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The Monday interview

Weren't you the bloke in...

He is frozen in a generation's mind as the frizzy-haired tough guy from the 70s TV show *The Professionals*. Now Martin Shaw is back, playing an idealistic, white-haired judge in a legal drama for the BBC. So has he escaped his most famous role at last? Simon Hattenstone finds out.

Monday November 26, 2001
[The Guardian](#)

Martin Shaw sits at the table in the London bar, rigid with disapproval. "Well this isn't the most auspicious of starts." I'm 25 minutes late, and he dislikes interviews at the best of times. I apologise, tell him that the West End is partially shut down because they are putting the Christmas lights on. His lips swell with petulance. "I have come all the way from Norfolk and have managed to get here on time."

He wouldn't have been here in the first place if it hadn't been for GF Newman. Shaw stars as Judge John Deed in his new series. Newman, who wrote *Law and Order* and *The Nation's Health*, is one of TV's finest writers, and has been conspicuous by his absence in the dumbing-down years. As I tell Shaw how much I love Newman's work, he softens. "We espouse a lot of similar principles," he says. Both are vegetarian, both mix radical politics with spiritualism, and both have a compulsion to tell the truth, however deadly. "Yes, I have a protesting soul," Shaw says before erupting into self-conscious laughter. "Can a soul protest?"

Shaw, 56, made his name on stage at the Royal Court and became famous as Ray Doyle in *The Professionals* - Britain's *Starsky and Hutch*. Bodie, played by Lewis Collins, and Doyle were butch, hard-living, tight-T-shirted CI5 agents. At its peak, in 1980, *The Professionals* was watched by 17.6m people.

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Today Shaw's hair is whitey-grey and his face seems shrunken behind the huge specs, but he is still handsome. I tell him I thought he would be similar to Doyle; a megalad. He looks disappointed. "Really? Oh. Could hardly be further from the truth." If you went back to his mid-20s, he says, you might find someone closer to Doyle. Shaw came to prominence in the age of the kitchen-sink hero. "When I was young, the badge of your trade was to be a hellraiser. There was Peter O'Toole, Richard Harris and Nicol Williamson."

So he drank. Beer, whisky - you name it, he put it away. "It was a way of fitting in with whatever environment I was in." He says one of the reasons they drank was because they found it difficult to be emotionally honest when sober.

The Professionals made Shaw a household name, and he hated it. For years he wouldn't talk about the show. At one point he stopped repeats being shown by refusing to sign for what he regarded as a derisory repeats fee. Newspapers suggested he was ungrateful, or that he thought himself too grand for showbiz fame. Neither was true.

Didn't he ever enjoy it? "No. Dodgy ground here... very thin ice." He often stops himself by saying something is dodgy ground before spilling his guts out. "But there is something about that show that attracts negativity. Since it finished 20 years ago [the series lasted four and a half years], I don't think I've ever seen an accurate comment from myself on it."

Let's have a comment to report accurately, then. "I will give you two: a negative one and a positive one. The negative is that it disenfranchised my career before it. Prior to The Professionals, my career had been rounded and successful and blessed. But then, because of its success, it was not only as if my career had started there, it was as if that's what I did, so there was no longer the opportunity to do what I had done before. It was as if my personality had been appropriated. It was like being an Action Man doll. No humanity, just a function.

"Anyway, enough of the negative shit," he says. "The positive thing is that it's less of an obsessive pop star thing with people. It's more, 'Hey, you're my childhood, I watched you when I was a kid, I had your poster on the wall, I can't believe how great it is to meet you. Wow!' "

Now, finally, he can see the humour in the show. I ask him whether he appreciated the homoerotic bent of Bodie and Doyle at the time. He smiles through chipped incisors. "I'd never spotted it. The Comic Strip did a spoof, The

Bullshitters. It was brilliant and it ended up with Bodie and Doyle rolling around on a rubbish heap in their underpants snogging each other."

Perhaps you need to know what drives Shaw to understand why such fame was purgatory for him. A few years before the series began, he had reordered his life. "I was doing Polanski's Macbeth, deep into that hedonism, thinking, me, I'm successful, I'm in a Polanski movie. I was a friend of Polanski. It couldn't have got any better." Then he took a fresh look at himself and was repelled by what he saw.

An old friend of his, also working on the film, converted him overnight to vegetarianism. He then introduced him to his Indian guru, Charan Singh. What appealed to him about the guru? "It is no different from falling in love. It was what I wanted to commit myself to, and its attraction was so powerful that giving up meat, fish and eggs and alcohol and mind-altering drugs was no problem at all. It's not a religious belief, but it is a spiritual belief. The guru is there as an intermediary to guide you to the higher power that mere mortals don't have access to. Its sole purpose is to prepare you for merging, or if you like to get out of the earth's plane, because this is not where we belong." He blurts to a sudden stop. "I sound like David Icke. Ahahahahaha."

He doesn't, actually. Just as his spiritualism was not conducive to celebrity, neither was his socialism. Although he says that, as he gets older, he tends to fixate about smaller things - the packaging of cheese, automated telephones that leave you hanging for ages - he hasn't lost sight of what he regards as the bigger picture.

Which wasn't always easy to do when he was surrounded by "stars" bathing in their own regard. "I don't like people who give themselves an inflated sense of importance simply because they do a certain job. If you are Stephen Hawking, if you are Mother Teresa, even if you are Tony Benn, you can afford to sit back and be a little bit pleased with yourself. But not for being a fucking actor."

Benn is one of few politicians he admires. As for big business, "It remains a source of disgust. It has long been an adage that people will shrug and say, 'That's business,' as though it's OK. You can't say, 'Oh well, that's child molestation.' You can't shrug and say, 'Oh well, that's murder.' "

After *The Professionals*, Shaw withdrew from the limelight. It was partly a conscious decision, partly because he wasn't offered decent work. Today he lives in Norfolk in an old Quaker house with his third wife, TV presenter Vicky


Kimm, and a few cats and hens. Despite his advice to the contrary, all three of his children have become actors.


Three years ago he considered giving up acting. Why? "When I despair it's about dumbing down: the fact that the measure of excellence in our job nowadays is not how moved I was, how truthful it was, how much I enjoyed it; the measure of excellence is how under budget it was, how quickly it was delivered, what the ratings were."

I ask him what he dislikes about himself. He quickly says that he has a propensity to negativity. But there is so much that is positive in his life: his wife, his kids, his beliefs, his role as sexed-up consultant in ITV's A&E, the work he's doing now with Newman. Suddenly his face is ablaze with hope. "It is amazing that we've got GF Newman back on prime-time," he says, like a man who has just witnessed a miracle. And what could be better than playing Judge John Deed, an idealist who has lived some and who still wants to change the world for the better?

- Judge John Deed is on BBC1 at 8.30pm tonight.

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