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Michael Billington

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Charismatic actor whose tough-guy image distracted from his broader gifts

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The actor Michael Billington, who has died of cancer aged 63, achieved minor cult status as Colonel Paul Foster in *UFO* (1969), the first live action adventure series produced by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, the creators of *Thunderbirds*. This, and similar roles, resulted in the tough-guy actor being tipped, for more than 10 years, as "the next James Bond".

His failure to succeed first Sean Connery, then Roger Moore, was the biggest disappointment of Billington's career. His compensation, a brief part as the agent killed off before the main titles of *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), was not enough to keep him in Britain.

Deciding that he no longer wanted to be an action hero, he went to the United States, where he studied acting with Lee and Anna Strasberg. But the roles that followed, in episodes of series such as *Hart To Hart* and *Magnum, PI*, were not that different to what had gone before. He tried, unsuccessfully, to sell the screenplays he had written, and, after returning to the UK, worked mostly as a teacher.

A fine actor with star quality - and a very funny man to boot - Billington could, if fate had decreed it, have become a British Burt Reynolds. I first met him when I was a teenager in 1965, working in a film library he visited regularly, and was awestruck by his charisma, and later by his generosity. He played himself in an amateur film I made and, soon afterwards, got me my first professional job as a screenwriter. He was defeated by bad luck and his uncertainty about what he wanted to achieve.

Born in Blackburn, Lancashire, Billington loved the cinema from childhood and came to London to work for the film distributor Warner-Pathé. Connections made at the gym got him work as a chorus boy in such West End musicals as *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* (Shaftesbury, 1963) and *Little Me* (Cambridge, 1964). He also stooged at Danny La Rue's nightclub.

His first film was the short *Dream A40* (1964), banned by the censors because of a scene in which male lovers kissed. In 1965, he made his television debut, as Neil Hall in the football soap opera *United*, and his stage debut in *Incident At Vichy* at the Phoenix theatre.

Sylvia Anderson spotted Billington in an episode of *The Prisoner* and cast him in *UFO*. "I cringe when I see it," he claimed later (but attended *UFO* conventions almost until the end of his life). His other major TV role at this time was as Daniel Fogarty, in the seafaring drama *The Onedin Line* (1971-4), which he left after one series. He was credited in the film *Alfred The Great* (1969), but was a glorified extra. He also had a small part in a television production of *War And Peace* (1972).

Throughout the 1970s, and into the 1980s, Billington waited for the call that never came to play Bond. In 1980, he sold his only filmed screenplay, *Silver Dream Racer*. In the US, he had a gag role in a parody, *Flicks* (1981), and was uncomfortably Russian in *KGB The Secret War* (1985), two films that were shelved for years before release on video. Back in the UK, he had his last decent role as co-star, with Peter McEnery, of *The Collectors* (1986), a television series about HM Customs and Excise.

Billington worked on the book of a stage musical about Jack the Ripper, and his last stage appearance was in the highly regarded *Never Nothing From No One* (Cockpit theatre, 2000). He enjoyed his work at the Lee Strasberg Studio in London, where he was a popular tutor in the mid-1990s. He wrote enthusiastically on his website about the craft of acting that he was able to practise, to his satisfaction, all too rarely.

After eight years as the partner of Barbara Broccoli, daughter of the Bond producer Albert "Cubby" Broccoli, Billington married Katherine Kristoff in 1988. She died in 1998, after which he devoted himself to raising their son, Michael Jr, who survives him.

· Michael Billington, actor, born December 24 1941; died June 3 2005

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