

## **Science Fiction Britannia**

# The Cult... of *Survivors*



From top to bottom: Lucy Fleming; Carolyn Seymour; Ian McCulloch; Pennant Roberts and Martin Worth

Broadcast as part of BBC4's heavily-promoted *Science Fiction Britannia* series, the **Cult of... *Survivors*** (initial TX 20:30, 5 December 2006, BBC4) provided an energetic and fast-moving (if frustratingly incomplete) appreciation of the finest post-apocalyptic serial ever broadcast by the BBC. Despite suffering from the kinds of deficiencies which can't help but irritate anyone with more than a cursory awareness of the programme, the **Cult of... *Survivors*** provided an effective (and often affectionate) introduction to Terry Nation's groundbreaking drama. *Survivors'* inclusion in what must be said was a fairly eclectic shortlist of six 'cult' BBC shows also indicates that the reputation of what has long been an overlooked and undervalued show continues to be rehabilitated.

Within the significant constraints of both 26-minute running-time and a very restricted budget, the documentary was able to evoke a credible sense of the political and social context in which *Survivors* was created; the topicality and relevance of its core themes; and of the creative antecedents for its small-screen post-apocalyptic preoccupations. The programme also took time to reflect (if all too briefly) on several of the key themes and critical turning point in the history of the show's evolution: its guiding motifs and assumptions; the decisively important relationship between producer Terence Dudley and originator Nation; the skilfully matched characterisation of the three series one leads; and the dramatic mettle of some classic first series episodes – including, most prominently, **The Fourth Horseman** and **Law and Order**.

Ultimately, however, a retrospective TV documentary of this type has to be judged on the quality of the interviews it secures with a programme's creative alumni. In this, the **Cult of... *Survivors*** excels to such an extent that it's easy to forgive the occasional wince-inducing moments in the material that surrounds the lucid testimony of cast and crew. The producers bring together actors Lucy Fleming (Jenny) Ian McCulloch (Greg) and Carolyn Seymour (Abby); director Pennant Roberts and scriptwriter Martin Worth, each of whom offer insightful recollections on their own contributions to the success of the programme.

A stalwart *Survivors* enthusiast, the ever-reliable Roberts provides the clear and entertaining production history around which the memories of the cast's time in front of the camera can colourfully intertwine. Fleming comes over as warm, fluent and considered in her defence of the programme's appeal. Seymour also acquits herself particularly well, demonstrating that the passage of 30 years has done little to dampen the resiliently feisty and self-assured aspects of her personality. At the same time her revelations about the private demons she was wrestling with at the point where producer Dudley dropped her from the show were remarkably honest and open – acknowledging uncomfortable truths for this first time on camera. She concedes that her struggles with alcohol could only have weighed heavily in Dudley's decision making about her fate, reinforcing other issues and personality clashes. McCulloch comes across as more gruffly guarded, and while his perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the show are well known, his remained a weighty if sometimes tendentious contribution.

All interviewees – quite properly for a documentary of this type – cover what for most aficionados of the show will be quite familiar territory, but there are some surprisingly fresh revelations and anecdotes revealed along the way: Seymour's evocative anecdote of the exploding rabbit carcasses in the props van was, to my knowledge, entirely new to the public domain.

The 'talking heads' are intertwined with an interesting selection of extracts from the BBC archives (including **Take Three Girls** (Seymour, pre-*Survivors*), **Colditz** (McCulloch, pre-*Survivors*) and **Cold Warrior** (Fleming, post-*Survivors*) and the participants' comments and recollections

# An effective introduction to Terry Nation's ground-breaking drama

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are richly illustrated with an intelligent selection of what for the new and returning viewer are (hopefully) tantalising extracts from *Survivors* itself. The most unexpected, and highly welcome, inclusion from the archives was a never-seen-since-transmission BBC1 trailer for **Starvation** from June 1975.

What was refreshing in the documentary's approach was the willingness to take seriously the breadth and depth of *Survivors'* dramatic acumen. The decision to have so strong and determined a female character as Abby Grant as the driving force of the first series is rightly heralded as an innovative break with TV norms of the era. The efforts by *Survivors'* scriptwriters to explore the politics of self-sufficiency and communal living; to examine the tensions between morality and the imperatives of brute survival; and to try to ground their storytelling in all-too-believable 'what if' situations – all these were acknowledged as strengths of the series.

Although all of the documentaries in the **Cult of...** series share a tone that producers like to think is 'irreverent' but which is actually frequently irritating (not to say formulaic), there's little point complaining about the frequent 'isn't old TV funny, eh viewers?' asides delivered through the voiceover narration. Such irks simply have to be swallowed as one of the necessary costs of having the programme in the first place. Equally, it was almost inevitable that overdrawn comparisons with **The Good Life** would find their way into the programme (shared Volvo and all); and far from surprising that the director thought it worth drawing particular attention to the risible scenes with the dog pack from *Starvation*. Each of these offered easy laughs at the programme's expense. Tiresome and predictable stuff perhaps, but relatively painless.

Other shortcomings in the **Cult of... Survivors** were, however, more difficult to accept.

It was likely that the documentary would focus – by omission rather than by intention – on series one, but of the long list of absentees from the interviewee chair, Denis Lill's exclusion is little short of inexcusable. Lill's leading role in series two and three is absolutely definitional to the show, and his absence is acutely felt. What skews the post-series one coverage all the more is the decision to allow the frame of reference for the discussion of series two to be set by its most consistent critic (McCulloch himself); even while series two scriptwriter Worth's always thoughtful perspectives on the Whitecross era have apparently gone unrecorded. Series three, meanwhile, is effectively dismissed as little more than a coda to events (something that Lill and Worth would have immediately challenged, given the opportunity – as would scriptwriter Don Shaw or director Tristan de Vere Cole).

Given *SFX*'s almost total indifference to any pre-2000 TV series (except *Doctor Who*, naturally) in recent years, it's also hard to accept the magazine's News Editor Steve O'Brien as an 'independent expert' on *Survivors* or on any other of the cult shows under scrutiny. [The magazine had no interest, for example, in interviewing an almost identical line-up of *Survivors* personnel assembled for the series one DVD studio day in June 2003 – an insufficiently 'newsworthy' occasion perhaps?]. O'Brien introduces the well-worn theme of the apparent class snobbery of *Survivors*, but to his credit does go on to acknowledge that the programme's alleged failings in this respect were, if anything, a reflection of the social composition of the BBC itself in the 1970s rather than a cause. Fleming and Seymour both provide interesting thoughts on the issue, even if both actors have long since absorbed the 'common sense' of *Survivors'* class failings themselves – while the on-screen evidence from the programme itself suggests a more complex picture of the sociology of survival.

Yet if the contention that *Survivors* was overrun with regressive class-based stereotypes remains a simplistic, not to say myopic, theory, voicing such

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criticism is in many ways a perverse compliment: acknowledging that *Survivors* is a grown-up enough drama to be assessed against naturalistic real-world standards, rather than against those found in some fantasy-writer's rulebook. None of *Survivors*' **Cult of...** contemporaries (not even **Doomwatch**) was subject to same degree of scrutiny regarding their apparent political shortcomings.

The **Cult of... *Survivors*** unquestionably represented a remarkable televisual moment in the ongoing history of the show. Even a few years ago, the notion that some of the key talents involved in the creation of the programme would be back on BBC screens, more than thirty years on from the time of its original transmission, to reflect on the importance of *Survivors* and its continuing resonance, would have seemed inconceivable. Despite the disappointing decision not to accompany the documentary with a broadcast of a first series episode (as happened with both **Doomwatch** and **Adam Adamant Lives**), the **Cult of... *Survivors*** will doubtless have boosted sales of all three series of the programme now available on DVD, and is unlikely to have harmed discussions currently underway between the Nation estate and the BBC about a possible revival of the show. With all instalments of the **Cult of...** series repeated on BBC4 over the Xmas-New Year period, it's surely now time to schedule transmission on BBC2 to give all these productions the wider exposure they deserve. Please don't let BBC4 be the only one...

Rich Cross  
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