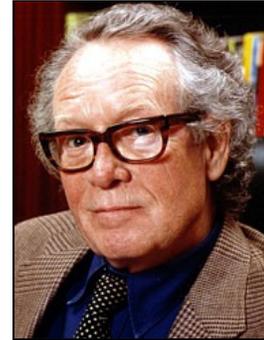


PATRICK McGOOHAN 1928 - 2009

Obituary of the screen star and theatrical actor



The passing of actor Patrick Joseph McGoohan, on 13th January, 2009, not far short of his eighty-first birthday, will be seen as both a great loss within theatrical and entertainment circles, as well as amongst worldwide admirers of him as a screen icon and cult figure. McGoohan was the star of and driving force behind two memorable British television classics of the sixties, "Danger Man" (called "Secret Agent" in the US) and "The Prisoner". Although often remembered primarily for those productions, the actor also had many stage and cinema screen roles, as well as assorted directorial and scriptwriting undertakings.

McGoohan was born in the New York neighbourhood of Queens, in the district of Astoria, on 19th March, 1928. His Irish parents, Catholics Thomas and Rose, had emigrated there in 1925, but returned to their native country when their son was six months old. Back in the homeland, a decade followed in which three daughters, Catherine, Anne and Frances, were born. Continuing attempts to make a decent living from farming proved unsustainable, leading to a decision to move to Britain, in the year before the outbreak of war.

The north of England was chosen and the family settled in the city of Sheffield, which remained their home for many years. The young Patrick was evacuated during the war to Ratcliffe College, in Leicestershire and by the time he returned home in 1944, war was over and he was of an age to take a few lowly employments. He tried a spell in a factory, a bank and finally a chicken farm, although an allergy to feathers caused a severe resurgence of a childhood bronchial asthma condition.

The youth turned to acting in his leisure time, finding the experience liberating. After a number of notable youth club and amateur drama roles, one day McGoohan walked into the Sheffield Playhouse theatre, to obtain work within its repertory company. He was taken on and quickly moved up from stagehand to assistant stage manager, gradually taking small parts and latterly becoming a respected regular performer. He became the company's leading man and at the close of the 1940s, McGoohan met a young actress, Joan Drummond, who had joined the repertory group. After a respectable period of courtship, reflecting Joan's young age, the couple married in 1951 and in the ensuing years had three daughters. The McGoohans enjoyed nearly 60 years of marriage, always keeping their personal lives away from the glare of the showbusiness publicity machine.

Needing more money to maintain his wife and daughters, McGoohan joined other repertory companies around Britain and went on to appear in several productions in London's West End. He was highly rated in the Orson Welles production of "Moby Dick" (1955) and received excellent reviews for his performance in "Serious Charge" (1955), playing a vicar accused of impropriety. His crowning glory was the portrayal of a tortured priest in Ibsen's "Brand" (1959), with a performance being screened by the BBC. The run of several weeks gained McGoohan high critical praise and a Best Actor award.

Throughout the 1950s, the actor undertook many roles, often in costume dramas, on both the BBC and emerging ITV channels. He also appeared in some filmed action-adventure series at the time. However, a movie career began slowly, with bit parts such as RAF guard in "The Dam Busters" (1954), seaman in "Passage Home" (1955) and therapist in "I Am a Camera" (1955). These small roles were followed by McGoohan testing for Rank and his entry into their 'Charm School' for grooming likely male pin-up material. At the end of the decade he had made a quartet of films with the renowned studio, including "High Tide at Noon" (1957), "The Gypsy and the Gentleman" (1957) and "Nor the Moon by Night" (1958). However, he secured an early release from his contract, disliking all the publicity.

McGoohan received a second Best Actor award for the TV play "The Greatest Man in the World" (1958). He also impressed TV mogul Lew Grade, with his appearance in the ITV play "The Big Knife" (1958). Grade saw the potential of the tall actor's handsome looks, combined with a strong screen presence and so swiftly signed him up for ATV's new spy show "Danger Man". The production ran, with breaks, from 1960 to 1966, its star being the highest paid on television. However, after completion of 86 episodes, McGoohan grew tired of the repetitive format. He moved on to create his own enigmatic work, "The Prisoner" (1967), a series still screened regularly around the world and discussed at length. Originally, the show did not enjoy wide critical acclaim, or popular approval, leading to its star leaving Britain. After a spell in Switzerland, the actor relocated to the country of his birth, the United States, where he resided for the rest of his life.

McGoohan landed some good roles in US 1970s movies, including "The Moonshine War" (1970) and "Silver Streak" (1976), as well as a directorial debut with "Catch my Soul" (1974), being a rock adaptation of the successful Jack Good stage musical. However, a big screen break came with the blockbuster "Ice Station Zebra" (1968), in which McGoohan appeared alongside star actors Rock Hudson and Ernest Borgnine. The Cinerama production - about a nuclear submarine conspiracy - became Howard Hughes' favourite movie, watched obsessively by him, almost a hundred times. During filming, McGoohan had to be rescued from a flooded chamber by a diver who freed his trapped foot, saving his life.

McGoohan's foray into US television started with the first of several highly popular guest appearances in close friend Peter Falk's "Columbo" detective mysteries (1974 - 2001). He was the only guest ever to receive two Emmy awards for different "Columbo" roles. Daughters Catherine and Anne McGoohan appeared in separate "Columbo" stories. The series' lead star, Peter Falk, said of his friend, "Incidentally, in all my years I have never played a scene with another actor who commanded my attention the way Pat did."

Next, McGoohan took the lead role in a US thirteen part medical drama series, "Rafferty" (1977) and had several other television appearances during the latter part of the last century. In the cinema world the actor did not shy from varied and experimental roles. He teamed up once more with former fellow Prisoner actor Alexis Kanner, who produced and directed the movie "Kings and Desperate Men" (1981), the men sharing dual lead roles. Other mainstream cinema parts continued to provide work for the actor during the eighties.

In the next decade, McGoohan would find no less than four of his movies being released within a few years: "The Phantom" (1996), "Hysteria" (1998), John Grisham's thriller "A Time to Kill" (1996) and Mel Gibson's "Braveheart" (1995), in which McGoohan's portrayal of Edward I was acclaimed. Participation as a voice actor in cartoon productions such as "The Simpsons" (1999), or the Walt Disney animated movie "Treasure Planet" (2002) also gave McGoohan added strings to his acting bow. However, there were to be no further screen appearances for him in the twenty-first century and although he was rumoured to be offered a cameo part in the coming remake of "The Prisoner", this did not materialise.

Throughout his long career, McGoohan's roles embraced differing screen genres: cult shockers like "Scanners" (1981), offbeat dramas such as "All Night Long" (1961) and a pair of early Disney audience-pleasers, "The Three Lives of Thomasina" (1963) and "Dr. Syn - Alias the Scarecrow" (1963). His last filmed interview was for the 2008 DVD release of "Dr. Syn". One other Disney film was the 'mini monster movie' "Baby...Secret of the Lost Legend" (1985). In tough guy mode, McGoohan appeared in movies like "Hell Drivers" (1957) and the TV film "The Hard Way" (1979), yet was easily able to embrace sensitive or difficult parts, such as "The Quare Fellow" (1962), or "Life For Ruth" (1962). The former involved playing a prison guard at an execution, the latter portraying a doctor trying to save a dying child.

There were also various costume screen drama roles, including "Mary, Queen of Scots" (1971), "The Man in the Iron Mask" (1976, for TV) and "Jamaica Inn" (1982, a TV mini-series). In these, the actor sometimes did his own stunts, including a risky clifftop sword fight. Away from the cameras, McGoohan took part in radio interviews and a chat session with Canadian students, as part of a sociological educational course based around "The Prisoner". He appeared on ITV in 1982 in the nostalgia show "Greatest Hits", talking on a

mocked-up “Prisoner” set and also collaborated on Channel 4’s 1983 documentary, “Six into One: The Prisoner File”. At that time the actor even made his own quirky ‘documentary’ about the cult series, although the material was never screened.

Despite McGoohan’s love of the acting profession, some people in the world of television and film-making found him to be difficult and even outspoken. Others would declare him a joy to work with, a dedicated soul and a man of high principles. In his private life, the actor fiercely protected his family from the media. His religious beliefs, rejection of the material world and condemnation of sexual liberalism, sometimes led to him being cast as a stern or serious character. He turned in a chilling performance as the warden in “Escape From Alcatraz” (1979) and a cold portrayal of a strict father in “Trespases” (1987), shot in New Zealand.

McGoohan made films, or TV programmes, in several countries, including Canada, Africa, Ireland and even a 1970s ‘spaghetti western’, in Italy. Many in the business felt that he could have become the Gielgud or Olivier of his generation. Dismay was expressed when the actor seemed to leave behind the British stage and look towards Hollywood, or the US TV industry. Even his own comments about both establishments were ambivalent, sometimes praising the US system of fast turn-around production, whilst at other times objecting to the ‘conveyer belt’ method of working. His last theatrical role came in 1985, during a Broadway run of “Pack of Lies”, a spy drama.

McGoohan accepted the position of honorary president of the official appreciation society for “The Prisoner” at the start of 1977. For more than three decades, he received all the mailings and bulletins from the society, as well as regular invitations to attend conventions. Sadly, the actor never returned to the filming location of the cult series, Portmeirion in North Wales, although members of the society “Six of One” continue to hold annual conventions there and celebrate the actor’s life and screen career.

During McGoohan’s later years, living in the plush Pacific Palisades suburb of California, wife Joan enjoyed a career as a successful high-end market realtor. In 2008, at the age of eighty McGoohan became a great-grandfather. At this time, plans were announced for a remake of “The Prisoner”, due to air at the end of 2009, something with which McGoohan would neither be involved, nor see the finished results. Also at this point, the first biography of the actor appeared, spanning his career of 60 years. Entitled “Patrick McGoohan: Danger Man or Prisoner?”, written by Roger Langley, the book included Langley’s communications and conversations with the actor over many years.

Langley remembers the star - a term McGoohan hated - as a man of integrity, a person who retained that “Irish twinkle in his eye”, being even a reluctant mentor for thousands of admirers around the world, as a result of the principled characters portrayed by him and his own moral standpoint. Patrick McGoohan was fond of saying, “The sky’s the limit” and his memorable catchphrase, from “The Prisoner”, was “Be seeing you”.



McGoohan as John Drake in “Danger Man”



McGoohan as No. 6 in “The Prisoner”