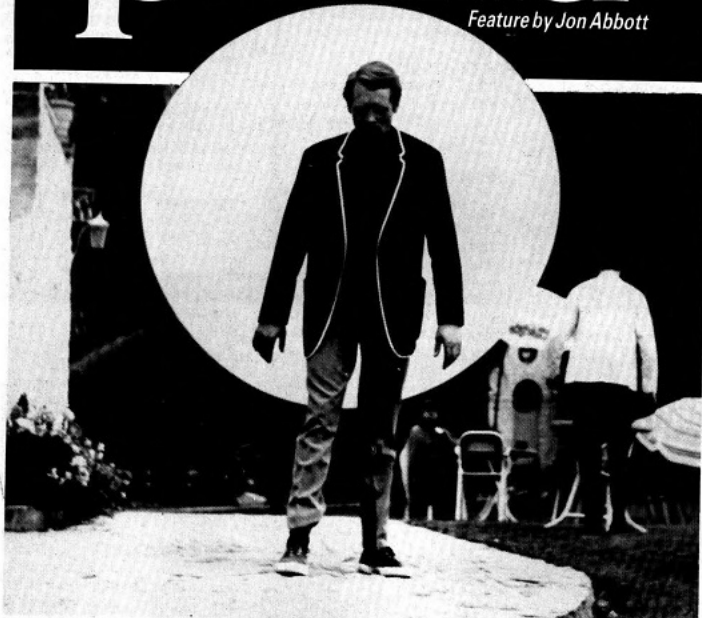
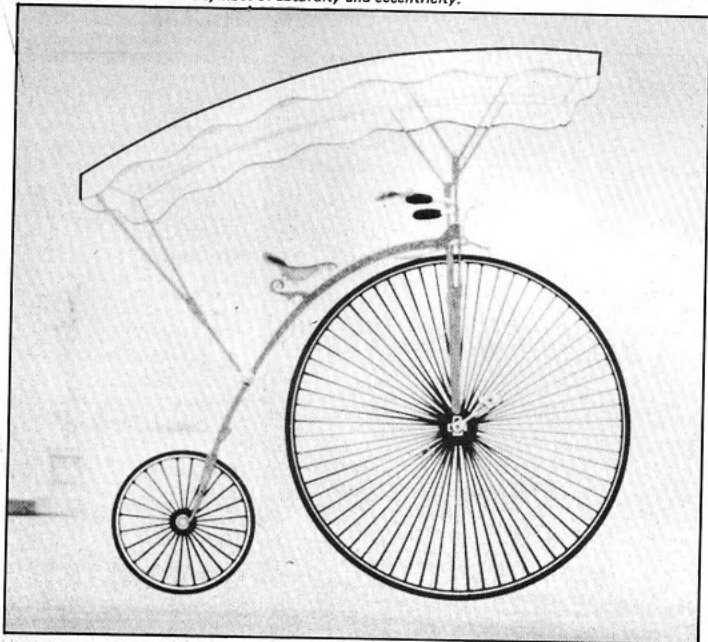


the Prisoner

Feature by Jon Abbott



Above: *The Prisoner* (Patrick McGoohan) has a feeling he is being followed by the village police. Below: The series' famous symbol of absurdity and eccentricity.



When *The Prisoner* was first broadcast in 1967, on Sunday evenings at 7.25, I was eleven years old, and as baffled as anybody by the complexity of this new, eagerly-awaited fantasy series. When it was eventually repeated in a late-night slot some years after the furor had died down, I was fourteen and aware by now that this strange series was not quite what it pretended to be. I worked at figuring it out. It was seven years later before it was shown again, by which time it had attained the status of a cult series. I sat and watched it in the company of people my own age and older who still hadn't figured it out. I laughed out loud. I loved it.

When *The Prisoner* was first screened, it was almost universally panned by perplexed audiences and populist pundits alike. The average TV viewer had by then already been conditioned not to think while watching, and take what they saw at face value, while the newshounds, running with the pack as usual, jumped on their prey with the same jackal-like enthusiasm with which they've recently greeted Channel Four, and, more deservedly, TV-AM. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

The ingenuity and imagination of *The Prisoner* unparalleled in British TV, except perhaps by *The Avengers* and the William Hartnell episodes of *Doctor Who*... but whereas the style and success of those two series can be attributed to a happy accident, *The Prisoner* was a very definite and deliberate statement by a man who had suddenly and unexpectedly found himself in the enviable position of being able to call the shots, a brave indulgence that paid off in spades artistically, if not in the intended financial manner preferable to a bamboozled ITC and their American buyers.

The series was conceived by McGoohan, writer/producer David Tomblin, and George Markstein, script editor on both this series and *Danger Man*, the straightforward spy thriller on which McGoohan had made his name and reputation. Markstein had worked in some capacity British Intelligence (it's him at the desk in the opening sequences), and knew that there are places where retired spies were sent to quietly live out the rest of their lives if their heads were too full of secrets to take chances with. Imagine, for example, a drunken, embittered ex-agent, or an aged operative approaching senility.

But whereas Markstein saw the series as a simple and logical extension of *Danger Man*, McGoohan came to see the series as a surrealist and symbolic commentary on the absurdities and hypocrisies of the British way of life, actively taking an ever-increasing hand in the overall look and direction of the show, contributing to the bizarre little visual touches, and writing and directing three episodes, "Free For All", "Once Upon A Time", and "Fall Out", episodes in which the imagery and double-meanings are naturally at their strongest. "Free For All" is a marvellous satire on politics, and the ultimate futility of freedom of speech when the establishment is holding all the cards before and after you open your mouth, while the latter are the two concluding episodes that caused all the controversy.

Markstein, the masses, and ITC abandoned the series, and it ended its prematurely curtailed seventeen-week run in the 11.15 graveyard slot on Sunday nights, amidst the jeers of our society's very own Number Twos, the conformists and narrow-minded non-thinkers who McGoohan's glorious, near-private joke had been sending up all along. This he did in the guise of a bizarre science-fictional spy drama based partly on fact, but mostly outrageous fantasy and imagery that grew

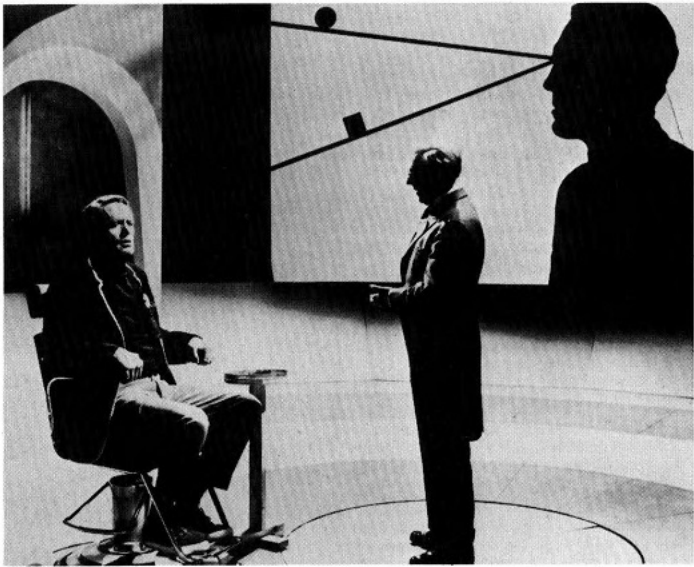
even more bizarre as the series went on.

The Prisoner was a scathing, satirical indictment of British complacency in which society is represented by The Village, a grand mass delusion of parades and privileges earned. Here, the majority of inhabitants turn a blind eye and deaf ear to the quiet atrocities of the community leaders (each a Number Two answerable only to the mysterious unseen Number One) which are committed on the few inhabitants who refuse to conform. These are fellow prisoners who dare to ask questions ("Questions are a burden to others" is one of the many Orwellian slogans that adorn the walls of the village public places), who resist their masters' conditioning and try to escape.

McGoohan plays the non-conformist Number Six, forever trapped in an environment where the people are free to do exactly as they please just so long as they do exactly as they're told. Sound familiar? The daily paper is the "Tally-Ho". Each day starts with the over-familiar friendly tones of an insincere announcer on a radio and loud-speaker system that can't be turned off, and which broadcasts the day's instructions to the villagers as activities they might wish to participate in. Each week McGoohan is harangued by the latest of the faceless bureaucratic Number Twos. Their task is to extract "information" from him, the information that caused him to furiously resign from their set-up... to break his will, but without damaging him, for he has something they want. They must know... Why doesn't he want to do as he's told, like everybody else? Why can't he just be happy in their village? Why must he be difficult and disruptive?

Incredibly, so many years on, there are still some people who haven't yet twigged the double-meanings behind this series, even though McGoohan blew the whistle on himself rather obviously for the final two episodes, abandoning the spy theme completely when the financial rug was pulled out from underneath his feet and he was ordered to wrap up the series. As most viewers had been following the stories purely on this surface level, all hell broke loose when McGoohan switched from symbolism to out and out surrealism for the final two episodes which were to reveal all, with a bizarre scenario including hooded accusers each labelled after one of society's ills, a model house and office complete with bars (which eventually takes off down the M1) and an unintelligible youthful rebel whom no-one can understand.

McGoohan was joined for the climactic two-parter by an earlier Number Two, Leo McKern (better known today as John Mortimer's *Rumpole of the Bailey* and the similarly symbolic and anarchic TV play *Country*), who takes him on a harrowing single-stage journey through the conditioning and gradual erosion of his freedom and independent ideas throughout his life in a last-ditch effort to make the Prisoner explain himself. Did the village belong to "our side" or "their side"? It hardly mattered of course, as the conclusion to the series makes abundantly clear, but ITV was besieged by indignant callers and perplexed viewers, while the hacks from the real-life "Tally-Ho" had a field day stirring up outrage over this amazing, arrogant "flop". Did their editors really know what the series had been trying to say, and were trying to discredit it, or were they genuinely mystified by its message? That question alone could supply enough paranoid input for an as yet unrealised eighteenth episode, but of course the series is gone, remembered, but firmly wedged in its time period. Fifteen years on, its credibility and sophistication marred only by the attentions of a nutty fan club of the sort that constantly makes tv and sf a laughing stock in the eyes of the general public (but which has at least succeeded in their



Top: *The Prisoner* undergoes a true-or-false test, village-style. Middle: McGoohan confronts the show's script editor, George Markstein, in *Many Happy Returns*. Bottom: In *Checkmate* McGoohan does the ward round at the village hospital with Peter Wyngarde.



the Prisoner Episode Checklist

Prod: David Tomblin, *Dir*
Photography: Brandon Stafford,
Music: Ron Grainer. *Regularcast:*
 Patrick McGoohan (Number Six),
 Angelo Muscat (The Butler).

ARRIVAL

by George Markstein/David Tomblin, *Dir*:
 Don Chaffey. *Guests:* Paul Eddington, Virginia
 Maskell. *The Prisoner arrives at the Village,
 where those in control try to determine
 the reasons for his resignation from the
 British Secret Service.*

THE CHIMES OF BIG BEN

by Vincent Tilsley, *Dir*: Don Chaffey. *Guests:*
 Leo McKern, Finlay Curry. *Number Six is the
 victim of a complex hoax to make him think
 he has escaped the Village.*

A, B & C

by Anthony Skeene, *Dir*: Pat Jackson.
Guests: Peter Bowles, Sheila Allen. *Number
 Two invades Number Six's dreams in
 attempt to find the information he needs.*

FREE FOR ALL

by Patrick Fitz, *Dir*: Patrick McGoohan. *Eric*

*Portman, Rachel Herbert. The Prisoner
 attempts to get himself elected to the post of
 Number Two.*

THE SCHIZOID MAN

by Terence Feely, *Dir*: Pat Jackson. *Guests:*
 Anton Rogers, Jane Marrow. *The controllers
 of the Village use a double of Number Six to
 make him doubt his identity.*

THE GENERAL

by Joshua Adam, *Dir*: Peter Graham. *Guests:*
 John Castle, Colin Gordon. *The Prisoner
 thwarts a plan to control the minds of the
 villagers through an electronic "teaching de-
 vice".*

MANY HAPPY RETURNS

by Anthony Skeene, *Dir*: Joseph Serf.
Guests: Patrick Cargill, Donald Sinden. *The
 Prisoner finds the Village abandoned and
 attempts to escape.*

DANCE OF THE DEAD

by Anthony Skeene, *Dir*: Don Chaffey.
Guests: Duncan MacRae, Mary Morris. *The
 Prisoner is put on trial after trying to conceal
 an SOS note in a coffin leaving the Village.*

DONOT FORSAKE ME OH MY DARLING

by Vincent Tilsley, *Dir*: Pat Jackson. *Guests:*
 Nigel Stock, Clifford Evans. *The Prisoner's
 mind is transferred to another's body.*

IT'S YOUR FUNERAL

by Michael Cramoy, *Dir*: Robert Asher.
Guests: Derrin Nesbitt, Wanda Ventham. *The
 controllers of the Village try to convince
 Number Six an assassination plot is afoot.*

CHECKMATE

by Gerald Kelsey, *Dir*: Don Chaffey. *Guests:*
 Peter Wyngarde, Ronald Radd. *The Prisoner
 is the pawn in a deadly chess-game.*

A CHANGE OF MIND

by Roger Parkes, *Dir*: Joseph Serf. *Guests:*
 George Pravda, Angela Browne. *Still trying to
 discover Number Six's reasons for quitting
 the service, the controllers use complex elec-
 tronics to transform his thought processes.*

HAMMER INTO ANVIL

by Roger Woddis, *Dir*: Pat Jackson. *Guests:*
 Victor Maddern, Patrick Cargill. *Number Six
 tries to convince Number Two that he is in the
 employ of the Controllers.*

THE GIRL WHO WAS DEATH

by Terence Feely, *Dir*: David Tomblin.
Guests: *Dir*: Christopher Benjamin, Justine
 Lord. *Number Six engages in a battle for
 survival with a girl who calls herself Death.*

ONCE UPON A TIME

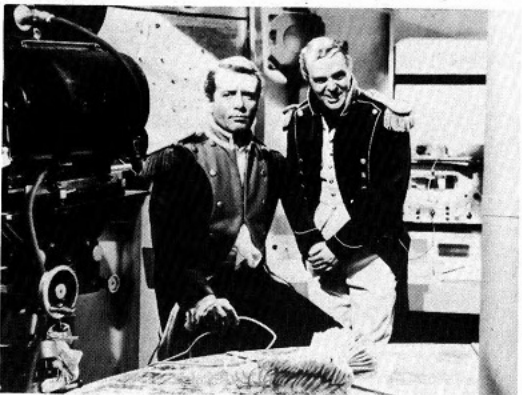
by Patrick McGoohan, *Dir*: Patrick
 McGoohan. *Guests:* Peter Swanwick, Leo
 McKern. *The Prisoner is subjected to a
 dangerous electronic mind probe device.*

FALL OUT

by Patrick McGoohan, *Dir*: Patrick
 McGoohan. *Guests:* Peter Swanswick, Leo
 McKern. *The Prisoner finally escapes from
 the village, but finds the outside as much of a
 prison.*

LIVING IN HARMONY

by David Tomblin, *Dir*: David Tomblin,
Guests: David Bauer, Alexis Kanner. *Number
 Six inexplicably finds himself as a sheriff in a
 Western town and is torn between his peace-
 ful instincts and the necessity of carrying a
 gun.*



Top left: McGoohan and butler Angelo Muscat beside the enigmatic black hearse that took him to the village, and his own distinctive custom car. Bottom left: McGoohan and would-be world conqueror Kenneth Griffith in *The Girl who was Death*. Above: *The Prisoner* Living in Harmony.



Top: McGooohan looks slightly uncertain about running for office in *Free For All*. Bottom: Local calls only on the village telephone.



persistent lobbying for repeats), even ITV was prepared to feature an episode as one of its finest achievements in its "Best Of British" season a couple of years ago, a selection that otherwise hardly lived up to its hopeful title. Number Six would have been amused.

"Arrival" is the opening episode in which McGooohan first encounters the Village, and not surprisingly is a definitive example of the series, in which the stage is set for the Prisoner's coming struggle with his smug kidnappers. It's essential to have seen this episode to fully appreciate the effect of those that follow. Masterfully constructed with split-second precision editing and direction, the villagers' statements are infuriatingly unhelpful and laced with double meanings ("Feel free", "Beseege you!") as he explores his elegant Alcatraz. Meeting the first of many Number Twos, he snaps "Get Number One!" "As far as you're concerned, I'm in charge" is the smooth reply.

If "Arrival" can be considered the definitive explanatory episode, "The Schizoid Man", in which Number Six is transformed seemingly overnight into a man who is about to become a duplicate of Number Six in order to break him(!), demonstrates perfectly the series' own distinctive speciality, that of a plot within a plot, meanings within meanings, and wheels within wheels, marvellously intriguing in its complexity, and a *tour de force* from McGooohan. Unfortunately, the inevitable climax of this episode, while executed quite professionally, is all too obvious, and Number Six has been shown to be so devious and resourceful in this and other episodes that it's difficult to imagine that he should ultimately fall so carelessly for one of the oldest tricks in the book at story's end. "The General", a witty satire on education in which the villagers gleefully participate in brainwashing under the guise of speed-learning without mistakes, is challenging and successful throughout many superbly realised and bizarre scenes; a single man being chased along the beach by a mob, deceitfully reassuring TV broadcasts, the idiocy of the villagers, a drawing room filled with sheet-covered busts, and a self-indulgent garden where pupils do anything but learn while under the impression that they're learning. Again, it almost, but not quite, falls apart in the closing scene, when people begin to act out of character for the sake of a speedy convenient resolution.

One episode with a genuine twist ending is "Checkmate", easily another of the best tales, with final scene both entirely unexpected yet totally logical. Only "Many Happy Returns", in which the Prisoner wakes one morning to find the village deserted and abandoned and promptly sets about making a getaway, slams home so effectively the force of the despair Number Six must experience at having come so close to freedom after so much effort, only to be thwarted in the final stages of his plans.

Given the strenuous physical exertion expended by the Prisoner in these episodes, it's ironic that his final escape is generally straightforward once his exhausting symbolic battle of minds is completed with McKern.

The series must be seen complete, and every episode is a gem, but although there were no bad episodes, certain episodes are inevitably stronger than others. "Hammer Into Anvil" was perhaps one of the most conventional episodes of the series, and as such one of the most immediately accessible at first view. Because of this, unlike the more complex, multi-layered episodes, it stands up to repeat screening the least well, having had most of its impact at first viewing. A straightforward hero/villain set-up is established in the first scene when the latest Number Two (comedy character



Top left: *The Prisoner* prepares for some Fall Out. Bottom left: *McGoohan* attends a Dance of the Dead with *Mary Morris* and *Norma West*. Above: *McGoohan* on the beach 'cave' set. Opposite page, top left: *The village* cordless telephone. Bottom left: *Another lovely day in the village* . . . Top right: *The Prisoner* adapts to life in the wild west during another of his captors' elaborate stunts, in *Living in Harmony*. Middle right: *McGoohan* on location in the village. Bottom right: *Number Six* enjoys life in a democracy in *Free For All*.

actor Patrick Cargill, who appears in an earlier episode) confronts Number Six. Already shown to be a particularly nasty sadist, as opposed to the usual gentlemanly adversaries of other episodes, he taunts McGoohan, sneering, "I wonder what's going on in that mind?". "Disgust," replies McGoohan, unhesitatingly! Cargill's portrayal of the man's breakdown and gradual disintegration around his colleagues and underlings is faultless, but despite the immediate enjoyment in watching this pantomime villain's downfall (McGoohan has it in for him after he has seen a young girl driven to suicide) as a gut-level response, the plot is conventional enough to have been an episode of any well-made TV series with an elaborate and ingenious scam as its premise.

Equally conventional, but containing some of the usual unique mystery, magic, and double-meanings readily identified with the series is "It's Your Funeral", in which an ugly end for a former Number

Two is planned by his fellows. Number Six, for no good reason, assumes that if the assassination attempt is successful, a horrible punishment will be meted out on the village (and destroy the illusion of a contented society, while simultaneously revealing keepers from the kept by their immunity?), although just what form this might take is never explored, and the Prisoner never once suspects the usual trap. He decides he must warn the victim and again plays the hero. It's these episodes that come the closest to straining the show's already naturally tenuous credibility. If we are to accept the analogy of the series' premise, we must also accept Number Six as the persecuted, not a knight in shining armour.

Three of the strangest episodes of the series, that helped add to the cult of the bizarre that the cancelled series would be thrust into, were a direct necessity of the premature curtailing of the show (originally intended to be in groups of thirteen, the series was finally extended to a complete run of

seventeen). Producer David Tomblin was presented with the thankless task of producing three episodes and a finale without the very village locale that the Prisoner was trapped in, and one of them without the star himself! The writers rose to the task admirably with remarkable resourcefulness and imagination, achieving their aim with three extraordinary and brilliant plays. In "Do Not Forsake Me Oh My Darling", the Prisoner's mind is placed inside another body, and the entire episode takes place with Number Six played by a different actor (Nigel Stock)! "The Girl Who Was Death" is a hilarious 'Avengers'/'U.N.C.L.E.'-type spoof, complete with madman who wants to take over the world (dressed in the typically appropriate garb, of course), with McGoohan inexplicably chasing the would-be world conqueror and his femme fatale through a TV wonderland of eccentric '60s Britain far removed from (but naturally reminiscent of) the village. Again, the solution to this scenario,



although hinted at throughout the entire film with groan-inducing hindsight, is both elusive and desperately obvious, as usual revealed only in the final minutes. Most outrageous of all (and terribly upsetting to the American buyers of the series, for whom this was the last straw – they didn't even show the episode until after its initial run, when it went into syndication) was "Living In Harmony", in which McGoohan is dropped, again without explanation until the final scenes, into a western adventure. Even the opening credits were remade in western format! It's difficult to decide which of the episodes of the series were the best; the contrived, painstakingly composed early instalments, or the later, equally ingenious hastily improvised ones. In the final analysis, perhaps it's the combination of them both that gives the series its very special uniqueness. Its day is done, but it remains as relevant and as entertaining as ever, a genuine television achievement and landmark. ■

