

# Barry Morse: Actor who found fame as Philip Gerard, police chief in 'The Fugitive'

The Independent

Tuesday, 5 February 2008

When Barry Morse signed up to play Lt Philip Gerard, the police officer obsessed with capturing Dr Richard Kimble in *The Fugitive*, little did he know that he would become a part of television history. The programme, starring David Janssen as a man on the run after falsely being convicted of murdering his wife, was US television's first series successfully to use the cliffhanger device at the end of each episode – and became a phenomenon around the world, with viewers eager to catch the next instalment.

Gerard was left unconscious while escorting Kimble to jail on a train that was derailed, allowing the prisoner to escape and scour the United States in search of the real murderer, a mysterious, one-armed man whom he had seen fleeing his house after committing the crime. As he did so, he took a series of jobs and false identities. Although the policeman's shadow was ever-present throughout the 120 episodes (1963-67) of constant tension, and he was seen in the opening credits every week, Morse actually acted in only 38 of them.

Soon recognised as an anti-hero, Gerard was dubbed "the most hated man in America", but Morse succeeded in portraying the two sides of the police officer – a public servant dedicated to tracking down a man convicted of murder, thus colluding with a miscarriage of justice, but occasionally showing signs of doubt.

Twice, Kimble rescued Gerard from certain death and, on another occasion, the fugitive unintentionally kidnapped his son. When the boy was released, and questioned the doctor's guilt, Gerard simply responded that, although he might have been wrong, Kimble had to be apprehended.

Having been told that *The Fugitive* was influenced by *Les Misérables*, in which Inspector Javert pursues Jean Valjean, Morse studied Victor Hugo's novel in an attempt to make his own character as three-dimensional as possible. "I've always thought that we in the arts are all 'shoplifters'," he said. "Once you acknowledge that, when you set out on a shoplifting expedition, you go always to Cartier's and never to Woolworth's!"

Gerard's ruthless manhunt ended with a two-part finale in which Kimble chased the real murderer – played by Bill Raisch – to the top of a water tower. As the killer confessed, Gerard arrived, realised he had been wrong and shot the man, saving Kimble's life.

Such was the popularity and compulsive nature of *The Fugitive* that the final episode was screened around the world on the same day, to keep the outcome secret. In the programme's homeland, 72 per cent of all Americans watched – a record until the conclusion of the "Who shot J.R.?" scenario in *Dallas* in 1980 – and, in Britain, more than 20 million tuned in. Morse found out the ripple effect once while eating out. "I was

dining in a London restaurant," he recalled, "when the waiter brought me a note. It read, 'Kimble is in the kitchen.'"

He was born Herbert Morse, in Hammersmith, London in 1918, and was brought up in Shoreditch. On leaving school at the age of 15 he worked as an errand boy, delivering samples for a glass manufacturer. Aided by a £3-a-week scholarship and his talent for mimicry, he became the youngest student at that time to enter Rada, after an audition watched by Dame Sybil Thorndike, who described his performance as "curiously touching".

Barry Morse made his professional début in the People's Theatre production *If I Were King* while at Rada and finished his time at drama school by taking the title role in *Henry V* for a Royal Command Performance in front of George VI and Queen Elizabeth. Then, in 1937, he made his first television appearances in some of the BBC's earliest broadcasts.

Two years later, Morse married the Canadian-born actress Sydney Sturgess, after meeting her in rep at Peterborough, but his attempt to enlist in the Navy during the Second World War failed when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which was subsequently cured. He made his film début as a stooge to Will Hay in the wartime espionage comedy *The Goose Steps Out* (1942) and followed it with character roles in pictures such as *Thunder Rock* (1942) and *When We Are Married* (1943).

Morse's West End début came in *School for Slavery* (Westminster Theatre, 1942), which he followed with *Crisis in Heaven* (Lyric Theatre, 1944) directed by John Gielgud. In 1951, Morse, his wife and their two children emigrated to Canada, settling in Toronto when CBC introduced the country's first television service the following year, with Morse working as an actor, producer and director.

Over the years, he won Canada's Best TV Actor award five times, but he was also prolific on radio, most notably acting in and producing the drama series *A Touch of Greasepaint* (1954-68), a chronicle of actors down the years that inspired his own one-man touring show, *Merely Players*, starting in 1984.

Morse split his career between Canada, the United States and Britain. On the Broadway stage, he was Tom Richards in the short-lived *Hide and Seek* (Ethel Barrymore Theatre, 1957) and directed *Staircase* (Broadway's first serious depiction of homosexuality, starring Milo O'Shea and Eli Wallach, 1968). Then, he replaced Alec McCowen in the starring role of Father William Rolfe in *Hadrian VII* (alongside his wife, at the Helen Hayes Theatre, 1969) .

But he became known worldwide through *The Fugitive*, also directing a 1967 episode, before moving back to London and playing Mr Parminter, the secret service contact issuing assignments to an American government agent played by Gene Barry, in the British series *The Adventurer* (1972-73).

He will also be remembered in Gerry Anderson's live-action sci-fi series *Space: 1999*, taking the role of Professor Bergman – a brilliant scientist handicapped by an artificial heart – in the first run (1975-76) but leaving after contract negotiations for a second series broke down.

Anthony Hayward

**Herbert Morse (Barry Morse), actor: born London 10 June 1918; married 1939 Sydney Sturgess (died 1999; one son, and one daughter deceased); died London 2 February 2008.**