Tristan de Vere Cole (Director).

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Tristan de Vere Cole worked on series three, and directed three episodes, including Mad Dog, a dramatic story which achieved some notoriety at the time for its depiction of rabies.

How did Tristan embark upon his career as a television director? "I was in the Royal Navy from the age of sixteen until twenty five. when I left I managed to get a job as an assistant stage manager and understudy, with a touring jazz review called Here is the News. This was directed by John Bird with a fair number of Johnny Dankworth[1]s band on stage. Amongst a very varied cast were Cleo Laine, Sheila Hancock (understudy to Phillida Law - Emma Thompson's mother), Dickie Goulden and Lance Percival. I then went to the Bristol Old Vic as an A.S.M. and bit player. I was in a pantomime there with Leonard Rossiter and Jessie Mathews - both were brilliant and a joy to work with. I soon realised that if I wanted to direct in the theatre I would either have had to have been a 'whiz-kid' at Cambridge or Oxford, which I wasn't, or else I should soldier on as an actor and possibly at the age of forty be given a chance. Somebody suggested that I think about television as an alternative. A friend of mine was still in the navy, at the Admiralty, and I got him to look up a file on a certain captain who ran Associated Rediffusion. I had heard that he was unpopular in the navy but ran the television company well, albeit on Naval terms. So, having got the details of him I used Bristol Old Vic note paper to write a letter and obtained an interview and started work as an A.S.M. at Rediffusion. I soon became an Assistant Floor Manager and worked on everything from Drama, to This Week, racing, Double your Money etc. A good general grounding. when BBC2 started in 1963, I joined as a Production Assistant in Drama, now known as a Production Managed First Assistant. I was fortunate enough to work with Jimmy Cellan Jones and Michael Barry, who had been the head of plays and had then come back to direct The Heart of Midlothian. They both gave me good reports, so I was put on the directors' course. Those at the course were a mix of aspiring directorial talent like Michael Bogdanov, and those who were at the top of their tree, like Alan Jeaps, a brilliant graphics designer. He did graphics for Secret Army and Eastenders. He also did the logo for BBC 2 which was a simple number 2.

"I actually started directing in 1966.1 went to Birmingham first on a series called United, and was very lucky to get Kennilworth in 1967. This was a classic serial which got excellent reviews. I thought that I was really on my way. However, I soon found myself allocated to Z Can, Dr Who and the like. I did a Dr. Who story called The Wheel in Space, written by Kit Pedler, produced by Innes Lloyd and starring Patrick Troughton as the Doctor. This was a very good story and got the best ratings on Dr Who for quite some time. There were a number of us who were production assistants, working as acting directors and we got wind that they were going to put us back as we were, so some of us decided to go freelance. This I did in 1972, my first freelance job being to 'kick-off' the opening episodes of Emmerdale Farm."

Would Tristan agree that starting out in television in the 1960's was perhaps easier than it is today? "Absolutely. Back in the 1950's, the Drama Producer and Director were one person. You didn't have financial Assistants, Story Editors and so on. Basically, they either instigated, or were given a project with a budget and were told to go off and do it. When I appeared, you had a producer and they were just starting to bring in script editors. In television drama it is generally accepted that the script is the most important item. The priorities being: Script, casting and production. If you have a good script, and it is well cast, then the production should be comparatively easy. And this is nearly always the case, even though a good cast and production can gloss over a bad script; more often the product is unsatisfactory. The producer on a long-running series is more important than the producer of, say, The Wednesday Play, because that was a one~off. Nowadays the producers have an associate producer, who looks after the money, and in recent times the latter also has a finance assistant and of course script editors too and it has now blown out of all proportion. All this means that it is now far more difficult to get new ideas off the ground. Everything revolves round money and viewing figures with: 'too many cooks'... I look back on my early days as a director with pleasure and gratitude."

How did Tristan become involved in Survivors? "I honestly can't remember how or why Terry Dudley invited me to join the team. I seem to recall that I met Terry in the East Tower at Television Centre, and he didn't outline, as you might expect, the format of the series and the way it was to go. I was just told how long I would have to do the episodes and if I thought I couldn't work within the time restrictions and budget, then I should say so and not do it. But he didn't speak about the scripts or story-lines."

Tristan's first story for Survivors was Mad Dog, one of the high-lights of the entire series. "As a director, the first thing you get is the script. I immediately saw that it was good. This would have been the draft script, i.e. as supplied by the writer, but without the camera directions etc. You make notes about what

you think could be improved, what you can't understand and so on, and then sit down with the producer and hopefully the writer, to thrash out a rehearsal script. I
actually started my Survivors contract on December 6th, 1976, and it ran till May 23rd, 1977, to do a total of three episodes. On December 8th to 10th, I went to stay at the Isaac Walton Hotel at 11am in Derbyshire. On December 18th I went to see Don Shaw, the writer, who at that time lived in Etwall, Derbyshire. In those days the P.A., Gordon Elsbury in this case, would be the location finder as well as the production manager. Nowadays you would have a location manager who would do nothing but find the locations. Gordon, who died quite recently, was a successful producer, came from Derbyshire and, acting on a suggestion from his father, he told me that I ought to come and see Monsal Dale. Granada had done a very successful series called Country Matters with H.E. Bates and we later discovered that The Watercress Girl, with Susan Fleetwood in her first big part on television, was shot in Monsal Dale.

"In those days the O.B. unit was in fashion. We had two cameras on long umbilical cords. Planning in those days was like organising a battle field; particularly in Studio Productions with 5 or 6 cameras and 3 Sound Boom Platforms, how you could move camera 1 to position c without crossing cables and so on. You don't have to do nearly so much planning these days. We had five days to shoot an episode, so we had to get ten minutes a day. It was planned so that when there was a dialogue scene both cameras were working together but if it was a landscape scene you would leap-frog, so that while you were shooting with one camera the other camera was moved across to the next location. It was indeed like a military operation. Sometimes things changed, a camera went down for example, so you had to change the sequence, but if it was planned properly it would be fine.

"Having put the episode together, Shaun Sutton, Head of Department, said that although the episode was excellent, we simply couldn't put this out at that time with all the frothing, horrifying scenes with Maurice Perry. So I had to go and cut some of the best horrific bits. Nowadays they would probably have been accepted.

"I then had to go back to Monsal Dale on March 12th to 13th, to re-shoot. The main problem here was the weather. I have always been known as someone who will deliver on time and on budget, but at times we had to wait for a half an hour or even more for the equipment to thaw out. Also, because of the cuts that Shaun Sutton had asked me to make, I had to fill in for those lost shots. So it was a re-mount primarily for what went wrong weather-wise and to make up for the cuts.

"I remember that we arrived at this hotel, The New Inn, at Alsop en la Dale, which was a place of real character and perfect for a location. Bernard Kay, who was playing one of the leads, had sadly lost his wife just the day before and I remember telling him that he didn't need to come up to the location and that we could find a way of working round it, but he insisted. I was very keen on backgammon and so was he and we played quite long into the night, which I hope helped him. Stephen Bill, who played the slightly loony boy in Mad Dog, is a top writer these days, writing not only for TV but for film. He is also a cracking actor. The fireman was played by Robert Pugh; I had seen him at a theatre school and thought he had great potential. The Survivors part was his first for TV. He has done well and taken up writing too. When I look back over nearly thirty years of directing, Mad Dog would be in my top ten."

What has Tristan got to say about the experimental O.B. cameras that were used in Survivors? 'They weren't really experimental as they had been used before, but you had to be prepared for a breakdown. They weren't 100 % reliable. We had a third camera on standby. Everybody in the business, actors and directors, would prefer to work with film. You get a better quality picture. The television cameras, particularly in those days, would, for example, go hot white if you were shooting into the sky. Colours were reflected much more strongly. if you're wearing a red shirt, for example, it reflects a lot. You're not so aware of this on film, but because red 'vibrates' on video you are aware of it not being so sophisticated as film. Many directors, myself included, would put a stocking over the camera to degrade the picture somewhat.

"On film you also have more control over the editing and laying sound. Video is cheaper because, amongst other things, you don't have to go through the grading process or the negative cutting. The director, once he had got everything on video, would take the cassettes with a time code home, would sit down with the script and would take the best takes. If you'd done four takes of something you might think that the shot was best on take one, the performance was better on take three, for the master take you might use take two and you tried to check that the continuity between them all worked. On an all video programme like Survivors, the director would have the tapes at home and half of your job in TV, as opposed to a feature film, would be to fit a time slot. With the time code you can do it from home, working through and selecting the timing for each scene. The video editor would mainly be there as an assembling technician. He could throw in his own ideas and suggestions, but you didn't really have much time for that as you only had two days to do the editing. A film editor on the other hand would be much more flexible under less time pressure and would be able to contribute much more than on video.

'The cameramen were very good indeed. They tried very hard and there was no moaning. I had especially asked for Hugh Cartwright to be the lighting man. I was so relieved when he accepted. He had just finished The Mayor Of Casterbridge and he had worked on Z Cars with me. He always wanted to use a natural light source with a minimum of artificial lights as back up. This meant that the engineers sometimes complained that the picture was too "noisy" ie. grainy. But Hugh and I both overrode them. You are so dependant on your crew. We had an excellent Sound Man in Ian Lieper - a great sense of humour and not afraid to use radio mikes - and the designer Geoff Powell who is perhaps best known for his fine work on Alan Bennett's The Insurance Man."

Tristan's second story was Roger Parkes' Sparks. 'This story was good, but not nearly so exciting as Mad Dog. I was living in Wiltshire at the time, and I knew that for this story we would require a derelict old church. We found a church on Salisbury Plain in a village called Imber. The village was no longer lived in, having being given over to the army, but was a good location. The army said we could shoot there and we liaised with them. It is a dear little church which is used just once a year to keep it consecrated. On the first day of shooting all hell let loose as somebody down the line hadn't told the army we were there. We also had to have a timber yard for the story, and I knew of one nearby. I must confess that Imber had the added attraction for me of being only twenty miles away from where I lived. I had just moved into my home, where I had 6 acres of land. I discovered that I had some beehives on the periphery of the land in a belt of trees. The people in the village told me that they were Inspector Smith's bees, so I left a note saying that he was welcome to keep his bees there and that I looked forward to a pot of honey now and then. Bob Smith became a great chum, and it turned out that he had been the P.C. allocated to look after my mother when she was on a charge of attempted murder at Salisbury Assizes in 1955.1 remember her saying that he was kind and considerate. Anyway he provided the beehives which John Bennett kept in the churchyard for the episode.

"Half the fun of shooting is if you get a good cast who you enjoy working with. John Bennett had worked with me before and I immediately thought of him. John White, who is dead now, had worked with me a number of times. I had also worked with Linda Polan and Gabrielle Hamilton."

Does Tristan enjoy working with actors? "I love working with them. Actors are incredibly disciplined and patient. Both on film and video, they'd be asked to do the same shot, not just four to six times from one angle, but if you're doing dialogue you'd maybe do four different angles! Sometimes there would be problems and you'd have to do the takes again, but never do you hear them complain. Indeed, you had to treat the technicians far more carefully than the actors! Generally speaking, actors are as good as gold. As the director, you should be able to accommodate the overall view, taking account of the views and experience of both actors and crew."

Tristan's final story for Survivors was Long Live the King by Martin Worth. "This episode was shot at Piddlehinton Army Camp, indeed the foot-scrapers outside my front door come from this camp! John Comer, who is now dead, and Ray Mort had both worked with me before and made a strong double act. On their day off these two great northern characters went into Dorchester and found themselves in a middle-aged women's dancing class! They both joined in and they came back with stories of who they had picked up and so on! Sean Matthias has won some awards with his writing. I think he was actually writing his first play at that point. And recently Sean has become an award winning theatre Director. Roy Marsden was very good and Frank Vincent played Roy's side-kick. We had some very good scenes with them and Gabrielle Day, when they broke into her house and threatened her. Once again, I didn't particularly dislike the story, but when you compare it with Mad Dog, it was a difficult act to follow."

Does Tristan believe that made in the 1990's, a new series of Survivors would be expensive to produce? 'The public today expects to see a polished, slick product. In the old days, when TV was relatively new and shows were live, people didn't compare it with films. In an age when you can flip from one channel to another things have to be much more sophisticated."

Does Tristan believe that there is a place for a series like Survivors today?" At the time the cold war was still on but the tension and threat have now receded. Dr. Who, Balks 7 and Survivors were all successful in their day, but I don't think that they will ever be re-made.

"Maybe the germ of the idea for Survivors could be reworked in a different format. The dangers are very real. The Dustin Hoffman film Outbreak with its frightening Ebola virus, based on the story of a new strain of deadly virus which emerged from a monkey at an army base in Virginia is a frightening parallel. The true story of the death of the Australian Vice Rail and 14 of his prize racehorses from a mystery virus, caused the Australian government to impose a Cat III alert -the highest there is - to deal with an outbreak of an infectious disease. The virus appears to have burnt itself out - but for how long?"