

FILM; Sorry, Uma, There's Only One Emma

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THE great tragedy in the lives of men of a certain age and outlook is that there is one, and only one, Emma Peel. As embodied, quite literally and quite luminously, by Diana Rigg in the arch 1960's spy-fi show "The Avengers," she was the first and arguably the last woman on television to combine sensuality with ironic intellect. Tall and cool and defiantly self-reliant, Mrs. Peel -- "the widow of a famous test pilot" -- was fluent in nine languages (including kung fu), could tie knots in mastermind-bending schemes and shoot the cork off a champagne bottle at 50 paces.

In two seasons of battling eccentric British megalomaniacs bent on taking over the world, she always struck while the irony was hot. Her banter was fierce, often distancing. When Mrs. Peel's genteel partner, John Steed, offered her services to an enemy agent, the agent scoffed: "She is your choice?"

"I am my choice," corrected the emancipated Emma.

The agent, respectfully: "It will be a pleasure working with you, Mrs. Peel."

Emma, insouciantly: "It will be a change."

The generous scoops of Ms. Rigg's cheeks gave Mrs. Peel a mysterious, painterly beauty: on a color television set, her face was all porcelain and shadow, dusted with roses. Her smile was crinkly; her large, almost-black eyes, knowing; her voice, darkly husky and swooping, with the ring of Baccarat crystal.

With the jury already rigged, Uma Thurman faces an impossible task portraying Emma Peel in the film version of "The Avengers" opening on Friday. How can Uma compete with Uber-woman?

If you were 14 in 1966, you could endure only a certain amount of Avenging without contracting an enormous crush on Diana Rigg. During my college days, I was a hajji in the Cult of Diana, stalking her to theatrical productions on two continents. In London, I saw her invoke the spirits of the night as Lady Macbeth, and swing from a papier-mache moon while singing "Sentimental Journey" in Tom Stoppard's "Jumpers." At the St. James on Broadway, I watched her witchy, worldly Celimene in an updated "Misanthrope." From my redoubt in the eighth row of the balcony, I was rapt in adoration. Like her Emma Peel, Rigg's Celimene was a stylishly capable woman forged from flashes of fire and touches of ice. I snapped out of my reverie midway through the first act after realizing my entire row was filled with rapt, adoring Peel stalkers. In fact, the entire theater was packed with them. It was sweet and touching and utterly pathetic.

Women of a certain age could be similarly smitten. A friend who grew up in Ireland in the 50's and 60's says Mrs. Peel and Mother Julian (superior of Holy Child Lower School) were her role models. "Both were well-dressed -- at least pre-Vatican II," she explains, "and both were independent of men."

The name Emma Peel was appropriated from the British film industry expression "man-appeal" or "M-appeal." And in the boxed video sets of the series just released by the A&E network, Emma's still got appeal. "Diana is absolutely tantalizing," says Patrick Macnee, her trusty Steed. "When you see her throw a man over her shoulder, and then casually push back her auburn hair, you cannot help but love her."

Rigg had a splendid foil in Macnee, who played the competent, slightly stuffy Steed with Edwardian aplomb. Steed was older than Peel by at least three centuries. "He was an old fogy who delighted in Emma's newness, her nowness and her intelligence, while clearly enjoying her repartee and beauty," says

Toby Miller, a New York University film professor who teaches "The Avengers" and even wrote a book on the show that was published earlier this year.

Steed's own appeal may have had something to do with his floorwalker foppery: if a bank-manager type could be Mrs. Peel's pal, there was hope for us 14-year-olds. Ralph Fiennes, who plays Steed in the movie, is no old foggy, and his savoir-faire is more like a waiter's offering you a grinding of pepper than Macnee's clubby MI-5 professionalism.

Rigg was actually the second of Steed's four female partners. She followed Honor Blackman, who dominated the show for two seasons in black leather cat-suits and left to become Pussy Galore in "Goldfinger." "Leather clings to her like an animal's skin," Macnee once said of Blackman's allure. "My theory is that man, as a hunter, wants to get at the meat underneath." Camille Paglia surely has something to say about this theory, but frankly, I'd rather not know what.

Rigg was younger, wrier and hipper than Blackman: her wardrobe not only included zippered leather, but Courreges couture. And she really could act, having come to television by way of repertory. A five-year veteran of the Royal Shakespeare Company, she had been Cordelia to Paul Scofield's Lear. "For all Rigg's classical training, her Emma Peel was ultramodern," says Miller. "She was not frozen in the picture-past of Britain."

"The Avengers" played into Americans' curious mix of awe and envy for British "cultivation." "Mrs. Peel was the ideal broker of the U.K. into the swinging world of the 60's," Miller says. "She exuded the same style, confidence and beauty that were central to the abiding appeal of James Bond."

Then again, her lack of physical intimacy with Steed was almost anti-Bondian. Over their 52 episodes together, the two rarely kissed, barely touched and never stopped addressing each other as Steed and Mrs. Peel. Theirs was a subtle eroticism. Mrs. Peel never unzipped.

Today, after more than a century of films and a half-century of television, it's hard to think of any screen character as smart and strong and sexy as Emma Peel. Rigg's feminist femme fatale remained steadfast and unapologetic, even when faced with mortal peril. In one episode she was apparently sent back through time to 16th-century England, where a mad sadist stuck her in a stockade, threatened her with hot irons and accused her of being "a heretic, a bawd, a witch -- designed to drive a man to lust."

Locked in that powerless place, the unconquerable Mrs. Peel looked up, tossed back her hair and quipped, "You should see me in 400 years."

Photos: AVENGING ANGEL -- "You cannot help but love her," Patrick Macnee said of Diana Rigg, his co-star in "The Avengers." (ABC); PRETENDERS? -- Ralph Fiennes as John Steed and Uma Thurman as Emma Peel in the new movie "The Avengers." (David Appleby/Warner Brothers)