

# The Rank Villainy of PATRICK MCGOOHAN

*Johnny Loves Nobody*

## Ray Banks

Patrick McGoohan was a tough man to know. Famously guarded and often opaque, his longest interviews often feature a moment of exasperation on the reporter's part, typically manifested as an admission of failure. Two pages into a lengthy profile for *Cosmopolitan* in 1969, Jeannie Sakol sets out the impossibility of her task: "To even begin to understand the complexities of a man like Patrick McGoohan could mean a lifetime study of James Joyce, Irish Catholicism, the history of Ireland from Brian Boru to Brendan Behan, the heroes and scoundrels, and the woven threads of poetry, idealism, mother love and thwarted sexuality." The real truth is that McGoohan's chosen career was dictated not by ancestral history but by a bucket of coal.

At sixteen, McGoohan was academically averse and painfully shy, the kind of boy who would watch the youth club dance from the street, safely swaddled in his favorite Mackintosh, "one of those universal, mass-produced, putty-coloured garments that make the average Englishman about as distinguishable as a grain of sand in the Sahara." But when McGoohan was forced into a bit-part in the youth club play, carting a bucket of coal from one side of the stage to the other, he discovered that "being on stage, sheltered by the bright glare of the footlights, was a much better cloak of anonymity than a mere Mackintosh. On stage I found I didn't mind what I had to do, or who I had to pretend to be. It was a wide, confident world up there and I enjoyed it."



The birth of a bad boy: McGoohan takes time away from the empty lobster traps to play a sexual predator in *High Tide at Noon* (1957)

## The Long, Earnest Man Hits Rank

A series of menial jobs after leaving school did nothing to blunt McGoohan's ambition. After a particularly dispiriting tea break at the bank where he worked, he strode into Sheffield Rep and demanded a job. That job led to others in repertory companies in Coventry, Bristol, Windsor, and Kew before a stint in the West End as a protestant priest accused of homosexuality in Philip King's *Serious Charge* kick-started a minor career in the cinema. In one year (1955), McGoohan spent a day patting a dog in *The Dam Busters*, two days wrestling Laurence Harvey into hydrotherapy in *I Am a Camera*, and five days in the company of Errol Flynn on the set of his swashbuckling swan song *The Dark Avenger*. A big break came courtesy of Orson Welles, who cast McGoohan as A Serious Actor/Starbuck in his London production of *Moby Dick—Rehearsed*, which critic Kenneth Tynan called "the best performance of the evening," but it was only when McGoohan played stand-in for Dirk Bogarde in someone else's screen test that The Rank Organisation took an interest. McGoohan was offered a five-year contract starting at £4000 a year. A handsome sum for a relatively unknown 27-year-old, but the studio would make him earn it.

McGoohan's first film under his new contract was *High Tide at Noon* (1957), a fitfully coherent melodrama set in the fishing community of Nova Scotia. McGoohan plays Simon Breck, one of a trio of lovers vying for the attention of the newly returned Joanna (Betta St. John), and the only one with a discernible character. When his violent advances are rebuffed and revenge is threatened by Michael Craig's bland hero, Simon takes off, an event from which the film never truly recovers—instead falling into fragments of romantic saga that end with the bathetic cry of "The lobsters are back!" McGoo-



McGoohan as Red, "the toughest of them all," clutching the much-coveted cigarette case in *Hell Drivers* (1957)



Tom (Stanley Baker on floor) meets his match in Red (McGoohan) as Sean Connery and Sid James look on. Before the *Hell Drivers* credits roll, they'll clash again in a fight the *News of the World* called "as gory and savage as we've ever seen in a British film"

han's performance is dynamic and nervy, especially compared to those of his drizzle-damp co-stars, and The Rank Organisation took notice labelling McGoohan as their new "bad boy" star. As an actor already used to proving his versatility in rep, McGoohan chafed against his new image and balked against the studio's publicity demands: "I felt I was becoming not only a puppet actor but, to some extent, a puppet human being, too. I should have had the honesty to break the contract. Instead I thought I could see it out comfortably for five years."

### The Toughest of Them All

At first glance, *Hell Drivers* (1957) is a pop culture devotee's wet dream. Its cast boasts a doctor (William Hartnell), a Bond (Sean Connery), Clouseau's future foil (Herbert Lom), one of the great *femmes fatales* (Peggy Cummins), the only woman Spock ever loved (Jill Ireland), a Man from U.N.C.L.E. (David McCallum), and the paragon of TV butlers (Gordon Jackson), as well as stalwarts of both Ealing and Carry On comedies (Alfie Bass and Sidney James). Concerning the dodgy machinations of a truck company tasked with

hauling gravel at top speed along dangerously rutted country roads, *Hell Drivers* aims for the high tension of *Wages of Fear* (1953) and the grimy social realism of *On the Waterfront* (1954). While the film never quite reaches those dizzying heights, the story by former truck driver John Kruse is gritty, Cy Endfield keeps the action sufficiently taut, and Geoffrey Unsworth's cinematography is impressively bleak. But the picture belongs to Patrick McGoohan, whose performance eclipses that of the nominal star Stanley Baker.

McGoohan's work ethic demanded he take parts, but his discontent meant he took them without discrimination.

*Hell Drivers* was Baker's first lead after a career largely spent playing supporting villains. As Tom Yately, the ex-con whose initial gratitude at landing steady employment turns to righteous indignation once he discovers what's really going on, Baker is tough, good-hearted, and dangerous only when pushed too far, ushering in a new wave of proletarian male stars who would go on to challenge the box-office dominance of gentleman actors like Dirk Bogarde. McGoohan's Red, on the other hand, is unadulterated villainy. He prowls his scenes with brawny menace, aided by extensive shoulder padding, a deep facial scar, and a growling Irish brogue. When the truckers



On the set of *Hell Drivers*: the future John Drake (McGoohan, right) shows the future James Bond (Sean Connery) a thing or two about cheating at a game of chess

crash the village dance, Red's duds are vulgar—thick, garish belt hanging from his waist, the tips of his shirt collar jutting over his lapels like daggers. When the dance devolves into a brawl, Red is first into the fray, cackling as his wannabe assailant's blows fail to land. And when Tom uses Red's own underhanded methods against him to fill his truck first (and thereby get a head start on the run to the building site), Red is vengeance personified, glaring sheer bloody murder through a shower of stones. The studio wanted a bad boy, and McGoohan, ever the professional, delivered in spades.

"Up till now, Baker has been regarded as our toughest screen character," said the *Daily Sketch*. "Move over, Mr. Baker. McGoohan has just knocked your tough-guy crown for a loop." But if McGoohan thought he could move on, he was sorely mistaken. The studio wanted more. "They must have felt," he said, "that, in me, they'd netted an oyster with more sand than pearl. They compensated for this by deciding to project a public image of me as a 'rebel'. In fact, I have never been less rebellious. I passively accepted it all, as disinterested in the kind of films I was having to make as in the round of publicity 'celebrations' I was expected to attend." McGoohan's work ethic demanded he take parts, but his discontent meant he took them without discrimination.

### The Proto-Barrett and Colonial Ennui

Hollywood's loss was Pinewood's gain, as Rank continued to exploit HUAC-exiled talent like Cy Endfield by signing Joseph Losey to a three-picture contract. Losey had been introduced to the studio by Dirk Bogarde, who was set to star in the director's first Rank project, *Bird of Paradise*. But when the film fell through, Losey found himself, much like McGoohan, confronted with a clutch of mediocre scripts. Unlike McGoohan, he actually read them, declaring one—written by Janet Green (*Sapphire, Victim*) and based on the novel *Darkness I Leave You* by Nina Warner Hooke—as "immoral, vicious, déjà vu, old fashioned and badly constructed." That script was *The Gypsy and the Gentleman*, and it would be both Losey and McGoohan's next picture.

*The Gypsy and the Gentleman* (1958) is an overripe slice of Regency melodrama in the Gainsborough Pictures mold. The story concerns the rakish aristocrat Deverill (Keith Michell), whose infatuation with a gypsy named Belle (Melina Mercouri) proves both his material and psychological undoing. Pulling the strings throughout is Belle's rough-hewn lover Jess (McGoohan): he urges Belle to seduce Deverill for his (non-existent) wealth, while he quietly pursues his own dream of owning a stable of thoroughbreds. Charitable crit-



Patrick McGooohan considers the perils of accepting a part before he's read the script in two 1958 features: restraining a temporarily non-hysterical Melina Mercouri in *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* (left), and desperately searching for an exit from the cursed set of *Nor the Moon by Night* (right)

ics have called *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* Losey's dry run for his later masterful take on class warfare, *The Servant* (1963), but while McGooohan's ostensibly subservient Jess may well prefigure the Machiavellian scheming of Dirk Bogarde's Barrett, his measured, cerebral performance is frequently drowned out by Mercouri's belabored histrionics. The picture was an unhappy one for Losey, who left before completion citing executive interference and proclaimed the finished product "a piece of junk." On release, *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* was largely ignored by British critics and barely released in a truncated form in the United States. Its inevitable failure at the box office marked the end of Losey's contract with The Rank Organisation.

McGooohan wasn't so lucky. The second unread script was the unfortunately titled *Nor the Moon by Night* (1958), which McGooohan described as a "run-of-the-mill 'two men and a girl' picture in which I played a game warden." What McGooohan failed to mention is that, as the romantic hero of the piece, his character perversely spends more time grappling with lions than he does in the arms of his true love. Set in the game reserves of Africa, Andrew Miller (McGooohan) is about to finally meet the subject of his long-distance romance, Alice Lang (Belinda Lee) when an emergency means he has to send his brother Rusty (Michael Craig) to meet her instead. Rusty and Alice fall deeply in lust and spend the movie bemoaning their mutual attraction as Andrew squares off against poachers, wild animals, and the bullwhip of a villainous landowner. While McGooohan is a fine hero and a dedicated action star, he is a singularly disengaged romantic lead, and while the cinematography is as exotically lush as other Rank travelogues of the time, the story struggles to maintain tone, lurching from love triangle drama to

colonial adventure and back again.

That a finished film emerged at all is a miracle. The movie's animal stars proved violently uncooperative, the cast and crew were plagued by heat exhaustion and dysentery, Michael Craig almost drowned, Belinda Lee absconded from the set and attempted suicide, and McGooohan was involved in a car accident that left him concussed. At one point, director Ken Annakin said, "there was only me and a snake available to work." To make matters worse, the home-loving, uxorious McGooohan was six-thousand miles away from the people who mattered most. Something had to give. "I had seen enough to make up my mind that never again would I go on location without Joan. I came to a few other decisions at the same time, the main one being that I'd had enough of messing around with the financial security of a long contract."

Rank executives were also disappointed. When the renewal option on McGooohan's contract came due, both parties agreed to cut their losses. Finally emancipated from studio shackles, McGooohan returned to the theatre. After a career-defining performance

as Ibsen's eponymous *Brand*—"one of the greatest, most demanding roles I shall ever have the privilege to attempt"—and a series of TV plays that included a harrowing performance in John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* and the role of over-the-hill Hollywood star Charlie Castle in Clifford Odets' *The Big Knife*, he found himself courted by ITC impresario Lew Grade. Grade took great interest in McGooohan. "It was the way he moved," Grade said. "He moved like a panther—firm and decisive." Just the man to play a NATO super-spy who would predate the cinematic debut of James Bond by two years. His name? Drake, John Drake, aka *Danger Man*.

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McGoohan seethes as Johnny Cousin in *All Night Long* (1962): the actor spent four months perfecting his drumming technique—only to have jazz drummer Allan Ganley ghost his musical performance in the finished film

Once again, financial security beckoned, but McGeehan had one last villain to play for Rank, one with an irresistible pedigree.

### Introducing Iago on Drums

Blacklistee Bob Roberts had produced *Body and Soul* (1947), *Force of Evil* (1948), and *He Ran All the Way* (1951) for star John Garfield before his exile to England, where he survived by selling off previously optioned screenplays to British studios. One of these was *All Night Long* (1962), a loose, jazz-infused adaptation of *Othello*, offered to the director-producer team of Basil Dearden and Michael Relph after their BAFTA-winning *Sapphire* (1959) showed they could handle racial issues with aplomb.

When Rod Hamilton (Richard Attenborough) throws a jazz party in his London pad to celebrate the one-year wedding anniversary of band leader Aurelius Rex (Paul Harris) and singer Delia Lane (Marti Stevens), he unwittingly abets the dastardly scheming of drummer Johnny Cousin (McGoohan), who has promised backers that he will persuade Delia to come out of retirement and front his new band. When that fails, he attempts to destroy the happy couple with manufactured rumors of Delia's infidelity with troubled saxophonist Cass (Keith Mitchell).

There is no great *Othello* without a great Iago, and McGeehan's Johnny Cousin ranks as one of the finest performances of his career. He needs no soliloquy, no compact with the audience. McGeehan never fully telegraphs the extent of his machinations; instead portraying Johnny as a man incapable of repose, forever on the look-

out for the next angle, fingering props as if gauging their potential lethality, and coldly scanning his fellow jazz musicians for exploitable weakness. His motives are fluid and ultimately irrelevant: sexual jealousy, racism, and thwarted ambition are merely temporary justifications. What drives Johnny is hatred, ostensibly aimed at Rex and Delia, but really pointed at himself because he knows, just as Emily does, that he's just not that bright a guy. And when his plot fails, he is left alone, sweatily bashing out his frustrations on his personalized drum kit. Like some snare-snapping Salieri, Johnny is haunted by his mediocrity and cursed to spend his life in roiling self-hatred.

Without conflating actor and role too much, there are certainly elements of Johnny Cousin in Patrick McGeehan. While his talent was never mediocre—Welles once said that McGeehan could have been one of the finest actors of his generation if television hadn't gotten its claws into him—he is often portrayed as a deeply discontented man, whose restless ambition became a stick to beat him with, especially in the years following *The Prisoner*. As a performer, he was as dynamic and iron-willed as Olivier, and, like Olivier, he was at his best when confronting his crippling shyness with roles of barely suppressed intensity, whether it was the zealotry of Brand and Musgrave, the mercurial heroics of Drake or Number 6, or his archly ironic late-career turns in *Columbo*. Such talent could never flourish under the constraints of romantic lead or even simple supporting villain; it demanded constant movement.

In hindsight, that bucket of coal has a lot to answer for. ■