

6 DAYS OF JUSTICE



Images courtesy of Network Distributing.

Over the last forty years, producer, director and writer David Wickes has been associated with some of the most popular and best loved British TV drama series – *Public Eye*, *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals*, to name a few – persuaded Sir Michael Caine to return to television, and has successfully run his own television production company, on both sides of the Atlantic. Considering the sheer variety of his work in the entertainment industry, *Infinity* considered it was high time we called on him for interview looking back over his long and distinguished career...

"My father was an international stage illusionist. He's often been called the David Copperfield of his day, something that Copperfield himself acknowledged on BBC radio a couple of years ago. So, you could say the entertainment industry was in my blood. My father had also volunteered for wartime military service, and was twice decorated, so the idea of serving the country seemed quite natural to me. Also, I like doing unconventional things, so – after I graduated from the military academy Sandhurst – I applied to train a unit of the Nigerian army. With hindsight, serving with my 100-strong company of Nigerian soldiers and later working with 80-strong film crews had a lot in common. Both activities involved close-knit teams and in both cases, there was a 'one-for-all, all-for-one' approach to life. Looking back, I wouldn't have missed my time in the West African bush with those guys for anything.

"ABC Television, which was a hot bed of creative talent at the time I joined in the 1960s. Some of the most talented people in the country rubbed shoulders at ABC's Teddington Studios (now sadly demolished); night after night, rock

stars gathered in the bar to laugh with the likes of Tommy Cooper and Morecambe and Wise, while in the canteen, ambitious young writers tried out new ideas on legendary drama directors like Philip Saville and Ted Kotcheff. You might spot Peter Sellers in a corridor, or Laurence Olivier hurrying to the make up department. Once or twice, John Lennon dropped by. The creative atmosphere was truly extraordinary. I was fortunate indeed to have seen some of it.

"I was lucky in another way, too. I won a place on ABC's coveted director's course and was trained by Marjorie Ruse, OBE. For a whole year, I was taught and tested on everything from story structure and character development, to lighting techniques, budgeting, publicity, lens selection – the whole complex world of film and TV production from A to Z. I owe a lot to Marjorie Ruse and her assistants.

"My first prime-time drama (after a lot of documentaries and some children's dramas) was *Six Days Of Justice* (1972-75) starring

Freeling are set. Travel and hotels were expensive for the British crew, but it looked great.

"Next, for the anthology series *Armchair Cinema* (1974-75), I wanted to shoot Georges Simenon's *The Prison*' in Paris where the story is based. Unfortunately, this caused an uproar. The Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians union (commonly known as the ACTT, now defunct) denounced the idea as an early example of 'off-shoring' jobs. But the charge wasn't true; all of the crew and cast were British. Moreover, Thames had made a lucrative sale to a French network, which wouldn't have happened if we had dressed up bits of London to look

Prison, a lot in those days. Anyway, I didn't get fired!

"I admire the BBC and I enjoyed my time there, but it was a different experience from the free-wheeling Thames under its mercurial head of drama Lloyd Shirley and its high-IQ programme controller Brian Tesler. Lloyd was an ex-professional ice hockey player from Canada who didn't suffer fools gladly, while Brian was the brilliant producer who discovered Bruce Forsyth and

Opposite top: Alfred Burke as Frank Marker, with Patricia Haines in the 1965 *Public Eye* episode, 'And a Very Fine Fiddle Has He'. This one wasn't directed by David but he did work on five episodes of this iconic show

THE WICKES MAN

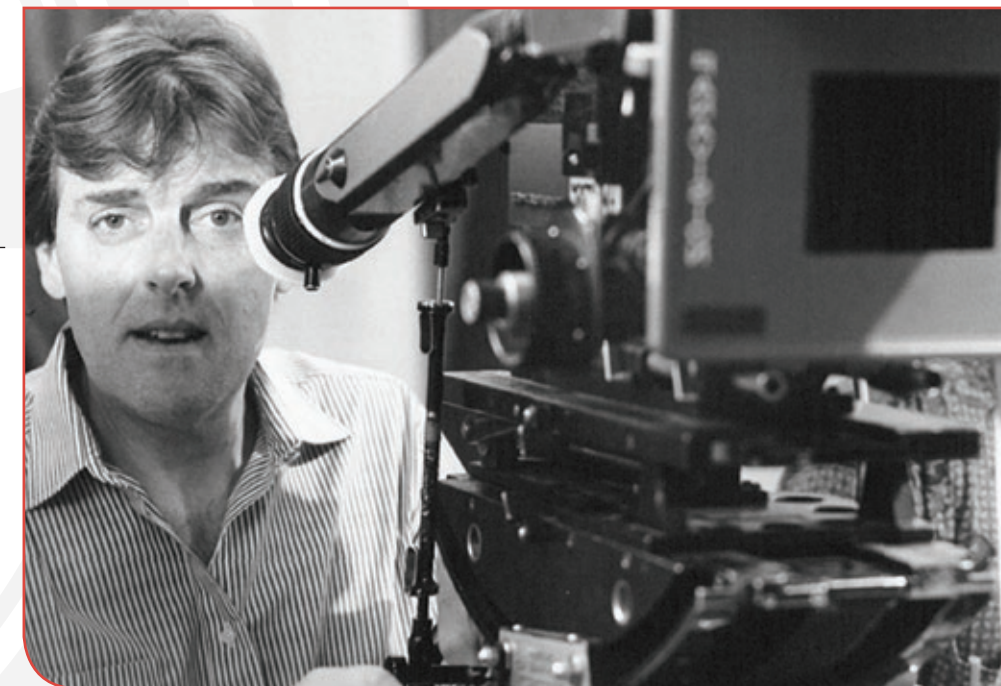
In the first of a two-part feature we showcase the fascinating memoirs of director David Wickes, whose amazing career includes *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals*. Robert Fairclough asked the questions...



Bernard Hepton. It was a courtroom series about errant teenagers who were up before 'the beak' in a magistrate's court. Like all courtroom dramas, it was static. But it got decent ratings so I was off and running. From there, I worked on *Spyder's Web* (1972), which was an ATV series for Lord Lew Grade. The trouble was, it didn't seem to know if it wanted to be like *The Saint* or James Bond. Still, the cast and crew were good to work with.

"I've sometimes been asked if the 1960s and 1970s were the golden years of TV. I'm biased, of course, but we were definitely on the cutting edge of progress when we made shows like *Van Der Valk* (1972-73), *Public Eye* (1965-1975) and *Special Branch* (1969-1974), particularly when it came to escaping the confines of studios.

"I did a bit towards this myself. I persuaded Thames Television's head of drama Lloyd Shirley to let me shoot *Six Days of Justice* with outside broadcast cameras in an abandoned courtroom. Outside broadcast units shot football matches, not dramas, so some people thought I was nuts. I admit it was awkward at the time, but somehow it seemed to work. The episode felt less formal and stilted than the usual studio-based shows. There was even a very slight increase in the viewing figures. I think this encouraged drama head Lloyd Shirley to move a whole new series of *Special Branch* out of the studio altogether and shoot everything on location, like a movie. It was a master stroke and it set the tone for the future. In the late '70s, we took *Van Der Valk* out of Britain altogether and filmed it in Holland, where all the stories by Nicholas



'French-ified'. None of this impressed the union organisers, and there were marches with banners outside the ACTT HQ in Soho Square, but the mayhem didn't last long. A mass meeting of union members was called in Westminster and the vote went our way. A week later, about 50 of us were on our way to Paris.

"I took another risk with *The Prison*' in the casting. I put the then little-known Diane Keen – later she starred in *The Cuckoo Waltz* (1975-77) and *Foxy Lady* (1982-84) – in the female lead opposite New Zealand actor James Laurensen. The publicity department said 'Who are these two?', but the chemistry between them was terrific, and that's worth its weight in gold. Though I say it myself, the reviews were the best I'd had up to that point and the show topped the UK ratings twice and hit number one on the re-run too. Something like 22 countries bought 'The

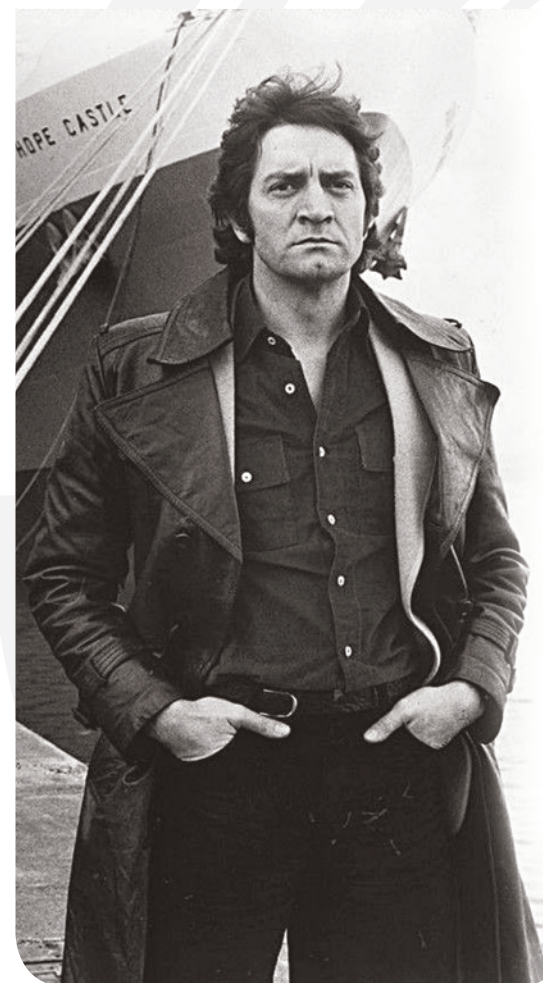
brought Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby to Britain. Both men were wonderfully informal. Even junior directors like me could pop into their offices and get a hearing. By contrast, the BBC seemed like a branch of the Civil Service. If you forgot to get your car park pass stamped, some official in an office would report you. Nonetheless, I enjoyed directing the police series *Softly, Softly: Task Force* (1969-1976).

"I became good friends with Leonard Lewis, the producer, and, one day, he showed me a letter from Elwyn Jones (the creator of *Softly*) in which he suggested ways of exploiting the fame of his two main characters, Detective Chief Superintendents Barlow (Stratford Johns) and Watt (Frank Windsor).

"The ideas in the letter included having Barlow and Watt investigate unsolved real crimes that were still on the police books

Above: Director David Wickes, also seen opposite below directing Diane Keen and Stephan Kalifa in the 'Killer With a Long Arm' episode of *The Professionals*

Other images below left, clockwise: Barry Foster and Joanna Dunham in *Van der Valk*, John Savident, Patricia Cutts and Roger Lloyd Pack in *Spyder's Web* and *The Sweeney* in action



Above, clockwise: David and his crew working on *The Professionals*, David Essex and Cristina Raines in *Silver Dream Racer* (1980), Bodie and Doyle in *The Professionals* and Patrick Mower as Det. Supt. Steve Hackett in *Target* (1977-1978)

and having them criticise 'unsound' court verdicts from the past. Neither of these ideas inspired Len. I agreed with him. Nonetheless, we lunched with Elwyn and, at the end of a sombre meal in the Balzac in Shepherd's Bush, Elwyn suddenly perked up and said 'Why don't Barlow and Watt solve the Ripper murders?' 'Len jumped at the idea and immediately submitted *Jack the Ripper* (1973), co-created with Troy Kennedy Martin, to the mysterious BBC machinery known in those days as the 'Offers' process. No one down at my level could fathom how 'Offers' worked. Only the most senior layers of BBC officialdom were privy to matters of such importance. One effect of this was that it took forever to get a decision from on high. Freelance directors need to earn a living, so I went off to do other things, but several months later, Len called to say that he had been given a green light and was I still interested. I jumped at it. 'Over at Thames Television, breaking down the barriers between studio dramas

and location shows was Lloyd Shirley's dream. He and his co-executive producer George Taylor worked for months researching into costs, sales prospects and everything else that might bolster their case. Finally, they persuaded the main board of Thames to establish a brand new film company, called Euston Films. There were to be no built sets, no massive lighting grids and no elephant-sized cameras on cables. Instead, Euston would use hand-held 16mm film cameras in real streets, in real pubs... the real world in general, in fact. The news traveled fast. Soon, a flood of eager writers, designers and directors came flocking to Colet Court, the dilapidated school building in Hammersmith which housed the new company. 'Right opposite this damp old school, there was a well-known villains' pub called The Red Cow, frequented by some of the

odgiest 'faces' in London AND by Flying Squad cops. That may seem unlikely but it was true. These 'sworn enemies' used to drink together, watch the strippers together and exchange 'info' with each other. Well, you can imagine the impact on these tough geezers when a bunch of namby-pamby film people took over the school across the street, and announced we were going to make *The Sweeney* (1975-78). We got the title right (Sweeney Todd, from the cockney rhyming slang for Flying Squad) but The Red Cow villains thought we were what would now be called snowflakes, so they decided to mark our cards. Whenever any of us went to the pub, we were grabbed and told how to REALLY rob a wages van, bump off a blackmailer or smash a drugs ring. 'The result? A whole new way of portraying crime on TV. In place of office conversations and formal arraignments, we had car smashes, flying fists and shoot outs. Soon *The Sweeney* was the number one show in Britain. It ran for four years and earned audiences of up to 15 million per week. It's watchwords? 'Shut it!' 'The Professionals (1977-1983) was different - equally successful, but different. My friend, the writer Brian Clemens, came up with the idea of creating a unique squad to deal with terrorists, spies and double agents as well as criminals. This had ever been done before. As soon as I read Brian's treatment for *The A Squad*, which it was initially called, I congratulated him. He asked me if I wanted to direct some episodes and I replied, 'Try keeping me away!' Like *The Sweeney*, the show pulled no punches. Activists like Mrs Mary Whitehouse accused us of glorifying violence, but *The Professionals* was pulling in audiences of 14-16 million week after week. It also sold throughout the world and was dubbed into several different languages. By now, there could be no return to the BBC's dear old *Dixon Of Dock Green*. 'One day, my agent called to say that Shaun Sutton, the BBC's head of drama, wanted to have lunch with me and a *Doctor*

and sold all over the world. I suspect this is what prompted Tony Williams, executive producer for Rank Films at Pinewood, to ask me what I wanted to do next. Tricky question... To be honest, I had no idea. 'At that time, I was receiving a couple of scripts a week from various writers and agents. Most of them were just about unreadable. Then, out of the blue, the actor Michael Billington, who'd been in *UFO* (1970-73) and *The Onedin Line* (1971-1980), handed me a screenplay with an interesting theme. It was about an amateur bike racer who wants to become World Champion at Silverstone. It needed a re-write, but I liked it because it was about a very human thing - dreaming the impossible dream. Tony Williams liked it too, so I went to see David Essex. I thought he might be interested because he was a keen biker himself. We had a chat in his West End dressing room, just before he went on stage to play Che Guevara in *Evita*. To my amazement, he just grinned at me and said, 'When do we start?' 'Rank greenlit my rewrite of *Silver Dream Racer* (1980) and we agreed a budget. Then the whole thing almost collapsed: how do you get a 500cc racing bike approved for the real world championship? It can't be a Suzuki or a Honda - all the big manufacturers have their own racing teams and they won't give you the time of day. We nearly shut the picture down. But then we found a brilliant Welsh engineering company called Barton Motors. 'Yes', they said, 'we can make a totally original bike that will pass muster with the engineering "scrutineers" of the World Championship.' Quite frankly, it didn't seem likely, but they pulled it off. It took several weeks, but we ended up with a great-looking bike that could go respectably fast around a track. 'All we needed now was a world-class rider to stand in for David Essex. We were very lucky indeed to persuade ex-champion Roger Marshall to ride for us. Even better, David agreed to write the music. We were back in business. It was time to fly to Hollywood and cast two more stars - Beau Bridges (from *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, 1989) and Cristina Raines (from Ridley Scott's *The Duellists*, 1977). All we had to do now was make the movie. 'We shot the big race scenes during the actual 500cc World Championship at Silverstone in front of a quarter of a million people. I think we still hold the record for using 16 Panavision cameras on a single day. The picture did pretty well in the UK but a lot better overseas. Most of the reviews were favourable, and David's song '*Silver Dream Machine*' went to number two. By now, though, my eye was firmly on Hollywood...'



Who producer called Philip Hinchcliffe. I visualised a sandwich in the canteen and a discussion about Daleks. 'Boy, was I wrong. The lunch was in a private dining room at Television Centre, served by uniformed waiters. Shaun, whom I had never met before, asked if I might be interested in directing a series to rival *The Sweeney* and beat it in the ratings. You could have knocked me down with a feather; the staid BBC wanted to enter a world where cops punch your lights out first and ask questions later? What a departure for the Beeb. Quite apart from that, there was another question mark hovering over the proposal - the question of BBC film procedures and BBC crews. 'Euston Films' crews were movie people. To a man and a woman, they were freelancers and among the best technicians in the world (ask Steven Spielberg). Many of them had worked on Hollywood blockbusters like the James Bond films. It's the same today - think *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*. Movie technicians are highly competitive and proud of their reputations. As you might expect, they don't wave rule books at you. If the show needs to work late, there is usually a deal to be done - then handshakes all round. 'At the BBC, this sort of thing was unheard of. Their crews were permanent employees with career structures, holiday entitlements and overtime consultation procedures. Their normal routine might involve an interview for *Newsnight* on Monday and filming at the zoo on Wednesday. As for shooting stunts and car chases for 26 weeks on a fast-moving action series...? Hmm. 'I had learned all this on *Softly* so I screwed up my courage and put it to Shaun Sutton. To my surprise, he didn't seem dismayed. He asked me to sort it out with the film department at Ealing, helped by Philip Hinchcliffe. Shaun was proved right. After days of negotiation, Philip and I managed to get agreement on a continuing crew and conditions of work, then we settled down to co-write episode one of *Target* (1978-79). After much wrangling, I got Patrick Mower accepted as leading man and we shot the first episode in Southampton. To be honest, I was less than thrilled with the result, especially the post-production. At the time, I had another offer so I bowed out as gracefully as I could. 'My idea of making a cinema movie of *The Sweeney* was mocked in the biz. 'No audience will pay to watch what they can get for free on TV!', people said. But the head of EMI Films, Nat Cohen, put up the money and *Sweeney!* (1976) proved them wrong. It topped the UK box office, got good reviews



Photo kindly provided by Abigail Thaw

ME AND MY DAD

Now appearing in the TV series *Endeavour*, Abigail Thaw is the actress daughter of legendary *Sweeney* star John and his first wife Sally Alexander. She has a half-brother, Daniel (by her mother and her second husband), as well as a stepsister Melanie Thaw and her half-sister Joanna Thaw (born to John Thaw and his wife Sheila Hancock). Here she talks to Richard Leon about her father.

What memories do you have growing up of John filming *The Sweeney*?

I remember that he was very excited about it. I was very young so he explained the cockney rhyming slang: Sweeney Todd: flying squad. It was a part that was written for him and I suppose the pilot, Regan, must have gone well for it to be commissioned. He used to teach us self-defence from moves he learned at work. Dennis Waterman became a good friend of his.

Did you ever visit the set when filming?

No. I didn't live with him and weekends, when I saw him, were work free. I can't imagine it would have been much of a fun place for a little girl!

What impact did the success of the series have on John's career?

It had a huge impact. The theme tune was particularly catchy so it used to be sung to me walking down the street to school. That's when I realised he was famous

What was John's favourite episode to film?

I'm afraid I don't know. But he was always very proud of the fact that the police didn't always get their villains. That it was realistic.

What was it like growing up in the 70's with your dad being one of most popular actors on TV?

I was very proud of him. Sometimes he was recognised coming round to pick me up for the weekend in his blue MG. I was called "Sweeney Girl" by the local lads and sung to. But I never was allowed to watch the series myself. It was on too late!

Do you have any memories of John's appearance on *The Morecambe and Wise Show* with Dennis, and Eric and Ernie's appearance on *The Sweeney*?

The Morecambe and Wise Show was a favourite with our family so when they were asked to do the show dad was beside himself with excitement. It was like royalty. He came back with stories of awe and admiration for them, especially Eric Morecambe. I think that was one of the points where Dad felt he really was a success. He was a very modest and shy man but this was a great accolade for him. I have to say that's the one time I would have liked to have been on set: their episode of *The Sweeney*.

Part Two next issue.