

The Avengers Avenged!

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I need no special effort to bring back the memory; it is easily recalled. From the abyss of childhood recollections comes an urgent image, of a special woman -- in trouble! She is seated in a trap, a contraption that will destroy her. It is a model of a race car that confines her body, and in front of her is a movie screen, with a speeding image of a race track. But the race track is speeding along in reverse! She has to drive it, at high speed, backwards! And if she makes the slightest slip, if the game of race car goes the least bit wrong ... the wonderful lady will be no more.

That and a few other memories from my childhood in the 1960s came from what I consider one of the top three television shows of all time. It has always been number three, following *The Twilight Zone*, and *The Prisoner*. But lately I wonder if I should not elevate it all the way to number one among my favorites. Because while those other two TV classics were always somewhat grim and dark, *The Avengers* worked their magic while at the same time managing to have some fun. I suspect it is easier to produce ingenious material in a grim vein than in a way that is light-hearted, sparkling, witty, and, dare I say it ... cute.

Sorry, but Emma Peel was cute, along with such a long list of other traits that she possessed. Even for a fictional superwoman she had a lot going on. In a 1998 *New York Times Arts and Leisure* article, Franz Lidz wrote "The great tragedy in the lives of men of a certain age and outlook is that there is one, and only one, Emma Peel." He went on to say that she was the first and arguably the last woman on television to combine sensuality with ironic intellect.

It does not overstate things to say that Diana Rigg (Emma Peel), Patrick Macnee (John Steed), and the creative team behind *The Avengers* played some part in changing the world in the 1960's. This show was part of the cultural revolution of those years. It was for television what the Beatles were for music. If that sounds like an overstatement, bear in mind that *The Avengers* remain the highest rated British television show ever to come to the United States, topping *Monty Python*. Among the most popular British entertainment imports in general, the show is on a short list behind the Beatles. There was even a slight nod given to the show by the Beatles camp, when, in the movie *Yellow Submarine*, an image of Patrick Macnee as John Steed appears briefly on the

screen, as one of several flamboyant figures in a scene. (It appears about 18 minutes into the movie, in the upper right part of the screen.)

Emma Peel came as a revelation to people around the world in those days. Here for the first time was a woman who was supernaturally powerful, independent, and competent, and yet sensuous, feminine, and erotic. Her name was a play on a bit of BBC jargon, "M. Appeal", which meant Man Appeal, or something that would play well to the male audience! While a contemporary feminist may find that repulsive, it remains a fact that this character, as brought to life by the formidable Diana Rigg, was also a fairly early image of feminine equality. However cloaked in the trappings of fantasy she may have been, the message came through loud and clear to millions of young girls who dreamed of being like her. This was well before the 1970's Women's Liberation Movement. It was a very different time, and to say that The Avengers were ahead of their time is to say the very least.

While strong, independent women were quite uncommon in American television, the sensuality of Emma Peel was unheard of. Diana Rigg was the first, or among the very first women to wear a mini-skirt on television. When the show was first attracting the attention of the American networks, the production team asked Ms. Rigg to wear longer skirts. She flatly refused, and there was a minor furor when this new look was first televised in the States. The furor, such that it was, quickly gave way to the mini-skirt fad, one of the biggest of the fad-saturated '60's.

The Avengers were right on time for the Sexual Revolution, and gave a boost to its two sides: equality for women, and the tearing down of repressed attitudes toward sexual identity going back to the Victorian Age. It is amazing how well it all went, considering how sweeping the change was. It brings to mind the old saying about an idea whose time has come. Still, it is not as if there were no bumps in the road. There was the incident of the infamous (and fabulous) Avengers episode entitled, A Touch of Brimstone.

This 1966 installment of the show featured Steed and Mrs. Peel infiltrating a modern version of the 18th century Hellfire Club, which was a secret society dedicated to sexual debauchery and political intrigue. The costume in which Emma went undercover was essentially right out of an S&M fantasy, right down to the spiked collar. It showed lots and lots of Diana Rigg, but not on American television it didn't. The episode was, pardon the term, yanked. It would not appear in the United States until the show came back in syndication, sometime in the 1980's.

American sexual attitudes were always a conflicted muddle. The legacy of the Puritans is alive and well, but at the same time we have other influences, pushing the other way. The sensual experiences of jazz, rock 'n roll, and Hollywood originated in the United States. Yet so did any number of crusades against what H.L. Mencken described as the notion that somebody, somewhere, might be enjoying themselves. It has been a cosmic journey from the Victorian Age to the present landscape, in which sexual imagery is both ubiquitous and largely joyless. Diana Rigg and her cat-suits and mini-skirts came along at an interesting juncture.

It was a fascinating time for American television, in general. Some incredibly imaginative programming was being done. Color was new, and that alone made for splashy shows. Show sets were often a riot of color, as if to justify the new technology. But more than this, there was programming that didn't care a damn about flaunting hoary old convention. Wild romps like *Batman*, *Laugh-In*, *Get Smart*, *The Smothers Brothers*, *The Monkees*, *The Munsters*, *The Addams Family*, and numerous other over-the-top wingdings made up the TV landscape. *The Avengers* went into this mix quite well, with the ratings to prove it. The show even tipped its bowler to *Batman* in one notable episode. In the climactic fight scene of *The Winged Avenger*, animated "Whack!" and "Splat!" graphics spin onto the screen, as Steed clobbers the bad guys.

If not as noisy as the American shows, *The Avengers* staked out their own ground in eccentric, outrageous fun. The show was entertainment first and foremost, but unlike the shows mentioned above, *The Avengers* could be more than just silly fun.

The style of the show was something unlike anything that has been before or since. Certainly this style was utterly absent from that ghastly insult of a movie that came out in 1998. (I generally refer to the movie as *The Scavengers*, and the less said about it the better.)

The Avengers show has often been described as being like a world of its own. Some have used the term "Avengersland" to note the surreal nature of this strange plane where almost anything can happen. The show has been called the ultimate triumph of style over substance; meaning not that the show had no substance, the Emma Peel had quite a psychological impact in her time. But the styling of the show heavily overshadowed anything that might be happening in its plots. In fact, the writers of *The Avengers* seemed to take a crazed delight in plot holes and glaring illogic. The episodes are absolutely riddled with some of the most laughable lapses in common sense. Then there was weird stuff like the recurring situation of no-one ever being around, other than the principals of the story. Empty streets, empty buildings, except for Steed and the villain!

It doesn't take much watching of the show to see that the plot gaps are part of the terrain here. It is beside the point to dwell on them, just as it would be to say that an Impressionist painting is not realistic. There was real artistry in The Avengers, as well as a light-hearted yet intriguing atmosphere that is difficult to describe.

It is that atmosphere that leads me to conclude that The Avengers show is still ahead of the times, that is, ahead of our times. Ours is the time of the heavy-handed, hard-boiled, hard-core, joyless jerk. The people who put together The Avengers would no doubt have chosen to fall on their umbrella-swords before working in that "style." The Avengers were defiantly happy, no matter what was going on. They were the epitome of hip, and were quite confident about it.

The Avengers episodes are available from A&E Home Video.

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