

A Starburst interview by John Fleming

DENNIS SPOONER

Dennis Spooner has written for everything from Gerry Anderson series to *Doctor Who*, *The Avengers*, *The Professionals* and *A Man Called Sloane*. He also created and co-created many of the highly-successful ITC adventure series of the 1960s, like *Jason King* and *The Champions*. Yet he remains little-known in comparison with his contemporaries Brian Clemens and Terry Nation. John Fleming tries to put the record straight.

He was born in Tottenham, London, on 1st December 1932 and claims he has developed "an inverted snobbery about education." He says he must have had less education than anybody else in the country except possibly those who didn't go to school at all. He was supposed to start school in September 1939 but one little thing got in the way: the outbreak of World War II. Most children were evacuated from London but he remained there throughout the War. "My mother was fairly dramatic," Dennis Spooner says: "We were all going to die together."

Because of the evacuation, there weren't enough children in Tottenham to justify a school, so young Dennis had about half an hour's schooling every week at a Quaker house then, when the Blitz died down, he started school proper in 1941. "At that time," he says, "the school-leaving age was 14. But, when the War ended in 1945, they came round as said 'Well, you're 13. There's not much we can do with you. You might as well go.'"

So Spooner left school at 13 and began working for the Post Office, who allowed him one afternoon a week at "quite a good school" and it was during this time that he developed two interests: showbusiness and football. He played for Leyton Orient's third team at a time when it included several part-time professionals. He also appeared in Ralph Reader's boy scout Gang Shows.

"I lived in a road that was exactly like Coronation Street," he says, "with the Mission Hall opposite. I joined the scouts because they were in this church hall literally across the road." Eventually, he was talent-spotting. "It was absolutely marvellous," he says, "because, until that time, I thought showbiz was something you saw, not something you did. Ralph Reader had directed Al Jolson on Broadway and virtually retired in his thirties or forties because he'd done everything and, on those shows, he was a bastard really. I can remember doing a dress rehearsal the night before one of the shows and he rehearsed the kids all night up until about 3 o'clock the following afternoon. We went through a sketch I was in 56 times. But, when the show went on, you suddenly realised the sheer hard work that goes into everybody looking natural."

When he was 18, Spooner had to do his National Service in the Army and was posted to Egypt: "It was at the time of King Farouk's abdication, so we were all confined to camp. Entertainment was zero. So they went round saying *Who knows anything about shows?* I'd come from this marvellous four or five year background in the Gang Shows where we even did a Royal Command Performance. I'd hob-nobbed with the professionals, so I knew how shows were put together and I was interested because I'd rather rehearse shows than do guard duty. At the time, the



Egyptian students had a habit of creeping up on the perimeter and shooting the British guards. You could say my entry into theatre was born of cowardice."

Someone from the Forces Broadcasting Service saw Spooner's performances and offered the young man a radio show. For 15 minutes every Saturday, he could comment on the week's events. "It was only current affairs," says Spooner, "in-as-much as *Not The Nine O'Clock News* is current affairs. I'd deal with what was going on in an irreverent way. After that, I compared a variety show. Then the C.S.E.—Combined Services Entertainment—started to bring out a lot of comedians and shows and I got involved. I mean, after doing two years in Egypt, you were talking a new language. A lot of Arabic words were used and genuine Army slang and, in the end, outsiders had to concentrate hard to know what was being said.

That's when I started writing. These comedians would give me their scripts and I would translate them and they would go on and get very big laughs because the audience didn't expect the in-jokes."

After his National Service ended, he returned to Britain: "I got a job in the City with the Railway, Mine and Plantation Equipment Co Ltd. By this time, I was writing odd jokes and was going to submit stuff to various comedians for (the BBC radio show) *Workers' Playtime*. There was a secretary in my office who said *Oh, there's a fellow lives next door to me who writes scripts and sent some to Max Bygraves. I'll ask him how to set them out*. And this guy was Johnny Speight (who later created *Till Death Us Do Part—US: All In The Family!*). It was a lucky break which was to pay off years later. In the meantime, Spooner had to struggle hard:



"As I say, I had no education and wasn't good enough as a footballer and I messed around. I worked the clubs as a comedian—and some music halls." One night, he played a date at Stanmore with comedian Bob Monkhouse and ventriloquist Harry Illingworth. *God, you're pretty terrible!* Illingworth told Spooner. *But the material's great. I've got a Vic Oliver's Guest Night on Saturday and I can't make anything up and I'm a ventriloquist! What do I do on radio?* The outcome was that Spooner wrote material for the ventriloquist, who gave up his dummy, dropped the "Illing" from his name and became comedian Harry Worth. Spooner went on to write successful four and five-minute spots for Derek Roy, Arthur Haynes and other top radio performers. Instant success story, right? Wrong.

"I was working full-time in factories and as a window-cleaner and whatever," says Spooner, "To write ten minutes of original jokes for a comedian on **Workers' Playtime** used to take me forever and I was lucky if I got £12 for it. I decided this wasn't a very good way of making a living. But then ITV started and Harry Worth did a show called **Val Parnell's Startime** and they were paying £40 a sketch, which was marvellous. Then they started a police drama series called **Murder Bag**, which turned into **No Hiding Place**.

"In those days, when ITV started, I think they found scriptwriters a bit like pressgangs found sailors. I'm sure they went out and hit the nearest passer-by over the head. Nobody knew what they were doing. I mean, **Murder Bag** and **No Hiding Place** used to go out live. Sometimes we might be running five minutes early and, another time, five minutes late. It was extraordinary to get in the last line *The Butler did it!* smack before the commercials without putting in an interlude. My progression really, was from writing four and five minute sketches on things like **The Arthur Haynes Show** and **Val Parnell's Startime** to things like **Tell It To The Marines**, which was a half-hour comedy show from which came **The Army Game**.

"**Tell It To The Marines** was script-edited by John Junkin and Terry Nation, who used to be writing-partners. By that time, I'd got myself an agent at Associated London Scripts, which was an agency formed by Eric Sykes, Ray Galton, Alan Simpson and Spike Milligan. They had a secretary called Beryl Vertue, who went on to greater things. Johnny Speight had an office there, too. At that time, radio still hadn't died and there were **The Floggitts** with Elsie & Doris Waters (which Terry Nation was writing) and **Life With The Lyons**. I did a stint on **Life With The Lyons**. I suppose it was a Golden Era, when no-one really knew what they were doing. I'd gone from doing a small sketch into doing a longer sketch with a studio audience and then deciding that, if I was doing a half-hour and the only thing I really found difficult was making it funny, why not do a half-hour that wasn't funny? It must be easier. I did **Coronation Street** for a while: the last episode I did was number 88."

Around this time, he also met Gerry Anderson at a party. "Johnny Speight was writing a feature-film for Gerry—I think it was a comedy, but it never got made. At that time, Gerry had done **Four Feather Falls** and **Supercar** and I met him at Johnny Speight's party. We got chatting and he said *We're going to do another series of Supercar*. There were about ten episodes, mostly written by a couple called Hugh and Martin Woodhouse, but I wrote about three. By this time, Gerry was working for Lew Grade. And Lew suddenly said *Oh no, we won't do Supercar. Do another show*. So the first scripts I wrote for Gerry were for the **Supercar** series that was never made.

"I suppose Gerry taught me to think in pictures rather than dialogue. I was writing like Terence Rattigan or Somerset Maugham. I was thinking like the plot progression of an actual story and Gerry would never accept those sort of stories. Well, he might, but I'd have to sell them to him in another way. Gerry would always say *Tell me four things*. It was exactly the same way as Hitchcock worked: he listed the magic moments of his film and then gave them to his scriptwriter. Alan Fennell and I did most of

Fireball XL-5. Alan was never a scriptwriter per se. He was always into comics and was editor of *Girl or Eagle* or something and turned out comic strips and Gerry thought very much in terms of comic strips.

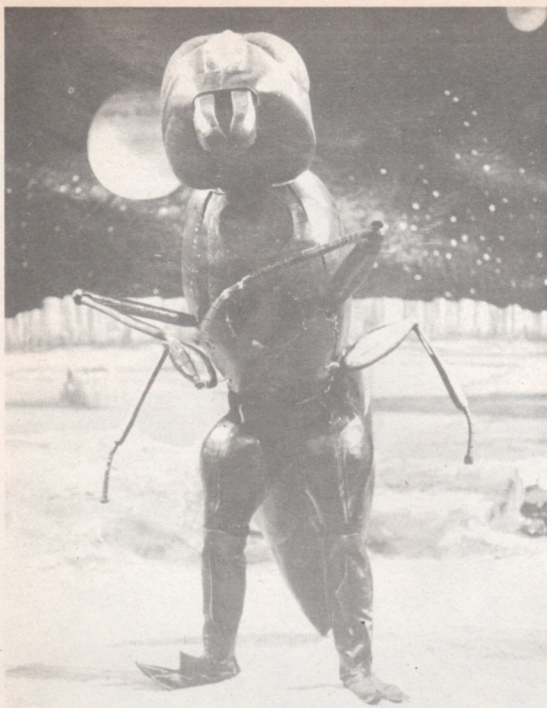
"When Gerry started on puppets, his contention was that you could do a better show if you thought in terms of stills rather than action. On **Fireball**, you had to say to him *These are the four sequences*. Very often, (special effects supervisor) Derek Meddings would say something like *We can do this marvellous thing where something goes down into a volcano and the whole thing blows up and lava comes out*. And that moment would be enough to justify a story. You'd have, say, an exploding volcano, the disintegration of a submarine and two other spectacular scenes and, once you'd sold Gerry those four moments, he'd say *That's it. Make up a story where they happen.*"

Spooner says he never found scripting for puppets difficult, because he never thought of them as puppets. "On film, you can do anything," he says: "With three cuts, you can make a puppet walk through a door. You can't do that if it's (an electronic) television camera. Doing a Gerry Anderson puppet series was less restricting than doing a live-action **Arthur Haynes Show**, because Arthur Haynes couldn't do as much as the puppets. He had to keep in range of the (electronic) cameras as they pushed and pulled them about whereas, with a film camera, you can stop and do anything. I remember I wrote a fight for the puppets once—with punches—and Gerry said *That's impossible!* but then he thought about it and they did it and it worked. The restriction was that to get 15 seconds of fight took an enormous amount of time, because there were so many cuts. That was the limitation."

But weren't puppets a come-down after writing for the immensely-popular and high-rating **Arthur Haynes Show**?

"Oh no," says Spooner. "I never think—ever—in terms of *That's beneath my dignity!* If ATV phoned me up tomorrow and said *Will you write three episodes of Crossroads, please?* then, if I had the time, I would. I'm not Dennis Potter—although I'm not so sure Dennis Potter wouldn't write **Crossroads**. I don't believe you can decide what is beneath or above your dignity because, if you look back in time, all the things that have been knocked off quickly are the things that remain. I mean, Charles Dickens was the Peter Ling (co-creator of **Crossroads**) of his day. He knocked out a chapter of *Pickwick Papers* on schedule for a magazine. He didn't say *I am going to write a great novel*. I'm sure Shakespeare would be on **Coronation**





Street if he were alive today because, for a start, he wrote in television terms. People say *Oh, it's not classic writing if you're doing Charlie's Angels because you have to do a hook and manipulate a story!* But Shakespeare always wrote hooks. The style of *Hamlet* is the hook—the ghost and everything. Shakespeare always started off with a hook and he always followed what has become a television shape.

"In the cinema, the things that were knocked out in the 1930s and 1940s are the ones that have the lasting quality because, apart from anything else, they capture the time. If you sit down and say *I am going to write a masterpiece* then any critical acclaim is not likely to have the lasting quality of, say, Charlie Chaplin who was making two films a day. Even now, in terms of television, people remember the most extraordinary shows of a long time ago which weren't really appreciated at the time."

One show which has certainly lasted is a cheap children's series which started in 1963: **Doctor Who**. Dennis Spooner was asked to write some of the earlier episodes and became script-writer for a time. He says that one reason he has written widely for television but has never written a novel is "maybe my inferiority complex raising its head. Television and plays are always English-as-she-is-spoke as opposed to English as it is written. The fact that my grammar is appalling is an asset in dramatised work whereas, if you write a book, it becomes a sweat because suddenly you're not writing how you know people speak."

"When I was script-editor on **Doctor Who**, the BBC decided they would heighten the standard of television writing by offering a writer's job to anybody who got a First in English at Oxford or Cambridge. So they had all these guys walking around on contract and assigned them to all the script-editors. I'm sitting there writing **Doctor Who** and suddenly I get two Dons who know everything there is to know about English grammar. So they get next week's script and say *Can we re-write this one?* So I said *Sure*—at least it got them out of my hair. So, three days later, they came back with this beautifully-bound script which I read and which did not have a single grammatical mistake in it and it was so... Well, I handed it out to the cast and the actors nearly collapsed and died on the spot. It was terrible. It was unspeakable. But what do you do with them. We didn't use it, of course. It takes a lot of work to be able to write as bad as people speak."

One of Spooner's more unusual scripts for **Doctor Who** was *The Dalek Master Plan*, which he co-wrote with Terry Nation. ▶



"It came about," says Spooner, "because they wanted a 13-part series and Terry didn't want to write 13 parts. I was script-editor and, during the meeting, he said *Well, let's write some together and I think he wrote seven and I wrote six. One of Terry's favourite anecdotes is about a television writer who ended an episode on a cliffhanger which it was completely impossible to get out of. So, when we decided to write *The Dalek Master Plan*, we had a vague idea it was going to be a sort of chase through time and we decided to try alternate episodes and catch each other out by ending episodes with un-get-out-of-able cliffhangers. So it became a total joke and we had a great time. I think at the end of one episode someone was literally in this pit which it was impossible to get out of, and when the next episode started, she was somewhere else. I don't think anybody complained. We just tried to see what we could get away with.*"

One of the reasons Terry Nation did not want to write 13 *Doctor Who* episodes was that he had been asked to write six scripts for the ITC series *The Saint*. After working on *The Saint*, Nation then became story-editor on ITC's new series *The Baron* and he phoned Dennis Spooner up to ask "Are you going to stay on *Doctor Who*?" Spooner's reply was: "No, I think I've had enough," so Nation offered him the chance to write 10 scripts for *The Baron*. When that

series ended and Nation left, ITC wanted another adventure series and asked Spooner what he wanted to do. The answer was *The Amazing Incredible Wilson*.

"He was a character in the *Wizard* comic," says Spooner. "He won every race in the Olympics and God knows what else. They traced him back and he was 175 years old because he'd found some special diet in the Yorkshire Moors. I mean, it was *The Six Million Dollar Man*, but years before. The trouble was we couldn't get the tv rights. By that time, Lew Grade had heard what we were trying to do. He'd got a bit fed up with ordinary heroes too and thought the only thing to do was go into the area of superheroes. So I thought—it was *Lost Horizon* really—you have three agents crash in Shangri-La and, when they come back to normal life, something's obviously happened. That was the format of *The Champions*.

"It sold in America, though it wasn't as successful as *The Saint* or *Danger Man*. We had an American advisor on *The Champions* because we were showing it in America. He was also the advisor on *The Six Million Dollar Man* and I saw whole chunks of *The Champions* in . . . I mean, *The Champions* could do everything that *Six Million Dollar Man* could do, but I was about 35 years before my time."

The American advisor (who worked on *The*

Avengers) was not, according to whom, a direct censor: he was someone with whom to liaise on certain points. "The most obvious one," Spooner says, "is that you can't have a hero say to the girl *You go to bed now and I'll knock you up in the morning*. It's acceptable in English, but it has a double-meaning in America. There's a lot like that. They also have so many pressure groups in America and he was just as well versed on what was acceptable. He didn't say *You MUST do this*. He tended to say *It would be better if . . .* And we were very interested in that, because British television has never been able to pay its way (in high-budget adventure series). The price of an episode is always more than you can ever recoup here in terms of advertising. We need the rest of the world to subsidise the standard of our television." ●

In part 2 of this interview, next month, Dennis Spooner talks about his work on Jason King, Doomwatch, The Professionals, the un-made Avengers movie and much more.

