

Terry Nation (The Creator). Interviewed by Kevin Marshall.

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Few people have made such a lasting and worthwhile contribution to British TV as Terry Nation, who was born in 1930. He started out in the Fifties by writing radio scripts for all the leading comics of the day. While still writing comedy he began work in television. By 1961 he had completed his first full length television play. He soon started contributing scripts to *Out of This World* and became a regular contributor to *The Saint*. About this time, Sydney Newman at the BBC asked Nation to write a new science fiction series. He came up with *Dr Who* and wrote many of the early episodes of this now legendary series. In so doing he also created the most successful of all the Doctor's opponents, the dreaded Daleks, which kept most children hidden behind the sofa! It was also in the 1960's that he became script-editor to successful series such as *The Avengers*, *The Baron* and *The Persuaders*.

In 1975, Terry Nation created what is probably his most mature and thought-provoking work of all, *Survivors*. His direct involvement in the series lasted into 1976 and the second series. *Survivors* was followed in 1978 by *Blake's 7*, a tale of interstellar proportions, telling of the struggle against an all-powerful, all-embracing and utterly corrupt Federation by a small group of freedom fighters. *Blake's 7*, like *Survivors* before it, deals with man's struggle for survival. *Blake's 7* is a classic example of mature, well-rounded British science-fiction. Just over a week before *Survivors* first went on the air, in the chilling Terry Nation *Dr Who* story *Genesis of the Daleks*, we hear the Doctor say to Davros, the creator of those fiendish automatons:

"Davros, if you had created a virus in your laboratory, something contagious and infectious, that killed on contact, a virus that would destroy all other forms of life, would you allow its use?"

Terry Nation first took his idea for the series to Andy Osborne, who was BBC Head of Series, in late 1973. "I was talking with the BBC about coming up with an idea for a series, and this was something that I had wanted to do for quite a long time. Andy was a great enthusiast about everything. I told him the outline of the story and he told me it was fine and that I was to go ahead and do it. I was able to go away and mount the show. I had already written my first four stories, and I was also trying to find some other good writers who felt the same way as I did about the idea. It was an important show, and had a lot of important things to say."

In the April 10th 1975 edition of *The Radio Times*, Nation eloquently sets out his ideas and underlying philosophy for his new series. He uses the example of a piece of wood carved in the shape of a chicken. "Who cut the tree? Who made the steel to create the saw to cut it down? Who dug the coal to feed the furnaces to make the steel? Who dug the iron ore out of the ground?" Again quoting from the same edition of *The Radio Times*: "It is only since I started work on this new series that I have realised my writing has previously been dominated by the business of survival: the people in those other series (e.g. *The Saint*, *The Baron* and *Doctor Who*) survived because of their extreme cleverness, wit or ability." From its very inception Nation never considered *Survivors* to be science-fiction which conjures up the idea of remote fantasy. Referring to a recent report in *The Sunday Times* newspaper, he reminds us of how a deadly virus had slipped into the country, and that over 200 people had been in touch with a man who had died in London a fortnight earlier from what was thought to be Lassa fever - a very rare and deadly virus.

At the time he and his wife Kate were living in their Kent manor house, surrounded by 36 acres of land. He did in fact grow his own potatoes and his wife Kate baked their own bread. Nevertheless, he readily admits that they bought the yeast and were unable to cultivate it, and at the same time relied on oil central heating and that they would sorely miss their hi-fi system! "We're less practical than Iron-Age men", claims Nation forcefully. He was, and is, deeply concerned about the enormously complex interdependence of the modern world.

Speaking openly, Nation underlines his basic concerns: "*Survivors* is something that I had long wanted to do, in a way as a celebration of how little I knew. I had moved to a large house in the country and thought of being independent and self sufficient. Almost everything I touched I would think back to the axe-head, I suppose. I could use an axe-head but I did not know how to make one.

Then I began to think how reliant we are upon one another to make things. I knew virtually nothing, I did not have to invent anything because it had all been invented but I still did not know how to do it and I still do not know! And that was the thing that, as it were, I wanted to bring home throughout the nature of the series.

It frightens me to some extent, I think, our growing reliance on computers; that's something that takes us even further away from being independent and being able to make things, to be able to do things with our hands."

Terry' Nation has for many years lived in the United States and finds the divorce of mankind from nature even more striking there than in Britain: "I fear for these trends. When we first came to the United States, we rented one of those super modern houses that had everything done for you on an electrical relay. I could lie there until about six in the morning and wake up and I could hear the house come to life, I could hear the garden watering switch on, I could hear all the things that it did automatically. I thought to myself that there is a jugular vein called an electrical cable; cut that and the house is dead. I feel that really about the world too; there is a jugular cable somewhere and if it is cut we are going to be in deep trouble."

In the late 1980's Terry' Nation came very close to resurrecting *Survivors* in the United States. "I had an idea that I would love to do it here and I think it could be done on a splendid scale. You could make it like the old covered wagon, learning about the disaster in the north east and have an Abby figure who wanted to find her son who was in California. She would come right across America and it would be fascinating to do. There was a lot of interest shown in the idea, but with the coming of the Aids virus it was thought to be a little too close to home for comfort."

Survivors was for its time unusual in having a strong woman as the lead. Abby Grant, played by Carolyn Seymour, is a middle-class housewife who by default almost becomes the leader of a small group of survivors. Her previous role as a well-to-do housewife contrasts superbly with her new role as leader. Carolyn Seymour was in fact Britain's highest paid actress at the time. "I remember one scene where she is driving around her small wealthy village, and there's nothing to be seen but cars left on the roadside, and the people she had known are sitting inside them dead. Eventually she goes to the village church and finds a small group of people huddled together in the nave, all dead. She leaves the church, stares up at the heavens and exclaims 'Dear God, don't let me be the only one!' Although she starts out as a rich, spoiled lady living in luxury, she must become strong soon. Finding her husband dead, she takes a cold shower, crops her hair, burns down the house with her husband inside and sets off in search of her son Peter who was at boarding school. She believes that if she could have survived the Death then genetically he too may have been able to survive it."

Is it true however that Nation was not a great fan of Carolyn Seymour? "I didn't really see eye to eye with her. I think it was in the initial episode, *The Fourth Horseman*, I had a very symbolic act of her searing off her hair. On several occasions she said that she wouldn't do that but I insisted, and that is when she and I became not the best of friends." [Ed. note: Carolyn denies this story].

Terry' Nation is very glad that interest in *Survivors* and its message has lasted into the nineties: "I'm delighted to learn that after so many years there is still a lot of interest in *Survivors*. You know, I never really wrote message pictures, but this one did have a sort of message and I'm glad that people realise that there was something more to it than just entertainment. Unfortunately, the BBC of today want only happiness in a world full of misery. I'm not surprised they don't want to do *Survivors* again. The BBC were really very good in those days, and Andy Osborne kept telling me to make it big and to spread my wings on *Survivors*."

In 1976 Terry' Nation published a novelisation of the series, which followed the TV version very closely up till *Garland's War*. Thereafter the two parted company drastically, following Terry Nation's own vision of how *Survivors* should evolve, a vision totally at odds with that of the producer, Terry Dudley. But which came first, the book or the series? "It was a sort of chicken and egg situation. I remember that I signed a contract to do the book the same day that I signed a contract to do the series. So I think it's probably fair to say that the two things came together, but I can't honestly remember all of the details. What I wanted to do, in the huge scale of things, was to see them cross the channel back into Europe, and to get away from the terrible northern winters they would start to work their way south to the Nile Valley, since they would have to work ever harder to survive in the English climate. They would in fact have to work all summer to have enough to eat when winter came. Abby realised that the only sure way to survive was to return to the warmer climate in the Nile Valley. In essence they would have become a Mediterranean people once more. They would have to cross the English Channel to France, and then cross the Mediterranean, but the scale of such a trek was

just too big for television. In the novel they actually started out on this gigantic trek." The novel ends with Abby being shot and killed by her son Peter. "It was always intended, almost in a huge operatic form, that Peter, the boy she had looked for for so long, should destroy his mother. It would have been an awful thing for him to live on with."

Nation felt that the choice of producer for Survivors, Terry Dudley, did much to harm the series' development:

The producer I got for Survivors was as thick as a board and I haven't really got a kind word to say of him. Although he's dead, I do not mourn his death in any way for what he did to that series. I didn't like the man and I don't think he was intelligent enough to know the full strength of the idea. Certainly, he didn't deliver for me as a producer. Already by about the third episode he wanted to switch the electricity back on. It seemed to me that his main concern, for no good reason, was to get the lights back on. But why, there was nobody there to use them anyway! He just did not think it through and never saw things clearly. I remember when he, Clive Exton and myself met at my home in Kent to discuss the concept before going into production, that we had disagreements over The Fourth Horseman.

There is a scene in this when Abby

meets Dr. Bronson in Peter's school. He tells of radio transmissions petering out one by one. Terry Dudley thought it laughable that the BBC would not still be broadcasting! In the end I got exhausted at the constant fighting. I felt that I had lost and didn't have the energy to fight tooth and nail for everything and so I left. I was greatly disappointed by the way the series went."

Terry Nation wrote seven episodes for Survivors, all in the first and many would say, the best series.

There can be no doubt that in Survivors, Nation has left us one of the most mature and thought provoking drama series ever made by the BBC.

**N.B. Terry Nation passed away in the USA a couple of years following this interview.
B.M.**