



British TV star Jonas Armstrong dons the bow and quiver for this adaptation.

Reinventing Robin

The hero of Sherwood Forest rides again in a new BBC television series.

By Michael Giltz

WHEN LITTLE CHILDREN (especially those lucky enough to be around horses) play make-believe, two games are constant: cowboys and Indians, and Robin Hood. That's one reason Robin Hood is always being reinvented.

Errol Flynn's iconic 1938 film version is the standard, of course, but recent years have seen Sean Connery and Audrey Hepburn face old age in *Robin and Marian* (1976), Kevin Costner helplessly tackle a British accent in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, and author Nancy Springer create a distaff teen version in her series of young adult novels that began with *Outlaw Princess of Sherwood: A Tale Of Rowan Hood* in 2003.

Thus it probably seemed like the most natural thing in the world for 25-year-old actor Jonas Armstrong to play one of the most famous heroes in history for a new 13-part television series for the BBC. Slightly less natural was being whisked from a film location in India to Budapest, where a lavish set recreated

12th-century England so he could play the nobleman turned outlaw. It begins airing in the United States on BBC America this March.

There was one problem, however: Armstrong had never ridden a horse.

"When he arrived in Hungary, he wasn't good enough yet," admits Bela Unger, a Hungarian stunt man and the leader of "Hood Academy," the nickname of the two-week course in riding, swordplay, and other stunt work the actors went through before filming began.

"Jonas is working with a very nice brown Hungarian horse called Pedro, who is very experienced and very knowledgeable. He knows what we need on a set," notes Unger.

Clearly, Unger knows the faith he can place in the animals he works with is going to be well-founded. After six months of filming on the highly anticipated series (the casting of the new Robin Hood made headlines in the U.K.), Armstrong is grateful for the

brusque, businesslike manner of his trainers.

"You can't go into it a bit hesitant," says Armstrong, best known for his performance on the U.K. drama *Teacher*. "You've just got to fling yourself in. I landed in Budapest on a Sunday, and on a Monday I was up at the crack of dawn and I was introduced to Bela. He doesn't take any bullshit," laughs the actor.

"He said, 'OK. This is Pedro. This is your horse. He knows everything. OK. On you get.' There's no messing around here; there are no airs and graces with the Hungarians; just get on with it and do it."

So Armstrong just got on with it. His Robin Hood isn't the merry fellow who dashes about in green tights either.

"He can be a very selfish character and arrogant," Armstrong observes of their modern take on Mr. Hood. "He loves himself. He's not with his hand on hips, saying, 'Ha ha, I'm a hero!' None of this, 'Maid Marian, I shall sweep you off your feet!' He can't be too selfish, of course. You do see him put his life on the line for others."

Armstrong had little time to prepare for the biggest break of his young career. Although who wouldn't have fun playing Robin Hood? That's as basic a thrill as it gets for any actor.

"It is great fun," admits Armstrong. "You do enjoy it when you're having the fights, because Robin is supposed to enjoy fighting. But you can't look like you're enjoying it too much because you're supposed to be thinking about a hundred things at the same time, so you can't be, 'A-ha! I'm fighting away!' I want a bit of menace."

Happily, the equestrian and other required skills weren't menacing to the star. Riding came fairly easily and, like most theatrically trained actors, Armstrong was already well-grounded in swordplay. But how handy is he with a bow and arrow?

"I'm OK," Armstrong responds with a smile. "I'm good. I'm better than your average guy, but I wouldn't say I'm amazing. Thank God the modern technology of TV can make me look fantastic." ♦