

Barry Morse

Prolific British actor remembered for pursuing The Fugitive across America

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Today's British actors, including Hugh Laurie and Anna Friel, who have found success on US television playing American characters, follow in the footsteps of the actor and director Barry Morse, who has died aged 89. As the relentless detective Lieutenant Philip Gerard in *The Fugitive* (1963-67), Morse became a national and international figure for his portrayal of a policeman with a quest that took him all over the United States.

He was tracking David Janssen, as Dr Richard Kimble, wrongly convicted on flimsy evidence of murdering his wife. Kimble had escaped from a derailed train taking him to death row on Gerard's watch, and his only hope of proving his innocence lay in trying to track down the true killer. As he took jobs and tried to establish other identities, the lieutenant was always one step behind him, and a menacing, permanent presence in the opening credits. However, Morse took an active part in only 38 of the 120 episodes.

The enormously prolific actor was born in a flat over his father's shop in Bethnal Green, east London. By his own admission, he was a failure at school, but by "a series of flukes and coincidences", he discovered acting and auditioned for Rada in 1935, winning the Leverhulme scholarship.

He spent four years from 1937 in repertory, largely in the north and playing over 200 roles. While in rep in Peterborough in 1939, he met fellow actor Sydney Sturgess; they married later that year, and remained together for 60 years. His West End debut came in *School for Slavery* in 1942. Two years later, he was directed by Sir John Gielgud in *Crisis in Heaven*. His plan to enlist in the Royal Navy was thwarted by a bout of tuberculosis.

A visit to his wife's relatives in Canada in the summer of 1951 coincided with the expansion of TV drama there. After moving with his family to Canada, Morse won the best television actor award five times and ventured into directing and radio work. His CBC colleagues included Sydney Newman, later to revolutionise British TV drama, William Shatner and Patrick Macnee.

In American television, Morse demonstrated a wider range than fellow British actors, who tended to play "stiff-upper-lip" caricatures. His roles included east European drug smugglers, boozy Irish writers, and devious American politicians, before he was cast as Gerard. Lean in build, with a jaw often clenched in

determination, Morse's baldness accentuated his high forehead, giving him the face of someone seemingly always deep in thought. He was an expert at stealing scenes in this way with small pursings of his lips while other actors had all the dialogue.

Morse's film roles were surprisingly few, though along with Peter Ustinov he supported Will Hay in *The Goose Steps Out* (1942). The most unlikely role of his career was an ageing porn star named Har Poon in *The Telephone Book* (1971), an underground satire made by some of Andy Warhol's collaborators.

On stage, Morse directed Charles Dyer's *Staircase* - then seen as a breakthrough in the depiction of gay life - which had its Broadway premiere at the Biltmore Theatre in 1968. William Goldman compared the production to "a charade performed by happily married daddies", and it ran for less than two months. Morse did better the following year, succeeding Alec McCowen in *Hadrian VII*, at the Helen Hayes Theatre. In 1992, he was in a revival of George Bernard Shaw's *The Philanderer*, at the Hampstead Theatre.

With his American television experience, Morse seemed an ideal choice for the many action series made by the ATV subsidiary ITC. After an episode of *The Saint* (1966), he was a regular in *The Adventurer* (1972), a quite dreadful series in which the star Gene Barry sported clothes and hairstyles 20 years too young for him. As a tweedy, cricket-loving power-broker, Morse seemed to be acting in a different show entirely. *The Zoo Gang* (1974), in which he featured among several screen veterans playing second world war resistance fighters reunited to right wrongs in the south of France, ended after just six episodes. The writing was thought to be so unsatisfactory that it prompted Sir John Mills to bring the rest of the cast out on strike.

Scripts were again the problem with *Space 1999* (1975-76). Frustrated by the preference of Gerry and Sylvia Anderson for special effects over characterisation, Morse and lead Martin Landau once played a scene "as if we were puppets". He was absent from the second series, and whenever he was asked by fans what had happened to his character, he usually replied that he "fell off the back of the moon".

More fruitfully, and all for the BBC in 1972, Morse was in Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*, with Lee Remick; *Poet Game*, with Anthony Hopkins as a thinly disguised Dylan Thomas; and *The Golden Bowl*, a serial from Henry James' novel. In *Whoops Apocalypse*, David Renwick and Andrew Marshall's 1982 satire for LWT, he played Johnny Cyclops, a former movie star elected American president, and held his own against a cast including John Cleese, Rik Mayall and Alexei Sayle. His last TV roles included *Waking the Dead* (2001), and the daytime drama *Doctors* (2002).

His wife died from Parkinson's disease in 1999; he had done a lot of fundraising work since her diagnosis in 1986. His son Hayward and daughter Melanie followed him to Rada and into transatlantic acting careers. She predeceased him, in 2005. Two years later, he published an autobiography, *Remember with Advantages*.

- Herbert 'Barry' Morse, actor and director, born June 10 1918; died February 2 2008