

## *Don Shaw (Scriptwriter).*

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Don Shaw wrote a total of four episodes for Survivors, all of them extremely well written. One of them, Mad Dog, was one of the highlights of the entire series. He is also well known for his contributions to Doomwatch and his recent BBC series, Dangerfield.

How did Don start out on his career as a scriptwriter? "I started out by acting in radio plays while I was still a teacher. I had actually been to Sandhurst as an officer cadet with King Hussein of Jordan, King Feisal of Iraq and the Duke of Kent. I didn't like the army, so I finished my national service and became a teacher. It was while I was teaching that I passed a BBC audition in Birmingham and acted in a number of radio plays, and from that I learned how to write a radio script. I wrote a number of radio plays, and then I acquired a literary agent who told me that if I wanted to make a living out of writing then I ought to go into television. She introduced me to Gerry Davis, who was my first contact. I met Gerry with another writer, Roy Clarke, who now writes Last of the Summer Wine. They turned down one of his scripts but did mine. From that I moved on to Thirty Minute Theatre with Innes Lloyd, who became a very famous producer. So that's how it all started."

Does Don believe that it was easier getting into television twenty or thirty years ago than it is today? "I think it was easier then because they were more open to new writers. They were, for example, doing a thirty minute drama every week of the year on BBC 2, and these were live! You also had The Wednesday Play, which went out for six months of the year. In short, the call for new drama and therefore new writing was enormous compared with today. Also, because the audiences were getting more sophisticated in terms of the punctuation of television and film, they have now switched to film making. All the drama that I did was done in the studio with film inserts. Now it is much more specialised and expensive. I've been writing a new drama series for the BBC called Dangerfield. Each episode costs about £500,000 to make on film, so it costs roughly three million pounds for six episodes and therefore they are much more careful and choosy in who they commission to write. In fact, I only write for film these days, not for television. Indeed, there's not a great deal of difference between a television script today and a feature film. I do however agree that there was a lot more experimentation in the 1960s and 70s.

"I recently got out some Survivors and Doomwatch scripts and I was shocked at how much dialogue there was. The scripts were almost like radio scripts or theatre scripts. Scenes in modern drama are much shorter. The advent of remote controls means that people's attention span is much less than before. It was because I got on well with Terry Dudley, the producer of Doomwatch, that he invited me to write for Survivors."

Given the differences in drama style from Survivors and today, if Don were re-commissioned to write his Survivors episodes again, would he write very differently? "I don't think I would approach the stories any differently, in fact I was pleased with them. It was a long time ago now, but I remember being very pleased, particularly with Greater Love. I would make certain, I think, that the story in question ran more quickly. The stress today is on film punctuation; they want to keep the story flowing. For example, in Dangerfield, the orders we have are to keep the frame very busy, rather like in Casualty. They want a lot of activity and action."

Does Don remember very much about his first story, Greater Love? "We shot the episode down at Callow Hill, not far in fact from where Dennis Potter lived. I went down there for a few days to see the shooting. The reason why we shot the series down there was because there were no flight paths overhead. The story saw the departure of Chris Tranchell from the series. I remember being very pleased with the story."

Don's second story was Face of the Tiger, directed by Terry Williams which tells the story of a child murderer. "I suppose I was very much the teacher in those days, and would try to get across certain themes and ideas in the series format. I suppose that today the important thing is entertainment. Somebody like David Mercer, who was one of our top writers, would have difficulty getting his stuff on television today, because it is considered to be too esoteric and difficult to understand. I think that in terms of content we have come down-market, whereas in terms of technique and style of production the values have gone way up.

The third series episode Mad Dog is one of the highlights of the entire series, achieving a certain notoriety at the time for its depiction of rabies. Does Don have any recollections of this? "I remember talking to a doctor friend of mine, who oddly enough is the technical adviser on Dangerfield, about the symptoms of rabies etc. When necessary, I've always

tried to do the research properly. One of the interesting things about being a writer is that I've got to talk to everybody, from private soldiers to Field Marshals, from nurses to surgeons and indeed people of every profession.

"Some of Mad Dog was made at 11am and other parts at Monsal Head and at any rate all in Derbyshire. Although I lived nearby and still do, I didn't actually write the episode with Monsal Head in mind, that would have been the director's job (see interview with Tristan de Vere Cole). The part when Maurice Perry was seen running round the yard suffering from rabies was done at 11am. It had snowed and Maurice Perry was dragged by a horse and I remember doing the take again and again. I said to Maurice, 'You must be frozen!' and he answered by saying that he was an actor and that was part of his profession. The bad weather meant that some scenes had to be re-mounted. The cast and the technicians had to be very hardy for this type of work since they had to spend a long time just standing around in the cold. My daughter Jane was also in this episode!"

Does Don think that there is a place for a new and updated version of Survivors? "Yes I do. I think that the time is ripe to resurrect the idea and do it on film. I think it would get a large international audience. I think that the reason why the BBC turned it down recently was because they thought it was a 'downer', and they are trying to get viewing figures up by being much more optimistic. They want to entertain without being pessimistic. The BBC have a special responsibility to a mass audience and they are determined at peak viewing to compete with ITV. For the Dangerfield series I'm involved with now they've done all sorts of market research. They didn't do any audience research in those days, if they had then series such as Doomwatch and Survivors would probably never have been made. The BBC have just brought in Nick Elliot from LWT to take over drama series in order to give it that extra boost. Certainly, when I was writing for Doomwatch and Survivors, I was never interested in ratings, I was only interested in the quality of the script and the production. The main thing about writing today in series drama is (a) are you adaptable? (b) are you hard working? (c) can you meet the dead-line? and (d) are you willing to put up with a lot of hassle and compromise?"