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SOHO

Time Out



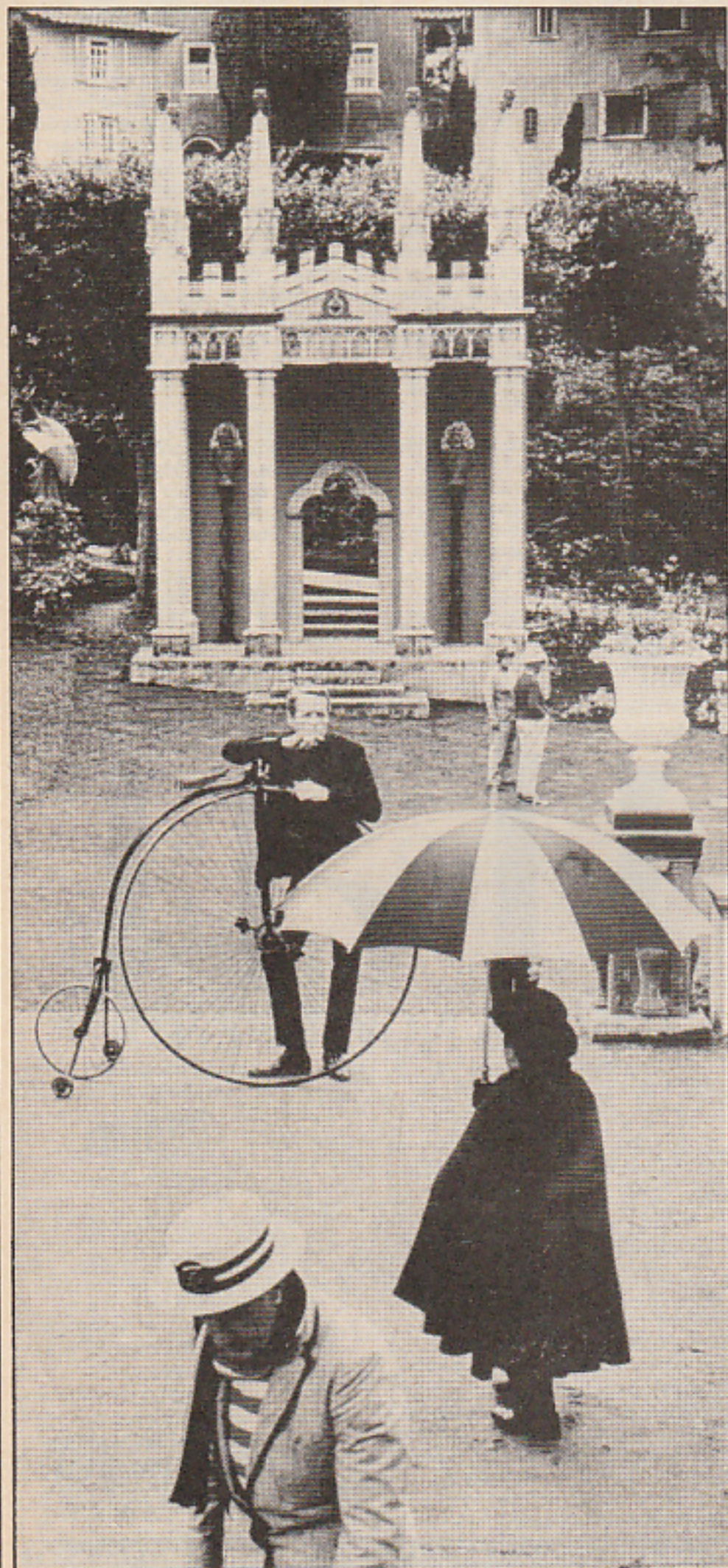
The Prisoner Released

McGOOHAN'S CULT TV SERIES
HITS THE LONDON SCREEN
ALL THIS WEEK

THEATRE: MID-SUMMER
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PORTABLES

INSIDE OUT

Fifteen years on, and devotees of Patrick McGoochan's TV serial 'The Prisoner' are still acting out human chess games in a small Welsh seaside village, and agonising over the identity of Number One. With the Scala presenting 'The Prisoner' in a short season of 1960s TV films, Chris Rodley explains the enduring popularity of McGoochan's TV swansong, regarded by some as prophecy and others as hokum.



On Sunday February 4, 1968, several million viewers tuned in to the seventeenth and final episode of the ITC/Everyman Films production of 'The Prisoner'. Written, directed and co-produced by its star Patrick McGoochan, the episode, called 'Fall Out', had been completed at the eleventh hour and was expected to answer a series of important questions set up by the previous 16 instalments. A final narrative resolution was eagerly awaited by a viewing public who had been intrigued, mystified, confused, frustrated and excited by a unique mixture of 'Danger Man' meets Kafka in Wonderland.

With an apparent total disregard for television convention, 'Fall Out' was a radical mess. The immediate results were a major disruption of the Sunday evening's viewing, a complete denial of audience expectation and jammed switchboards at ATV House, but in the long term it guaranteed 'The Prisoner' cult status and longevity. What were the reasons? And why, 15 years later, does the series attract new adherents at each showing, while continuing to satisfy those who know its intrigues inside out?

The series' cult status is most obviously reflected in the observations of the 6,000-strong Six of One: The Prisoner Appreciation Society, a Gloucestershire-based fan club run by Roger Goodman, a teacher at Cheltenham Ladies' College. This club, which has branches in 16 countries from Sweden to Swaziland and members whose ages range from eight to 75, holds an annual conference, usually at the Welsh village of Portmeirion created by the late Clough Williams-Ellis in outlandish Italianate fashion and which served as the location for most of the series. Goodman, who rejoices in the variety of his members — 'one is the chairman of his local Conservative Association, another is 99 per cent communist' — says that "'The Prisoner'" was at its time the most adventurous TV programme in existence. The style and content was a televisual equivalent of Beckett's plays and Dali and Magritte. Its subject was completely universal — the repression of the individual spirit by oppressive, spiritually hostile forces. Tragically, though, nobody was able to follow up the example of the series and there still isn't anything to touch it now.'

Six of One, who produce their own regular bulletin 'Alert' and even recreate sequences from the series, notably The Human Chess Game which involves 34 disciples, have spawned a cult industry which series' creator George Markstein doesn't wholly appreciate. Mark-

stein says that the series, though original when it was made, 'is now very old hat. It's dealing with things which were very new at the time — computers, electronic surveillance, even credit cards — but are now part of everyday life.'

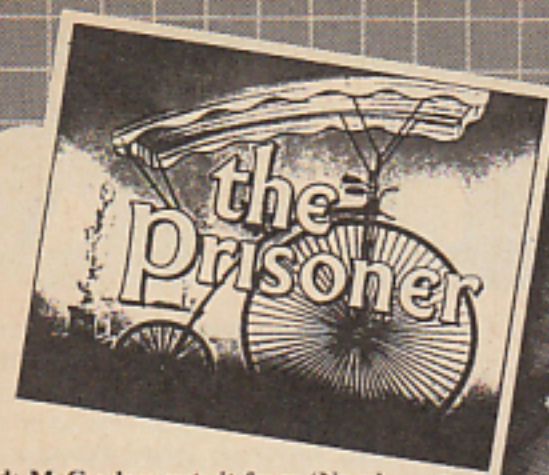
Markstein, now a successful novelist, parted from the series after six episodes following McGoochan's virtual complete appropriation of every creative avenue. 'The series is certainly not what I intended it to be. I conceived it as an entertainment about imprisonment of all kinds. It could have led to the Prisoner going out into the outside world for instance, I had lots of ideas about the development of the character.' As it is, Markstein's own attitude to its later stages and to the ultimate episode is simple and frank: 'It was a load of crap. As for the fans: well, it's nice that it gives so many people pleasure but, really, the whole thing has been taken so ridiculously far — I saw an episode in LA recently and they had a psychiatrist lecturing on the significance of the series. He probably made more out of it than I did...'



'The Prisoner' had its origins in the corporate politics of Lew Grade's ITC, a subsidiary of ABC TV, now part of the ACC empire. Just when 'Danger Man' was proving to be the most successful series the company had produced, McGoochan (in the role of secret agent John Drake) decided to quit. Number one with the public (much to the annoyance of Roger Moore — The Saint — ITC's other property), McGoochan knew he had some leverage. Lew Grade's determination to keep him, plus possible contractual obligations to ITC, meant that the only solution was to find him another vehicle.

George Markstein, ex-intelligence man and journalist, was script editor for 'Danger Man' at the time, and contrary to McGoochan's claims, it was he who had the original idea for 'The Prisoner'. To be precise, it came to him on the 18.21 from Shepperton to Waterloo. Markstein's idea ingeniously exploited the true situation: McGoochan was, in TV terms, about to become a retired secret agent. The idea of constructing a series around an agent (John Drake?) who retires for reasons of

'The Prisoner's' strange 1960s surrealism: McGoochan's the ace with the bike.



Wired: McGooohan gets it from 'Number Two' Mary Morris in 'Dance of Death'. Right: Angelo Muscat, The Butler.

his own, possibly at the height of his career (McGoohan?) uniquely developed an established TV character and persona. However, the name John Drake was the property of 'Danger Man's' creator Ralph Smart. Rather than pay royalties, a change was suggested. The new name was a number: Number Six.

Markstein told his idea to McGooohan, rather than Lew Grade, and suggested some story lines, all of which related to the central premise: a man resigns from British Intelligence but gives no reason. He is abducted and taken to a mysterious location inhabited by others who know too much and cannot even be allowed retirement without 'safeguards' being applied. Unknown captors attempt in various ways to break his spirit and discover why he resigned. Meanwhile, he continues his attempts to escape and to establish the identity of his jailers, particularly the all-powerful Number One.

Markstein's was a perfect double-edged formula: an action spy thriller onto which were grafted more serious thematic concerns about the individual versus the system, personal freedom and personal prisons. This double edge signalled 'The Prisoner's' ambitions (or pretensions) and set it apart from its nearest relatives ('The Saint', 'The Avengers', 'The Baron' and 'Man In A Suitcase').

Markstein then added vitally important elements which were both prophetic and accurate. He created a society called simply The Village, with all-seeing 24-hour surveillance, where money was replaced by a credit card system called 'units', where everyone was known by number rather than name (in the Prisoner's case Number Six) and where brainwashing hallucinogens were in constant use. In the mid-1960s, these touches and many others looked like fantasy or sci-fi. Some were already a reality, albeit not to public knowledge; others have since become so.

McGoohan took the treatment and some sketches to Grade. His additions were some Sunday colour supplement pictures of Portmeirion, where he had previously worked on location on an early 'Danger Man'. The first Markstein knew about 'The Prisoner' going into production was when he read about it in his evening paper on that same line from Shepperton to Waterloo. As stars rather than script editors sell programmes, it was inevitable that someone should generate the story that McGooohan alone had conceived his next series and had sold it to Grade. It was a good story, and one that stuck until McGooohan literally

made the reality fit the fiction.

Everyman Films, formed in 1960 by McGooohan and director David Tomblin as a subsidiary of ITC, was to become the producing company. Tomblin, as series producer, set up a complicated and expensive production on location in Portmeirion and at MGM studios in Borehamwood and assembled a team of highly experienced technicians and directors, while Markstein briefed writers. These briefs were complex, as 'The Prisoner' was to be no bang-bang spy thriller (guns appear only in the final episode), nor was it (yet) a symbolic pantomime. McGooohan began to contribute considerably to the 'look' of the series: the symbol of the penny farthing bike, the piped blazers and many other visual details were his. They, along with art director Jack Shampan's own numerous inventions, including Mini Moke taxis and cordless telephones, helped to seal 'The Prisoner's' image of malevolent pantomime and contributed to its initial and lasting impact.



McGoohan had been the 'reason' for 'The Prisoner', had sold the idea to his patron, assumed executive producer status, pushed the project into production with his partner/director in Everyman Films, written and directed one episode with another to come, and had starred in every programme. He was a talented and ambitious actor, not a pretty boy fronting yet another ITC international playboy/spy series. He believed passionately in 'The Prisoner's' and his own potential. And so he staged a coup and took over the entire production; he re-shot 'unsatisfactory' sequences by other directors, re-wrote scripts, hired and fired at a moment's notice, and even attempted to compose the series' theme song.

Enthusiasm, commitment, arrogance or megalomania, McGooohan's rapidly developing vision of 'The Prisoner' ran contrary to that of Markstein and many others. Allegory was about to devour the spy thriller and with it the balance. 'Once Upon A Time', the last of the first 13 episodes, written and directed by McGooohan, is the remarkable 'filmed' triumph of its creator over the series. It clearly signals Mc-

Goohan's intentions formally and thematically. On a single black set called The Embryo Room, Number Six and Number Two (played by Leo McKern) are locked in Oedipal struggle for mental and physical supremacy. Number Six's final and vicious triumph represents McGooohan's right of ultimate control over the series. Markstein left. It was, after all, the end of the first season and for him the end of 'The Prisoner'.

Doubts at ITC about McGooohan's reported behaviour and vast expenditures no doubt contributed to the early demise of 'The Prisoner'. But it was McGooohan's self-appointed work load, and that of Tomblin, that made another series impossible. McGooohan went to America for a part in the film 'Ice Station Zebra', leaving Tomblin behind to set up a further four episodes to make 'The Prisoner' a 17-part single season with a 'resolution'.

The first of these episodes operated without any appearance of McGooohan (he was still in America) and was followed by a 'western' and then by a 'spy' pastiche. They were obviously 'padding' but extremely accomplished in their own right. 'Once Upon a Time' was screened as the penultimate episode before the faeces hit the fan with 'Fall Out'. An eight-month production gap actually separates these last two episodes.

'Fall Out' was a rude intrusion into the cosiness of British Sunday evening viewing. Through necessity and design, McGooohan abandoned 'reason' and opted for the symbolic. He presided over what must be the most remarkable piece of spontaneous programme-making ever attempted. The result was messy, ambitious, pretentious and incoherent. It was also unforgettable, rupturing the established relationship of television and spectator in a series of visual and verbal consciousness. Answers were forgotten and replaced by more questions.



The final twist of the last episode was that Number Six was his own worst enemy: the mysterious Number One. It was an arrogant solution on McGooohan's part: revealed as the all-powerful Number One, an al-

most perfect mirror to his bid for power within the production, the figure of Number Six fused with the actor as they destroyed both The Village and the series. What had been conceived as a controlled experiment had suddenly arrived like a premature birth — an infant monster, ill-formed, self-centred and screaming. It emerged onto the small screen and, in doing so, bit the hands that had fed it.

The continued reputation of 'The Prisoner' over the last 15 years, prompted by precious few repeats, is an unparalleled phenomenon. 'Fall Out's' outrageousness not only guaranteed the series' cult status; its barrage of indigestible material also forced the viewer to re-read and re-evaluate all that had gone before, breathing new life into previous, more 'fixed' episodes. The production of meanings from a finite number of episodes is also still possible, thanks to Markstein's basic premise and his ability to 'predict' aspects of a future society. Visual realisations have remained fresh, undated and original. The picture has emerged as perhaps pop culture's ultimate testimony to a decade's understandable paranoia; a perfect manifestation of the gloss, swing, weirdness and political turmoil of the 1960s.

Ultimately there are two major reasons for its continued good health. The first, to Markstein's credit, is his double-edge principle. The secret agent in Wonderland, underwritten with social, political and cultural comment, was its greatest success. Each episode took a theme and expertly buried it beneath a surface of entertainment and pleasure. The viewer could merely scan the surface or find deeper meaning beneath. The second is to McGooohan's 'credit'. His megalomania produced an individual — rather than a spy — with whom people sympathised and identified.

McGoohan will be back in England for a role in the remake of 'Jamaica Inn', though the most recent news of him was two weeks ago in his arrest for alleged drunken driving. Although he left England for America soon after finishing 'The Prisoner', there is little doubt that he would like to work here again. If ACC had its way, no doubt 'Danger Man' would return, with an older and wiser John Drake. If McGooohan had his way, TV switchboard operators might again find themselves in the position of having to pull the plug.

Wider Television Access is presenting 'The Prisoner', 'The Avengers' and 'Danger Man' at the Scala from Saturday. See Film: Independents listings.