

360

A FEW WORDS ABOUT

MONTY BERMAN

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M O N T Y B E R M A N

Since he turned from production of theatrical movies to television filming, the series Monty Berman has made have totalled nearly 300 segments and well over 250 hours of screen time. If you sat back to watch everything he has produced for television alone (the mind boggles at the footage if you included the feature films), it would take almost eleven solid days and nights without a break - or, if you restricted yourself to an eight-hour viewing day, a complete month.

You would be seeing The Saint, Gideon's Way, The Baron, The Champions, Department S, My Partner the Ghost (the American title of Randall & Hopkirk, Deceased), Jason King and The Adventurer.

Monty Berman's productions have brought fame to many a star. To Roger Moore, for example. To Peter Wyngarde. And others. They have also given very early opportunities to many, many more who have since reached stardom, among them Julie Christie (who appeared in an early episode of The Saint), Donald Sutherland (quite unknown when cast for a role in The Champions), Francesca Annis, Sylvia Syms, Jennie Linden, Colin Blakely and Edward Woodward, to mention just a few.

Jean Marsh, Nicola Paget and Gordon Jackson were in his productions long before Upstairs, Downstairs attracted so much attention to them. Steve Forrest, Alexandra Bastedo, Gene Barry, John Gregson, Jeremy Brett and Sam Wanamaker are among the numerous stars to have been featured.

Monty Berman doesn't build stories around the stars, though.

"The story," he says, emphatically, "must always come first. Television can make a star, but a star will not lift a bad TV premise off the ground."

His philosophy is simple and straightforward: "Every penny spent on production should show on the screen. Overheads and non-productive money should be kept to the smallest possible level."

Unlike producers who spend all the time in the office, he is to be found on the studio floor for long periods throughout a production. It's much quicker to solve problems on the spot rather than being called for, and Monty Berman's decisions are sharp and to the point. A graduate from the photographic side of the business, he is very much of a practical "floor man".

The Baron was the first British film series to be made in color. Monty Berman took himself off to Hollywood for a couple of weeks to study the specialized requirements of television color filming and, returning to England, personally photographed the first two segments, with the cameraman who was to take over standing by his side.

This was one of his many visits to the United States. "When you are making films for international markets," he points out, "you have to study those markets. This doesn't mean only the tastes of viewers and new trends but the standards and practices of the networks and sponsors."

Because of this, his productions have spearheaded the success of British shows throughout the world. He

was one of the earliest of British producers to have his series on the American networks.

He is equally happy whether filming in his own country or abroad, in the studios or on location. He has taken his units all over Europe - to France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Eire and also to Cyprus and North Africa.

Monty Berman has one great advantage over many other producers. He is entirely independent. Although he has worked for many different production companies and in most of the British studios, he remains completely uncommitted to any company or studio for supplies and can make his own choice of equipment and crews. Which means that he uses only the best talent and materials available for the job. It is the production more than anything else that matters. Monty Berman loves films. He has never been tempted to turn to the theatre or even to television tape. The motion picture, whether in its completed form or its production technicalities, has always fascinated him.

He was a film fan in his youth. Getting into movies was the only thing he ever wanted to do. Not as an actor, but as a back-room boy. The pictorial aspect was particularly strong, and it was on the photographic side that he succeeded in entering the studios, starting as a junior camera assistant at the Twickenham Studios.

He became a fully-fledged cameraman, but World War II had broken out. Monty Berman volunteered for service. After a short time, he was transferred to the Army Film and Photographic Unit and became a combat cameraman in

the Middle East, serving with the famed Eighth Army in the desert.

"One thing I never expected then," he says, "was to find any of my material on television a quarter-of-a-century later! A lot of it is now in the official libraries and I've often recognized my work in war documentaries. But I have never borrowed any for my own productions!"

The war over, he and a Service colleague, Robert S. Baker, decided to set up production on their own. It was a gamble. They could have lost every penny they had saved. But they wanted, more than anything else, to be independent.

The start of it all was on a modest scale. No Trace was the title of their first picture. The actor portraying the Police Inspector in it was Barry Morse. Later, Barry played another Police Inspector in a further production, Daughter of Darkness. In the years that followed, fame came to Monty Berman's fellow Londoner when he went to Hollywood to play the ever-pursuing Lieut. Gerard in The Fugitive. And there was a reunion for the producer and the actor when Barry returned to England for a vacation and was persuaded to play a guest spot in a segment of The Saint. Later still, Monty Berman created the character of the mysterious Mr. Parminter for Barry Morse to play in The Adventurer.

Low-budget movies paved the way to bigger productions. There was always an eye on the main chance. Nudity would never be allowed on British or American screens at that time, but such scenes were in demand for Continental markets. Nudity shots would therefore be included, from time to time, especially for foreign sales.

"Because of this," one production, Hellfire Club, became the first movie to be featured in the Playboy magazine, though the shots in question would never be seen on American screens."

Perhaps the luckiest break of all was the sheer chance of spotting a second-hand book dealing with the most famous crimes in history, among them the most horrific of mass murders, the Jack the Ripper killings, the story of body-snatchers Burke and Hare, and the classic siege of Sidney Street in which Winston Churchill, then the Home Secretary, personally took charge of the operations.

The book cost just one dollar. From it sprang the idea of a series of hair-raising horror films which proved to be box-office bonanzas, the first of them based on the factual crimes brought to mind by the book, followed by such successes as Blood of the Vampire and The Trollenberg Terror.

Thrillers were by no means the only productions. Sea of Sand and others were equally popular at the box-office. But the time was approaching when the cinema was obviously going to take a knock from television. The TV film series had arrived.

"I had always enjoyed The Saint books," Monty Berman says. "Several had been made into films, and these had shown their dramatic potentialities. So I managed to get an introduction to their author, Leslie Charteris, and we met. The first thing I discovered was that he was very keen on the idea of The Saint being adapted for television, but all previous offers had come unstuck because no-one would go further than taking options.

"There was only one thing to do and that was to go the whole way by agreeing to take everything he had written with the exception of the stories already filmed. The negotiations took a long time. The idea was sold to ATV's Lord Lew Grade, and the deal was eventually finalised.

The Saint not only established Roger Moore once and for all as one of the biggest of television stars but the series became one of the most internationally popular of all television programmes.

Monty Berman went on to produce Gideon's Way, choosing John Gregson for the title role. Gregson was an early Monty Berman discovery who had starred for him in "Sea of Sand" and "The Secret of Monte Cristo."

Gideon's Way was the first authentic police series made in England with the full co-operation of Scotland Yard.

The Baron was not only the first British colour series but also marked the first time Monty Berman had an American star. Steve Forrest was brought to England for the title role. Later, Monty Berman visited the United States to find another American star to team with Peter Wyngarde in Department S. The third American star to be featured in a Monty Berman series was Gene Barry, engaged for The Adventurer.

There has been a close association on many of his productions with writer the late Dennis Spooner, and the way-out ideas for The Champions (characters with super-human qualities) and Randall & Hopkirk Deceased (a private eye whose dead partner rejoined him as a ghost) sprang from the proliferation of imaginative ideas tossed between them.

But perhaps the principal reason for Monty Berman's success can be traced right back to the beginning of his career. As a cameraman, the visual qualities of his productions have always been of paramount importance. A Monty Berman production has visual excitement.

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