

‘Filmed Across the World, Made at Elstree’: How television made at Elstree in the 1960s and 70s brought a global experience to the small screen

The various studios of Elstree and Borehamwood were, in the 1960s and 70s, home to globetrotting adventurers including *The Saint*, *Department S*, *Jason King*, *Danger Man*, and *The Baron*.

While many of the shows made featured the globetrotting exploits of their leading characters – Simon Templar, international playboy; Jason King, Interpol agent and novelist; and John Drake, spy and fixer for international organisations – the production crew rarely, if ever, left the confines of the TV sound stages and backlot, except for a brief dash down Borehamwood high street or into rural Hertfordshire.

This paper will discuss the operations and technical methodologies used on a weekly basis by production crews in their attempts to recreate Rome, Paris, Madrid and even the Sahara Desert on small budgets, using stock footage and with limited materials.

During the 1960s, the studios of Elstree and Borehamwood produced some of the most adventurous and prolific television productions in the UK. Three major studio sites (all of them actually in Borehamwood, not in Elstree) – MGM British Studios, Associated British Productions (ABPC) and ATV Studios – were all producing television content 52 weeks of the year. “Elstree’s” output during this time was at its peak. Production crews at Elstree were able to make shows with an international flavour, while barely leaving the studio. Some of the people who worked on these productions have been interviewed over the last three years, and I have been recording these interviews in partnership with Elstree Screen Heritage to create an oral history archive we call The Elstree Project. Throughout this paper I will be referring often to some of this new source material.

Most active of all the companies producing or commissioning/distributing television in Elstree during this time was Lew Grade’s ITC Entertainment. Established in the 1950s and producing swashbuckler shows including *The Adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot* and *Sir Francis Drake*, ITC was able to establish a strong reputation for adventure drama serials.

Most of their previous shows had been historical dramas set in castles, forests or on sailing ships – and so were able to remain in-studio or on the backlot without too much difficulty. A sea backdrop with no land in sight is very simple to achieve, as is a cluster of trees (papier-mâché or otherwise!) to make a forest. However, beginning in 1959 with *Interpol Calling*, ITC began to move towards producing drama that was set in present day foreign locations, which their audience would need to be able to recognise. The first major hit in this genre was *Danger Man* – produced by ITC with

86 episodes across four series between 1960 – 1968.

Danger Man featured the exploits of spy John Drake, portrayed by Patrick McGoohan, as he worked as an international trouble fixer – originally for several secret service organisations within NATO, and later for the fictional British government agency M9. Being "international" meant he had to go to foreign locations - not something the budget for the show could afford. Each 50 minute episode cost up to approximately £30,000 to make, on 35mm black and white film. This would typically include rehearsals during the day and then filming in the evening - rather like a theatre production. And travel beyond Borehamwood, let alone Hertfordshire, was most unlikely; it just wasn't in the budget or the schedule.

The pilot episode was a rare exception - pilots often cost more money to make, with slightly higher production values, as a way of impressing TV stations into purchasing the series. [Stepping outside of Elstree for a moment, the pilot for *LOST* cost so much that Disney fired the exec who actually commissioned it.] Written by Brian Clemens (who would also write the pilot for *The Avengers* and go on to be the showrunner for that series) the pilot for *Danger Man*, *A View from the Villa*, was set in Italy. Even the slightly larger budget for a pilot show wasn't going to stretch to traveling abroad, so instead the episode was shot in a relatively unknown hotel resort called Portmeirion, on the Welsh coast. The location must have impressed the star, Patrick McGoohan...

Later episodes rarely left the studio lot, and instead a basic rule was established as to how to convince the viewer that their hero was in a different country. Speaking to The Elstree Project, producer of *The Saint* Johnny Goodman had this to say about foreign locations:

We made a lot of use of library material because if you're gonna shoot a scene in Berlin, all you use is a stock shot of the main street. Pan up to a hotel and cut straight inside. Once you cut inside, into the studio, people are totally convinced you're in Berlin, you know, so there's nothing very special about that but that's the way we shot television.

This became the standard rule of thumb for all shows which followed. Stock footage, and using a caption to say "Paris", was cheaper than going abroad. Of course, this had limitations - you could only use "picture postcard" footage of cities, and the actors wouldn't ever be able to appear in the footage, nor would the director have any control over the action in a recording. Kubrick, particularly in his films *Barry Lyndon* and *Eyes Wide Shut*, made extensive use of Second Unit photography to shoot the backs of doubles in front of the actual locations, and then cut to show the real actor on the set. Of course you then can't show too much of the background - especially if your television budget doesn't allow you to build many backdrops. Johnny Goodman told us:

The technique, of course, was to try and shoot very big close-ups of people.

So the background is just passing background, but we got away with it.

Elstree was particularly a good choice for television production because it already had a large set for a town on the studio backlot. Most productions made use of the backlot because it was much cheaper to do so, and it enabled the scenic artists the chance to employ a few of their skills with clever set-dressing tricks. Johnny Goodman used it extensively for the international travels of Simon Templar:

When we moved into Elstree there'd been a feature film there. I'm not sure which film it was but they had a pretty big set. A small village/town, and had all kinds of buildings and we didn't tear it down, it stayed up there. And nearly every episode of The Saint, of course, took place in Barbados or Hong Kong, and so it was a question of changing the signs and changing the shutters on a few windows. But, I mean, we shot on the backlot and it, it played every city in the world and worked very well. We had funny times. I remember sort of one day even using the door to the camera room. We're shooting through a potted palm - it's supposed to be Cannes in the middle of summertime. There's two young girls in a bikini, obviously frozen bloody stiff coming out of this door which was actually the camera room with a sign over the top which said "Nice Airport" or something, and we're shooting through a potted palm. And so those, you couldn't get away with that today, but we got away with those kind of tricks.

Changing the signs on the shop fronts from one language to another was good enough - perhaps not to actually convince an audience in the 1960s that the production was really in Paris, or Rome, or Madrid - but to make the story believable. Looking back on the technique more than thirty years later, Brian Clemens found it quite comical!

That was used a great deal by Berman and Baker for 'The Saint' and the other things that they did there. Because they just changed the sign from 'butchers' to 'charcuterie' and you were in France... [Laughs] Or put a palm tree in - the famous palm tree... [Laughs] That was the South of France! [Laughs]

As did Johnny Goodman:

You, you change, just change the signs, change the shutters. Other shows being made at the same time would have used the backlot the same as we did. It wasn't exclusive to us. It was part of the studio facility, you know. And you, obviously you, you would liaise with the production manager on the other shows to make sure you didn't turn up on, on the same day with, you know, "Excuse me, this is Hong Kong, not Berlin".

However, after a while, and with many shows all making use of the same backlot flats, eagle-eyed viewers could easily spot the same buildings appearing again and again. So instead of just sticking to the fake buildings around the studios, the production crews started to make use of the actual studio buildings too. The MGM

British Studios clock tower - with its distinctive white art-deco exterior - made numerous appearances in ITC and other Elstree-based productions. It was the science lab and also a hospital in the first episode of *The Invisible Man*, it's a Spanish customs building, and an airport building in some of its many appearances in *Danger Man*. Over on the ABPC lot, the opening episode of *Department S* makes use of the scene dock at the rear of stages 7, 8 and 9 – and the adjoining office building – to double for an airport entrance.

Also the backlot, while used continuously for a number of years, wasn't always able to offer up the best of working conditions. Roger Moore recalled:

I suppose when I moved on to other things, bigger things, I suddenly realised what hell we'd been through on the backlot. Sort of, in the pouring rain, Bob would say "it doesn't matter it's raining; unless it's backlit we won't see it". And we even had sets that didn't have a roof in so I could walk from the street into an office. It was... not big budgets.

Budgets may have been small, but they didn't hinder the imagination of the writers. Brian Clemens had his own particular rule about how to work with a small budget but still aim big:

Well my theory on 'The Avengers' was if we couldn't do something properly – the analogy I used was if we can't do the sinking of the Titanic, I want the very best row-boat disaster you've ever seen! So that's cutting your cloth according to... And it worked every time. It would work every time, that mindset, really.

Many shows would feature car chases and so local roads around the town would also guest star in episodes as spies, villains and all manner of crooks would attempt to get away from our heroes; and local buildings would feature as the cars departed or arrived. In order to film the stars "driving", a double of the car would be filmed in the studio against a rear screen for projection, blue backdrop or a revolving drum. The car double would be used for all the car interiors, and so it was able to have the sides and windows taken out. While it may have been an additional production expense to have a second car, the benefit of being able to film in a controlled environment and regardless of the actual weather – as well as allowing for controlled lighting – made for much greater production savings. On *The Saint* the production expense was even less, as Johnny Goodman recalls:

I was talking to a friend of mine who was in the Special Branch, in the police, and he said "Here I saw a car the other day driving in London, new car, never heard of it before, it was very sleek, a sports car, called a Volvo or something". So I mentioned this to Roger Moore and he said "Well, I'll, I'll have a look". So he went down to the showrooms. He phones me up, he said "Delightful people. They're going to give, prepare one immediately for us in white and to give us the mock-up of the, um, well not the mock-up, the actual (cab...) of the Volvo for the studio use for when we're shooting interiors". And that is how we got the

Volvo which became, you know, sort of, um, their, their, their master stroke because after that, Volkos really, really hit the scene.

Second unit shoots would allow for a few exterior car chases, with a camera unit sent out to film the action from a suitable enough distance so as to not show stunt drivers – rather than the actors – at the wheel. Then it was purely a matter of cutting together the studio car shots with the few exterior shots and you had a pretty convincing car chase. Roger Moore directed some of the later episodes of *The Saint* and remembers the different ways of shooting car scenes:

Well it had to be fast. We usually started on what, on a blue backing day - finish on a blue backing day - meaning we'd do all the car interiors, interiors of the cars. It was very difficult to persuade people to take a camera out into a car and shoot, which I successfully did actually. Erm... because it wasn't done, it was always much better to do it on stage.

Johnny Goodman describes the process of filming with the drum:

Um, you know, we're doing a scene example one day, there was the mock-up of the Saint's car and the Saint's driving at a hundred miles an hour. We had a revolving drum behind it. It was very corny in those days. You know, it was just a painted drum with, if it was a town shot, it would be buildings, or if it was the country it was leaves. And he's driving and suddenly there's a cut on the screen and the Saint's no longer driving, but the propman, or the camera assistant's sitting there driving at a hundred miles an hour, and running alongside holding on to the car is the Saint. And, er, suddenly the Saint puts a bit of paper in which says 'Stop'. And the guy looks up and he's still driving and Roger Moore's still running alongside at a (hundred miles) ... puts another bit of paper which says 'Why?' with a big question. And a third bit comes in and says 'My cock's caught in the door'. Cut. And so, you know, this is, this is some of the things that Roger Moore got up to which sometimes annoyed, um, Monty (Berman) wasn't quite as, um, easy-going as Bob was. Bob had a great sense of humour but Monty would say "Send Mr Moore an invoice for", you know "two hundred feet of film, film stock and processing". I didn't but, you know.

Working under relatively primitive conditions and tight budgets, production crews faced a huge challenge to convince audiences to suspend their disbelief and accept, albeit briefly, that they were watching adventures filmed in exotic foreign locations.

In this paper I've let the TV veterans we've interviewed for The Elstree Project describe in their own words how they used a combination of shooting on a permanent backlot, selective filming on locations just beyond the studio gates and their technical skills – and guile – to meet that challenge. And as a bonus they have left us a comprehensive guide to what Borehamwood and vicinity looked like in the 1960's and '70s.

So how well did they succeed? I believe that the continued popularity of these shows up to half a century later proves that the production crews of the studios of Elstree and Borehamwood did indeed bring a global experience to the small screen.