

Ian McCulloch (Greg Preston)

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The face of Ian McCulloch is almost synonymous with Survivors, and for the first two series was very much at the centre of the show. Although appearing in only two of the third series episodes, his character still pervaded the show.

How did Ian start out in the acting profession? "I did a lot of things at school which attracted good notices and then I had to do my National service before I went up to Oxford. At University I couldn't get any parts and actually did more opera than acting. I did go to the Edinburgh Fringe in 1960 and then directed a college production of The Government Inspector. As my acting career took off my scholastic career disintegrated to the extent that I eventually ended up acting without my tutor's permission and my picture appeared in The Times. I was called to the Proctor's office and given the option of either being sent down immediately or staying and working hard. I stayed and in my penultimate term someone recommended me to George Devine who was then running the Royal Court Theatre and he in turn recommended me to the Royal Shakespeare Company. The upshot was that with a term still to do at Oxford I was offered a long term contract by the RSC. I sat my last exam in Oxford on a Wednesday morning and in the afternoon I was rehearsing with Vanessa Redgrave, Eric Porter and others at Stratford. It was a wonderful start but I'm afraid I didn't really do myself justice. The main criticism of me was that I was diffident. I thought that meant difficult and it was only two years after I left Stratford that I bothered to look it up. The criticism was absolutely right and it was only being in David Hare's first play that removed the diffidence and made me the actor I was capable of being."

How did Ian get the part of Greg Preston in Survivors? "I was sent up for an episode of Colditz to be directed by Terry Dudley and told to look boyish, heroic and the sort of person you would put on a pedestal. It was a wonderful part eventually played by Jeremy Kemp of a prisoner who built a glider. At the end of the meeting with Terry he gave me the script and offered me a part but when I read it I found that the character was a cold blooded shit whom everyone hated and was a vicious killer! As a result of the episode being shown I did a rather silly film called The Ghoul and a couple of things for BBC Scotland and then Terry offered me the part of Greg. As I've said before, the part was originally scripted to be an American presumably to help with the sales but as my American accent is shaky to say the least he became a Brit."

Greg Preston makes his entrance to the series in episode two, Genesis. Does Ian wish that he had also been in the The Fourth Horseman, the highly acclaimed first episode? "In a funny sort of way I think it would have spoilt it. The first episode was really well constructed by Terry Nation and beautifully directed by Pennant Roberts. Pennant has a rare talent for starting off series - Tenko, Blake's Seven, Howard's Way among them. Incidentally he asked me to be in all of these but the producers always turned me down. And while these series had maximum publicity the BBC never really publicised Survivors. Their excuse was always that the series was doing well enough without publicity. I don't remember much about Genesis but it was nice to get started."

Is it easy making a first appearance as a star in a major new TV series? "It never occurred to me that I was a star. Carolyn was always going to be the leading character and we were never sure what was going to happen in the later episodes. But I find working outside much easier than in a studio and I found the whole concept exhilarating."

The first 6 episodes of Survivors were made using a combination of studio work and film inserts. Thereafter it was made almost entirely on location. You've already said that you find working outside exhilarating. So you must have enjoyed the change! "Yes, of course, that was terrific. You were told that you were part of a pioneering effort, it certainly hadn't been done before. Also, you were able to see the play-backs there and then because of the video monitors, enabling you to see the things you weren't too happy with. Looking at the episodes now, despite the problems with lighting etc, and given the primitive equipment they had, I don't think they could have done much better. We all had complaints. For example, using video glossed it up to make it look far too good, it was only in the third series that director Peter Jefferies came along and he wanted people to look dirty and be scruffy and have everything looking roughed up a bit. That would have been a bonus in the first series, the video cameras just lit everything up and gave everything an awful glossy look. But I don't think it was the BBC's fault i.e. the technicians, I don't think they could have done anything about it, it was just the state of the art at the time. However, that was a

permanent criticism that we all made ourselves; it looked too good, and that using film could have changed the tone a lot."

It would seem to be clear then that Ian deems the first six episodes of *Survivors* to have been very successful. "Well, I'm on record as saying that, and I think that the first series that Terry Nation did had hit upon a really good idea. The scripts were good, the directing was good and people tuned in every Wednesday in their droves."

How did Ian feel about the change from a wanderer format to the more settled way of life once the community had established itself around Hampton Court? "As an actor you don't really have anything to say; that had all been decided in advance. The progress was going to be from going around and finding a couple of people and getting on with the problem of how on earth we were going to manage in this situation, to getting a few more people and finding a more solid base. That's when all the defence stuff came in, which I didn't really care for all that much. So they found this big house with all this land and all the facilities that it's possible to have in that situation and then tried and make a go of that. Eventually, in the story-line, it burned down."

During the first series we see two philosophies, that of Terry Nation and Jack Ronder on show. For the viewer this was good since the series didn't become predictable. Whose philosophy was on top? 'The philosophy that was on top was that of Terry Dudley, the producer! Terry Nation has said that *Survivors* is the series that he is most proud of but that by the end of the first series he had run out of steam and didn't have anything else to say or contribute, which left Terry Dudley in a bit of a hole. That's why he came to rely on Jack, who was not only a very skilled writer but a very scientific man and was very keen on the actual basics of the scientific side, you know, how do you produce methane gas, which I personally hated, but that side of it came more to the fore and is one of the reasons why I became increasingly unhappy. I liked the series as an exciting adventure and drama which, if we do it again, that's what it will be. Some episodes became a bit too technical, and unfortunately they did tend to be Jack's. On the other hand he did write some of the really good ones, the London ones for example."

Two of the most memorable episodes of the second season are Jack Ronder's *Lights of London*, the only two-parter of the series. Does Ian have any particular memories of these episodes? "Well, really only because I had never had anything to do with the colour separation overlay before, and wandering round the Oval Cricket ground, just trying to imagine how they were going to turn it into a vegetable garden. I think it actually was one during the war anyway. I remember that and the tunnels at the end of episode one and the beginning of the second part, and the rats, which were pathetic. They tried wild rats first of all, said "action" and they had gone, in a blink they had gone! So they then got these laboratory rats which they dyed, but of course they had pink eyes so they looked stupid. And they were tame too, so instead of running away from you they were almost saying to you "please come and cuddle me!". I must say that I hate rats. My uncle died of a rat related disease, and rats have been permanently fixed in my brain as being carriers of sickness. Knowing that I had to do something with them eventually, tame or not, didn't please me."

One of the most controversial episodes of the first season was *Law and Order* (see interview with Carolyn Seymour). Does Ian have any memories of this? "I thought it was one of the best episodes although initially I thought it was going to be pathetic. There were plenty of discussions about all the issues behind the scenes which involved all the unit more than any other episode. I thought it was done very neatly. When I look at this and other episodes I just think how much colour Talfryn Thomas brought to the series and how much he was missed. It was a pity he couldn't continue but I think Terry Dudley's view was that having done this terrible thing in killing the girl he couldn't be allowed to get away with it. The following episode, *The Future Hour*, was not very good. Again, had it been done on film it would have worked better."

If there ever were another series, would Ian try to get back together as many members of the original cast as possible? "I asked Terry Nation to contribute and he said he would if he could but he was very busy in America. Incidentally I think it has been a big loss to British TV that he hasn't been here for so long. All other cast members who are still alive and want to be involved would be asked to join as well as all the guests. I would also try to involve as many familiar television faces from the seventies, wonderfully talented actors and actresses you hardly ever see nowadays. While these established characters would return there would be a big contingent of new dynamic young actors male and female."

Series two opens with many changes, a fire destroying the original community at Hampton Court. How did Ian feel about these dramatic changes and the general development of the second series? "I was very sorry that Carolyn was leaving (a political decision). I felt that the three of us, Carolyn, Lucy and I, worked well together and I would have preferred the same format with my character gradually coming more and more to the fore. From a purely selfish point of view I wasn't happy sharing the male lead with Denis Lill. It had nothing to do with Denis himself, it was just that I felt that I had built something which was then being

taken away. For example, Don Shaw wrote the third series episode Mad Dog for Greg and Terry Dudley gave the episode to Charles. As it was one of the best episodes of the entire series I wasn't best pleased. One of the fascinating things about Survivors is to watch the progress of people who were in it. Denis for example has done some brilliant work especially in the comedy field. However at the time I felt I was doing less and less and that of course was one of the reasons I didn't want to go on. I also thought the fact that they didn't develop Lucy's character was a terrible waste. When I left at the end of the second series Terry Dudley asked me to appear in one episode of series three. He said I could write and direct it as long as I appeared and then died!

'this episode, The Last Laugh, was my favourite because of the work put in by the director Peter Jefferies. My style of writing was to create a mini-thriller with plenty of twists, turns and surprises. My first episode, the second series story A Friend in Need worked well enough and seeing it recently I think I've been a little unkind in my criticisms of it as it is in fact very nicely put together. But too many of the surprises were given away and this has a flattening effect. The second episode, the third series story A Little Learning, I count as a disaster and I lay the blame wholly at the feet of the director. Apart from asking me who I wanted as the old lady he didn't ask me a single question during the rehearsal or filming. He cut and changed dialogue without asking me to explain anything even though I was in the same room and he kept giving away the surprises. For example, the audience are not supposed to know it is an episode involving children. As the camera approaches the house you see a big sign saying 'school'. And when we hear screams from upstairs you are supposed to think that someone is being tortured but as the camera gets near you see a sign saying something like 'sick-bay. I had enjoyed writing it as it was meant to be an episode for Lucy but when Terry Dudley appeared on location while we were shooting The Last Laugh he took me to one side and said 'He's fucked it up.' Peter on the other hand did a wonderful job. He involved me in everything from casting to editing and I think it made a big difference to the finished article. Apart from one scene with Clifton Jones which sounds like it was copied from the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations I feel very proud of it. I would have liked to work with Peter again but we were involved in a fatal sailing accident soon after we finished the editing and we have barely talked to each other since."

Does Ian believe that his departure from the series effectively killed it off? "I didn't think that a series would survive without Greg. But I think that the departure and the demise of Greg did kill the series off. It may be because of the feeling that I had let Terry Dudley down or whatever from his point of view, that he felt he had to take the series through to a crescendo towards the restoration of electrical power."

Can Ian remember anything of the plans to do a fourth series of Survivors in 1978? "I suggested this to Terry. Again I had similar ideas for bringing my character back. The whole basis of it would have been that Britain was invaded by a black African state which had survived the holocaust, and they had all the military hardware which we, several centuries ago, had taken out to Africa to enslave and colonise them. This was going to be exactly the same only in reverse. They were going to be led by a character not unlike Idi Amin, although there would be good and bad on both sides. I thought it would take the series off in a different direction. I gave it to Terry, he quite liked the idea of doing it. He took it to the then Head of Series, who spurned it saying that it was too racist. In fact it was exactly the opposite. It would have given a lot of employment to black actors. In fact, I was the only person who brought a black actor into the series, Clifton Jones who played the doctor in The Last Laugh."

So if the character of Greg was effectively killed off in The Last Laugh, how does Ian plan to bring him back if there is another series? "I don't know if I ought to tell you! But it is very simple, very realistic and very dramatic and it has its own special twist."

Would Ian's proposed new series follow an action-adventure format, rather like the second series episode A Friend in Need, the story of a sniper who kills young women? "It would be exactly like that. But it would not have the same format for every episode. It really would be very exciting with the older familiar faces and the new young characters. I was very disappointed that the BBC decided not to take up BBC Scotland's suggestion of reviving the series. Survivors was a wonderful series to be a part of and the way all the unit mixed together was terrific. I have many happy memories and many friendships and I know that the programme became part of the lives of millions of people. If the protests of a few people can keep a programme like Take the High Road on our screens surely an equal pressure could do the same for Survivors?"

"I would like to add that in all this I don't think I've given enough credit to Terry Dudley in producing the series and bringing together all the parts that made such a successful whole. Terry Nation gave him wonderful material to work with and we certainly had our differences but we all owe him a great deal."