

John Abineri (Hubert).

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John Abineri seems to have made a career out of playing extraordinary characters, from roles in The Last of the Mohicans, King of the Swampies in Dr who, Hearn the Hunter in Robin of Sherwood, and of course the incorrigible Hubert the tramp in Survivors.

How did John start out in acting? "It was a mystery really! Just after the war there was a rule saying that the universities had to take 90% ex-servicemen. So I had to do an exam for the 10% of places that were left and fortunately I got in. After that I got called up. When I got into the army I thought to myself 'Do I really want to be studying the oil supplies of the world or the British nylon spinners and soon? I must be mad to be doing this!' Because I was locked into a kind of system, if you like, I just continued in this blind state of barminess, jumping the next hurdle only because it happened to be there. I am really grateful for the fact that I was conscripted, because it gave me the chance to think and decide what I wanted to do. While in the army I was supposed to take a commission but I decided not to take it since it would have involved 90 weeks' training, so I gradually began to sidestep my responsibilities in the army, so instead of polishing my boots I used to lie on my bed and think of my career! I gradually got into the position where I became a lecturer. First of all I lectured the Poles in German. I was taken around in a lorry and I had to lecture to these Poles on something called 'British Way and Purpose'. I can't imagine what that was. I then took a little step to the left and became a lecturer in economics at a rehabilitation college, for soldiers who were being dc-mobbed and coming back into civvy street. The course went up to 'A' level. There was a guy there who was running the drama course and when he left I slipped in fast and I ended up owning three theatres. In fact I built one theatre out of a rifle range at night! We all had skeleton keys and broke into the rifle range at night and in the morning the rifle range had disappeared and a theatre was there in its stead! Actors often used to apply to come on these refresher courses. I was able to take the 'bullshit' further, and pretend that the studies which entitled me to a grant had not been in economics but in drama! I then got a grant and I went into the London Old Vic School, which was very difficult to get into. They took in twenty men and twenty women each year. So that's how I started out in acting!"

John has played all sorts of extraordinary characters in his diverse career. Does he enjoy playing these unusual roles? "I would much rather be offered roles like these than have played the same old thing again and again as some people do. In fact quite recently I've played an English aristocrat who is fluent in German for German television. Now that's quite a way out thing! I played him in German, speaking a bit like Prince Charles, speaking German in that sort of clipped English way. I like the fact of being right at the edge of oneself, hanging on by your finger nails trying to get away with playing something like that! When I first saw the part I thought to myself 'I can't learn all this in German!'. Then they told me how much they were going to pay me and I thought 'Oh I can learn all this!'"

How did John get the part of Hubert the tramp in Survivors? "It was Terry Williams who brought me into the series. Terry Dudley, the producer, used to write me little notes saying how much he liked certain scenes and how funny certain scenes were."

Whereas in the second series the character of Hubert was at times just a replacement for the lost character of Tom Price, as we move into the third and final series, Hubert gains in prominence and becomes one of the leading characters in the series. "What happened was that one of the actors had got very 'picky' about the scripts, and I think he rather got up the noses of the guys who were running the series saying that he would only appear in certain scripts if he thought they were good enough. This contracting out created a kind of vacuum which I began to fill. We spent a lot of time galloping around on horseback saying, 'Where's Greg?'. I had much more to do, although not so much funny stuff, Hubert became a more serious and mature character."

John, like many of the other actors in Survivors, had to do a lot of horse riding. Had he previous experience at riding? "Yes, I had done my first Dr. who with Hugh David. He asked me if I could ride because I'm going to do The Man in the Iron Mask and I lied through my teeth, saying I could! So I then went straight to a riding school and told them that I had to be able to gallop within a week. They said it was impossible but I insisted I had to do it. I paid for it all myself and I learnt to ride. I got them to take a photograph of me galloping and I sent it to Hugh David and I didn't get the part! However, I now knew how to ride. I've ridden a great deal since. There was one of my favourite episodes of Flambards, in which I played a fat major who couldn't ride, but who won a point-to-point race when an aeroplane went overhead

and distracted all the other riders. The brief was to get on this horse and behave as if I couldn't ride. Of course I could ride very well at this point and I had a marvellous horse. I had to go round in a circle in front of the crowd before the race. I made my horse go the wrong way round, and the horse actually allowed it! Instead of riding with the horse as it trots, I banged down on it instead. I did everything the wrong way round and this brilliant horse allowed it all! They then told me I'd raised the price of the horse by about £400. The race then started and I was sitting with my horse facing the wrong way, of course, my horse wanted to go with the others, so I turned him round and he went off like an arrow, and as he went off the camera which was on an arm came round to feature it and when the horse saw the camera he swerved and almost broke my back trying to stay on. We went down to a fence, but instead of jumping the fence I brought him down to it and stopped him, and then he jumped it! Now that was comic timing! He then threw me into a pond, I re-mounted and eventually won the race! When I was in *The Last of the Mohicans*, I used to go off on a Sunday and ride in the hills. I rode a lot in *Survivors*, in fact I used to go to work everyday on my horse from nearby Skenfrith where I was staying. I still love riding even today."

Filming at Callow Hill in winter must have been quite demanding and energy-draining for the actors. How' did John find it? "We started on New Year's Day. I love that sort of thing. I love hardship. If you can imagine filming *The Last of the Mohicans* naked, up in Scotland, with midges biting you. Poor old Philip Madoc was almost killed by the midges! I really love that sort of thing, I love to get out there and do that sort of thing. Up at Callow Hill we had a little room we used to huddle in with a little smoky fire. That's where we used to sit and smoke and make tea and so on. I did winter up there once, and it was very cold, but you keep warm by cutting wood and so on."

Is it difficult to join an already established team, as John had to do at the beginning of the second series? "There's always terror when being an actor because you are always starting again. Unless you're playing a very long part, you're always changing. So a new part has been invented for you, you step in front of the camera and this is terror time and you're shaking like a leaf. But once you get that first shot in the can and they say 'O.K. we'll buy that' then that's a great relief. Then you can start! I think that Celia Gregory and Lorna Lewis came into *Survivors* at the same time as I did."

It has emerged that while at Callow Hill two separate factions formed, each having different views about the series. Did John ever get involved in these factions? "What happens in this sort of situation is that all the time you are being pressurised to join this or that faction, to be against this person or for that person. Now that is a very difficult tightrope to walk. If you do one thing then you're going to be unpopular with one group and if you do something else then you're unpopular with the other group and you're on a hiding to nothing. I don't like that, I've never liked that kind of thing. You can't really get away from it. Once we left Callow Hill I lived on a house-boat for most of the time and we used to move it from location to location until we went up to Scotland and we had to abandon it. So I wasn't even with the company then. At Callow Hill, there were something like five brothers lived together on the hill with their wives and in a way they had an ideal community. They also brought in orphans from London, so they had a kind of double community up there."

Did John have an idea initially how the character of Hubert was going to evolve? "No, you don't really know. One writer writes better for you than another. My first story, *The Witch*, was a Jack Ronder story, so one he put his stamp on the character, I then put my stamp on that. Then, of course, the other writers have to look at the character which is already pointing in a certain direction and wouldn't be able to alter it too much."

The Witch was in fact the first second series story to be made, and included some hilarious scenes between Hubert and the woman he was chasing, Mina, played by Delia Paton. "In the story I was supposed to fall in love with her, but not surprisingly she spurned me. She actually threw a dirty nappy in my face! That was a wonderful scene. I enjoyed that episode very much. I remember I had to do a backward fall upon being hit with the dirty nappy. I like doing that sort of thing. I remember when I was doing *The Last of the Mohicans*, I used to love trying to get the canoe right on the mark which had been placed as a guide."

John in reality speaks in an accent which is far removed from Hubert's Herefordshire brogue. Did he model this on anybody? "No, I simply made it up. There is a very funny story which I remember. We had shooting at the water mill in Skenfrith, not far from Callow Hill. There is a pub nearby (~he Bell Inn) and all the actors were there having a drink while waiting to start. I came in through the door dressed in my Hubert garb. The landlord took one look at me and told me to get out. The other actors looked at me and played along saying 'Get out, you dirty old thing!'. There was a Welsh farmer in the pub at the time who took my side saying 'Don't you tell him to go!'. He told me to come over to him and he bought me a drink. He then gave me sixpence. Seeing the rope about my waist I used as a belt, he said 'You've got a bit of string, you've got sixpence, have you got a penknife?'. I told him that I had, to which he replied that I could now be a man! I thought it was so charming of that man."

A memorable episode for Hubert in the third series is Martin Worth's Law of the Jungle, which also starred Brian Blessed. In this episode the transformation of Hubert's character is plain to see, as he uses a crossbow to shoot Bred (played by Brian Blessed) in the back and by so doing frees the group. "I nearly killed Brian Blessed in that episode! Now that just shows you how dangerous acting can be. The director told me to aim the crossbow at Brian, which I did and I was concentrating so much on this that if he had told me to fire I would have done so! I really do swear that I would have fired. But the director told me 'Of course John, we're not going to fire you know' and at this point I woke up. I enjoyed working with Brian Blessed on that story."

Did John find working with Outside Broadcast cameras more difficult than working in the controlled environment

of the television studio? "It's much nicer working on location than in the studio. Working in a studio with four cameras is pretty boring. Another thing they invented for Survivors, and I may have had a hand in this (as I suggested it to Terry Williams), was to place a monitor out in the field, to avoid a lot of running to and fro from the scanner van to the place we were shooting the scene. That way the director could pass on instructions to the actors and speak to the scanner van. There was one director we used to call The Road Runner (Eric Hills) as we constantly saw him running backwards and forwards with his little bobble-hat going up and down! Today this arrangement is commonplace."

Was John sad to learn that there wasn't going to be a fourth series of Survivors? "Yes, indeed I was. Obviously, Hubert was a lovely part for me to play. I loved the riding, being out in the open air and earning money! Of course, it was much easier for actors in those days. You'd shoot a scene and within a couple of weeks it would be broadcast. These days, you can do something and have to wait for years! I was in continuous work in those days."

**Footnote: A year or two after John's interview, he developed an illness & passed away.
B.M.**