

# Dealing in Dreams

**David Barrie reflects upon *Dance of the Dead's* influences and elements**

The essence of *The Prisoner's* appeal must lie in the strength of the scripts. However good the production values, the acting of Patrick McGoohan, the visual appeal of Portmeirion, what has ensured the longevity and the cult status, are the bold and imaginative scripts.

For this we must thank George Markstein, the script editor. George stated, "It is the script editor who carries the ethos of a series". He went on to say that, after having worked with McGoohan on *Danger Man*, he realised that he would have to find writers who had not worked on *Danger Man*, writers with a particular view of the world to carry *The Prisoner*.

It is to his credit that he was able to do this. Whilst David Tomblin and

George were locked away writing *Arrival*, the pilot episode that would set the scene, McGoohan was pouring his views of the political system and the individual against bureaucracy, into the remarkable *Free for All*.

Charged with finding suitable scriptwriters, the first scriptwriters to be taken on board were located by George. Amongst them was Anthony Skene. Skene had actually been approached by George to write for *Danger Man*. However, his idea (a plot about the Cannes film

festival) was never used, because the series was coming to an end. However, what interests us is why Skene was considered a suitable writer for this proposed new series.

As *Dance of the Dead* is my favourite episode, though I initially found it puzzling, I decided to contact Skene to see if he would answer some questions. He and I corresponded and con-



Trial in progress, during *Dance of the Dead*.

versed during 1994 on this topic. What follows really can be traced to that. I subsequently wrote a number of lengthy articles about *Dance* and Skene's other two episodes. I also hosted a one-day workshop for members who wished to look at his Prisoner contribution in more detail.

In 1965 Skene had written two scripts for Rediffusion Television that were to be screened under a series entitled *The Seven Deadly Sins*. One, *In the Night*, unfolded in real time. However, it is the other offering,

*File on Harry Jordan*, that interests us. It contains a number of elements that maybe formed part of the genesis for *The Prisoner*.

Harry joins a mysterious corporation, run by an unseen figure (Peter Howell, from *The General*), who rules from an office on the thirteenth floor, which is out of bounds. Harry has apparently filled in a questionnaire, that, unknown to him, marks him out for special things. Harry is determined to find out who 'the man behind the big door' is and, breaking rules, does just that. He gains entry to the penthouse where he meets this ruling figure, who explains that he is retiring and Harry has been chosen to take his place. The man exits, and Harry then finds that for him, there is no way out. He is imprisoned, along

with a dwarf butler who will serve his needs. Is it any wonder that Markstein contacted Skene?

Skene remembers being invited to Elstree, where the concept was explained to him. He remembered, "I saw not one piece of paper...the show was a cosmic void. They sat there waiting for ideas... a free hand? Oh God yes." So given this opportunity to write virtually anything on a blank sheet of paper - a gift seldom given to a scriptwriter - what did Skene do? "If I'm stuck, I do a trial." Markstein said proceed.