

## *Eric Hills (Director)*

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Eric Hills directed a total of four second series stories made at Callow Hill in the Welsh Marches, and is therefore in an ideal position to comment on series two.

How did Eric start out in his career as a television director at the BBC? "I joined the BBC in 1956 as a holiday relief Assistant Floor Manager. Prior to that I had spent five years in the theatre. First as an actor in Rep (having trained at RADA) and later as an A.S.M. and stage manager in the West End with reviews such as: Penny Plain, Joyce Grenfell Requests the Pleasure and Fresh Air. I had also toured with Children's Theatre and Guys and Dolls. Once at the BBC I worked my way up to being a floor manager and production assistant in the drama department. As such I would have been responsible for helping with the casting, putting the show on and assisting the director. In film terms this would be a First Assistant Director. In those days we had black and white turret cameras. I did that for a couple of years, after which I went on the Director's Training Course. A short time after completing the course, I was given the chance to direct my first drama - episode 13 of Z Cars. I subsequently directed another 19."

How did Eric become involved with Survivors? "After working on Z Cars I got a job as Staff Director, which we don't have these days. You would naturally go from show to show. I had worked with Terry Dudley as his assistant when he joined the BBC, in fact I was with him on his first day. He came straight in as a director from the theatre. He had been running a theatre in Wales which had lost him a lot of money. I worked with him quite a lot. I did all kinds of shows myself, working with different producers. They used to have a system whereby the staff producers would walk in, look at a heap of scripts and choose which one they would do! Then Sydney Newman (of Dr who fame) joined the BBC as Head of Drama from ITV, and he decided that it ought to become a bit more professional than that. He split the department into three. Whereas series, serials and plays had all been one department they were now three with three heads. He was a clever man. I later worked on The Regiment, again with Terry Dudley and again with him on Doomwatch. I then of course worked on Survivors, partly I suppose because of my long association with Terry Dudley. I thought that the first series was excellent. I came in for the second series and I rather felt that it had got away from the issues. Jack Ronder, for example, who was a scientist, had written notes about, for example, how to make soap or surgical Spirit (see preamble to second series reviews). This was the sort of thing which interested me very much. Terry Dudley however wasn't in the least interested. He was a writer as well as a producer and director and was more interested in telling stories about people. Of course, if you were a writer then this was perfectly right and correct, but it seemed to me that if you had a world where you could not enter cities or get your hands on books in libraries then we were thrown back on absolute basics, which I found fascinating, but we didn't take this approach at all. We had only general stories about people and only touched upon the real problems in a peripheral way. What do you do when you run out of steel, for example? These issues were not dramatically dealt with which was a great shame."

Could Eric describe what a typical day's work on a series such as Survivors was like? "The problem is that Survivors was by no means typical. Survivors was experimental. We were trying out some new light-weight German cameras and it was done as an Outside Broadcast. They gave a very green cast to the picture and were not very good. They were joined with a cable to a Location Production Unit. There was a lot of very heavy gear and we had a scanner in the control room in the van. The director, when recording would sit in the control room. These cables had to be fed to a particular location, so they had to be laid down in advance. Their run was limited to about 3,000 feet I think. So the shooting had to be localised, and if you wanted to move far you had to up sticks and move the van. When working in the studio you have control over everything, such as lighting. In Survivors, they decided that you wouldn't have a vision mixer, the director would vision mix. This would make things much cheaper. On the face of it, it seems like a reasonable idea, like in a sports event, where the director does the vision mixing himself. For the first Survivors story I did, I had to sit there and look at the previews and do the cutting. The vision mixer doesn't look at the actual show but only at the preview. In drama the director doesn't look at the previews, but only at the show and judges whether it is a good performance because on recording a director is not so interested in the technicalities as in capturing a good performance. if you're involved with the cutting then there's no way you can know whether the performance was any good or not. So really using those cameras in the way we did was a bad idea and was a false economy."

Does Eric believe that Survivors would have been better had it been done on film and that the experiment with the new cameras had failed? "Definitely, no doubt at all! As I've said, what we did was an experiment but it must be admitted that it was a dead end, being neither this nor that and I don't think they should have pushed it. They said that you could 'leap-frog' with the cameras having a single camera

shooting one thing while the other was lining up something else. But being on the end of a long cable was absolutely hopeless! The other disadvantage was that there was no time for rehearsals. We had four and a half days to shoot it all. Basically each section had to be done as live. The Tuesday before shooting began on the following Monday, you would take the actors round the locations with the scripts and very roughly block what was going to happen. But there were no rehearsals as such and all you could do was just show them what you thought would happen wherever you were. They would then go on shooting the current story while learning the following week's story in the evening. You would then all arrive to the location on day one of shooting, and they would all have forgotten what they were supposed to be doing and hardly knew the words! So this way of working was really not an advantage at all. You could do it in a television studio with pre-rehearsals or with a single camera and a lot of editing as on film. But if you're cutting to people and they can't remember their lines then it doesn't work. On film you can really tighten things up and you can do what you like. We didn't have the time or the money to pay for sophisticated editing techniques. The great advantage of going on location is that everything is real, real stones, a real river and a real mill etc. They thought that by going on location they would save money on studios and constructions and spend it on the location equipment and all the ancillary staff.

"Using location equipment in the small rooms is always a headache. If you go into a small room you've got to light it. In a studio this is no problem, but in a real house, such as at Callow Hill, you're very restricted. Once you've got all the actors and so on in the room then there's not much space left. But drama is all about movement and once people start moving you've got to be able to adjust to camera on a dolly or to crane up and down. Having all this equipment in a small room was severely limiting. But if you're trying to work with two cameras, one screwed down because you've only got one jib, and the other one is the one that moves, if there is some movement then you've lost the other camera! You'd have to stay with the developing shots, which we do in fact try to encourage, but you can't develop very far in a small room with furniture and lot of people. Regarding Callow Hill, we actually talked the producer Terry Dudley into changing the house, since although the one he had chosen had much more atmosphere it also had a very low ceiling and was painted with shiny paint. So we switched to a house known as the White House. People think that the hardest thing on television or film is to get things to look right, but actually the biggest difficulty is the sound. Rooms with plaster are so lively that the sound is appalling. What you have to do is to line polystyrene sheets against the walls and once all the crew were inside the room as well we were all really cramped and huddled together! Another problem about shooting in these very confined spaces is that every time you move something you have to move equipment out and all this of course takes a long time."

Did the technical crew on Survivors have to learn new skills, given the experimental nature of the series? 'rule cameramen who were working on the show had been more used to doing sports events than drama. if you have two cameramen working together then you rely on them seeing things in the same way. One day they put in a new chap who had only ever done football, and he tended to follow the ball! It is a rule that you've got to have steady shots so that you can cut to the next one as otherwise it looks rather amateurish. This kind of 'hose-piping', the sort of thing you see on home videos is quite useless to you as a director. On one show I had to teach this chap what the shot sizes were and how to do things. The other difficulty, that I've already alluded to, was with the lighting. You would have a lighting engineer who was good at something big like Songs of Praise, for example. I would have to change his style for intimate drama scores, it was quite a challenge for them, but they did remarkably well."

Does Eric remember any discussions with the producer as to the direction that the second series was going to take? "Only light discussions. I remember that while the second series was running we had a meal one evening to discuss the following series. His idea was that there would be communications between this country and Norway and Sweden. This idea was in fact copied, albeit unsuccessfully, by a series called Triangle. The trouble at that time was lack of money.

Eric's second story was Ian McCulloch's A Friend in Need, which tells the tale of a sniper killing young women. The twist at the end of the story is that the sniper also turns out to be a woman. "I had a letter complaining about the fact that we had used a man instead of a woman. I think I really should have had a woman but it was slightly before feminist times. Ian was very unhappy with what I had done with this story. He wanted us to go to a location a long way from where we were based, but we couldn't because you cannot move all that equipment to a location twenty or thirty miles away to a forest. We only had very sparse woodland where we were, where you could not easily hide anyone. So it was enormously difficult to tell his story the way he wanted it on that farm. Ian was quite right of course, but logistically there was no way I could go along with him."

Does Eric remember the two children who played the parts of Lizzie and John? "Yes indeed. I remember once that the girl, Tanya Ronder, for some reason threw a tantrum and just refused to work for the whole day! There was nothing I could do except wait and hope that someone would talk her round! (See interview with Tanya for more details). Terry Dudley's son, Stephen, played the part of John. Terry only wanted people who could speak standard English. The children from stage school were all cockneys and he didn't want that so he got his own son. Because Stephen never really mingled with other children

but only adults, he was in a way sophisticated but tense and I could never get him to get a move on. I had never worked with children before. I think the Americans do this sort of thing better by not expecting the children to learn their lines. Instead, I believe they tell them the gist of the story and let the adult actor guide them along, but that would be on film."

Eric's next story was Roger Parkes' *The Chosen*, which delved into the theme of eugenics and power politics. 'The villain of the story, Kershaw, in the script that Roger wrote was a total wimp. I think Roger was right and I was wrong because I made him strong. Originally he was rather like one of those scout masters of whom you're not quite sure which way he is. You weren't quite sure of his sexuality. This was the character that Roger wrote but I thought that it would be a joke and that there could be no way of carrying that through. I decided that I had to strengthen it. The rehearsals with Philip Madoc were absolutely hilarious, going through all these diseases that people suffer from. This was shot in the studio at Television Centre with film inserts shot at an army camp in Dorset. I also remember that we had ordered a ferocious guard dog for this story. The dog that we ended up with just wanted to go around kissing everyone and there was no way we could get it to look angry!"

Eric's final story was Martin Worth's *Over the Hills*, in which Charles' attempts to spark a baby boom at Whitecross are spumed by the women. "I thought it was a good story. It was good to have young people rising above the situation - generating electricity and having fun. It gave us hope for the future. I thought that the third series was rather better than the second as they were able to get out and about."

Does Eric believe that there is a place today for a new series of *Survivors*? "No, I don't think so. I believe that twenty years ago with the cold war on it was natural to do a series like *Survivors*, but not today. I think that the concept has had its day. I also think the *Doomwatch* was very much more interesting. The problems it dealt with are still with us today."