

THE LAST LONELY MAN

by John Brunner
Dramatised by Jeremy Paul

This article previously appeared in HTML format on the Mausoleum Club website as part of a series of articles under the title **Out of the Unknown: In Focus**.

The only surviving complete play from the third season, **The Last Lonely Man** also boasts a superb cast and some very assured direction from the fondly remembered Douglas Camfield. As with the previous entry, John Brunner's original short story (published only three years previously in the premier British magazine **New Worlds**) was considerably expanded to accommodate a host of new characters and plot developments, although at no point does the excellent script resort to any redundant "padding".

The play opens quite literally with a bang: a tremendously well paced and tightly edited film sequence of a young couple in a speeding car, culminating in a graphic road accident. A startling "fourth wall" twist reveals the whole sequence to be a television advertisement for "Contact", a future Health service through which the minds of the dead can be incorporated into those of a living relative or friend. Effectively banishing the fear of death, friends and families alike can effectively provide "cover" for each other in the event of either natural death or unforeseen accident.

Taking centre stage in the play is Peter Halliday, who is quite superb as the neurotically tenacious Patrick Wilson. He is a solitary figure who cons the sympathetic into providing cover for him and then proceeds to worry obsessively about their own safety. He shadows their every move, afraid that his own "Contact" might meet with an accident themselves and so deprive him of his only means of personal immortality. A chance meeting in a bar provides him with his latest victim - mild mannered Jimmy Hale (another outstanding performance, this time from the under-rated George Cole) - and before the night is out, Jimmy and Patrick have attended the nearest Contact Agency to undergo the necessary operative procedures.

As Jimmy realises what he has got himself into however, the relationship soon turns sour, and Jimmy declares his intention to break the contract he had hastily set up with Patrick. Driven to complete despair, Patrick then commits suicide, and his mind is "picked up" by Jimmy before he can anything to reverse the process.

The storyline then follows the gradual but entirely perceptible deterioration of Jimmy's personality, until it becomes clear that it is Patrick's paranoid thoughts and stratagems that will determine all his subsequent actions. A chilling denouement has the Jimmy/Patrick amalgam imprisoning himself and his family within their own home, determined to ensure that his one surviving Contact in the world - his wife Rowena - will never escape.

A deceptively simple plot is told with complete conviction by all involved, and the quality of Camfield's direction, often extremely subtle, ensures that the disturbing undertones of Brunner's near future scenario are never lost. Several scenes are also effectively underpinned by Don Harper's hauntingly sparse incidental music, which Camfield also utilised to equal effect on his well known 1968 **Doctor Who** serial **Invasion**. Ironically, adaptor Jeremy Paul once professed to having felt uncomfortable about working with SF themes and storylines, but his script for **The Last Lonely Man** is a highly inventive affair, highlighting the human drama of the original story in a plausible and convincing manner.

Errata

- o For timing reasons a number of recorded scenes did not make it to the final edit/broadcast version. The first of these would have followed the scene where Jimmy and Rowena go out for the evening, naively leaving their twins in the care of Patrick. The excised material concerned their entry into the crowded cinema, with the camera picking up the furtive figure of Jimmy slipping through a throng of people in the foyer. Rowena catches a glimpse of him, but shrugs this off as her imagination (a scene adapted from the original short story, where Rowena is convinced that Patrick is following them along the street towards the cinema).
- o Another major alteration concerns the cuts to the scene where "Contact Consultant" Dr. Goddard and his assistant Jenkins discuss the moral disintegration of society. Originally this scene was much longer, with Jenkins referring to the political expediency afforded by the hastily set up Contact service, and the overtly homophobic Goddard vehemently deriding the agony columns in the newspaper on his desk, which only serves to increase his fears that "a nation of homosexual schizophrenics" is just around the corner.
- o **The Last Lonely Man** was the first play to be recorded when production commenced on the third season in May 1968. Camera rehearsals took place on the 8th, 9th and 10th May, with the actual recording taking place on the final evening, a full 8 months before the play was eventually broadcast.
- o Don Harper's very distinctive incidental music also graces an episode of the now little-known 1969 LWT series **The Inside Man**, starring Frederick Jaeger as Psychiatrist-Criminologist Dr James Austen.
- o An excellent interview with scriptwriter/adaptor Jeremy Paul can be found in Issue 18 (Spring 1992) of the excellent British fanzine **TimeScreen**.

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