

# EITHNE POWER GETS ON THE TRAIL OF THE NEW AVENGER

THE first time I met Gareth Hunt was outside a house in Hammersmith, London, where *The New Avengers* crew were working on location, doing exterior shots of what's supposed to be the basement flat of the pugnacious Purdey.

He tried to pretend that he was delighted that I'd finally caught up with him after a day trailing him from location to location, but his eyes gave him away. He looked trapped.

My sympathies were with him, but I had a job to do. Not even the consummate skills of arch-Avenger John Steed could get him out of his present predicament.

Figure it out for yourself. There he is one minute, doing very nicely as Frederick, footman to *Upstairs, Downstairs'* Captain Bellamy (Simon Williams). The next, he's joining the National Theatre to play Rosencrantz in *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead* to nice, well-bred murmurs of praise. And all this time no one is the least bit interested in what he ate for breakfast, or whether he ate any breakfast at all.

But now, since becoming Mike Gambit, hit man of *The New Avengers*, his preference for kippers over scrambled eggs is a matter of major concern.

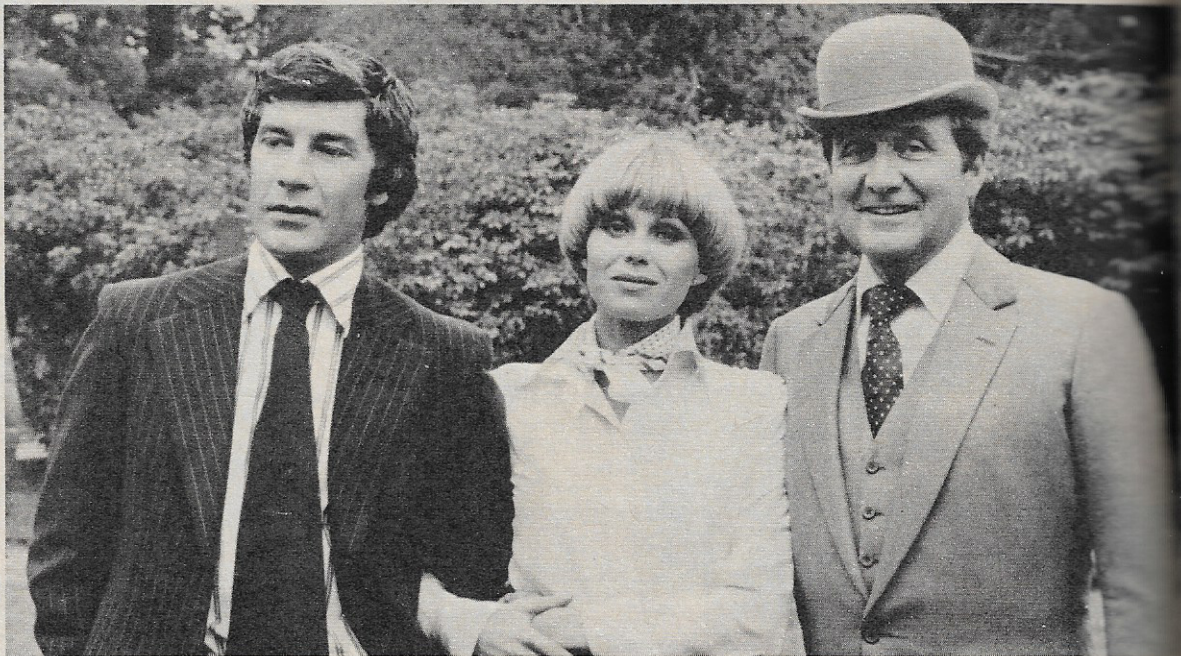
## Journalists just want to peer down your knickers

And he doesn't like it one bit. "I heard someone went and hunted out my old woodwork teacher the other day," he said gloomily. "Luckily, we always got on. Journalists—they just want to peer down your knickers."

He sighed, summoned his ebbing strength and decided to take evasive action. "Let's walk," he said.

With that, he broke into a light gallop and I was only saved from respiratory failure by rain and an invitation from a stranger in a blue woolly to come inside the Hammersmith house. Obviously the occupier, he took us into a book-lined study, said he'd just get on with his carpentry, smiled and withdrew.

"He's a judge, you know," said Gareth Hunt, apropos of nothing, but before I could digest this surprising piece of information a cheerful-looking lady bustled in and asked if we'd mind going down to the



Above: Gareth Hunt, Joanna Lumley and Patrick McNeen

## Right: Decorating really can be quite a relief after karate

kitchen. This Irish cleaning lady was coming to be interviewed and since it wasn't quite so chaotic here as downstairs . . . We moved.

Downstairs, we waded through what looked like a few hundred pairs of little Wellingtons and took refuge at the kitchen table where a flaxen-haired four-year-old was devouring a large plate of macaroni cheese. A huge cat jumped on to Gareth Hunt's lap, and a second four-year-old plonked himself down beside me. "Twins," said the *au pair*, rolling her eyes and, with a kind of smothered shriek, "there are three more upstairs."

This was all up Gareth Hunt's street. No one in their sane senses could expect a man to bare his soul in the middle of such a *mêlée*. Especially as, at that moment, the sound of small molars munching macaroni was drowned out by the busy whirr of the judge's Black and Decker in the back scullery.

So we made an appointment for the next week, and he gave me the kind of handshake you give to someone in failing health who's going to Australia on a one-way ticket.

When we met at Pinewood, in the middle of a gruelling six-day



week, he looked every minute of his thirty-two years. I offered him lunch and he accepted glumly. He was wearing a smart beige bomber jacket with matching trousers ("My sewer suit. Mike Gambit spends quite a bit of time down the sewers in the episode we're on."), a lot of make-up and the expression of a man who's expecting to be taken away in a closed car at any moment. He jumped ship once in New Zealand when he was in the merchant navy, was

duly put inside, and perhaps the experience has left its mark.

For nostalgic types who yearn for the era of the strong silent man, Gareth Hunt is the answer. He dug into his salad like someone who'd been eating baked beans on an oil rig for months and admitted, when pressed, that he's an only child, that he never knew his father because he was killed in the war, that he's had two stepfathers, and a wife and eight-year-old son from whom he's now separated, and





**Left: The Coronation Street-type kitchen in his Victorian house**

this rôle he'd bought himself a "very grotty" Victorian terrace house in Putney and you get the distinct feeling he'd much rather be ripping down walls (with his teeth if necessary) than talking about himself. "So much to do," he muttered.

Neither is he importing any precious interior decorator to pretty things up for him. He's a Victorian man, pure and simple; an avid collector of pure brass locks and iron brackets. He even *looks* Victorian, built as he is on noble lines, and unfashionable sentiments to go with it.

"Say what you like about *The New Avengers*, but admit that it's a great showpiece for British products abroad—exactly what we need at the moment. I hate to see this country going down the drain. I'm one of those patriotic fools who would probably be the first out of the trenches and over the top if it came to it, which I sincerely hope it won't, of course. All for King and Country." He laughed morosely.

He had his first brush with death when he was seventeen and a storm blew up in the Bay of Biscay. "I was sure we'd had it, I couldn't see a way out, I was terrified. Like anyone else in that situation—whatever they profess to believe—I prayed. And I thought of my mother and swore to write home more often if I survived. Once you've come that close to the other side you're never quite the same again. It tends to make you think a bit more, hopefully to some effect."

Gareth Hunt has the kind of calm of a man living at the foot of a volcano, and for the same kind of reason. "As a firm follower of Nostradamus, I believe the world has nearly run its course—please don't let me put you off the pudding, it won't be quite that soon. Nostradamus has been right about practically everything so far, and I've no reason to doubt him when he says we've got two more Popes to go and that's our lot."

### The future is worth worrying about

Some Popes being notoriously long-lived, he obviously feels it's worthwhile worrying about the future.

"I'm not bothered about my son: like me he's an Aquarian, he'll be all right.

"But, if I ever made a lot of money, I wouldn't lash out on yachts and villas and things. I'd invest it properly.

"I'd happily spend it all on trying to find out where talent lies and developing it from there. Everyone is good at something—

we should be looking in the schools now for our doctors, engineers, mathematicians and actors of the future, not just sitting round hoping it'll be all right on the night."

Gareth Hunt was told by his school careers officer: "Hunt, you're quite tall—you'll make a good policeman . . . Next!" Which may account for his late start as an actor. He was twenty-eight when he left the merchant navy and embarked on what can only be called a varied career. He took a BBC design course, dug up roads and went door-to-door selling.

After that, there was the usual trudge round rep., then *The Royal Court*, *The Royal Shakespeare* and, in 1976, the *National*.

Now, after seven months hard slog with *The New Avengers* he's dog tired, fit as a fiddle, glad to get home to his still bare boards and curtainless windows, where slapping up paper can be quite a relief after karate.

### Not even time to call the plumber

"Originally, I'd intended to go through the house like a forest fire and do everything myself, but that's impossible—there just isn't the time. Even getting to the phone to ring the plumber can be tricky. Joanna and I have decided that before the next series we'll get a secretary between us." Joanna is Joanna Lumley who plays Purdey.

Cooking he leaves to his girlfriend, Carrie, who produces gourmet meals in his Coronation Street-type kitchen. "When she goes away she leaves quiches and stuff in the fridge—she knows I wouldn't bother with anything more than take-away pies."

Not at all like the home life of Steed's sophisticated sidekick, Mike Gambit, whose upper-class background is implied rather than stated.

"We're a nicely balanced trio, Patrick, Jo and me. Patrick is the wise one, takes everything in his stride; you feel there's nothing much he hasn't figured out, he's *mellow*. I'd like to feel I'd be like that at some stage.

"Joanna? Well, of course, she's lovely—and nice with it. I mean one doesn't expect a girl with her sense of humour to have looks as well.

"And Gambit? Well, he's a right bastard, isn't he? But he isn't just a door-kicking, karate-chopping sex maniac. I hope I've made him more subtle.

"Most of all, I hope Mike Gambit entertains.

"I had a note from Albert Finney recently. He finished it: 'Love to those who laugh.' My mother would go along with that."

no—he doesn't want to talk about them. But, yes—you guessed it, Errol Flynn was his boyhood hero.

"My mother was a great film fan. Every Monday afternoon she'd make a packet of sandwiches, collect me from school, and we'd go to the pictures. She really knew how to enjoy herself—once we were asked by the management to leave, she was laughing so loudly. She's a great laugher, my mother. These days, whenever I'm playing

comedy, I beg her not to come and see me; I'm afraid she'll break into that laugh and it'll put me right off.

"I'm a great fan myself. I get more of a kick meeting people like Roger Moore here at Pinewood (currently making his latest Bond film, *The Spy Who Loved Me*) than being asked for my autograph and stuff like that."

He sighed heavily and kneaded his large workmanlike hands together. Just before he landed