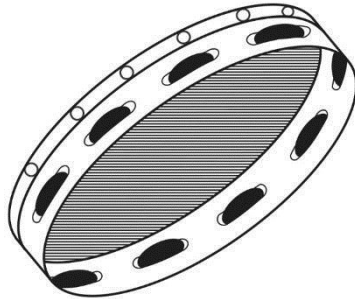


The Silver Archive #1C

SAPPHIRE & STEEL

Assignments Five and Six



By James Cooray Smith

THE SILVER ARCHIVE
SAPPHIRE AND STEEL - ASSIGNMENTS FIVE AND SIX

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Assignment Six

1: 'Answer to a Higher Authority'

At some point near the end of 1980, the cast of **Sapphire & Steel** assembled to make what would be the series' final serial. Did they know they were working on the characters' last outing? In recent years, Joanna Lumley has intimated that all involved suspected it would be. Hammond, at least, she's suggested¹, knew that no further episodes would be commissioned, and so had made a decision to give the series a memorable send-off within the fiction. David Collings has suggested that another series was on the cards, perhaps with Silver being present in most episodes, but that this plan quietly collapsed around the time the sixth serial was recorded².

The three serials the cast and crew had made in such a rush earlier in the year had not yet been screened. The first two would debut in the new year, the third — as we've already seen — would crawl out over Summer 1981, traditionally a period where little new television was scheduled, the three broadcasters choosing instead to show repeats, on the grounds that summer weather meant that few people watched whatever was screened, regardless³. Being treated as such by ATV and/or the ITV network hardly seemed a show of confidence. But, as was always the case in Sapphire and

¹ *Counting Out Time*, 24m00s

² <http://www.kaldorcity.com/people/dcinterview.html>

³ The late 1970s had seen a string of exceptionally good summers, which had helped this behaviour 'bed-in' as standard broadcasting practice.

Steel's own adventures, larger forces were at work than were necessarily immediately obvious.

The company that made **Sapphire & Steel** was ATV, the franchise holder for Independent Television in the English Midlands under the now obsolete Federal ITV structure⁴. During the 1980 franchising round it had agreed to make drastic changes to its business operations in order to hold onto the contract. January 1982 would be a substantially new company with a new name and on-air identity: Central. What may also be relevant is that David Reid, **Sapphire & Steel**'s executive producer, internal champion and the man who had bought the series to ATV in the first place, was in the process of moving to the BBC, where he would become the Head of Drama Series and Serials. This serial's director David Foster has intimated that Margaret Matheson, the new Head of Drama at Central, held that ATV's drama had been too flippant and too little engaged with the real world⁵. That's possible, but it's an odd charge to level at a fantasy adventure serial for children and families⁶.

It is perhaps more likely that, quite simply, a new broom sweeps clean. Only the most successful and popular ATV series would survive the broadcaster's transformation into Central, and **Sapphire & Steel** was not a priority. ('I had an idea,' Hammond

⁴ The 1990 Broadcasting Act made possible a variety of changes in the nature of the ITV network, which was consolidated into essentially a single national company devoid of regional identities, beyond local news, by 2002.

⁵ *Assigned 72%*.

⁶ Matheson had worked on **Play for Today** for the BBC, where her credits included *Abigail's Party* and the original version of *Scum*, the first of several projects with Alan Clarke. Her later career also largely consists of socially conscious drama concerned with issues.

acknowledges. 'Things were changing at ATV. Various different people were going to be in power'⁷.)

It could also hardly have been said to have dominated the television charts. While popular with children, the recipient of some merchandising⁸ and a comic strip in *Look-In*, the 'Junior TV Times' of the era, it only ever achieved around 20% of the available viewers, a poor showing for the dominant channel in terms of ratings in an era of only three stations. Moving the series to 8pm for the third serial was probably a mistake (although understandable given the content), the later slot being more valuable to ITV in terms of advertising and thus innately requiring more viewers.

While an understanding that the franchise round was coming and that ATV (or at least ATV-as-it-was-then-structured) was unlikely to survive it, may have played a part in the end of the series, it does not seem to have been the only factor. Its stars fees made **Sapphire & Steel** an expensive programme to make⁹, especially considering its place in the schedules, and despite its headline names, its

⁷ *Counting Out Time*, 25m03s

⁸ Chiefly books, such as P.J. Hammond's own novelisation of *Assignment One* and an Annual from Worlds Distributors.

⁹ O'Riordan recalled, anecdotally, that McCallum's fee was £5,000 an episode. We should not necessarily take this off the cuff remark literally, but as producer this is information that O'Riordan was in a position to know and remember, and as a long-time friend of McCallum's he's unlikely to wildly caricature his finances on camera and on the record.

nature as a videotaped drama limited the possibilities for overseas sales¹⁰.

David Collings has also suggested there was a 'general falling out'¹¹ around the time the serial was made, albeit one in which he himself was not involved, and that it was the cast and crew, rather than the broadcaster, who were keen to have the series end, and end memorably, at this point. 'The television company were very keen on the idea and they wanted to do another series, but then Joanna and David decided that they'd had enough of it by then, and didn't want to do anymore... I was very keen for it to go on.' Concurring with this, Hammond remembers having no great desire to continue writing the series¹² at this point. Perhaps it's the case that, given the situation, it would have required herculean effort for there to be more **Sapphire & Steel** for television at this point, and for a variety of reasons no one was either prepared, or in a position, to put that effort in.

¹⁰ When it was marketed in the 1990s as one of the 'classics' of the ITC/ATV stable, and made available for repeats and on VHS, it was a notable exception as a multi camera videotape drama amongst a host of single camera film series.

¹¹ *Assigned* 72%. All participants in the final serial are, it must be said, enthusiastic about each other's contributions to the programme in *Counting Out Time*.

¹² *Counting Out Time*