BBC, which is why I never got rich! I had worked with Terry Dudley on a series called The Regiment, just before Survivors. Part of it was set in India. The first series was set around home and we eventually fought the Boers, in the Welsh mountains. For the second series we then went to Cyprus and finished off the Boer War in Cyprus and then we supposedly all went off to India. Cyprus doubled very well for India, the Khyber Pass and South Africa. So, my name was obviously around at the time as far as Terry Dudley was concerned, and I had heard it mooted the Survivors series was coming up and expressed an interest in it then. But I don't think they were terribly happy with the first set of scripts that originally came out of Terry Nation's stable, as far as I remember."

Does Denis recall anything of the first episode of Survivors in which he appeared, Corn Dolly? "Not very much, no. I recall that I was trying to persuade all the women in my community to get pregnant and I was setting quite an example! I was living with a sort of minor harem! But nothing ever came of that! This theme came up in the second series too (Over the Hills), but there I go off in a sort of tangent. Charles wishes to form a kind of loose confederation of these various settlements and he got political about it at one stage. I was very much the philosopher, I remember having lots of philosophical things to say. That did get a bit boring, but as we lost the character of Greg after the second series I became a bit more of an action-man which was certainly much more appealing to me."

Had Denis done any horse riding before Survivors? "Oh, yes lots. I'd done a lot of riding in New Zealand before I came over here and I did a lot of riding in The Regiment as well. I rode a horse whenever I could. There was a lot of horse riding in Survivors, indeed, it was one of the pre-requisites for being cast in the series. The first question they used to ask the actors was, 'can you ride a horse?', and actors being actors of course used to lie through their teeth and say 'yes, I can', and then they'd dash off and have a quick crash course on riding."

Denis only became a regular at the beginning of the second series. How did he feel about being asked to return? "I was delighted to be asked back, absolutely! I don't know why they asked me back really. I suppose they were impressed with the character. I'm not quite sure what was going on in Terry Dudley's head when he actually planned the second series. I mean, he wanted to establish some sort of established community, that was the Callow Hill series. I think that what Terry Dudley wanted to get away from was the men in jeeps with guns syndrome, which was very common in the first series, and had all these rather bizarre characters turning up in Rolls Royces and things like that. I also think that the character of Charles was quite a useful foil. The initial idea of reproduction at all costs had gone out of the window, and he was seen as something of a leader, trying to re-create some form of communal civilisation."

The second series was shot in and around a hilltop farm a couple of miles north of Monmouth. Does Denis have any recollections of this place? "Oh yes. Callow Hill was an amazing place. It had such incredible vibes about the place for a start, a very strange place. It was like a sort of little hippy commune. When we got up there, there were all sorts of odd people living in strange little ramshackle places that had been built out of railway sleepers and so on. The guy who had been the patriarch of the family, the David family which had lived in this big white house, was an ex navy commander, I think, and is actually buried in the grounds. He had been something of a philanthropist because he had taken a lot of waifs and strays and had fostered all these children from London. All these children, sometimes in the second generation would come and home in on the place, often in their 20's by then. It was a kind of meeting place for all these people.

"These odd people used to appear out of the woodwork. I remember the first night we shot up at Callow Hill, it was an episode called The Witch, by Jack Ronder, we had spent a lot of time stomping round the woods searching for a character called Mina. We held these great flaming torches, and it was a very elemental night with the trees actually rocking in the wind. Anyway, there we were charging round in the wind screaming 'Mina, Mina!', and suddenly this old boy who had been living in a field that we didn't know about in a caravan with his wife erupted from his caravan wondering what on earth was going on. I can't remember for the life of me what his name was, but he was constantly trying to commit suicide by overdosing on paracetamols. He didn't quite know what was going on. He used to come out with all these stories about having been taken prisoner by the Gestapo and we thought 'we've got a right one here!', so he was quietly ushered off by a very large Derek Nelson, our First Assistant.

"These makeshift dwelling behind the main houses have been demolished now. They had all been built without any planning permission. These shacks were sort of thrown up with corrugated iron chimneys and fireplaces and stuff like that. Perfect for the series, mind you, you could hear the insects ticking away in the woodwork! It was rat infested too. By the end of series two myself, John Abineri and one or two others had left The King's Head in Monmouth and were actually living on Callow Hill ourselves. We just gave up the hotel and went back to basics. It changed my life in a funny sort of way. Some of us really took to the place in an extraordinary way and we really wanted to put something into it as well; I even resurrected an old tractor and ploughed a field."

It seems clear then that Denis really enjoyed the second series of Survivors. "Oh yes, very much. There was an awful lot of stuff going on. Generally speaking I became a little bit disillusioned and a little bit disappointed with a lot of the scripts as they used to arrive through my door and as I used to look through them. It was very much a question of what sort of issue were we dealing with in this particular episode, and the way they would deal with it was by introducing all these rather bizarre characters that used to crop up, instead of concentrating on us as regulars and letting us take the issue through, thereby making it character led rather than issue led. We found that we were basically playing to a load of guest stars who were coming in and playing some quite charismatic characters in some cases.

Would Denis have preferred the series to have been made on film rather than on video tape? "The difference between video tape VT and film used to show up on screen, you would get that subliminal flicker, which was very slight but it was still very much film versus video tape. I think it was basically a lack of confidence as far as the BBC were concerned; Ronnie Marsh, the Head of series at the time had said something like 'how awfully depressing, 98% of the world's population wiped out, I don't think anybody will be interested in that, but I suppose if you must do it you must but I won't give you any studio time', so of course we were out in the fields all the time! Actually, it was like making a movie more than anything else because, looking back on it, you were there, on your horse in a field, I mean the hard work was for the guys who had to lay out miles of cables over fields! The only problem that we found with it was that the O.B.

cameras and the early video tape process tended to glamorise everything, it made it look a bit brighter and a bit sunnier when sometimes it could be pissing down with rain or whatever. But that however did not show and a relatively dull and overcast day would still come out looking rather bright and sparkling. And so everything looked a bit too idyllic for us, until Peter Jefferies, one of the third series directors, an excellent director, found that he could actually tweak the colour down and he could actually introduce blues and greens into it and just make it much cooler and colder and more miserable.

"I can remember a really laughable scene where Greg and the others were in a van. They were supposed to be having all this trouble from wild dogs which had formed into packs and were scouring the countryside and so on. And there was

Greg and the others, sitting in the van surrounded by all these dogs which they'd got from some stage provider of trained dogs. The dogs were sitting round the van in a little circle all wonderfully groomed and looking absolutely beautiful. When Peter Jefferies came on the scene he said 'We're not having another dog scene like that thank you very much!'. He got these really wild dogs, they were really incredible! And he shot a dog fight and they looked really vicious, they were for real! There was no problem however, the chap who trained them, a guy called Sam Perrin was a company sergeant major in one of the guards regiments, I think. He was quite a character and he had gone into dog training and I thought he handled those dogs pretty well."

While on the subject of our canine friends, does Denis have any memories of the classic third series episode, Mad Dog, one of the finest episodes of the entire series and which obtained some notoriety at the time for its depiction of rabies? "I had said to Terry Dudley that one of my ambitions was to do a western but that I had never got the chance! Finally, when the Mad Dog script came along, written by Don Shaw, Terry Dudley said to me 'You've got your western!'. That was certainly the episode of Survivors which sticks in my mind more than any other. It was also the most Charles orientated episode, I was very much playing the lead in that episode and I must say that it was one of the most exhausting jobs I had ever done. There was riding and wading through streams. It was directed by Tristan de Vere Cole and he was a bit of a hard man as well being ex-navy. I remember seeing the men putting out ropes across the river to stop me being swept away (it was winter and the river quite full flowing !) and I said to them 'There's no way you're going to get me in there!'. That episode was a bit like doing an assault course! We shot it in Monsal Dale, Derbyshire. I remember using an old house which had been built for somebody's daughter who had been dying of consumption. He had built this little cottage for her right up on the top of the dales. It was a beautiful little Victorian house in miniature for her to live in; presumably she died in it too. It was called Eyre Cottage, I think. It was absolutely deserted and rotting away up there, but it was a charming place."

Does Denis agree that Survivors has aged well and that it stands up well to contemporary standards? "Oh yes, absolutely. The few episodes I've seen lately stand up very well. Technically, of course, they can do a much better job today. Also, they can computerise video tape today to make it look like film, which is what happens with Outside Edge, it went through a computer called cadenza, they did the same thing with Peak Practice as well. But also it must be said that we had a very good pool of actors to draw from as well. I think in its own way it was quite a popular series, such that many actors said that they would love to be in Survivors. We had lots of good guest actors; Brian Pringle, Brian Blessed, Pat Troughton and some very good ladies, Barbara Lott I remember was in the episode I saw the other night, an excellent actress."

Ian McCulloch in particular has criticised the quality of many of the later scripts. Would Denis concur with this view? "Well, overall I suppose they weren't bad, although there were some pretty death-defying lines. They weren't exactly actor proof, but because we had such a good pool of actors I think we managed to carry it off. That's probably all there is to say about the scripts really, except that by contemporary standards the series holds up pretty well. I don't know what sort of yard-stick you can use to measure that, because of course over twenty years there is a generation of actors that have been brought up in front of a television camera, never having set foot on a stage. And of course the cameras get in closer now and I think the scripts cater for that as well. Some of the scenes in Survivors were quite long, sitting around the kitchen table discussing babies and so on. We could also use a multi-camera set up, covering three or four cameras in some cases. I think that the bare minimum we had was two. But nowadays they use a single-camera set up, just a single camera and that's it."

The third series of Survivors sees our heroes return to the wanderer format, as attempts are made to join up the isolated settlements and get the wheels of industry turning once more. Did Denis welcome this fundamental change? "I certainly welcomed it in as far as it gave me much more to do, I certainly had a lot more to do on my horse. A lot of those long discussions sitting around the kitchen table at Callow Hill I found frankly rather boring. I just wanted to get up on my horse and gallop around the countryside! There was a lot of movement in series three, which was great. Each episode was done in a different place. The first episode, Manhunt, was filmed in Suffolk. I got whacked over the head by a rifle butt by Lucy in that episode! The poor old chap who was cast as the German doctor had a lot to cope with not only the German accent, but the director Peter Jefferies wanted him to look as though he were doing something which could pass as something chemical. This poor old chap was getting terribly confused by it all and he couldn't get

all his test tubes and things together and got rather flushed while Peter was getting rather angry and shouting at him. I remember that there was huge sort of graveyard there, with big earth-moving machinery and old bulldozers and so on, and that's when Peter discovered the technique of tweaking the colour in the scanner to make it colder and more miserable. It was filmed near Woodbridge in Suffolk. Travelling was I suppose a bit of a strain, but by then we had the Real Ale Guide under one arm and The Good Food Guide under the other. We were shooting sometimes up to twenty minutes a day, which is a lot. For a feature film you would count on doing maybe three or four minutes in the can and ready to be edited."

Apart from Mad Dog, does any particular episode stand out in Denis' mind ? "I remember that Pennant had cast me for Corn Doily. Pennant is a Welshman, and I asked him how he felt about me being Welsh, and he said 'Not bad, as long as you don't drop your 'h's', that's common Welsh! I talked with Pennant quite often about the Welsh accent. Occasionally I used to come up with Welsh words, and after the series I used to receive scripts in Welsh asking me if I would like to play this or that part! Another episode which sticks out in my mind is Lights of London. We got to visit some extraordinary places. There are eight great underground shelters in London, I don't know when they were built but they seemed to be connected to the tube network. I think they were originally built during the war to house soldiers, a kind of force that would rise up and take control

should the Germans occupy London. There were four north of the Thames and four south of the Thames and they could each hold an incredible number of troops. They are still maintained today, with their bunks and their toilets. We filmed in one in Camden Town. That was the episode with all the rats. The make-up department had managed to kill off several rats because we couldn't use brown rats, since they were just too wild and too terrifying. I remember being attacked by rats, I remember having rats thrown at me from a big cardboard box. They would just pick them out of the box and throw them at me! I also had some dummy rats which had been sewn on to my costume. I didn't really mind. I wasn't frightened of these rats since they were white rats, laboratory rats which had been dyed brown by the make-up department. They delivered this consignment of white rats to make-up and said 'Brown rats please!'. They tried hairspray on them but that killed them but eventually they cracked how to do it. It was a pretty grubby episode to do, we had to crawl along tube-lines and things like that. We didn't use the tube stations, we used the City line which runs from Waterloo. Nobody had a glamorous role in it, there wasn't exactly a lot of mascara around! I suppose our Dr. Ruth (Celia Gregory) was the only touch of glamour. She coined a nice little market because she invented these bandannas that she wore. That became something of a cult, a lot of ladies up and down the country started wearing them. Coral Atkins was a fascinating lady, because she had just started these homes for distressed children without any help from councils or grants or anything and she has now come on and she is now established as a Mother Teresa-figure.

"The chosen is another story I remember, also a story by Ian McCulloch, A Friend in Need. I also remember that for the third season episode Sparks, we used a deserted village called Imber, in the middle of Salisbury Plain. It's not on the map as it's a military secret. There is virtually nothing left of the village now except its Church, and once a year the villagers are allowed to go back there to hold a service in the church. We had got the military to stop shooting for this particular day until six o'clock. But they warned us that the shooting would start again after six. Anyway, on the minute of six all hell broke loose with thunder flashes and flares and explosions; we got out of there quick!

"There was another bizarre episode (The Enemy) we filmed with Bryan Pringle. We found this curious sort of north-country pub or club. That was a really odd episode. Lucy's character actually called me a Welsh bastard! We even had committee meetings about that line. I didn't care what I was called as long as I was called Welsh. Anyway, we found this old sort of country club which had just been abandoned. I think it was up near Brecon. Up there in the hills this huge mansion had been converted into a hotel/country-club and everything was still there; all the cutlery and crockery, the bed linen and everything. We just took this place over and left it as we had found it!"

Was Denis happy with the way the series was brought to a conclusion? "I thought that some of it was over dramatised, certainly the last episode was. That episode (Power) was shot up in Scotland; there was absolutely no need for some guy going down and into one of the turbines and spat out of the other end. That was totally unnecessary as far as I could see.

"We had a tremendous barn dance up at Callow Hill when the second series ended, and we had another great party when the third series concluded. We were staying up in Killin at the Killin Arms, right on the shore of Loch Killin, I think. It was my first trip to the Highlands of Scotland and we certainly had quite a party up there."

Does Denis believe that there is a place for a series like Survivors today? "Yes I do, very much indeed. One of the things which I hoped would come out of Survivors, and which never really did, was the treatment of issues which it could have and I think should have dealt with. A lot of the social issues, for example, whereby we were flung back into an 18th century technology. I think that we should have been

given the chance to try and put things right this time with the usual old prejudices and political chicanery that used to go on in the times before the plague. I think the ethos laid down by our producer was very much based on survival. We were after all survivors and I suppose that as far as he was concerned we didn't really have time to sit down and discuss, at least not all that heavily, big social issues or whether we should have an established religion or anything like that. I think he was basically concerned just with survival. I think that if we were to see something like Survivors today there would be all sorts of issues such as pollution and looking after the planet and green issues. I doubt very much that there will be another series. I would be prepared to do another series, depending on the scripts. I don't know what will have happened to Charles, I think he's probably become some sort of hermit. I can imagine him being thoroughly disillusioned with trying to establish some sort of federation."