

Questions are a burden to others

3: The Girl Who Was Death

Deadlier than the Male by Dave Barrie



"An episode of one of the weirdest television shows ever."

The pearl of wisdom above was uttered by Frank Muir on the 2nd May 1992 on Channel 4 as he was about to introduce the final evening of TV Heaven¹. This was a series of thirteen evenings that had run weekly from 8 February 1992 and which was devoted to the best of archive television produced since the 1950s and collectively shown under the banner, *TV Heaven*. At the time Frank Muir was a very well-known TV personality, comedy writer, and raconteur. Each week he would introduce, comment on, and discuss the four or five programmes produced in that particular chosen year.

At the end of the run, on that final celebratory trip of nostalgia, and after watching a variety of gems from 1968, the best was saved till last. You guessed, an episode of *The Prisoner*.

At the time, interest in *The Prisoner* was still high. Last screened in 1984 - when *Six of One* received many thousands of enquires - it was anticipated that a key episode would be chosen, to illustrate why there was so much interest, and 'What all the fuss is about'. So, a new emerging generation, having been enthusiastically coached by their elders, family or friends, were about to discover that magic for themselves. Or perhaps not...

The very urbane Mr. Muir, in his introduction to this eagerly awaited screening, described the series structure and appeal in somewhat lyrical yet dismissive tones. *"The point about it as drama is that it seems to have no point. It's a triumph of style over content, or to put it another way, it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it."*

"There's not a real plot in our episode, just a string of wilder and wilder physical predicaments for McGoochan to get out of. And a finale involving a mad scientist... there's also a pretty girl who spends the time trying to kill our hero because she loves him, or something."

So, this new generation of potential *Prisoner* fans were treated to *The Girl Who Was Death*. I imagine in households throughout the country, said *Prisoner* virgins turned to their elders and, in great bafflement, exclaimed, *"I'm confused. I thought you said..."*

Now, for the first time, I can reveal why *The Girl Who Was Death* was chosen to showcase this legendary series. It was because of a simple mistake. When the researchers at Channel 4 sought advice, *Dance of the Dead* was recommended as an episode that cleverly portrayed the many different elements that made *The Prisoner* what it was. The Village setting, the attempts to escape, the mind games, brain-washing techniques, and all the rest.

Come the selection, the person despatched to retrieve said episode somehow suffered a memory malfunction. (*"What was it now, I remember it's got 'dead' or 'death' or something in the title, ah, this must be it."*) So, there we were, sat on the edge of the chair, and suddenly, jaw agape, here was our *James Bond* spoof.

I've remarked before how for this writer, part of *The Prisoner's* appeal, particularly in the final four Markstein-free episodes, when the series really took flight, is that we simply had no idea what awaited us. The structure of *AB&C* and *Many Happy Returns* indicated that the boundaries of the Village setting might be extended a lot further.

So, when I first saw *The Girl Who Was Death*, I was hooked. An adventure. A romp. Clever, imaginative, sparkling, highly amusing, and absorbing. It also demonstrated that McGoochan, in a class of his own at playing the isolated man at bay, could also play light comedy.

The time is ripe for an evaluation of this episode.

I've scoured the archives, the books, *Six of One's* considerable output and only unearthed two articles that in any way seek to assess this adventure. Everything else is devoted to either the production or interviews with those involved.

Although this episode does have its detractors as well as its fans, in the



four polls that have been conducted on episode popularity, it scored ninth, tenth twice, and then twelfth. So I am not alone. When I did a poll for people's favourite scene from all episodes, it was the poisoned pint that scored highest. So much for the psychology and philosophy.

Back to the beginning.

The script had its origins in *Danger Man*. Actually, I've always seen this episode as a companion piece to that series' episode, *The Ubiquitous Mr Lovegrove*. (One of the first two episodes to be released on videotape. The other of course was that signpost episode to *The Prisoner*, *Colony Three*.)

Mr Lovegrove is a story within a story, as is *The Girl Who Was Death*. Both have framing devices that play with their respective genres. Both have humour at the core, and are fantastical flights of fancy. Mould-breakers.

So, with the need to find stories to complete the run, David Tomblin remembered "That was an idea I sketched out some long time before for 'Danger Man'. When we were searching for more ideas for 'The Prisoner', I got it out, and had a look, and thought, 'Well, we could use it. It is out of context, but I thought it could be a lot of fun.'" Tomblin was busy on *Living in Harmony*, so he and McGoohan turned to a trusted writer, Terence Feely, who had already contributed *The Schizoid Man* to the series. Having written the script, Feely and his wife left to holiday in the south of France. In a letter to me Feely remembered, "They wanted to give the Village a rest... and between us we came up with the completely off-the-wall idea that he was reading a bedtime story to some children in the Village. Whose children? Who cared? This was the joy of the series. Today the South American writers call it 'magic realism' and claim to have invented it. Stand in line, amigos."

"David and Pat liked the script so much they flew down to Cannes asking if I could turn it into a feature-length episode of 100 minutes, which they were sure they could get Lew Grade to finance. And could I do it now...like...while I was on holiday?"

At the end of the day, for reasons of financial constraints Lew Grade knocked that idea on the head. "So the finished script is an amalgam of the two. It is really a feature movie, edited down to an episode, and one can tell. Pity."

The production of this episode has been well covered, again in both a number of books (Andrew Pixley's excellently researched volume for example), and in the many interviews that have appeared, notably in Six of One's publications.

Let me commence by placing this episode in *The Prisoner* firmament. It is not one that springs to mind when considering the premise, nature, and ethos of this series. There is no political manipulation, social comment, nor the search for the inner self (being three of the core issues this series explores). Instead it falls into the category of the realm of fantasy, action-adventure, and is perhaps comic book in

nature. And yet, perhaps buried beneath the surface, other questions are raised. Described as a 'fairy-tale', is it Disney-like, or the Brothers Grimm? Perhaps Number Six is having a little fun in creating confusion amongst his captors? Or showing disdain for them? And the children. Whose? Why? Do they have a future? Yes, I admit these are extensions, but isn't the whole point about this enigmatic series is that it compels one to question? To burrow beneath its glossy surface.

Described as a spoof, but why make it? The consensus is that there was a shortage of stories, a certain number had to be made, and this could fit the format. But McGoohan had famously turned down Bond, and yet this out-Bonds Bond. With 'Mr X' wearing the trademark apparel worn by John Drake in *Danger Man* McGoohan parodies his former series. Again, the action is fast-paced, even by today's standards. The ingenuity of plot devices, (consider the various thrills condensed just in the Witchwood 'Butcher, Baker, Candlestick Maker' sequence,) the Bond-like throwaway humour; Sonia, "Mountaineering rope, darling. It would hold an elephant." P: "I'll remember it next time I go climbing with one."

Let us consider the protagonists. Aside from the ultimate femme fatale and the hero, the other characters are minor and only there to support the two central performances.

And, what a femme fatale! Her pursuit of Number Six assumes the malevolent nature of a Black Widow Spider's courting ritual. Yet she is dressed in virginal white. In our culture this symbolises purity, however in some Eastern cultures the colour white is associated with death². Such a strong role for a female character in a TV series was comparatively rare at the time. (See *'Calypso's Island on p. 16 - ed*). There were exceptions, one thinks of the female partners to John Steed in *The Avengers*, and Mary Morris, both in this series and the BBC serial *A for Andromeda*. Yet it was the exception rather than the rule. Particularly as this character was a villain. So was Sonia a symbol of the truly liberated woman? Perhaps, but still authored by a man with all the assumptions that brings.

What of McGoohan, who appears not as the driving force here, but as the reactor, the puppet to be played with, maybe the hero of Greek mythology set with overcoming Herculean challenges. Remember, *The Girl Who Was Death* was not just the penultimate episode to be produced, but there was a certain over-lapping with *Fall Out*. Not just the cavern chamber and corridor sets (left over from the shooting of the film *Battle Beneath The Earth*) cleverly utilised for both. When shooting began McGoohan was still filming *Ice Station Zebra*, so the trusted Tomblin, apart from devising the plot, became both producer and director. Given budgetary restraints and time restrictions, both the last two shoots, this and *Fall Out*, took place locally to the studio and utilising whatever was to hand, the aforementioned discarded film set and then in the case of this episode, the MGM back lot in addition to Borehamwood High Street, the (sadly-missed) Thatched Barn, and various roads in the locality.

Both David Tomblin as director and producer and Justine Lord have



NUMBER SIX

THE GIRL WHO WAS DEATH

TERRENCE FEELY



Illustration: Cobby Feely 5

spoken of the room for improvisation whilst on the shoot. Justine found David, "A good director", and, "There was scope for ideas to be put forward."

If this episode consistently ranks so highly with we fans of the series, it must have something going for it. Its strengths are: high production values, a fast paced and witty script, ideas and thrills, ingenuity and imagination, the comedic element, plus McGoohan's accomplished acting,

triumphing in a field for which he was not generally known. *face of Number Six himself. However "...the face may have been that of McGoohan"... "laughing at the audience?"* If so, where does one go from there? Perhaps it is deliberate that the final image that confronts the viewer is that of a laughing clown, symbolically 'trapped' behind Number Two's viewing screen. Also, this episode sees Number Six emphatically defeat his captors. The trend over the series has been Number Six's growing understanding of the Village apparatus, enabling him to firmly grasp the initiative. With this triumph, the Village has exhausted its arsenal of psychological techniques, leading them to take the gamble of *Degree Absolute*. When that fails, the Village capitulates and resorts to trying temptation and bribery in the vain hope these techniques might prevent a total failure. In addition we might consider that *The Girl Who Was Death*, with its subterranean world, its destruction through fire-power, its rocket, as forming a blueprint in McGoohan's mind, both as a script structure, and as a rehearsal for *Fall Out*. Feely I'm sure, submitted what he thought was a simple script, however the inspirer of the series, its captain and driving force, launched it in the direction he felt it should travel. It's an interesting premise...

Karen also contributes a very thoughtful article that puts the fairground sequence under the spotlight. In a thorough dissection and commentary of this 12 minute segment Karen concludes "*The amusement park is like the Village; it is unlike the suburban streets and homes that surround it and it is a place of fantasy... while inside, visitors subject themselves to all kinds of ordeals and try to pass off their fear as enjoyment. What would life be like... if the fairground-goer had to stay, and wake up there the next day - and the next? The parallel is obvious*".

To this viewer, everything about McGoohan's care and dedication to *The Prisoner* tempts me to think there are deeper elements here, whether it is the points I have made above, or whether the format comes from another angle. Perhaps challenging the viewer to see what we would make of it. The odyssey of a Greek hero. How one man can survive in a hostile environment. Yet always remember, the whole tale, bar the framing device, is the pure story telling invention of Number Six. And what does that tell us about him...The Ontario Educational Communications Authority *Prisoner Puzzle Guide* of 1978 ventures, "*If Number Two was really paying attention to the story Number Six tells the children, he might learn a lot about Number Six's character.*" Why is Death in love with him, for he is not in love with Death? He pursues her, yet need not. It suggests there is there is something not entirely tongue in cheek in the storytelling. It asks we, the reader, what fantasy images do we have for ourselves?

Now consider. In this article, have I, like Number Six reading his fairy-tale, taken you dear reader, on a similar path, tantalised you with the theories of a deeper interpretation, when, in fact, this episode may possibly be just a piece of fluff after all? And yet... isn't that why we are captivated by *The Prisoner*? It challenges us, the viewer, to examine and question what we are presented with.

A final snippet. The actor Roy Beck (who played the masked Number One figure in *Fall Out*) wrote to me that his first wife, Ann, doubled for Justine Lord during the Beachy Head sequences. So one could say that Number One was married to Death, so to speak...

Goodnight children, everywhere.

Next Issue - **Living In Harmony**

triumphing in a field for which he was not generally known.

One is left with a sneaking feeling that McGoohan relished this opportunity, not just to escape the confines of The Village, but to demonstrate another strand of his acting talent. Also maybe to give a section of the audience what it wanted – a simple, easily followed action adventure where, unless you wish, there is no need to delve for the hidden undercurrents. Maybe Number Six isn't just having a game with those who run the Village; maybe he's having a game at our expense too.

As mentioned, there has been precious little examination of this episode, whether in our own publications or elsewhere. It was only when preparing to write this article that I realised two things. The first was how little analysis had been written over the years, and secondly, because *The Girl Who Was Death* is unlike any other story in this series, that I was initially baffled just how to approach the articles construction and content.³

Perhaps the only serious attempts were authored by Roger and Karen Langley and contained within *In The Village* issue 14 (Spring 1997). Roger, over some five thought-provoking pages really does penetrate the different facets of this story and presents some very intriguing and provocative theories. He has done his homework and brings in other's musings too. A flavour: "*Only the publications 'The Prisoner Files' by John Peel attempt an explanation. 'Even for a strange series, this was an odd story. The episode is akin to an Avengers' script with perhaps ideas from Bond parodied. Further, perhaps McGoohan was tiring of the criticism of his show being too profound and hard to understand, so this was a way of him giving the critics a 'Bronx cheer' (in the UK we term this a 'raspberry').*" Peel argues that this story has no message and no substance...

Roger continues to explore the extensions that can be mooted, "*Should the episode be seen as preparing the viewer for 'Fall Out', by lulling the audience into a false sense of security, one is perhaps forced to re-evaluate perhaps the most famous scene of all – when the mask is ripped from the face of the ape... Underneath it has always been assumed is the*



Editor's Postscript

We are all familiar with the clown puppet at the end of *TGWWD* placed in front of the camera being thought of as PMG's comment on TV audiences, but additional weight to this argument is given in the fairground sequence where we also have Jolly Jack Tar laughing at the absurdity of it all *from behind a glass screen*. For me this is case closed. PMG is saying that yes, we're all dummies - on both sides of the divide! The jolly dolly also appears to be an allusion to *Test Card F*, first broadcast in the UK in July 1967, an omnipresent icon open to all kinds of interpretation, the clown and young girl staring out from our TVs like a mute cathode oracle.

We can summarise the 'Girl Who Was

Death as parody' argument thus: Why is the plot so incredibly contrived - e.g. Sonia leaves her hankie in exactly the place Mr X throws the cricket ball, how has she poisoned his beer etc. could he really hitch a lift on the helicopter (unseen too)? How does he have the time to fix all the weapons when he arrives at the lighthouse? Is it deliberately silly/unbelievable to make a point about spy fiction? The episode parodies *Mission Impossible* (message on vinyl record), lampoons *Thunderball* (turkish bath), emphasises it's lowbrow thrills and puts it nearer the level of *Get Smart*. The easy escape from being tied to the chair, the rope left conveniently for McGooohan to escape - all sending up the genre (or the audience who unthinkingly lap this sort of adventure up) or is it specifically aimed at *Danger Man*?

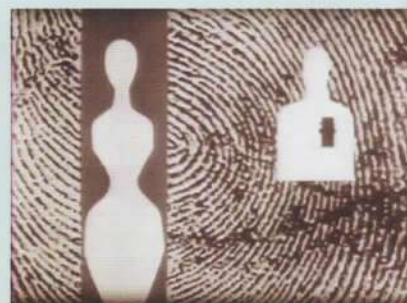
Then we have the rocket meant to destroy London (yawn) without any reason given or motivation. Bond villains rarely had a reason... and did the audience even care, as the film went from sunny location to sunny location.

Why is the dubbing so bad - is it again deliberate to show the fakeness of the genre? Is the (over) use of back projection also to show how unreal and cheap a lot of ITC stuff was? Mr X's car is the same type

as Emma Peel's, so there may be a sly dig at *The Avengers* in there as well.

The nursery rhyme characters butcher, baker and candlestick maker - do they hint at the child audience at the end or is it a dig at people who watch (non-ironic) spy fiction and lap it up? And what's the Napoleon connection? Does there even have to be one? Maybe it's just a further dig at the colourful yet shallow nature of many other ITC series.

The episode does seem to be casting a cold eye on either *Danger Man* (John Drake in the cast clinches it for me), or possibly spy-fi in general, yet for all it's ironies we have seen it's popularity with fans increase over the years - hopefully because we're finally getting the joke! **DC / RF**



Cherchez la femme? The non-ironic US Danger Man intro sequence.

Notes and References

¹ Readily found on YouTube for those who wish to sample a flavour.

² One theory why we in the west wear black for funerals is that originally it was believed that the departing soul, not wishing to leave Earth, would look around for a host body to occupy. Wearing black made one less conspicuous therefore less likely to be chosen.

³ Every other episode adheres to the story template presented in *Arrival*. Even the unloved *Do Not Forsake Me Oh My Darling*. It is true that *Living In Harmony* also uses a framing device that is revealed at the end, however this story is still connected to the story template by virtue of Number Six experiencing all that occurs as a result of being drugged. Here the link is tenuous (a bedtime story), so the viewer, one could argue, is being 'tricked'.

Various articles on this episode, usually interviews or production discussion have taken place in our publications throughout the decades. Dave Barrie would particularly like to draw attention to the following:

Number Six #2 Winter 1984

A brief look at relevant locations.

Number Six #9 Autumn 1986

Karen Langley article examining the role of Sonia.

Number Six #19 Spring 1989

Article on Justine Lord's career.

Number Six #21 Autumn 1989

Examination of this episode by Michael Richardson.

Number Six #32 Summer 1992

Article by Roger Langley on the screening of this episode as part of the TV Heaven series.

In The Village #14 Spring 1997

A close examination of this episode by Roger Langley spread over 5 pages. Also a two-page piece by Karen Langley. Both highly recommended. This author gratefully acknowledges their influence on the present article.

In The Village #15 Summer 1997

Correspondence to Dave Barrie from Terence Feely.

Contact Imminent #6 Autumn 2010

Karen Langley interview with Justine Lord.

Contact Imminent #9 Convention Report

Justine Lord interview pt. 1

Contact Imminent #10 Autumn 2011

Justine Lord interview pt. 2

Contact Imminent #11 Spring 2012

Justine Lord commentates on her episode.