Jacqueline Pearce

In Servalan’s Secret Service

By JEAN AIREY & LAURIE HALDEMAN

The sexy “Blake’s 7” villainess admits her hidden desire to get amorous with Avon & reveals how she tapped her way into John Nathan-Turner’s heart.

You are undoubtedly the sexiest officer I have ever known,” Servalan is told in an early episode of Blake’s 7. Both male and female fans of the show seem to agree. The British science-fiction series tried to give villainy a new look and succeeded beyond its wildest dreams with Servalan, Supreme Commander and would-be President of the evil, corrupt Federation.

As originally conceived, the ruthless Supreme Commander, dedicated to becoming Galactic Dictator and destroying terrorist forces such as Blake and his seven, was a male in uniform, a kind of establishment Rambo. But from this concept emerged the delicate-featured, exquisitely gowned but utterly heartless Servalan.

“The interesting thing about playing Servalan,” says Jacqueline Pearce, the actress who essayed the role, delightedly, “was that Terry Nation [the show’s creator and main writer] said he couldn’t write for women. When Servalan started out, she was a he! Terry woke up one morning and said, ‘No, he should be a she.’ So, he changed in mid-stream and I think that’s why she’s so interesting, because she does have male characteristics as well as female. And that makes Servalan a total human being.”

But the character’s male aspects might have overwhelmed the female if it hadn’t been for what Pearce calls her “utter lack” of diplomacy. With her hair styled in what at the time (1978) would easily have been perceived as a man’s cut, Pearce discovered the costume the producer wanted her to wear was “a military, safari-type outfit,” she describes. “Jackets, trousers, jack-boots—and a riding whip!”

Being, as she observes, not the most tactful of people, Pearce’s immediate response was to tell him, “If you dress her like that, with this haircut, you might as well cast a man.” Fortunately, the producer agreed with her suggestion that going in the opposite direction—making her appear ultra-feminine—would make the character doubly dangerous. “Because if you look one way and act another,” the actress notes, “people don’t really know what to expect—and that is drama.”

Although she acknowledges that Servalan is the series’ villain, Pearce is quick to point out that she doesn’t view the character as thoroughly evil. “As Servalan and I developed as human beings, we fed each other. “I found out a good deal about myself through her.”

“As Servalan and I developed as human beings, we fed each other,” Pearce admits. “I found out a good deal about myself through her.”

While filming the show, Pearce discovered that, to some extent, women directors were “probably more sympathetic,” she says. “They didn’t see Servalan as quite so black and white. They weren’t threatened by her as the men were, and they probably had a greater empathy for what I was trying to do.” Although no...
Despite Pearce’s insistence that “she was a very misunderstood woman,” Servalan set out to conquer the galaxy with sheer ruthlessness and an unerring fashion sense.

Blake’s 7 script ever emphasized what Pearce perceived as the character’s true vulnerability. “We got quite close with ‘Sand,’ the Tanith Lee script, which showed why she was vulnerable. Servalan had been rejected at 18 after a traumatic love affair and built the image as a defense,” Pearce explains. “Only those who are sensitive to that, who can see through that, can get through. And that’s true—I think we all do that in life.”

Life played a part in creating the dialogue for “Sand” as well. One day during filming, Steven (Tarrant) Pacey asked Pearce why she was looking so happy and she explained that she had just bought a houseboat in Chelsea. But, he protested, he also lived on a houseboat in Chelsea. Smiling up at the handsome young actor, Pearce said, with a Servalan-like smile, “Gosh, Stevie, I’m the girl next door!” Without a moment’s hesitation, he replied, “If you’re the girl next door, I’m moving!” Pearce told this story to Tanith Lee—who proceeded to write the exchange into the script as part of a scene between the boisterous exuberant Tarrant and the sophisticated Servalan that Paul (Avon) Darrow (STARLOG #116) describes as “a bit like introducing the Bride of Frankenstein to Andy Hardy.”

The only character who probably could have coped with Servalan actually being the girl-next-door was Darrow’s character, Avon, the series’ occasional hero and immutable gadfly. Terry Nation (STARLOG #106, #117) at the start of Blake’s 7’s third season, implied that there could be some kind of relationship between Servalan and Avon. Both Darrow and Pearce regret that possibility was never really developed. “I always saw Servalan and Avon as opposite sides of the coin. He was the only man who could interest her, and she was the only woman who could interest him,” she notes. Darrow has remarked that Avon admired Servalan because he knew he could never trust her—and he could deal with that!

During the series, sporadic problems arose with new writers, unfamiliar with the Blake’s 7 characters, scripting “their own ideas of the characters which often bore no resemblance to what they were really about,” according to Pearce. “We had dif-
frequent writers all the time, and they didn't always understand what you had to do," she says. "If you have a Terry Nation or Tanith Lee script, you have no problem—they're such wonderful writers—but unfortunately, not everybody writes like them." As a result, the cast often altered the script, adding or subtracting material. In the third season episode "Aftermath," a scene between Avon and Servalyn appeared totally bland (and most uncharacteristic) until director Gerald Blake, Darrow and Pearce took it in hand. Lines that were tame when delivered from across the room took on new significance as Avon and Servalyn exchanged them and wound up in a passionate—if not exactly loving—embrace.

Pearce is also familiar to Doctor Who fans for her role as Chessene, the Androgrand—"a simianistic creature artificially evolved to a higher order—in "The Two Doctors." Although also a villainous part, Pearce approached it differently because the character was so clearly alien. "I was fascinated by being an Androgrand," she says, "by the fact that she had these operations but could revert back as she did—as soon as she saw a bit of blood, she went crazy. But I had never seen a Doctor Who episode in my life when I did it. And now, I'm a great fan. They're a wonderful crew, I love them. They welcomed me with open arms. I felt had always been there—it was very special."

Producer John Nathan-Turner (STARLOG #82, 101), having worked with Pearce in "The Two Doctors," typically decided to cast against type, asking Pearce to play the Fairy Godmother in the 1985 Christmas pantomime production of Cinderella. The Christmas pantomimes are a uniquely British entertainment. Based on traditional tales, they combine new characters, old vaudeville jokes and routines, familiar songs, boys played by girls and women (such as the ugly step-sisters) played by men. They customarily star well-known television actors.

Cinderella had been produced in 1984 with Peter (The Fifth Doctor) Davison (STARLOG #102) playing the role of "Buttons" and his wife, Sandra (Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy) Dickinson as the Fairy Godmother. The 1985 season's production would see Doctor Who veterans Colin (The Sixth Doctor) Baker (STARLOG #105) as "Buttons," Nicola (Peri) Bryant as Cinderella, Mary (Romana) Tamm as Prince Charming, and Anthony (The Master) Ainley returning as Baron Hardup. Pearce had, she chuckles and says emphatically, never done pantomime before and, she observes, "I don't think you can have two actresses more dissimilar than Sandra Dickinson and Jacqueline Pearce. There was no way I could do the Fairy Godmother like Sandra. I don't have a voice like hers, for one thing!

"John asked me if I would like to do it, and showed me the video from the year before. I said, 'Well, I can't sing or dance.' 'That's all right, darling,' he promised me, 'you won't have to.' So, I went in on good faith, thinking the part would be written in such a way that I wouldn't have to sing or dance. I saw the video a few months later, and I saw myself ripping my skirt off as the Fairy Godmother breaks into a flashy tap-dancing number] and 'Tapping my Troubles Away,' and I don't know how it ever happened to me. I will never forgive John Nathan-Turner. But would she do it again? "Absolutely. It stretched me," she says exuberantly. "Doing things you can't do, that terrify you, is the only way to grow."

Part of her enjoyment in doing the pantomime came from the freedom the cast felt to play jokes on each other, such as one aimed at Anthony Ainley (STARLOG #82). "He had to announce to the audience that somebody had won a Honda motorcycle—whatever had this particular number under their seat—was to please come up on the stage. Of course, no one had that number because there weren't any motorcycles at all. But somebody that night had put the number under four different seats! Suddenly, all these people came up on stage, demanding this motorcycle!" She laughs. "Poor Tony! Not fair! He managed very well, though."

So, with her hair somewhat longer, her career in television and theater continuing, Jacqueline Pearce goes on, approaching every job with a dedication that Servalyn would recognize and appreciate. "My feeling is that you give 100 percent to everything that you do. If your attitude is 'Take the money and run,' then you run and you don't take the money. There are too many talented people out there who are not working and who would be very grateful for the opportunity to work and give it everything they've got."

Yes, some TV shows do change people's lives. "I was a completely different person before Blake's 7," Pearce reveals. "I was extremely quiet and shy and didn't really know who I was."

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