

Questions are a burden to others 2: Once Upon A Time



"This is a favourite of mine. It's a little autobiographical – it's always nice to get that stuff out of your system, isn't it?"

- Patrick McGoohan.

"I wish I could act like Pat can write."

- Prisoner scriptwriter Lewis Greifer.

One of the many reasons *The Prisoner* made for such an enthralling and exciting television experience was the uncertainty element. That is, what's it going to be about this week? Over and above the central premise of one man striving to hold fast to his identity, individuality and integrity, the plots became ever more adventurous, ever more wild and unpredictable.

The pilot episode, *'Arrival'*, sketched out the scene, initially the narrative appeared to be our hero's attempt to escape a mysterious Village, then with episodes, *'A. B. & C'* and *'Many Happy Returns'* one became aware that The Village concept was too small a canvas. The chains were finally broken by

Script Editor George Markstein's departure as he despaired of his plan to confine *The Prisoner* to a variation on the conventional spy genre.

With *'Do Not Forsake Me'* leading the way, this viewer realised we were going in an altogether different direction. The boldness of a story without the driving force of the series star excited me. I remember thinking, when first viewing this, *"Wow, the series has broken free – no holds barred"*.

Of course, *The Prisoner* never allowed the viewer to become complacent, but this was really nothing compared to what was to come. Because, the following week – we got a Western. No titles until the scene was set, then one began to understand the

formula had been cleverly transposed to the Wild West.

The following week I was prepared – what startling adventure awaited we viewers? Now we had a *James Bond* spoof, what fun! The message was, *"Viewers, fasten your seat-belts, because nothing is certain any more!"*

With this in mind, we were presented with *'Once Upon A Time'*. I had never seen anything like it. To say it was a 'duel' albeit mainly verbal is to not do it justice. It was riveting, intense, claustrophobic, exhausting – both for protagonists and viewers – powerful, and all consuming. The premise was unlike anything I'd ever seen, let alone evening TV family entertainment. The sheer quality of acting impressed. Both McKern and McGoohan breathed – indeed *were* – *Numbers Two and Six*. Both were impressive, rousing, exciting, inspiring. Thoroughly immersed, they lived their parts. Watch the episode now and the powerhouse performances simply fill the room, far larger than the screen from which they have escaped. For McGoohan it was partly autobiographical and partly views he felt passionate about, conveyed with a burning intensity. For McKern,

trying to keep pace, it was, as we know, overwhelming, and impacted on his mental health. Six-of-One member Arabella Macintyre-Brown, in an article for our Number Six magazine wrote in 1985, 'As far as I am concerned, this episode holds all the answers to the series.' In conversations, more than one other member has said much the same to me.

'Once Upon A Time' sent the strongest signal yet; all that had gone before set us up for this: the core message, writ in capitals.

But how had we got here?

It was a combination of circumstances. In the first place, the first few scripts had been filmed and in the fifth, 'Chimes of Big Ben', they found an actor, a personality, a Number Two that had truly risen to the challenge. McGoohan told *Primetime* magazine of Leo, "I thought he was just great, and then I knew he would be the protagonist in 'Once Upon a Time', he was the ideal one." Tony Sloman, *The Prisoner* film librarian is quoted in our journal 'In The Village': "During the shooting of 'Chimes of Big Ben' it dawns on people they haven't got another episode to shoot, but they've got a great Number Two". Clearly, a script had to be sourced quickly, but from where...? From the overworked, enthusiastic imagination of Patrick McGoohan, fully engaged in the project, emerged the required story. Sources differ, varying the timing from a thirty-six hour creative burst of writing, to two or three pages of script appearing each day. A second, very clever reason for devising a studio-bound two-hander was financial considerations. Tony Sloman, in an interview he gave me over twenty years ago said, "Of course, how clever, with costs rising and an overspend – particularly on those early episodes, how clever to devise an episode that was far less expensive."

These two factors prompted McGoohan, in these early *Prisoner* days, to distil his thinking and craft a script pure from The Source itself. With 'Free for All' he had satirised campaigning, voting, and the democratic system. 'Fall Out' would be his thoughts and reactions at journey's end, but in 'Once Upon a Time' we got to the essence of how McGoohan saw the philosophy and 'message' of the series.

Given that McGoohan was a man of substance, who had influenced various aspects of 'Danger Man', including the scripts, he had a track record. 'Free for All' demonstrates clearly he was a man who thought deeply, with an inquiring mind, and a wide range of interests.

Inspiration came to him from a variety of sources. We know that the premise of this episode is psychology. It's ingredients being anger, confrontation, conflict, and mind games. The episode is very theatrical in its realisation. As we begin, Number Six displays anger and the scene is set. Number Two must try a new way: to win his respect, to gain Number Six's trust, perhaps then he may reveal his secrets. Their journey begins with we viewers entirely drawn in, transfixed by their exhausting battle of wills. I find it intriguing that so private a man should be so revealing regarding elements of himself. Not just matters he felt passionate about, such as technology, 'progress', moral codes, brainwashing etc, but drawing on his own life experiences. Again Tony Sloman told our Number Six magazine, "Pat had just read something on child behaviour and that's what he was into with the see-saws and so on."

The process is revealed in act four when Number Six says, "It is a recognised method". And Number Two continues, "Used in psychoanalysis". Adding, "The patient must come to trust his doctor totally". Number Six points out, "Sometimes they change places." The explanatory dialogue continues with Number Six pointing out that this method has its risks. He adds, "And that is why your system is called 'Degree Absolute.'"

Where the term 'Degree Absolute' comes from is not entirely clear. It is generally believed by those scholars who write about *The Prisoner* that it is a play on the term, 'Decree Absolute', which is quite clever. I have researched and I can find no trace of this term in the various approaches to psychology, either Freudian, nor any other.

The clinical process is described thus – First and foremost, the psychoanalyst attempts to develop a confidential atmosphere in which patients can feel safe reporting their feelings, thoughts and fantasies. Analysands (as people in analysis are called) are asked to report



Illustration Richard Farnell

whatever comes to mind without fear of reprisal. The psychoanalyst's task, in collaboration with the analysand, is to help deepen the analysand's understanding of those factors outside of conscious awareness, that drive everyday behaviours. In the safe environment of the psychoanalytic setting, the analysand becomes attached to the analyst and pretty soon begins to experience the same conflicts with the analyst that are experienced with key figures in life such as parents, boss, significant others, etc. It's the psychoanalyst's role to point out these conflicts and to interpret them. The transferring of these internal conflicts onto the analyst is called, 'transference'.

Having devised the plot, the script had to be fleshed out, the setting, the characters, the format, how it would unfold.

In addition to using the concept of 'The seven ages of man' as written by Shakespeare from his play 'As You Like It' as a journey, it's my belief that the work of at least two other playwrights was highly influential on the episode. Samuel Becket, Harold Pinter, and perhaps N. F. Simpson. All three were part of a movement that created a new genre, plays that were oblique, absurdist, challenging, with dialogue that made the audience both question and seek the meaning of the work. Let's briefly consider their work.

The Irish playwright Samuel Becket, writer of avant-garde, surreal, perhaps absurdist

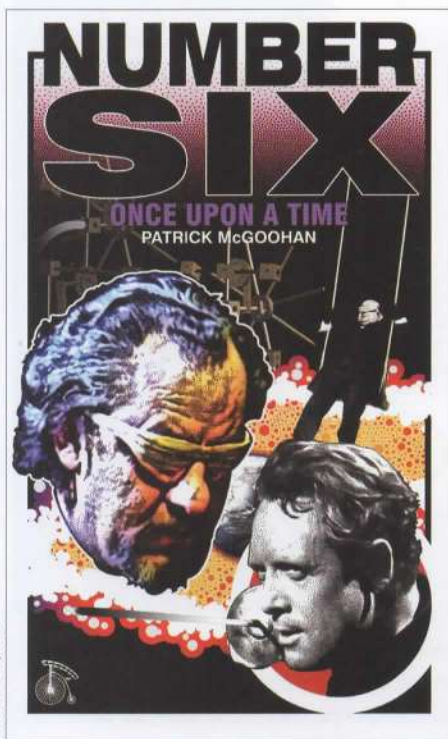


Illustration: Cooly Pad 5

plays is most famous for the classic 'Waiting for Godot', in which two men wait for Godot, who never comes. There are great similarities in the style of dialogue between the two protagonists to that found in 'Once Upon A Time'. The single word exchanges for example –

Estragon "Then adieu"
Pozzo "Adieu"
Vladimir "Adieu"
Pozzo "Adieu"

Silence. No one moves. Then this exchange is repeated. And so on...

Another of his works, *Endgame*, I also hold to be influential. Here a man is confined to a bunker-like room, along with his servant, the parallels with *Once Upon A Time* will not go unnoticed. In fact a stage adaption of this episode was performed in tandem with *Endgame* at the Edinburgh Festival in 1990.

McGoohan referenced Pinter in a 1979 interview he gave to *Six of One*, when he spoke of *The Prisoner* as "moral and social comment". He ventured, "Harold Pinter does it in everything he does, but he does it on a domestic level. I think he's a marvellous writer". Pinter's baffling plays were regularly on TV at the time. (A friend of mine was a BBC technician who worked on a production of a Pinter play, *Mountain*

Language, broadcast in 1998. Puzzled, my friend asked Pinter what the play was about. Pinter responded, "What do you want it to be about?")

The third candidate is the playwright N. F. Simpson, perhaps best known for *One Way Pendulum*, in which Mr Goomkirby builds a replica of the Old Bailey Court in his living room, whilst his son is in the attic teaching a number of I-speak-your-weight machines to intone the Hallelujah Chorus. A film was made starring Eric Sykes in 1965 and the DVD may still be sourced.

I conclude that McGooohan, having seen the work of these playwrights drew on the frameworks, the atmosphere, the style, and felt brave enough to push the boundaries in his own way. It's common knowledge how, as Tony Sloman put it, "The pages were coming down, two or three a day." According to props man Mickey O'Toole the author was 'Archibald Schwarz', and Mickey said to McGooohan in disbelief, "Where'd you get this guy?", with the answer, "He's a good guy Mickey, trust me." When I mentioned this name to Tony Sloman, he replied, "I've never heard of this name until you mentioned it." I imagine, given this script, with it's single words and numbers the crew were bewildered and perhaps using this pseudonym was McGooohan's way of testing the water. Clearly the name meant something to

McGoohan as in the Columbo episode *Identity Crisis*, he offers a giant teddy bear to a little girl and tells her its name is Archibald. George Markstein, script editor, some years later was to call the episode "Absolute gibberish." The fact was, McGooohan was blazing a trail beyond Markstein's comprehension.

Another influence I suspect, was when McGooohan appeared in the 1955 Orson Welles stage production of *Moby Dick Rehearsed*. It was produced as a play within a play, in which a group of actors meet and find themselves rehearsing *Moby Dick* instead of the planned play, utilising whatever props are to hand, encouraging the audience to exercise their imaginations too. Parallels with the theatricality of this episode will not escape the reader. (Also see *Six 4 Two* magazine issue 8 where I wrote about this production).

As in *Free for All*, McGooohan demonstrates his gift for word play, examples being the title of this article, and during the 'age' of school section:
Number Two: "You're a fool."
Number Six: "Yes sir, not a rat."
Number Two: "Rat?"
Number Six: "Rat!"
Number Two: "I'm a rat?"
Number Six: "No sir. I'm not. I'm a fool."

There is more than one meaning to the



Leo McKern and Max Wall in a 1977 production of *Waiting for Godot*. © BBC/Open University.



Repurposed stepladders, black curtains and minimal set design from *Once Upon A Time* and a production of *Moby Dick Rehearsed* (photographer unknown).

word, for in the Shakespearian tradition fools occupy a special place, a King's fool may tell him things that others would dare not. Certainly, they are out of the conventional social interaction system, an outsider.

In addition to the script, there was also a certain amount of ad-libbing. Certainly there are a number of differences between the script itself and what we see on the screen. Back in a 1979 Six of One interview, McKern had confirmed, "McGoohan was reasonably flexible if we had ideas." In an article in our magazine 'In The Village', from Autumn 1994, Roger Langley states, "McGoohan has admitted that for *Once Upon A Time* he left whole blank pages to allow for both this and chants of 'pop' and 'six'". Roger concluded his analysis of the episode with the words, "Who will break first, the man on the screen, or the viewer?"

The school system portrayed is one that instils conformity, obedience and group mentality. A uniform to ensure no individuality or individualism is encouraged. Thus the innocence, free mind, and free expression of the infant is ruthlessly repressed. Some readers may be familiar with the concept. I remember my enthusiasm for *The Prisoner* when it was first screened, and finding others did not share my view, and the joy when Six of One began, with letters arriving from fellow admirers, expressing their delight

at finding like minds. The following is one of many examples. "One of the things that gives *Six-of-One* its magic is expressed in the oft-repeated phrase in *Alert* (our first journal), "I thought I was the only one..." There is another who feels as strongly as I do! I am not alone..."

With regard to the ending, as role reversal takes place, in the late 1970s an early Six of One member, Stan Tenen, wrote of the conclusion, comparing the coming meeting with Number One, "With the penultimate scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, in which Dorothy has defeated the Wicked Witch and returns with her broomstick to meet the Mighty Wizard." Also from the 1970s emerged from an Ontario University a booklet, *The Prisoner Puzzle*. It described this episode as, "The most baffling, the most revealing, and the most brilliant of all *Prisoner* episodes."

The story reaches its climax as Number Two mentally, emotionally, and physically crumbles. Defeated, in the final seconds, Two and Six exchange roles, and as a disembodied voice (I think it is McGoohan) states 'Die Six' the final test has been overcome. Number Six's ultimate triumph, the persona, is shed, and Number Two, adopting this, loses the titanic struggle and dies. With that act, the Village, Markstein's structure and reason itself, all concede defeat. We have entered territory that Markstein could never imagine.

After our intense journey, there is one final touch. Six and Two, McGoohan and McKern, have formed a bond, and after the battle of wills, and Two's demise, Six displays compassion, gently touching Number Two's cheek. As the supervisor coldly says, "We shall need the body for evidence," Six smashes, perhaps in impotent rage, his whisky glass to the floor.

The final line in the script – which was cut – says 'We hear a sound. Loud and growing in volume – as of a rocket launching.' This was eight months before *Fall Out* was filmed.

When I had the pleasure of interviewing Patrick's daughter, Catherine, at the 2014 Convention, she had this to say about 'Once Upon a Time', "This was my Mother's favourite episode, for obvious reasons. There was nothing about that episode that was acted, they went beyond acting. ...One of my favourite moments is when my father looks up childishly with his ice-cream cone and I believe it. I totally believe he is seven, a young boy, licking his ice-cream. It was an amazing feat to pull that off..."

'Once Upon A Time' challenged the audience. Some of us rose to that invitation. Mr McGoohan, we're in your capable hands, bring it on. **DB**

Next issue - *The Girl Who Was Death*