

Stephen Tate (Alan).

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Stephen Tate appeared in a total of four second series episodes, and along with several other young actors, gave a much needed 'shot in the arm, of youthful vitality to the Whitecross community.

How did Stephen start out on his career as an actor? "Funnily enough I didn't actually start out in acting, but as a classical dancer with the Royal Ballet Company. I trained at the Royal Ballet School from the age of fifteen, I then went into the Royal Opera Ballet and then the Royal Ballet Company at Covent Garden. So I started on a road that was really some way from acting. I spent two years with the company before deciding that there must be more to life than Covent Garden. I wanted to spread my wings a little so in 1968 or '69 I went into musicals in the West End and this I suppose broke me away from the classical world. I stayed in West End musicals as a dancer for a few years, and then I got the role of Judas in Jesus Christ Superstar with Paul Nicholas who was Jesus. I was the original Judas! It was a really great musical. I got to sing as well, which is something I had always done, having been a choir boy as a child. That set me on the the road to wanting to act; at the age of nineteen I was playing a leading role on the West End, and the thought of going back to being a chorus dancer wasn't exactly very appealing! So I started to do small television parts in the seventies and do musicals at the same time. I went on to do very early episodes of things like Z Cars and The Onidion Line. It was in many ways a very productive time for TV drama with a lot more going on than nowadays. There were many inventive things on television and the quality was starting to become really good."

How was Stephen cast for his role in Survivors? "I was cast by Pennant Roberts. As I've already said, I had done some television, but not an enormous amount and so it now seems to me that it was a great coup to actually get into a series like this that was taped on location. At that time, being young and confident, I never really realised how much of a coup it was. It was however very much an adventure and I was very excited about it. By this stage I was no longer doing musicals and it was actually quite difficult to move from one to another, so that if you were a dancer or singer doing musicals, it was very hard to break into acting, especially television. I used to have to lie about what I had done. When asked what I had done before, I would say, for example, that I had been in the BBC's War and Peace by Tolstoy. They didn't actually ask me what I was doing. I was a dancer and there were these great ball-room scenes! So in a way I had to deny my roots

- dancing - in order to work as an actor, which I desperately wanted to do. Later on in my career I was able to do both, act and dance. I was, for example, in the original cast of Cats.

"When I went for my interview I was asked if I could ride a horse. I replied, through my teeth, 'Well, I have ridden.' I was told that in one of the episodes I would have to ride a horse. This was in the final episode of the season, New World by Martin Worth. In the story, Heather Wright and I were supposed to ride up this field to a beacon. They gave me a horse called Klaus, an eighteen-hand Dutch gelding, a truly massive animal. I was terrified of it, but they told me that he had done loads of filming and that anyone could ride him. Heather Wright was an excellent horsewoman, but I could not get this horse to do anything at all! It wouldn't even move! There had been a young stallion in the field where we were going to do the shooting, and this sent Klaus absolutely mad. Every time we took Klaus into the field he wanted to come out again. So they told me that I would have to start off at the bottom of the field, ride up and stop by the camera, which was half way up the hill, have this little scene with three speeches, and then ride off. So, we went down to the bottom of the field, and as soon as I turned him round he shot up past the camera before they even had time to shout action! In the end, the person who had brought the horse down said that he would go down the bottom of the field with me, holding Klaus but facing the wrong way, right up till the last minute, when he would let go. After that I would just have to pull him round and he would go anyway. He explained that when it got to the camera position then he would have one of his people, someone known by the horse, there to stop him. So we did things as instructed. We went down to the bottom of the hill. I was facing the wrong way while Heather was facing the right way. The director, Eric Hills, shouted 'Action!' and the chap let go of the reins, I pulled the horse round. But I pulled the wrong way, and he went up! I went backwards, grabbed on to his neck, my feet came out of the stirrups, and he set off up the field with me clinging on! When he got up to the camera, the man from the stables who knew him stood out in front of him and exclaimed 'Klaus, Klaus', but Klaus didn't take a blind piece of notice of him and he had to dive out of the way! I saw the rushes at lunchtime, and there was just a shot of me whizzing past the camera like a meteor. It was truly hysterical."

The second series of Survivors was very much a tale of self-sufficiency, a theme that was much in vogue in the 1970's. Does Stephen believe that an audience of the 1990's would find it interesting? "No, I

don't, not unless something were to spark off a trend of self-sufficiency style programmes, like The Good Life for example. But I think that things have gone in a different direction these days. People have discovered that self-sufficiency is bloody hard work and it is much easier to go to Tesco's! Most towns have a supermarket or even a hypermarket and the idea of living off the land is even further away. There was also more of a nuclear threat twenty years ago. There is less sense of threat today. Also, information technology is such that in a sense we are less afraid because we know so much more. Fear comes from ignorance. I was amazed at the lack of fear over Chernobyl, for example. So the general idea of something going wrong somewhere is not so frightening. People are both more cynical and more knowledgeable."

Did Stephen enjoy working on location at Callow Hill? "We became so integrated into the life of Callow Hill and into ourselves as a group that the filming always seemed to be secondary. I got on brilliantly with the folk up there, Robin and Cherry and so on. I must say however that they were such a weird and bizarre bunch of people. Ian and I composed a calypso while in the car park on the final day of shooting. The location caterers threw a party in the car park and I had my guitar and we improvised this calypso. I understand that someone recorded it but I've never had a copy of it. It was all about the three brothers, each one of whom had been left a bit of the farm, plus the wives and all the children. We all got involved in helping to run the farm while we were filming. There was always something to do to help. I can remember on many occasions being dragged off a tractor to do a scene! At first we all lived down in The King's Head in Monmouth, but I moved because the drunken nights there nearly killed me. This was every night and with a 7 o'clock call for make-up it was really difficult to be involved in heavy drinking every night. After a while I couldn't take it any more. Denis was by this time already living at Callow Hill, and I moved to The Bell Inn which was near the mill at Skenfrith. We were doing some scenes nearby and I just strolled over and asked if they had any rooms and the landlady let me have a room for something ridiculous like £2 IOs a night. They did these amazing breakfasts and I had a wonderful room overlooking the mill. After moving there I began to find it easier remembering my lines!"

Does Stephen have any memories of his first episode, Martin Worth's *By Bread alone*, directed by Pennant Roberts? "I remember singing 'While Shepherds washed their soc~ by night! It is always a bit nerve racking coming into an established series. If you're coming in just to do one episode then it's unlikely that you will become part of the group, but if you come in like I did to do several then it is more nerve racking. Everyone however was so very friendly and there was such a good atmosphere. My main memory of the episode is that it was all so much fun. Regarding all my episodes, what I remember most is the camaraderie, it just didn't seem like work at all."

Stephen had a very prominent part to play in Martin Worth's *Over The hills*, directed by Eric Hills, in which Charles' attempts to spark a baby boom in the community are spurned by the women folk. "There was a scene in this story when I had to play 'the game', when I climbed a rope in the mill while three people at the top of the mill secured it. One by one they would let go, and the idea was to climb from the bottom to the top before they had all let go. So as I was climbing, these three people were really actually physically holding me, and I was some 50 feet off the ground! So what was supposed to be happening in the story really was happening. It wasn't until we got to the last person who was holding the rope, and someone grabbed hold of me that I realised it had been for real! The story had very 1960's and hippyish elements to it. It was all so very innocent and yet dealing with very up-to-date issues."

Stephen's last episode was another Martin Worth offering, *New World*, which was directed by Terence Williams. Was Stephen sad to leave the series or did he feel that it had run its course? "I think we all felt that the series had run out of steam in terms of story-lines. It had buried itself somehow and had got away from its original brief, in the sense that it became very domestic and rather like a soap. In the end it was like *Emmerdale*. I suppose that the idea of how a community breaks down, to revive and rise again, what would it rise to? In our series the answer was that it rose more or less to what it had been before, which is why it became a little boring. The stories began to be about the technique of burning cowdung for fuel and making a car engine work, such that in the end it became about bringing back the society that had been wiped out. In that sense it lost its sense of drama, and became a kitchen-sink drama. It was nevertheless original and interesting television. Terry Nation had had a very good idea. How he convinced the BBC to put the series on I don't know. You could say that it was successful because it was so innovative and different."

"As often happens with a series, the actors get more and more involved, and feel that they want to voice their opinions. I can remember well that when we felt that the way it was written was taking the series down a boring road. We went to the director and told him that we thought it was absolutely terrible. Either Ian or Denis went to speak to Terry Dudley to say that the series was going in the wrong direction, but Terry didn't really want to know."

Survivors was in general roasted by the critics at the time. As a young actor, is it very disheartening to have such a negative press? "You would always like nice things to be said about you or the things that you are in. My view of critics is that if they were there to say nice things then we wouldn't need them. Their job

is to criticise and we shouldn't take it personally. I think that at the time when Survivors was made, there wasn't such a preoccupation with viewing figures as we have nowadays. The BBC was not in a war of viewing figures, indeed it wasn't expected to be in competition, it was quite simply the BBC and was only interested in quality. This meant that things like Survivors would get an airing. Today the very first question they would ask is what kind of ratings the series would get. Almost everyone in the series was Unknown before. They wouldn't make a new series today without a well known face."