

Stone the crows, it's Worzel abroad

After six years, Jon Pertwee makes a welcome return to the screen as that scatty old scarecrow, lovable *Worzel Gummidge*.



Above: Aunt Sally (Una Stubbs) and Worzel pop up in New Zealand in C4's *'Worzel Gummidge Down Under'*.



Beyond the hedgerows, in a bleak field, there is a murmur of life. Take a closer look and you will see a figure with a turnip for a head, a carrot-like nose, hair of straw and twigs coming from the cuffs of his tatty old jacket as he hangs on a wooden cross.

Could this be... surely not... that walking, talking scarecrow *Worzel Gummidge* again? It is six long years since we last saw him vying for Aunt Sally's affections. Here, 11,500 miles away in New Zealand, the face is the same as ever: a mixture of emotions – etched in sadness, betraying the scars of a love unrequited but, at times, beaming youthful optimism.

Worzel and Aunt Sally, the wooden fairground doll, returned last week in *Worzel Gummidge Down Under*, on C4 on Sundays. They ended up in New Zealand

after Aunt Sally was sold by a British antiques dealer to a museum curator Down Under. And, of course, Worzel followed.

'She don't treat me very nice,' says Worzel, looking faintly similar to actor Jon Pertwee, 'but ol' Worzel ain't too bright. I ain't got no brain, you see. It's instinct, really, that makes me follow Aunt Sally. I love her, and nothing is going to make any difference. She's very pretty, and lots of people seem to love people who don't treat them very well.'

Suddenly, there is a flick of the neck. Is Worzel switching to his sulking head, thinking head, writing head, brave head or handsome head? No, it's Jon Pertwee, who has sought passionately to revive Worzel on screen since the fourth British-made series ended in 1981.

'It's my baby,' he says of the programme, which attracts more

adults than children. 'I felt tremendous responsibility for it. I'm the one who has nurtured it and kept it going.'

'I can't think of any role that's better for a character actor because you run the gamut of emotions in just one episode.'

'The programme paints a picture of the English countryside that everybody imagines but doesn't really exist at all. A field will be ploughed by horses in *Worzel Gummidge* and people go to lovely funfairs.'

'Worzel is an amoral character because he has no brain. Then there's the morality of *The Crowman*, Worzel's creator, who tries to keep him on the straight and narrow, and teach him the basic principles of Christianity.'

The original *Crowman*, Geoffrey Bayldon, was committed to other acting work, so New Zealander Bruce Phillips took over; Una

Stubbs still plays Aunt Sally; James Hill, who made the British programmes, directs; and Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall have continued to write the scripts, based on the books by Barbara Euphan Todd.

Award-winning director James Hill has his own ideas about Worzel's popularity. 'The basic story is so funny and so sad,' he says. 'It can be watched on many levels and has great depth. It's the most hopeless love affair. There's truth in the writing.'

Giving Pertwee the Worzel look is a lengthy process. Filming often starts at 6.00am, with the first 'face' of the day, which takes an hour for the make-up artist to apply.

Jon Pertwee, who is a very active 68, has no plans to retire or slow down – which must be good news for fans of that cantankerous old scarecrow *Worzel Gummidge*.

Anthony Hayward