



The end of civilisation?

A new BBC drama follows the survivors of a terrifying virus... and experts say it could happen for real. By Jill Foster

One morning, you wake up to find that the person lying next to you is dead. Lost in anguish, you scramble for your phone and dial 999, but no one answers. You race to your neighbours – barely noticing that the streets are eerily quiet – and hammer on the door, screaming for help. But it doesn't come. You are alone.

It's the kind of chilling nightmare that most of us would wake up from in a cold sweat. But, for the characters in *Survivors*, a new six-part BBC drama, it's all too real. In only a few days, a mysterious flu virus has wiped out everyone they know, their family, friends, and millions of strangers across the land – maybe even the planet. It seems as though only a handful of people have survived. Now, they must fend for themselves in this weird and hazardous world.

'Survivors is all about what it means to be human,' says the show's writer and executive producer Adrian Hodges. 'It asks questions about our nature and confronts us with our deepest fears. When everything else is stripped away, would we band together and find the best in ourselves, or would we fall apart and retreat into barbarism and savagery?'

The new drama stars several well-known faces including Julie Graham (William And Mary), Max Beesley (Hotel Babylon) and Freema Agyeman (Doctor Who). And if the plot sounds familiar, that's because *Survivors* is a remake of the BBC classic series of the same name, which was aired between 1975 and 1977.

Based on the novel by Terry Nation, the series was a cult hit, and Adrian was one of its most ardent fans. Adrian, whose previous writing credits include ITV's sci-fi series *Primeval* and the BBC period drama *Ruby In The Smoke*, says that when he was offered the chance of writing a fresh series, he couldn't turn down the challenge. 'I was about 17 at the time

of the original and I remember seeing that first episode very clearly. I recall the shock that everyone felt who saw it,' he says. 'I watched the rest of the series and thought it was superb.'

In his research for the show, Adrian spoke to virologists, who confirmed that, while a virus would not spread as quickly as the one in *Survivors*, a pandemic could be a very real possibility for our 21st-century society. 'In a world that is as interconnected as ours, it wouldn't take too long for a virus to take hold,' he says. 'Scientists are absolutely convinced that there will be a pandemic one day. They are not sure exactly how bad it will be, but they believe it would be extremely hard to control.'

'You only have to look at what happens when flu strikes in this country. People catch it from one another very quickly. There's very little chance a vaccine could be developed in time and, even if it was, the flu would probably mutate into something else, so we wouldn't know how to deal with it. What we do know is that there would be people who would be immune – there always are – but the number would be pure speculation.'

Filming a series where 99 per cent of the population has been wiped out presented certain logistical problems for the crew. 'Several shots are filmed in deserted roads and cities, so that meant getting up extremely early in the morning and begging people not to drive their cars up the streets,' says Adrian. 'But we also cheated a bit. There are tricks you can use with computer

graphics (CGI), which means you can film a street with cars in it and then delete them from the final cut.

'A few scenes are filmed on a deserted motorway, which is in fact a test track. We've extended it using CGI, but I don't think you can see the join. In episode two, we needed to film an extended scene in a supermarket and, of course, one of the things that has changed since the 1970s is shopping. Back then, it was very easy to shoot a sequence in a supermarket, because they'd be closed on Saturday afternoon and wouldn't open again until Monday morning.

This scene was very important to the plot-line, but it took us ages to find a large supermarket that wasn't open 24 hours.'

One element that surprised Adrian as he researched the show is how quickly the world as we know it would disintegrate. 'I always assumed that if we had no electricity, the water would keep running through our taps for a few weeks. But that's not the case,' he says. 'Everything would stop when the electricity stops – the water-pumping stations would flood very quickly, as would the London Tube, which pumps out thousands of gallons of water every week. There would be no water in our homes, apart from what was still in the tank.'

'After writing this, I've become completely obsessed with how reliant we now are on modern technology. Even in the 1970s, more of us were closer to the older way of living, and just looking at myself, I wouldn't have a clue how



The cast of *Survivors*, past and present, top

to survive without technology. Our children are even worse, because they've never lived without it. We wouldn't know how to survive, and that's something that the people in this show have to discover.'

With characters dying every few minutes in the first show, there are some genuinely chilling scenes. But Adrian was wary of making the programme too gruesome for viewers. 'We didn't want it to be a corpse-fest,' he says. 'We realised that if this really happened, most people would have got to their home and died there. But we wanted to capture the terror of seeing your friends and neighbours dead; the horror of having to drag someone out of their car so you can use it, because yours has run out of petrol. It would be incredibly scary and alarming. Julie has a wonderful line that's straight from the 1970s version, "Please God, don't let me be the only one", and you really do feel that it would be absolutely unbearable.'

For the actors, accepting a part in a drama where they can be killed off at any moment must have been nerve-racking. Adrian laughs. 'Poor Shaun Dingwall, who plays Julie's husband, looked at me and said, "Any chance I get better?" and I had to say, "I'm afraid not." All the actors knew if they were going to die right from the start – we didn't just spring a surprise on them. But a few of them were looking at me slightly nervously.'

Survivors is on BBC1 tomorrow at 9pm.