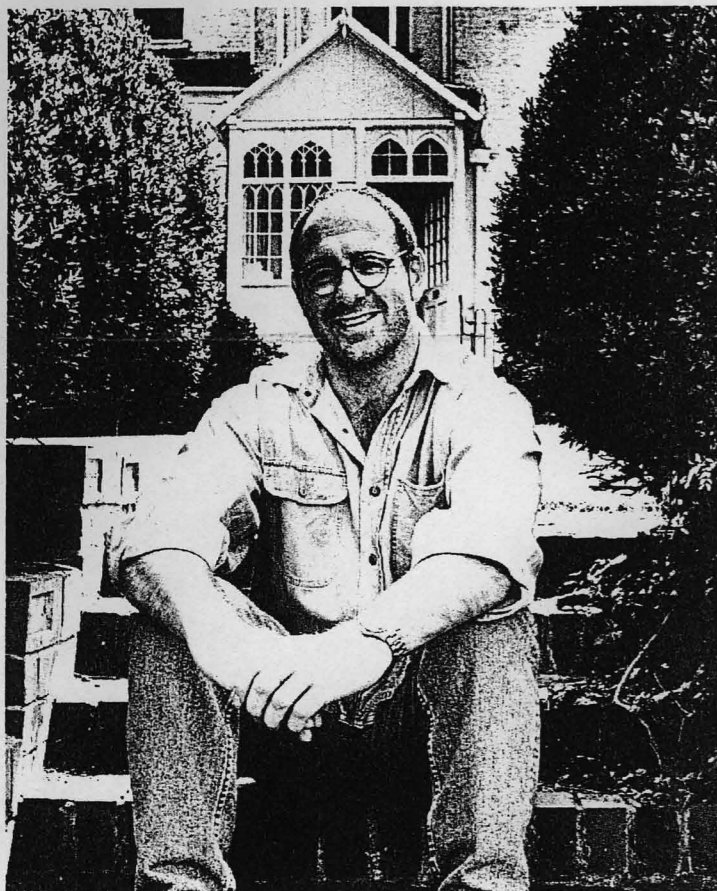


# Backbites



ELEANORE BERGMANN

## RELATIVELY SUCCESSFUL

Ruth Picardie goes for a Burton – Guy, that is

His name makes him sound like the hero of a Twenties novel. His look – five o'clock shadow, clippers set at No 2 – is Alexei Sayle without the menace. His accent, though he does a fine range of impersonations, is slightly Welsh, which gives the game away: Guy Masterson, actor, is Richard Burton's nephew.

But who says life is sweet for relatives of the rich and famous? In terms of work, Masterson, now 32, has been plagued by disaster. At 22, having moved to LA, he lost \$15,000 trying to set up a restaurant referral hotline – sadly too late for the 1984 Olympic Games. Sensibly, he gave up business for acting. After anglicising his name – he was born Guy Mastroianni – and doing walk-ons in *Dallas* and *The Golden Girls*, he won an LA Drama Critics award for *The Private Ear and the Public Eye*.

Determined to repeat his success in Britain, bad luck duly ensued: a tour of *The Importance of Being Earnest* collapsed; a feature film ran out of money. Masterson fired his agent and used his gold American Express card (left over from his days as an entrepreneur) to tour *The Boy's Own Story*, a one-man play about a soccer player. The reviews were great, but he lost £7,000. "I didn't anticipate the British theatre-going public's lack of belief that sport and theatre mix. I was playing to ten people, three people." To pay off his debts, he joined the ensemble of *Cyrano*, at the Haymarket Theatre in London last year.

Now he's back, in a one-man show of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. Masterson was going to perform all 69 characters in a straitjacket – the poem was originally titled *The World Was Mad* – but opted, on grounds of comfort, for pyjamas. For 93 minutes, his only props are a chair and a pair of Ray-Bans.

Naturally, things got off to a rocky start. "Opening night in the Isle of Sheppey in front of ten people and a dog and two of those people were

ambulance people ... I couldn't remember all the lines." Happily, the tour gathered momentum and the regional reviews have been raves. "... Masterful production ... prodigious talent," exclaimed the *Scotsman*; "Remarkable," proclaimed *Scotland on Sunday*. The show returns to Edinburgh for the festival, before going off-West End (at the Riverside Studios) in November.

The poem has been a lucky one for family: its inaugural radio broadcast, in 1954, made Burton a star, though Masterson didn't realise that Burton was famous for years: "He was just my uncle Richard. He drove a Rolls Royce. He came with my auntie Liz, occasionally, to the house ..."

Uncle was, in fact, great uncle; Richard Burton was brought up by his older sister, Sis, alongside her daughter, Marian, Guy's mother. While working on the set of Burton's *Alexander the Great*, Marian met Carlo Mastroianni, an Italian-American concert violinist. By the mid-Sixties, the family had settled in north London, with Sis and her husband in a bungalow in the garden and regular visits from the clan.

Burton became more than just another uncle for Masterson after Guy graduated with a third-class degree from Cardiff University with a bad case of unrequited love, and returned, depressed, to the family home. Burton, separated from his wife, Susan Hunt, and suffering from a pinched nerve in his back, had the same idea; uncle and nephew spent the summer together. They spent two weeks watching Wimbledon and then drove to Geneva, via Paris, in a bright red Mini Cooper "S".

The trip was a classic in male bonding: for the first few days Masterson and Burton talked about books, sport and television, and Burton regaled his nephew with acting anecdotes. Eventually the charm faded away. "He was vitriolic about loads of things, especially the business, what it had done and the pressure it had put on him," says Masterson. "We'd get out of the car and five minutes later there'd be a group of people around him." Little wonder then, that Burton warned: "I hope you don't have plans to become an actor. If you do, I won't help you."

Burton, who died in 1984, was true to his word. But sometimes talent will out. ●

Guy Masterson performs 'Under Milk Wood' at the Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh, from Monday

## HELL FOR LEATHER

George Barber gets to grips with *M Appeal*

*The Avengers* Weekend starts, for me at least, in the Three Horseshoes, a pub overlooking the lovely village green of Letchmore Heath, not far from St Albans.

"It's not just a picturesque little pub," says Sam, eyeing me up from behind unnerving crimson shades. "This pub, you see, was used in 'Man-Eater of Surrey Green', where Mrs Peel arrives at a village pub in her Lotus Elan, 'Dead Man's Treasure', where the sign outside holds a clue for Steed and Mrs Peel, and ..." Barely pausing for breath, Sam details a litany of classic televisual moments in which this pleasant, distinctly unsinister, watering hole has also cropped up.

Sam is one of the hardcore this weekend, willing, able and delighted to



display their knowledge of *Avengers*. And I mean all. I designed the credits, who wrote the scripts, who projected the slides, who polished the beer. The itinerary for this annual extravaganza is simple enough: 40 people book into a modest room in St Albans, visit key locations such as the pub – for key *Avengers* episodes, have a quiz night, watch videos in the lounge, share experiences, swap notes and a whole bang-shoot comes to a close with an *Avengers*-themed dinner. The hunt with a prize-giving-cur meal on the Sunday. The surprise, surprise – *Avengers* or, if you've already bought (and many have), posters. It seems harmless enough; a gathering of like-minded folk, a ramble through the English countryside, a chance to muse about John Steed and his string of assistants.

"I saw Diana Rigg dressed in leather – one of the best reasons why people get interested says, with a roguish smile. "In one episode, Mrs Peel is up with a dog collar and thigh-high ankle boots ..."

"Actually, do you know how I came to call her Emma Peel? Well, after Honor Blackman, one of the researchers made that the new person needed *Appeal* – as in 'man appeal' if you say 'M Appeal' fast, y'know, Emma Peel."

Which Diana Rigg clearly really do. In fact, no one else would. "Once *The New Avengers* started with Joanna Lumley went downhill. The original with Diana Rigg is far more uncompromising, weird and fun. There are fans of *The New Avengers* but I'm personally not so into it. bit crass." Mark goes on to talk about French, a timeless and enjoyable pastime in any English village.

"When Joanna Lumley took over, French money was put into it and they weren't so keen on the leather look, they wanted to go down and, since Joanna Lumley had been a model, what they wanted to see was lots of stocking tops, suspenders, legs and figure-skirts with high heels."

The *Avengies* like to think of themselves as soignée enthusiasts for the slickest entertainment television has had to offer, and

RONALD GRANT ARCHIVES