

Tise Vahimagi looks at the latest fantasy offering from ATV which stars Joanna (The New Avengers) Lumley and David (Invisible Man) McCallum.



Alonely, remote house in the country. In the kitchen a young boy works over his homework. In an upstairs attic bedroom, his parents read a nursery rhyme to his 6-year-old sister. Suddenly a faint rumbling begins in the house, building to a roar. Then, just as suddenly, it stops. And so do all the clocks in the house. The boy dashes upstairs to the attic room—and finds only his sister there. His parents have completely vanished! Within minutes, two strangers appear at the door—with an explainer for what has happened. They are Sapphire and Steel, who, the show's producer says, are "agents of status quo responsible for ensuring that the natural order of things remain."

Sapphire and Steel, ATV's new twice-weekly fantasy series, operates in a *twilight zone* somewhere between science fiction and supernatural fantasy. Each episode begins with a sombre, descriptive introduction: "All irregularities will be handled by the forces controlling each dimension. Some erratic, heavy elements may not be used where there is life,

Medium atomic weights are available. Gold, Lead, Copper, Jet, Diamond, Uranium, Sapphire, Silver and Steel. Sapphire and Steel have been assigned."

However, there is no reference to who is saying it. Or where he is saying it, and to whom. One is left to presume that this disembodied voice is trying to do the viewers a favour and fill them in (on a somewhat vague level) on the other-worldly title characters.

The series was created and written by

A blend between the Bermuda Triangle and the Marie Celeste.

Peter J. Hammond, a 12-year veteran of tv writing who has clocked-in as story editor and series writer on such lukewarm dramas as *Z Cars* and *Hunters Walk*. In writing the *Sapphire and Steel* series, scribe Hammond has created for himself a very open-ended format—a sort of cocktail blend between the "mystery" surrounding the Bermuda Triangle and the Marie Celeste.

Producer-director Shaun O'Riordan views the show as "a story of other

forces, suggesting the breakdown in the exacting dimensions in our lives." In other words, the possibility of a slight tear in the canvas of Time, allowing for a two-way flow of traffic from present-to-past and past-to-present. The series' central characters are portrayed by the fetching Joanna Lumley (hot from her starring role in *The New Avengers*) and the apparently age-less David McCallum (not so hot from his fame in the 15-year-old *Man from UNCLE* series and the recent tv flop, *The Invisible Man*).

The first story in the current 14-part series (another season of shows is already planned for Spring, 1980) takes place in a 250-year-old house, into which Time has "broken." Lumley and McCallum appear at the house to put things in their respective order. That is, retrieving the lost parents and destroying the force (and the source) responsible for the Time "break." To accomplish the task, in the latter stages, another "time agent" is brought into play—lead, a large, muscular character who seems to serve no other



Opposite: *Sapphire* (Joanna Lumley) and *Steel* (David McCallum) pose for a publicity picture.

Far left: A scene from David McCallum's previous tv fantasy outing, *The Invisible Man*. Left: Joanna Lumley as Purdie of *The New Avengers*.



purpose than shouldering down doors and crushing foundation stones into powder with his bare hands.

Lumley's *Sapphire* appears to be the more versatile of the two featured characters, having the ability to communicate via telepathy and physically experience sensitive changes in atmosphere. It also becomes noticeable that, whenever anyone's addressing her, she seems to delight in staring into their eyes for embarrassingly lengthy periods. One wonders what she's *really* thinking.

The start of the second story had the duo begin investigations at an old, abandoned railway station where an amateur ghost-hunter (though he calls himself an "investigator of psychic phenomena") is trying to parley with the malcontent spirit of a World War One infantryman. For reasons yet unexplained, the soldier (or maybe the station itself) is bringing into the present other restless souls from previous military conflicts.

By the close of the second installment we get to see, along with the soldier, a World War Two airman and a

couple of other "dead" characters.

Like all forms of mystery drama, a cobweb of questions is raised. What do they all want? What does the environment of the station represent to the "dead" folk?

The ghost-hunter has no idea. McCallum isn't saying. And Joanna Lumley is experiencing every available spooky effect, including transformation into a pretty young thing, circa 1914.

The special effects consist mainly of

Sadly, there is not attempt to explain the background.

transparent "ghost" figures, who fade in and out of the scenery. Scenes with the infantryman whistling a period tune as he wanders along the station hallways, and then slowly fades away with only his off-key whistle remaining are effective and strikingly eerie.

Sadly, there is no attempt to explain or explore the background and individual motivation behind the title characters. They are simply served up as cool and

exacting aliens with hyper-sensitive powers. Regarding the evil forces that they deal with, the two characters frequently question each other about the form of their enemy ("Is it human?"), but these references still give no clue to their own nature.

Overall, the video-taped production is well handled, despite some strange roving camerawork which is likely to disorientate the viewer from a tense, atmospheric scene. Also, at times, the dialogue (which helps promote a lot of the spooky sequences) is so laconic and almost meaningless that the viewer must eventually feel as if he's caught in a crossed-line telephone conversation.

The design and production departments, handled by Stanley Mills and David Reid, respectively, are suitable for this type of programmer. Cyril Orndel's low, brassy music enhances the dramatic effect, carefully accenting the suspense and highlighting the claustrophobically eerie scenes. Unfortunately, the series has the shakiest opening titles seen on network tv in a long time.