

Catastrophe and Quest

Introduction to series one, by Kevin Marshall

Directors:

Pennant Roberts
The Fourth-Horseman
Corn Dolly
Starvation
Law and Order
A Beginning

Gerald Blake
Genesis
Gone to the Angels
Spoil of War
Revenge

Terence Williams
Gone Away
Garland's War
The Future Hour
Something of Value

Writers:

Terry Nation
The Fourth Horseman
Genesis
Gone Away
Garland's War
The Future Hour
Something of Value
A Beginning

Jack Ronder
Corn Dolly
Gone to the Angels
Starvation
Revenge

Clive Exton
Spoil of War
Law and Order

The pattern of production of the first series was typical in that it was divided up between three directors, each with his respective team of three (see camera-scripts for full details), who only worked with that particular director. One would be given five episodes to direct and the other two would be given four each. Thus Pennant Roberts was the main director of the first series.

The idea was first taken by Terry Nation to Andy Osborne, Head of Series at the BBC in late 1973 (see interview with Terry Nation). The series was something that Nation had wanted to do for some time and Andy Osborne received the idea with great enthusiasm and told Nation to go ahead and do it. By the time *Survivors* went into production, Ronnie Marsh was Head of Series, and he was much less enthusiastic. This has always been a problem for making any television series. Executives often change along the way and wish to promote programmes in line with their own personal tastes and there will be a period when the new incumbent has to inherit a whole host of projects from his predecessors, and this is what happened with Ronnie Marsh and *Survivors*. When Terry Nation first approached the BBC, he had already written his first four episodes. The differences between the series and Terry Nation's novel of 1976 are divergences, which occurred *after* Terry Dudley had come onto the scene as producer.

Filming was originally intended to begin in September 1974 for a January 1975 transmission, and the directors would have been brought in around July 1974, but due to an industrial dispute at the BBC work did not commence till January 1975 and the first episode was not broadcast till April 1975. Because of this 'rush' the first two episodes, the *Fourth Horseman* and *Genesis* were filmed concurrently. For these episodes, Carolyn Seymour would work with Pennant Roberts till noon and then with Gerald Blake in the afternoon, the opposite being the case for Lucy Fleming.

The first series may be roughly divided into two parts, the first from episode one to six in which the main theme is Abby's search for her son in the aftermath of the catastrophe, and the second from episode seven to thirteen, in which the group puts down roots at a fixed base (Hampton Court).

Catastrophe and Quest

The first half of the series is very much one of catastrophe and quest. In Britain it was initially thought that no more than 10,000 souls had survived. The fabric of society however had been left intact. Buildings were still standing, machinery was still available and there were substantial stockpiles of preserved food and oil derivatives.

The *Fourth Horseman* is about as fine a piece of television drama as one can find. Whereas one might expect, as is certainly the case with numerous American dramas, the catastrophe to be caused by a bomb,

in *Survivors* Terry Nation uses an altogether more powerful weapon, a killer mutating virus. The virus has an incubation period of about a week, after which the victim becomes progressively weaker, and develops lumps in the armpit. What follows, for all but a few biological 'freaks', is death. The idea sounds wholly far fetched, but the recent events in Zaire with the spread of the Ebola virus, which itself has a mortality rate of over 90%, brings Terry Nation's idea within the realms of possibility. Fortunately, the Ebola virus is not air-borne, if it were we might well find ourselves in a *Survivors* scenario.

The undoubted star of series one was Carolyn Seymour, who played middleclass housewife Abby Grant. Her character is introduced in the following terms in Terry Nation's script:

ABIGAIL GRANT is in her early thirties. She is an attractive and sophisticated woman. Abigail's has been a life of considerable privilege. Modestly well-to-do parents. An education at a good boarding school. She 'finished' in Switzerland. She worked on a rather chic magazine. Designed clothes for a while, then with a friend established an interior design business. She married David Grant when she was twenty four and their son Peter was born a year later. The marriage has worked well Abby has enjoyed entertaining their friends and her husband's business contacts. She sees her domesticity as a career. She is a happy and vivacious woman with a great many interests that seem to keep her always short of time.

Carolyn Seymour had to fight hard to get the part of Abby; the BBC didn't really think she was right for the part. There was talk even of Wanda Ventham getting the part, but she looked far too buxom and well-fed. In the end Carolyn was cast, and perfectly so, although her character, not entirely dissimilar to Abby's, was in conflict with Terry Dudley and Terry Nation. Carolyn, like Abby, is a very strong character, outspoken, emotional, a leader, who doesn't suffer fools lightly and knows what she wants. When Abby's husband is struck down with the plague, along with everyone else in her village and the surroundings, she finds herself in a dark nightmare world. Is it possible to survive alone without human warmth? An American version, rather like the recent film **Outbreak**, would undoubtedly have concentrated on the violent and gory aspects. Yet in the British original, we hardly ever see a body or blood. *Survivors* at its best was a series of ideas. In another beautiful and yet sublime scene, towards the end of the episode, Abby showers and then cuts off her hair, symbolising the new woman, almost a New Eve. It is interesting to note that Terry Nation claims (unpublished interview with author) that Carolyn at first refused to cut her hair for this scene, and it was at this point that he fell out with her. Carolyn however has never had her hair long and denies the claim. Abby then douses the house and dead husband with paraffin, loads her estate-car with tinned provisions, sets fire to the house and sets off into the unknown. In burning the house she effectively cuts herself off from her past and looks ahead to the new world, fearful and bewildered. Her son Peter however may have survived, and her hopes are raised when, upon visiting his school, the sole surviving master tells her that Peter and some other boys had gone camping with a school master out into the countryside when the plague was beginning to bite, but he did not know where they had gone. The *leit-motif* of the first series then becomes Abby's search for Peter. In Terry Nation's novel of the series, Abby is gunned down and killed by Peter just as she finds and recognises him. By this time Peter had become one of Arthur Wormley's ruthless minions.

Fellow survivors

Abby is soon joined by fellow survivors, London secretary Jenny Richards, played by Celia Johnson's daughter Lucy Fleming, and engineer Greg Preston, played by Ian McCulloch. Terry Nation's original idea was that Greg should be an American engineer, but at the request (plea?) of Ian McCulloch he was played as British. Of the three, Jenny is the most vulnerable, and longs for human companionship after weeks of solitude trudging through the English countryside making her way towards the west. In this sense she provides an important link with the audience, rather in the manner of a **Dr who** assistant. Greg on the other hand is independent, but the necessity of survival forces him to stay with Abby and Jenny, a fact which he resents. The three are forced into extra responsibility when they come across the children Lizzie and John, played by Tanya Ronder and Stephen Dudley, the daughter of scriptwriter Jack Ronder and son of the producer Terry Dudley respectively. If the new world was to have any future at all, children would be the key. Tanya especially, provides some delightful moments of acting throughout the series. The following is taken from Terry Nation's camera-script and introduces the character of Jenny.

Jenny is a good looking modern girl. She is a short hand typist and works around town as a "temp". This gives her quite a lot of money and a certain amount of freedom. She buys her clothes at "Biba" and other better quality boutiques. She is very trendy without being outrageous. She is a capable and independent spirit. She achieved a few 'A' levels at school and is reasonably bright. Emotionally she is rather guarded, and enjoys being in demand as a girl without having to make any long term commitments. She is often untidy and will let the room fall into a dreadful mess, then with a burst of enthusiasm will clean and tidy the place and resolve never to let it get that way again. Jenny is a 'nice' girl, fun to be with. She gives the impression of being very vulnerable and her friends tend to be very protective toward her.

The character of Greg Preston, the final member of the first series triumvirate, is introduced thus in Terry Nation's script for Genesis.

Greg Preston is in his early thirties and is an attractive young man. Slightly introverted and would, if he were able, be something of a loner. He can be fairly tough, but never hard. Various emotional hurts have made him guarded about new relationships, but his natural compassion tends to involve him with people, even when all his experience warns against this.

Villains of the first series include ex-union leader Arthur Wormley, played by George Baker, convinced that he has the moral authority to oversee the return to law and order, including the use of summary executions, and itinerant Welsh tramp Tom Price, exquisitely portrayed by the eccentric and often 'over the top' Talfryn Thomas. Price would happily pin his colours to any mast for the price of a meal and was as unreliable and unpredictable as the weather. Talfryn Thomas brought a great dose of colour to all those scenes in which he was involved.

Abby, Greg, Jenny and the children eventually tire of scouring the English countryside for her son Peter, and find a manor house which they use as a base and nucleus for a proper settlement. They are soon joined by other survivors, Mrs Cohen, played by Hana-Maria Pravda, Wendy, played by Julie Neubert, the simpleton Barney, played by John Hallet, Paul Pitman, played by Christopher Tranchell, Arthur Russell, played by Michael Gover, Charmian Wentworth, played by Eileen Helsby and Vic Thatcher, played by Terry Scully and later by Hugh Walters.

Putting Down Roots

Television dramas up till this time had been produced using studio recording combined with film inserts. This had also been the case with *Survivors*, but as from Jack Ronder's *Starvation* the series was shot entirely on location using new German cameras (video). The OB unit had not been available to Terry Dudley for the first six episodes as a consequence of the **BBC** strike the previous fall. It is quite untrue, as Neil Alsop maintains in *Timescreen No 10*, 1986, p.14, that the settling down of the group in the manor house was Jack Ronder's way of revising Terry Nation's original concept. The decision to shoot from a fixed base was a purely logistical one. Indeed, in Terry Nation's own novel, published in 1976, we see Abby's group settle down to a sedentary life-style. It is true however that Terry Nation favoured the action-adventure style of story.

The original idea had been to kill off Lucy Fleming's character after the first nine episodes, but she had proved to be so popular that they decided to keep her. Instead they invented the character of Wendy, played by extremely youthful looking Julie Neubert. Wendy was left in the series just long enough for people to empathise with her before she fell victim to Tom Price's darker side in *Law and Order*, which is without doubt the strongest episode in the second half of the series. *Law and Order* is remarkable for the human dilemma the community face. How do you punish murder when all the trappings of a justice system have been swept away?

Highlights

Highlights of series one are undoubtedly **The Fourth Horseman**, **Corn Dolly**, **Garland's War**, **Law and Order** and **Something of Value**. **Jack Ronder's Corn Dolly**, in which we see Denis Lill for the first time, is the favourite of director Pennant Roberts and of the scriptwriter himself. The final draft of this fine script was ready by November 12th 1974, and the screen version remained quite faithful to the text. *Garland's War* was an action-adventure story so typical of Terry Nation. It boasts very strong performances by Carolyn Seymour and Richard Heffer as the handsome Jimmy Garland. It is here that we see the first signs of romance for Abby, which blossoms in the final episode of the series, *A Beginning*. *Law and Order* is the most controversial episode concerning as it does justice in a world without any *system* of justice. *Something of Value* is an action-packed story looking at the value of human life when commodities are in such short supply.

Departure of Carolyn

One of the great mysteries surrounding *Survivors* is why Carolyn Seymour left after only one season at the helm. The explanation may be gleaned from her interview in this book. Although the **BBC** had

wanted a strong woman in the role of Abby, once they had one they didn't know how to handle her. From very early on it was evident that the powers that be considered her character to be 'top heavy', creating an imbalance in the trio of Abby, Greg and Jenny. Carolyn is also a most outspoken and emotional lady, which is what one might expect given her aristocratic Russian Irish heritage. She saw the unfair way in which extras were being mistreated in the cold winter months, and complained bitterly about it, even refusing to work unless something was done to improve matters. At one stage she demanded a caravan for her and Lucy Fleming, a demand which was never granted. She clashed significantly with the producer over the conclusion to *Law and Order*, wishing Barney to be banished and not executed, something she has very strong feelings about. It is quite evident from the many interviews carried out, that Carolyn was treated shabbily by some, who didn't appreciate her obvious talent and the fact that she had so much to offer the series. There was never any specific production meeting whereby her fate was decided, if there had been then director Pennant Roberts would have counselled against losing her. The decision not to pick her up for series two lay entirely with the producer. Carolyn herself admits that she drank, worked and played hard. It is a shame that those at the **BBC** who had wanted such a strong character in the lead didn't know how to handle one. Carolyn, who was at the time the highest paid actress ever at the **BBC**, was simply not picked up (*Le.* she was sacked) for the second series. Survivors never quite recovered from the loss of this remarkable woman.

Carolyn Seymour was not the only loss at the end of the series. Hana-Maria Pravda was also dropped. There had been rumours going round for some time that she might not be picked up for the next series. At the time she was quite friendly with the Ronders, and pestered Jack to tell her what was going to happen. Eventually he gave way and told her the truth. When word got back to the producer that she had been told he was absolutely livid. It was this fact, coupled with Jack Ronder's protestations at scripts being changed without consultation, which in the end soured relations so much that it cost him his job.

Three Philosophies

Throughout this first series one can discern three philosophies:

(a) That of Terry Nation, who had created the series.

(b) That of Jack Ronder, whose background was in chemistry and had a fine reputation as a playwright.

(c) That of the producer Terry Dudley, who was the 'unofficial' script editor throughout the series.

(a) Terry Nation had been fascinated for some time before by the concept of survival, indeed many of his TV credits have this theme, running from *The Avengers*, *The Saint*, *Dr Who* up to *Survivors* and *Blake's 7*. In *Blake's 7* we see a few desperate individuals protecting what little they have against an evil Federation. Terry Nation wanted an action-adventure series, showing how noble the human spirit could be. Choosing a woman as the hero was inspirational, serving to highlight the weakness and vulnerability of the whole of humankind. That Abby was a middle-class lady who had never struggled before brought out the great sense of loss. She had by default become a leader, and the cutting of her hair and burning down of her house symbolised a new beginning for her. We see her harden and become, when required, as in **Law and Order**, quite ruthless. In Terry Nation's vision we see bands coming together for mutual help, but also an evil streak in man, always ready to take advantage of a weaker neighbour. Terry Nation also keenly wished to explore the issues raised by the loss of civilisation, and certainly did *not* wish a quick return to 'normality', hence his many disagreements with Terry Dudley. Originally, he intended a trek across Europe and down to warmer climates where surviving would have been simpler. But this was not practical in TV terms and the version we have is set wholly in Britain.

(b) Jack Ronder on the other hand did not believe that the survivors of the plague would resort to violence. It was a disappointment to him that it had often gone that way. He believed that the survivors would rather cling to each other and wished to explore how the Death had affected the individuals. An article in *D.W.* magazine, makes the claim that the 'departure of the independent Abby from the series removed the major obstacle to Jack Ronder's belief that women would inevitably slip back into dependence on the males...' This assertion is clearly incorrect. There is nothing in any of Ronder's scripts, from either the first or second series, to suggest that he held this belief. In the same article, Ronder is accused of undermining Terry Nation's concept of communities demonstrating a failure to learn from the collapse of civilisation, when in *Gone to the Angels* he presents us with two groups; those who have never been infected by the plague and those who have survived it, but are still carriers. The former, a small group of religious folk who had hidden themselves away in the hills, become infected with the virus on contact with Abby's group and die. There is no sense of undermining here. Ronder simply wished to explore how individuals would cope with the catastrophic loss and believed that people would cling together much more, and not resort to violence.

(c) The producer Terry Dudley believed that man would be reduced to medieval-style farming, but *without* the benefits of modern know-how. As director Pennant Roberts, himself a scientist, explained to him, people would surely revert to medieval techniques *with* the experience of the 20th century. Although individuals may not be experts in a particular field, the knowledge was at least available to them (see interview with Pennant Roberts). According to Terry Nation, he wished to 'turn the lights back on' after about the third episode. These conflicts between producer and creator led to the latter's departure after the end of the first series. In the end, it must be said that the prevailing philosophy on *Survivors* was Terry Dudley's.

For the viewer, it must be said that having competing philosophies made the series more entertaining, never being sure what the next episode would bring, although the sight of two men with shot-guns in a Land Rover did get a bit boring and make the first series somewhat 'samey'. As I have discussed in chapter two, *Survivors* fell down in not focussing on the real issues. This was a great shame and gave the series a shallow feeling, where there was in fact a vast potential for an in-depth study of what really makes people 'tick'.

Notes on The Fourth Horseman (See also interview with Pennant Roberts)

Directors Pennant Roberts and Gerald Blake with their crews and cast were out filming the first two episodes on location in Herefordshire for the whole of January, 1975. Rehearsals for **The Fourth Horseman** were commenced for the studio scenes about February 10th at Acton, London, and the episode was recorded on 18/19th February 1975. The procedure at that time was that having shot and edited the exterior sequences on film, these were then played in to the main recording. The actual recording of the episode in its entirety was done between 1930 and 2200 of the night of Wednesday 19th February, 1975. Terry Nation's script would have been evolved into a camera-script during rehearsals. This could be changed up to the point where the P.A. would require it to be typed up. Pennant would therefore have delivered the camera-script to his assistant, Mary Holdsworth, on the Friday of the week before recording, *I.E.*, Friday 14th February. She would then have typed it up on 'skins', to be run off the following Monday so that the technical crew could have it prior to the Tuesday recording session block. This meant that there may have been amendments which do not actually appear in the camera-script. Further minor amendments may even have been made on the studio floor itself. Although the producer would certainly have been in the gallery while the studio work was going on (and therefore be able to offer opinions *etc.*), according to BBC procedure at the time, the director was in full charge at this stage.

Writers would not normally be seen at these sessions, although provision was always made for them to be present if so desired. Any frictions between a writer and director would be smoothed over by the script-editor. One source of friction would be if the writer and director were telling different stories. On *Survivors* there was no official script-editor, that job was done by producer Terry Dudley himself. Director Pennant Roberts does not re-call any re-writes for *The Fourth Horseman*. In any case they would have been minimal, as the tight schedule was the major driving force.

One obvious discrepancy between camera-script and final transmitted version is the 50-second title sequence, written by Terry Nation. Explains director Pennant Roberts: "What would have happened is that Terry Nation wrote the title sequence that is in the camera-script. Then a graphics designer at the **BBC** would have taken it and constructed the final title sequence, using the essence of what Terry Nation had described. It would have been drafted, then the title music composed and then edited back against the music. Terry Dudley would then have given his approval to what the graphics designer had prepared. The sequence was certainly a powerful one. The **BBC** had a very strong graphics team at the time. Of course, a title sequence today would have to be technically much more subtle."

The theme music by Anthony Isaac is a quite outstanding piece, with an almost eschatological feel to it. *Survivors* however did not use any incidental music during the episodes. This was not a policy decision, as many series at the time did not have incidental music. Isaac had also worked on **The Onedin Line**, and with a similar turnaround to *Survivors* there was no time to do specially composed music. Once again the planning geared thinking and someone would sit down and watch the recording and try to squeeze loosely fitting clips of music to it. To come up with especially composed incidental music a composer would need at least two weeks. Incidental music for *Survivors* was an option that simply was not realistic.

The opening scenes of Abby playing tennis and giving instructions to her maid, designed to give the idea of a privileged class, were shot in a village near Elmley Castle (Little Comberton), not far from Evesham. The moving scene where Abby enters the village church were shot in Elmley Castle village itself. While the unit was working out of Ross-on-Wye, the early Abby scenes were shot much further to the east, in order to create the appearance of being in a very different location, before moving west to the borders. The interior scenes were all shot in the studio on 19th February, whereas the exterior scenes were done in January. The rural vista we see out of Abby's window is in fact a back-cloth. Working under these

circumstances, continuity was always a problem, and for that reason the film recordings were always made available for the later studio work. The traffic jam scene with Lucy Fleming were shot on the West-Way in London, which had just opened. The railway station scene involving Abby and husband David were shot at Malvern. The sign 'Brimpsfield' was, of course, put up by the **BBC!** The name was chosen as it is the name of a village which Pennant Roberts regularly passes on the Cirencester to London road. The station was not closed down for the filming and Margaret Anderson (Mrs Transon) actually got on a regular service train and was picked up one stop later!

The street scene involving Jenny and a group of rowdy youths was shot in Cheltenham. The night scene involving David Grant and Dr Gordon, when Abby had fallen ill and Mrs Gordon had already died, was shot closer to the hotel in Ross-on-Wye. The exterior scene where Lucy meets Tom Price was shot on a back road between Monmouth and Abergavenny. Thus we are introduced to the irrepressible Tom Price, the professional Welshman of the seventies. Talfryn used to tell a story whereby he required fifteen years to wear his hats in, so that the one he is seen to wear is the one he had been wearing for the previous fifteen years. In the evenings he would wear a similar but more modern hat. He had great

faith in his hats. On one occasion somebody stole his hat and he was absolutely devastated, claiming that fifteen years of hard work wearing it in had gone down the drain!

The scene where Abby's car passes Jenny, who desperately tries to catch her attention, was shot on the road between Ledbury and Malvern. The stretch of road wasn't actually closed off, but people were stationed at either end to stop the traffic. If one pays close attention to this segment of film, it is possible to see dirt on the emulsion. This is dust that has found its way onto the film between the first rehearsal on the show copy and the recording.

The school at which Peter Grant is a boarder is in reality called Llanarth Court, and although it was a Roman Catholic school 20 years ago, today it is a psychiatric hospital. It may be found on the old road between Monmouth and Abergavenny, approximately 7 miles east of the latter, not far from The Walnut Tree restaurant. On the same day Gerald Blake was doing a sequence for episode two. The night sequence between Lucy and Giles Melville in the wood was shot in the grounds of the school.

The most daring scene in the entire series, that of Abby showering at her home, was done in the television studio in London. Pennants recalls, "I remember that she wanted it done 'properly', and not sensationally. The point of the scene was a symbol of cleansing."

The episode ends with Abby burning her home, husband and indeed her boats in an almost religious rite, in readiness to start a new life in an unwelcoming world. This was very much according to Terry Nation's thinking.

N.B. A couple of amendments have been made to Kevin's original text.