

GEORGE MARKSTEIN PROFILE (from Free For All magazine 2005, by Roger Langley)

George Markstein, who died in 1987, was a guest at two Prisoner events and also appeared in the 1984 Channel 4 documentary, *Six Into One: The Prisoner File*. Gourmet and raconteur, in 1980 he appeared at the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts) in London at Six of One's gathering and in 1982 he took part in a Prisoner screening at the Scala Cinema, also in London. He answered questions from a large audience and spoke separately to Roger Langley for the then "Escape" society magazine. Let's now inspect the books and scripts penned by the writer and review his career.

Markstein said his intention was to take *The Prisoner* out of the Village into the world outside. For him, No. 6's adventures had only just begun. He wanted to show the man as being trapped universally, never able to escape. However, he disliked reading too much into the series and dismissed its allegorical aspirations. When he found an episode being screened in Los Angeles, he scoffed at the views being expressed by a psychiatrist, 'explaining' the series to viewers. He was scathing about scholars studying the series for philosophical or sociological courses.

Markstein felt that there was much wrong with British TV. His view was that too many people were involved in the running of TV stations and not enough creative individuals. He likened TV merely to a cassette recorder and did not think that the addition of a screen with pictures made television an "art form". The writer insisted that only thirteen episodes were planned and then when more were required, "things began to happen with Mr. McGoohan." It was impossible to go on, Markstein felt, and as is known he left the production before the final quartet of episodes was made (Once Upon A Time having been filmed months earlier).

He opined that in relation to *The General*, education could be as dangerous as somebody given a certificate to use a weapon. He believed that teachers did not always have to be qualified and could poison minds. Some might feel that the writer's approach was cynical, but with regard to No. 6 he wanted him to come up constantly against the System and the Establishment, showing that the Village could reach out anywhere in the world. Of course, nothing Markstein would say took away credit from the series' star. Quite simply, he felt that the actor WAS No. 6. However, with *Fall Out* he was not so generous and regarded the episode as "a load of old garbage, no, nonsense".

Markstein's opinion of McGoohan was that he was a superb actor with immense ability, but with the egomania all actors have. "He was difficult to work with. Some of his writing is as bad as some of my acting would be. And he gradually went off the rails." Clearly, Markstein wanted to keep the series on its original path. He was aware of an organisation called "I.S.R.B.", being the Inter Services Research Bureau. During the War, people were sent on 'holiday', kept at a place in Scotland and were treated well. They were not allowed to leave and were kept at the isolated spot because they had information or skills which were too dangerous to be taken elsewhere in the world.

"That was the birth of *The Prisoner*", Markstein claimed. Markstein enlightened the ICA audience that the place was called Invelair Lodge and the people held there had "reached the point in their career where they knew too much to be let loose, but they hadn't actually done anything wrong. They weren't in any way traitors, they hadn't betrayed anything, but in their own interest it was better if they were kept safely." He also insisted that he was the originator of the series, having penned his initial notes during a train journey. It is not clear whether he ever went to Portmeirion, but he did appreciate the place being chosen for its weird styles and the effect of creating disorientation.

His cameo in the opening sequence and reprised in *Many Happy Returns* led to Markstein quipping that No. 1 is the character seen in virtually every episode. He left no doubt that he was talking about himself.

In 1986 when Markstein's last novel *Soul Hunters* was published, he was interviewed on BBC Radio. He revealed his theatrical background, having been born in Berlin in 1929 and appearing on stage when he was five playing a Japanese pageboy. He came to Britain in the thirties and eventually became a consultant for Thames TV.

Of *The Prisoner*, he related that McGoohan had become fed up with *Danger Man* (a series upon which Markstein had already worked with the actor) and everybody was going to be out of work. Markstein liked the idea of John Drake, with all his secret knowledge, finding that he was not able to quit. Although the *Danger Man* series had been devised by Ralph Smart and the content could not be 'borrowed', there was an obvious similarity between the series'. Markstein, however, was forthright that No. 6 was Drake. The writer felt that McGoohan had taken Markstein's original idea and pursued it himself: "He tends to take everything over that he does. So it was par for the course." The writer's ire was transparent. "He wrote two or three of (the episodes) and he directed some and he wrote the music for some and he designed the clothes for some and he tap danced some! Tell me what he didn't do!"

Markstein believed that the idea for Portmeirion came from a Sunday Times supplement but

whether he was talking about the original Danger Man series, the early episodes of which were filmed in Portmeirion, or the later Prisoner, was not clear. Markstein intended originally, he said, that No. 6 was held by people and would not know which side they were on or which side he is still working for. His novels *The Cooler* and *Chance Awakening* carried these themes. He admitted that the series to him became silly at the end: "I walked out. That's why it became silly, you see. It needed a certain hand at the helm, you see."

Markstein's view of *The Village* was his own concept. He stated, "I've always been interested in the fact that all people are prisoners. Some prisons are prettier than others. A movie star is the prisoner of his face, for example."

He called the last Prisoner episodes a "Disgrace". He hated technology and especially computers. He would not have liked today's security-laden world. "To catch a bloody plane we have to open every pocket, we have to be prodded and poked because of these people who abuse freedom and make air travel impossible." Considering this was said back in 1980, he was quite prophetic.

Markstein penned a *Writer's Guide* for *The Prisoner* and of course co-wrote the episode *Arrival* with David Tomblin. He shared an antipathy of progress with McGoohan. "I am against progress. Everybody else is for progress and that's quite good enough."

He disliked over interpretation, the proliferation of numbers and always stressed that *The Prisoner* was a team effort, not a one-man-band. He felt that a number of persons on the team worked on the series "with the greatest dedication, devotion, talent and ability, and received no thanks whatsoever." He claimed to have dozens of story ideas for future Prisoner episodes and how the series would become more complicated. However, mostly he was in favour of creative expression.

When he came to be interviewed for the Channel 4 documentary in 1983, he was sat inside a London taxi, going past government and security services buildings, talking as though he was a defected spy, having been given asylum in Britain. However, nothing can be taken away from the structure, discipline and creative thought which came from Markstein, was mixed with the production skills of David Tomblin and given life by the dynamic and charismatic star of the show, Patrick McGoohan.

Profile

Markstein worked as a crime reporter and became a military correspondent with US forces in Europe during the Cold War years, after which he was a crime reporter in Fleet Street. He later worked in television drama, writing and script editing for *Armchair Theatre*, *Callan*, *Danger Man* (he was also story editor for the feature length 'movie' of the combined episodes *Koroshi* and *Shinda Shima*, created in 1966 for the US market and called *Koroshi*), *Mr. Palfrey of Westminster*, a number of plays and the first 13 episodes of *The Prisoner*.

He wrote episodes of *Special Branch*, *Public Eye*, *The Return of The Saint*, *London Embassy*, *The Rivals of Sherlock Holmes*, *Frankenstein*, *The Traitor* (an episode in the *Storyboard* series) and other TV shows. For cinema, he won a screenwriting award for *Robbery*, worked on *The Odessa File* and *Who Dares Wins* (US title: *The Final Option*) plus the 1982 film *Espion, léve-toi* (from his novel). On screen he probably only appeared in the Prisoner episodes *Arrival* - used also for opening sequences - and *Many Happy Returns*.

Markstein worked on provincial newspapers, then in Liverpool and finally London. Journalism took him into television as a reporter for the news documentary *This Week*. He worked on documentaries including *The Hot Line*, the first programme to be filmed in a nuclear bomb base control room. He was London correspondent for *Overseas Weekly*, the news magazine for the US forces in Europe and over a period of ten years he attended over 400 Courts Martial. This led him to become technical expert of the TV Court Martial series.

Books

- 1974 *The Cooler*
- 1976 *The Man From Yesterday*
- 1977 *Chance Awakening*
- 1978 *Tara Kane*
- 1978 *The Goering Testament*
- 1980 *Traitor for a Case*
- 1982 *Ultimate Issue*
- 1983 *Ferret*
- 1986 *Soul Hunters*

(All these books were reprinted in 2002 and were available from www.houseofstratus.com).

