

Interview by John Hiscock

# THE MAN FROM BRITAIN

David McCallum is probably the highest-paid British actor on American TV – not bad for a 79-year-old veteran of *The Great Escape*

## NCIS

Wednesdays 9.00pm Channel 5

**D**AVID MCCALLUM HAS a small problem. A van has parked across the driveway of his house in Santa Monica, California, blocking in his Volvo (registration number: DUCKY 4). Fortunately it's one of the few days when he doesn't have to be on the set of *NCIS*, the long-running drama series about agents investigating US Navy and Marine Corps murders, which returns to Channel 5 this week for its ninth series.

His character, the eccentric Dr Donald "Ducky" Mallard, the chief medical examiner, is not in the scenes being shot today but that's not to say he can take it easy. At the age of 79, David McCallum is always on the go.

"There's so much to do and life's so short," he says, settling onto a couch in his comfortable living room. Mozart plays softly in the background, a reminder that both his Scottish-born parents were classical musicians and that he is an accomplished oboist, as well as being one of the highest-paid British TV actors in Hollywood. (With Hugh Laurie's \$750,000 per episode run in *House* over, McCallum and *Homeland*'s Damian Lewis are the joint highest-paid Brits on US TV, earning reportedly \$75,000 per episode, although *NCIS* having 24 episodes per series to *Homeland*'s 12 edges McCallum ahead.)

"It's been a busy week. I had two autopsies on Monday and Tuesday;

I did *Batman* as the voice of Alfred the butler on Wednesday and then on Thursday I did *Ben 10*, in which I have a recurring role playing a mad professor." He has the day off today because he is awaiting the delivery of a slab of butcher's block for his kitchen counter.

Courteous, charming and youthful-looking, he has been in showbusiness for 69 years, dating back to when he first became involved in local theatre at the age of ten after his parents moved from Glasgow to London. He began getting roles in British films in the 1950s and had just finished *The Great Escape* when he landed the role of Judas Iscariot in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

In 1961 he decided to move to America. He and his then wife Jill Ireland, who shortly afterwards left him for his *Great Escape* co-star Charles Bronson, rented a beach house in Malibu. Two years later he landed the career-making role of Illya Kuryakin, the brooding, Russian operative in cult spy series *The Man from UNCLE*.

He was an immediate hit. Everywhere he went he was mobbed. "I was the male Farrah Fawcett Majors of the 60s," he laughs. Once he had to be rescued by police from crowds in Central Park; another time he was stampeded by 2,000 students at Louisiana State University and had to be evacuated by a phalanx of police officers. Fans tore apart two floors of Macy's clamouring for a glimpse.

"Then when the series finished, it all died off," he recalls. Other series followed and a demonstration of how he is viewed by different generations



## THE EXPERT

As *NCIS*'s medical examiner "Ducky" Mallard: "You can't play a pathologist for ten years without knowing what you're doing"; as 60s TV spy Illya Kuryakin (left)

occurred when he was walking down the street in New York and was spotted by a man and his three sons. One said, "There's Illya Kuryakin"; another said, "No, it's the Invisible Man" and the third said "It's Steel [from *Sapphire and Steel*]."

**H**E'S STILL IN close contact with his *Sapphire and Steel* co-star Joanna Lumley and, in an odd coincidence, while he was living in New York and she was in London, their two sons starting dating twin sisters.

"And I tried to call Robert Vaughn on his birthday," he says, referring to his *Man from UNCLE* co-star, now 81, "but he was too busy hustling."

The other day he received a letter from Leslie Moonves, president of the CBS television network, congratulating him on the fact that *NCIS* is the number one series in America,



## A LIFE IN CULT TV

### *The Man from UNCLE* 1964-68

In this spy romp that emerged hot on the heels of James Bond, McCallum played surly Russian agent Iliya Kuryakin opposite Robert Vaughn's super-smooth Napoleon Solo.

### *Colditz* 1972-74

Played bomber pilot and inveterate escaper Simon Carter in this seminal prison camp drama whose cast included Robert Wagner (who also appears occasionally in *NCIS*).

### *The Invisible Man* 1975-76

In this US drama, which only ran for one season, he played a scientist who became permanently invisible and worked as a secret agent.

### *Sapphire and Steel* 1979-82

Played Steel to Joanna Lumley's Sapphire. They were elements in human form who guarded time and solved cryptic mysteries using their superpowers.



despite having been on the air for ten seasons over there. Much of the reason for its success is down to McCallum's portrayal of the bespectacled, bow-tied Ducky Mallard, the chief medical examiner who has seen it all.

He goes to great lengths to ensure his portrayal is accurate and has become an expert in pathology through research, reading and hands-on experience. "You can't play a pathologist for ten years and talk about pathology without knowing what you are doing," he says. "I got in touch with the Los Angeles coroner and he allowed me to watch through the glass as he conducted autopsies. Then after a couple of years of watching, the coroner made it possible for me to come the other side of the glass and work with a pathologist and do a full autopsy.

"So for two and a half hours he basically took

"I tried to call Robert Vaughn on his birthday, but he was too busy hustling"

DAVID MCCALLUM

someone apart, and showed me everything. I watched every detail and I saw exactly how the human body works. It's quite miraculous; it was one of the most exciting days of my life." He now gets letters from pathologists thanking him for his accurate portrayal and for making their profession look good.

His continuing role in the series (last year his contract was renewed up to 2014) means he spends ten months a year in his house four blocks from the beach in Santa Monica, where the bookshelves are stacked with books on pathology; and where he has a studio in the back in which he paints and writes when he has time. He returns to his home in New York on holidays and for two months a year. His wife of 45 years, Katherine Carpenter, a former model/interior designer, divides her time between both homes.

As we say goodbye on his doorstep, a tow-truck is hauling away the offending van from in front of his driveway.

"Ah, good," he says. "Now I can get out."

*Series ten of NCIS continues on FOX at 9.00pm on Mondays*