

SURVIVORS



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FORTY-FIVE YEARS ON FROM THE FIRST EPISODE, TERRY NATION'S ***SURVIVORS*** HAS MORE RELEVANCE THAN EVER. STARS CAROLYN SEYMOUR, IAN MCCULLOCH AND LUCY FLEMING TALK ABOUT THE POST-APOCALYPTIC THRILLER'S SURPRISE AFTERLIFE...

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# REUNITED

IN THE LIST OF TERRY NATION'S artistic triumphs, *Survivors* has always tended to come a poor third, after creating the Daleks and writing *Blake's 7*. Yet recently, for obvious reasons, *Survivors* is back on everybody's lips.

"You know, I've been thinking about it a lot," says Lucy Fleming, who played Jenny Richards in the series all those years ago. "And people have been mentioning it to me a lot, saying 'Does this ring a bell?'"

It was on 16 April 1975 that BBC One viewers witnessed the end of the world as they knew it. In *Survivors*' first episode, 'The Fourth Horseman', we see Home Counties England ravaged by a deadly plague, one lethal enough to even wipe out Peter Bowles. By the time the end credits rolled, 95% of the world's population had been decimated by the flu-like killer, setting the scene for a series that would, over the course of three seasons and 38 episodes, explore how that surviving 5% would rebuild society, a world now without running water, basic medicine or electricity. "Our civilisation had the technology to land a man on the moon," says Abby Grant in the show's second episode, "but as individuals we don't even have the skill to make an iron spearhead."

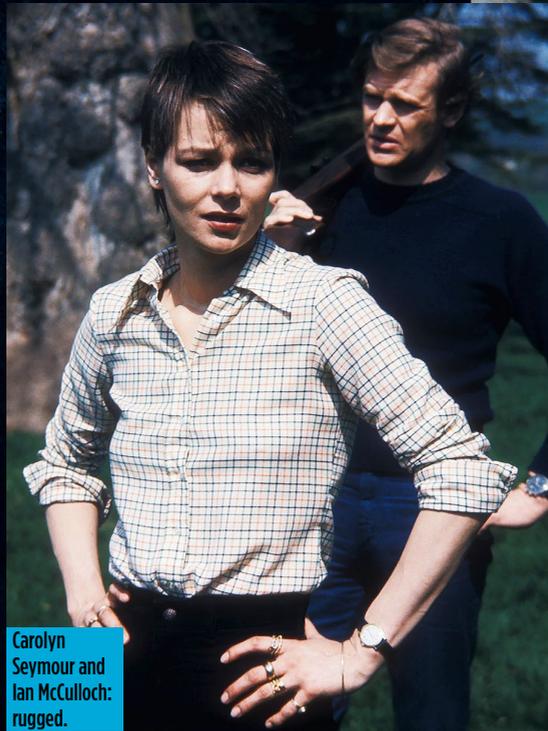
### NATION-AL TREASURE

Unlike most TV of the time, *Survivors* is commendably female-heavy in terms of characters. Greg Preston, the show's nominal male lead, doesn't even turn up until episode two. Instead, the driving force of those opening 13 episodes is Abby Grant, played by the then 28-year-old Carolyn Seymour.

"I had to audition a lot," Seymour tells *SFX*, on the phone from her house in France. "I went back two or three times, I think." She remembers clearly going for an intimidating meeting at the BBC surrounded by various bigwigs, but recalls one of them taking against her. "Terence Dudley did not like me," she says of the show's producer, an old-school BBC type who had previously worked as producer on *Doomwatch*. "He thought I was mouthy and uppity. He was *such* a snob. It was [director] Pennant Roberts who really fought for me."

Seymour wasn't the only person on the show who found herself butting heads with Dudley. That first series was to prove a fight for the soul of *Survivors* between its creator, Terry Nation, and its authoritarian producer, who was keen to reshape the series in his own image. "I fell out instantly with the producer," Nation would say, many years later. "He didn't see it at all."

"I asked Terry, 'What do you do when you've submitted your scripts?'" recalls Ian McCulloch, who played Greg Preston for much of the series' run. "He said, 'I've washed my hands of it because I know they're going to fuck it up. They're going to change it, they're



Carolyn Seymour and Ian McCulloch: rugged.

not going to want my opinion, and they don't care if I'm going to be upset!"

Nation would pen seven of that first season's episodes, a run that would establish Abby Grant, Jenny Richards and Greg Preston as *Survivors*' three leads. But the personality clashes between Terence Dudley and his primary star would soon bubble up, splintering that central trio.

"I did have a drinking problem," the 40-years-sober actress confesses. "The minute that we cut I was off and having a drink with the boys – and Terence Dudley, he didn't like that."

Before season two had begun filming, *Survivors* had lost both Terry Nation and Carolyn Seymour. For his part, Nation had been worn down by the near-constant scuffles with Dudley. Down to write four episodes of series two, Nation simply ignored Dudley's deadlines, leading the producer to pen a furious internal memo to his bosses, stating that, "In my judgement, Terry Nation can't give the programme the sort of scripts it needs at present."

But while Nation was too important for Dudley to fire, that wasn't the case with his leading lady. No fan of her character in the first place, Seymour's excessive drinking gave the producer an easy excuse to oust her.

"I had crossed the line with my drinking at that point," Seymour admits, "and I think Terence Dudley just thought, 'I'm not having that back, it's too much hassle.'"

"It was a surprise to me," says Lucy Fleming, of hearing that her co-star wouldn't be returning. "I was very naive about all the problems going on there."

"We were absolutely baffled," adds Ian McCulloch. "She's a great actress. I watched the first episode the other day, and she's absolutely perfect."

*Survivors*' second season would prove a recalibration of the series. Nation's concept for *Survivors* was always less about the specifics of



rebuilding society and more on the dramatic possibilities of a broken world. Dudley's version of the show, however, pulled it more in the direction of *Countryfile* than *Mad Max*.

"I think the problem was that Terry Nation's original idea was so good and so relevant," reflects Fleming, "and when Terry Dudley took over, he employed new scriptwriters and new directors. I think the scripts were okay, but I think that, particularly later on in the second and the third series, it goes a bit too cowboys and Indians."

"The quality of the scripts seemed to deteriorate, from my point of view," McCulloch agrees. "But you can't do anything about it because you signed a contract."

## “When Terry Dudley took over, he employed new scriptwriters and new directors”

Frustrated at the new Dudley-authored, agriculturally angled direction of the series and the parachuting in of a co-male lead played by Denis Lill, McCulloch eventually decided enough was enough.

"There was just too much concentration on something that I had no interest in, that I just thought was dull, that had no appeal to an audience," he says. "I wasn't really happy with the way it was going. I just said I didn't want to do season three."

McCulloch eventually agreed to appear in two third-season episodes, but the series seemed to flounder without his granite-like presence. "I didn't think that the series would



The farming community is friendly and welcoming.

survive without Greg," he says. "And I think it *did* kill the series off."

*Survivors*' final episode aired on 8 June 1977, with a note of hope, as electricity returns to the world for the first time since the pandemic hit. The series had come a long way since that first episode. Nation's grim, bleak post-apocalyptic thriller had become something warmer and more homespun. Both iterations of the series have their cheerleaders.

"I've met so many people who are still suffering from PTSD from watching the thing when they were kids," says Carolyn Seymour. "So many people were terrified absolutely witless by that show. I mean, that first series is really harsh."

"It was so popular," says Lucy Fleming. "Everybody, any taxi driver, anybody in a shop, had their own opinion about it. It was an exciting time, it really was."

Sometime after *Survivors* ended, Ian McCulloch relocated to a remote village in south-west Scotland, living what he calls "a very *Survivors*-like existence". It was there, in the mid-'90s, that he began working on an idea for a *Survivors* revival. Having secured Terry

Nation's blessing he cooked up a 20-years-later story about the UK being invaded by an African tribe. "It was going to be like colonisation in reverse," he tells us. "Did you see that *Noughts + Crosses* series? That was going to be the end situation, the world was going to be turned upside down."

Sadly for McCulloch, the response from the BBC was a flat no. "We don't want to do anything that's gone cold," they told him.

"So that was the end of that and I decided to give up and look after my cattle," he shrugs.

## NO SURVIVORS

Forty-plus years on from *Survivors*, its three stars remain fond of the series. "I find it very dated to watch but the idea is very prescient," says Seymour. "I think it parallels what's going on at the moment. It was really terrifying and you didn't think that it could happen. And now, of course, it's happened!"

Lucy Fleming, for her part, admits the DVDs are sitting on her shelf, but rarely come out. "When they do," she says, "there are some I simply don't remember making at all!"

Though the series has recently been made available via subscription-only service BritBox, for Ian McCulloch it's baffling that the broadcaster that made it hasn't chosen to repeat *Survivors*, or add it as a box set to the free-to-watch iPlayer.

"Despite all its faults, you know, it could be shown again," he suggests. "In fact, it would be so cheap now. Cheaper than one episode of *Downton Abbey* [actually an ITV production]. I don't know why they don't do it!"

*Survivors* is now streaming on BritBox. For information on Lucy Fleming, visit [postingletterstothemoon.com](http://postingletterstothemoon.com).

# SURVIVORS ON AUDIO

BIG FINISH'S DAVID RICHARDSON TALKS ABOUT HOW HE BROUGHT BACK THE SERIES

**How did the *Survivors* range come about, and what did you want to do with it?**

*Survivors* was a series that we all loved at Big Finish, and wanted to make on audio when the time was right. Thankfully the time came, and we got to make nine box sets that I'm hugely proud of. My intention was to revisit the '70s series and tell stories that ran in tandem with it - we were part of Terry Nation's original continuity. That's why our first episode told the outbreak with new characters, and they then went on to intersect and join up with the leads from the TV show. So when Jenny Richards wanders into the second episode, she's actually between scenes of episode two on TV. The big challenge at the start was that we couldn't track down Carolyn Seymour - I thought she was in LA, but it transpired she was in France. All of our first set had been written, but when we found her we then added a cameo, and then gave her a big role from the second box set onwards. I'd have hated doing *Survivors* without Abby Grant - to me, she's one of the most iconic TV characters of the '70s.

**How would you describe the range to someone who's only seen the TV show?**

*Survivors* changed on TV. Terry Nation moved on after the first series, and incoming writers took the show somewhere else. I think our dramas are pure Terry Nation. They're thrillers, they confront difficult issues, and they challenge the listener. I make no apologies for how dark our episodes are.

**Are there any more releases coming?**

At the moment, there are no more planned. I did think it would be nice to do one standalone final episode, and just make it really joyful. All about people helping each other, being kind, building a brighter tomorrow. I still like that idea, but I doubt it will happen.



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"Bad pint was it, mate? MATE? Oh bugger."