

MAN OF MYSTERY!

An Interview with Nathaniel Parker

After seven seasons of sleuthing amidst sparks flying, mismatched Scotland Yard duo Detective Thomas Lynley and Sergeant Barbara Havers will solve their final case this summer (the series was cancelled by the BBC). Since 2001, *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries* have found a loyal audience around the world, with Lynley recognized for his crime-fighting prowess, his star-crossed love life and his undeniably sweet ride (a 1968 Bristol 410).

Nathaniel Parker has played Inspector Lynley since the series premiered. An accomplished actor, Parker also has also appeared in MASTERPIECE productions of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Piece of Cake* and *Bleak House*.

In an interview with MASTERPIECE MYSTERY's Tina Vaz, Parker ponders Lynley's final episodes, talks about how co-star Sharon Small became like a sister, and imagines his own ending for the series.

Q: How did the role of Inspector Lynley come about, and how did you prepare for it?

A: I was approached by the producer, Ruth Baumgarten, before she had a script. I was intrigued, but I was concerned that we not replicate the TV coppers that were already out there. I love John Thaw in *Inspector Morse*, but we couldn't have Lynley be an old curmudgeon who drinks whisky and dates a different woman every week. I thought he needed a compelling back story of his own that could parallel the investigations. When I read the books, of course, that's exactly what Elizabeth does. She parallels the characters' home lives and work lives very clearly.

I admit that I was slightly nervous when I got to about page 17 of the first book and saw that Lynley had an "aristocratic chin." Being a typical actor, I'm rather worried about my chin, so I put down the book for a week or two before I picked it up again!

Q: Were there challenges or advantages to playing a character based on a novel?

A: Yes. One of the things I had to contend with is that Elizabeth is very popular and she's got a lot of people reading her books who have definite ideas about what Inspector Lynley should look like. I think it was a surprise to her, even, to see somebody who wasn't blonde and blue-eyed play him. But, I think the essence of the character was always much more important than the look, and the essence of the character played quite easily for me.

Q: How did you keep the character fresh over seven years?

A: One has to be careful when doing a series not to become lackadaisical and take things for granted. I was quite strict with myself about making sure that I didn't get lazy and that there was always a challenge ahead. With *Lynley*, there were always new actors to work with, new relationships to make, new paths for the character to take. Having three different actresses play Helen, his wife, over the course of the series certainly kept things interesting!

Q: Audiences may be surprised by some of Lynley's behavior this season. What was it like to play a character you've known for so long hitting "rock bottom"?

A: I hope that viewers are slightly shocked. If they're not, I've been doing it wrong all these years! When we first see Lynley, his life is falling apart. He's lost his wife, he's living alone, and he's drowning in the bottle. So, you have sympathy for him straight away. Without giving anything away, that sympathy is short-lived. As an actor, it was great fun to be able to show different and unexpected sides of his character.

Q: Did you know Sharon Small, your onscreen partner as Sergeant Havers, before you started working together?

A: No, I'd never seen her work. Early on, she came out to my house for a visit. At the time, she was moving into a small flat, and I had a nice house, having been in the business a good 10 years longer and therefore being more established. She came in and looked at our house and immediately turned into Havers! We hit it off right away and became good mates. I think of her like my little sister. The worst thing for me about finishing *Lynley* is not working with Sharon five months a year. She's lovely, and we had a wonderful time together.

Q: Did the two of you discuss how you would have liked the series to end?

A: We didn't. The ending of the series came as a surprise to us, so we didn't have an opportunity. I would have ended it with Lynley and Havers holding hands and walking off into the sunset, but I don't think Sharon would have let me go anywhere near her. I tried kissing her once, as Lynley, and she ran a mile!

Q: You've said that the final episode, *Know Thine Enemy*, is one of the best *Lynley Mysteries* ever. Why?

A: It deals with the investigation in a very different way. It begins as a whodunit but quickly becomes a why- and which-one-dunit. It's more psychological than previous episodes, and it takes longer to get inside the heads of the characters. It's also a much smaller cast, because we haven't got a lot of possible suspects and there are no real red herrings. It's more a race against time. I don't think that if we had carried on with the series we could have done many more like it, but this one works very well indeed. James D'Arcy (*Mansfield Park*) and Honeysuckle Weeks (*Foyle's War*) were fabulous to work with.

Q: You were quite a scene-stealer in *Bleak House*, which was a huge hit here in the United States. Can you share any backstage stories?

A: I was terribly nervous for *Bleak House*. Skimpole was a role I had no handle on at all. It was the first time in my life I'd ever been on set not knowing what I was about to do. Normally, the costume, the hair, or the makeup gets you in the part and you know what you're going to do. But this time, I didn't know at all, and finally—thankfully—it just sort of came out. I remember people coming up to me in the streets soon after the series aired and quoting my line, "Oh, I am but a child, I am but a child!"

Q: You decided to become an actor when you were nine. What appealed to you then and what do you like about acting now?

A: The reason I decided at nine to become an actor is the same reason I still do it. It's just a big, fantastically exciting game. As a child, I wanted to be a film star, an astronaut, a doctor, a king and anything else I could think up. Acting allows me to be all of those things and more.

Q: British drama is filled with memorable detectives, from Miss Marple to Inspector Morse, from DCI Tennison to DCS Foyle. Why is the archetype so popular, and how does Lynley fit in?

A: The characters are all captivating and distinct. Foyle is a classic 1945 copper. Morse is from the old English upper middle class. With Tennison and Marple, you have one woman who is going through life in a helter-skelter way, trying to prove herself, and the other who is possibly the most laidback person in the world. Lynley is different from any character that's been done before. One of the newspapers in London never took to the idea that it was possible to have a lord who's a copper. They used to criticize the series for not being like *Hill Street Blues*, but we weren't trying to be like *Hill Street Blues* or *Inspector Morse*. As the series has gone on, of course, people have made comparisons to Morse and Lewis. I think Lynley and Havers are right up there with them, and probably more fun!

The Inspector Lynley Mysteries, Series VII, is a coproduction of BBC Worldwide and WGBH Boston. They are based on the novels by Elizabeth George.

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