

THE PRISONER FROM ALL ANGLES (from Free For All magazine 2007, by Roger Langley)

Many people, when asked about *The Prisoner*, claim not know what it was all about. Some remember “those white balloons” and others how “he was always trying to escape”. On a surface level, *The Prisoner* worked as an action-adventure series, or a fantasy. However, the series has endured because of its deeper or hidden levels of meaning. Some would argue that there are no such interpretations and that analyses of the episodes are unjustified. Well, whatever view one subscribes to, there’s no escaping that *The Prisoner* has many aspects and so here’s a few examples of how episodes can be appreciated and approached.

We start with the most likely contender, with the focus being upon Patrick McGoohan himself. However, even here there is a dichotomy: do we believe what was said at the outset, or at the end of the first run on television? At the beginning, we learned that the star had felt that he had done enough Danger Man stories and wanted to quit. Thus, we had a John Drake lookalike being abducted for having resigned. Finding the reason for his resignation became the objective of the leaders of the Village, an unknown place to which he had been taken. So far, so good.

After *Fall Out*, McGoohan was heard more than once to explain that the series had been an allegory. Into this, one could read that there were religious elements, with the final episode containing biblical symbols. Here, in a short and simplistic summary, Man was being delivered from his imprisonment, being given his freedom and was being reborn. But how did that stand alongside the earlier stories? Surely nobody could say that the preceding 15 episodes were allegorical? And what of *Once Upon A Time*? This seemed to be more autobiographical than allegorical. McGoohan was taken through his life, ostensibly being regressed in order that No. 2 might find out the reason for resignation. However, intentionally or unintentionally, McGoohan seemed to make himself the main subject of the story, with aspects of his past life being to the fore.

Let’s leave behind the series’ star, executive producer, part-time writer and director, and look at the production as a whole. After all, there were many talented people at the helm, from the writers and directors, to the studio crew and not least of all George Markstein, the script editor. Somewhere, surely, there must have been a common strand in the thoughts and imaginations of the producers and writers? Perhaps the series really did start off as an escaped spy or scientist or whatever being kidnapped and held prisoner. This was the premise of Markstein, who knew of such an establishment operating during the war years. If this is the case, the evolution of the series is hard to define. Perhaps it was just the zeitgeist of the time which led to episodes becoming more experimental. Certainly, the cowboy episode and the spy spoof one at the end of the series could hardly be described as allegorical. More likely, the ‘swinging’ era influenced the series, the trend being for zany and madcap comedy movies, often with a spy theme. Maybe even James Bond himself had some effect on the way *The Prisoner* developed.

So much for the raison and style of the series. But what about all the other theories which have come to the fore, over the years? The prime one of these must be the preservation of one’s individuality. If we are not free to be ourselves, we feel the effect of some imagined imprisonment. Markstein said, as did Leo McKern, that we were all prisoners of our lives, jobs, mortgages, looks, health and so on. OK, we can all identify with No. 6’s fight, but it does not seem likely that the series was made in order to permit us to share the imprisoned feelings of the kidnapped man. Surely the way in which we align our thoughts with his predicament is a by-product, rather than an original ingredient. Staying with individuality for the moment, some have seen *The Prisoner* as a way of reflecting their own views on religion, sexual orientation or just the basic wish to bust out and be free. There is also the school of nostalgia, celebrating old TV shows and the golden years of the small screen. Fair enough, but what we are examining here is what *The Prisoner* set out to be when the episodes were first being constructed.

It has been said that *The Prisoner* was a warning, or even a prophecy. McGoohan claimed that Man was the most evil character on earth. Our most dangerous enemy is ourselves. He did not like progress; he wanted the penny farthing bicycle to represent a gentler time, when progress was slower, rather than having rockets which can shoot to the moon in no time at all. The actor hated the speed of the supersonic aircraft Concorde. He railed against teenage fashions, drugs, trends and music. Maybe some or even a lot of the actor’s personality found its way into *The Prisoner*, but once again this could not have been the basis on which the series was first proposed.

There is certainly a lot to be said for the prediction aspect of *The Prisoner*. The cordless

telephones, the surveillance cameras, computers and so on are part of ordinary everyday life now. However, those who designed The Prisoner simply did not want the series to date, they were not really looking into a crystal ball to see how the stories would bear out some prophecy in the future. And yet, we find it hard nowadays to ignore the prophecy or warning element of the series. In fact, it is probably fair to say that these are the strongest aspects which cause the series to be remembered and reported upon, regularly. One could argue at length about how much of The Prisoner was intended, how much was never foreseen and how much today is the product of the world around us being reflected in the series. One of the primary habits of human beings is to compare a situation with something, in order at least to be able to describe it or explain it. We have often heard unusual or unexpected events described as being like something from Alice In Wonderland, or Kafka-esque, or Orwellian.

Plenty of journalists have referred to The Prisoner and on countless occasions a writer has been heard to say that he or she expected a big white ball to come bouncing by any moment or hear McGoohan yelling that he was a free man. Therefore there is no disputing that there are, today, Prisonerish experiences and goings-on in the world. Not everybody can refer to them in this way, as not everybody has seen The Prisoner and for some who saw it only once, or long ago, the items remembered are just those big balloons or escape attempts.

More minor theories about The Prisoner relate to the abuse of drugs, science, education or even politics. Valid though these studies are, they do however simply relate to some of the storylines. In the sixties, many probing plays and TV shows were on screen, with Cold War dramatisations, Harold Pinter scripts and so on. The writers behind The Prisoner had to some extent a free rein, working only within the framework of an unknown man being held in an unknown place. It is therefore undoubtedly at their doors that we must place the blame for such content. At the end of the series we were even introduced to the concept of space travel, as mankind was getting ever closer to landing on the moon, as he did in 1969. So, spies, rockets and pocket dictatorships could be included innocuously in Prisoner stories. After all, were the same things not regularly seen in the earlier Danger Man?

Perhaps it is the concept of "No. 1" which was really the cause of The Prisoner being questioned and dissected so much, across the years. The opening sequence of the show demands our attention to the question "Who is No. 1", and only at the end did we have any hope of finding out the answer to this puzzle. McGoohan claimed that he knew from the beginning that the identity of No. 1 would be the prisoner himself. This seems hardly likely, when the first dozen or so stories are looked at. Certainly, when the more fantasy filled stories at the end of the series are viewed, it can be seen that the free rein which previously existed, became an "anything goes" opportunity, when McGoohan took over the writing and helming of the last two episodes. And so, No. 1 became our worst enemy, ourselves, our prisoner and our jailer. This was an extraordinary state of affairs for a prime time TV show and probably the other main reason for The Prisoner's mystery over the years was the inclusion of strange features in Fall Out: the hooded figure, the unusual set, the crystal ball, the Village being apparently just outside London, the symbolic escape through the gates, the replacing of cameras by machine guns on the revolving booms and the playing of Beatles music etc.

It has been reliably said on many occasions that The Prisoner was the sum of its parts and that there was no single definition or explanation, nor was any one theory more viable than another. In the episode The Chimes of Big Ben, at an Arts and Crafts exhibition, we learn from No. 6 that, "It means what it is". This is an ideal quotation to sum up The Prisoner and its unusual number of 17 episodes. Big white balls, peculiar psychiatric procedures, bizarre drugs, dream invasion, cowboys, women in white and rockets give us a kaleidoscope of viewing material. If we tried to explain to a listener what The Prisoner was about, putting in to our presentation all of the above elements and ingredients, plus those which have been left out, by the time our speech had ended, the listener would be either snoring loudly, or would have run away screaming, or would have been rendered into a state of complete confusion. We can all be experts on the subject of what The Prisoner was about, but privately, we still ask ourselves the same question: "What did it all really mean?"

