

*Broken Dispenser*  
**Scott Brummitt**

Over my many years writing about and speaking to the performers who bring to life the nation's longest-running and best-loved soap operas, a theme that has occurred time and again is confinement. Although they rarely admit it when the role by which they are defined still pays their wages, a great many soap actors long for their release. Only when it is granted, however, do they experience the difficulty of escaping a duality that on occasion merges silently into singularity, as the on-screen consumes the off.

With that said, few find themselves so lost as to walk into another form of confinement as readily as Guy Coales. As angelic innocent turned teenage tearaway Owen 'Combo' Comley in *The Grange*, Coales captured and broke the hearts of millions of viewers during his time on the nation's most famous fictional north-east housing estate. After joining aged eight in 1989 as the son of resident battleaxe Marge Comley, he spent seven years on the ITV soap, before taking a break to complete his GCSEs. Unbeknown to him, however, show executives were already making plans to recast his role with another actor.

"I really trusted those people," he tells me over the phone from his flat in Redcar. "They'd been nothing but nice to me as a kid; it was like having an actual family. And I could hardly grumble, because they'd given me a decent story to go out on [the botched community centre burglary plot, which saw Combo sent to a young offenders unit]. I thought 'right, do your education, get that done, and then you can be back in a year, job for life'. I didn't know anything different."

Coales audibly smarts as he talks about how he discovered that his job had gone: from a newspaper, on the day of his GCSE History exam.

"There was this lad a couple of years younger than me, who had a paper round. He'd spotted it, front page of the *Mirror*, and so he saved a copy. Then, he tracked me down first thing, to shove it in my face. Literally. I could have decked him, were I not so heartbroken."

Coales received an E for History later that summer. By then, his replacement Rob Pearson was already bedding in to the TV home and family taken from his forebear without so much as a phone call. With his washboard abs and blonde surfer mop – "most of that gone now!" – Pearson went on to establish himself in the role, standing as one of the show's longest-serving stars today.

"Some people, the younger ones especially, will only ever have known Combo as him. But you know, we were getting twice as many viewers back then, with half as many explosions. So to a lot of people – and I include myself in this – I actually am him. I am Owen Comley."

It's hard not to note a hint of bitterness in Coales' claims. The story of a child actor, cast for their early reading ability or convenient ignorance of the camera, hitting a wall in their adolescence is not uncommon. Some, however, successfully change course. There are countless tales of contentment found both inside and outside of television. But Coales does not believe they are open to everyone.

***Fiction***

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Clare Fisher

Editorial Team:  
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"I take issue with the idea that I could have just fell back on something else. Like what? Acting was all I'd been trained in – not officially, but it was the best training in the world, on-the-job training, year after year. I might not have been DiCaprio, but I'd like to see him learn five pages of rewrites in a freezing portacabin with ten minutes' notice."

So did he feel exempt from standing on his own two feet?

"Not in the slightest. The Grange was like an apprenticeship. It's just that like a lot of apprenticeships, there was no work at the end of it."

Regular readers will know well that this hard luck story is not the be all and end all. I speak from experience when I say that leaving The Grange – only a year before Coales first appeared on it, closing a part of my career to which he seemed usefully unaware – was the best thing that ever happened to me. I went back to school, then university, before finally earning the privilege of penning this column each week. Knuckle down, move on, and you can find new things to do with your time.

*"Regular readers". Yeah, put that in quote marks, see how you like it. If she heard herself. Thinks she's above it now, thinks she's superior. But all that kind of talk shows is that she's a performer. It's in our blood. We need it.*

For some, though, success does prove elusive. The tabloids made merry with the news, only two years after Coales' forced departure, of his part in another failed burglary – this time, for real.

*I thought this was gonna be even-handed. That certain subjects would be off-limits, or at least taken more seriously. Yeah, breaking and entering, no more and no less, and that was years ago. So does she really know what it's like? Convincing herself that her coverage is more insightful, because it appears in a broadsheet. Listen, I've been there; I know what it's really like. I've been the one in the papers people actually read.*

'From Grange days to Strangeways', read the headlines, unconcerned with the fact that he was actually incarcerated at the lesser security Buckley Hall, thirty minutes down the road.

*No. This is personal. Too personal. Combo would never stand for this. Combo would have words to say. Don't you think, Lucy?*

Unsurprisingly, he was reticent to talk about this. I couldn't help but feel, though, that his discomfort spoke to a deeper struggle, beyond that of going to prison and all it might ordinarily entail. For a celebrity, things are different. And for the typecast continuing drama escapee, even more so. Inevitably, when you leave a soap, you look forward to being able to write your own lines for a change. But in one fell swoop, Coales found his identity made immortal in the eyes of millions: the boy who played the boy who went to prison became forevermore The Boy Who Went To Prison.

*It's so obvious, innit. Leaving a soap to become a journalist, so you can 'write your own lines' – so you can write your own lines about... oh yeah, soaps. Christ, you're like an open book Lucy.*

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I write about much more than soap, and my name is not Lucy. Following his release from prison, Coales struggled to find his footing in a world for which he had no framework.

*Have you ever been back Luce? To the set, I mean?*

No. Why would I ever want to go back? Some of us left that part of our lives behind. The Grange is not the world. The Grange is not real.

*Isn't it?*

No.

*Is this article?*

Yes. Believe me, I wouldn't be conducting this interview if it weren't for the fact it had been commissioned.

*I don't think I do believe you. Are you telling me that if I found a way to get you back to The Grange, you wouldn't be interested?*

That has been established.

*Even if it helped your article?*

CUT TO:

EXT. GRANGE COMMUNITY CENTRE CAR PARK - DAY

*Lucy and Combo peer around a wall, looking out at a lifetime. She is anxious, he is excited.*

LUCY:

I don't think this is a good idea.

COMBO:

But you're here.

*Combo spies someone from across the road – and they're talking to Marge.*

COMBO:  
(SHOUTING)

Oi, Pearson! What do you think you're doing with my mother?

*No response.*

COMBO:  
(STILL SHOUTING)

I said Pearson! What do you think you're doing with my mother?

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*Lucy shuffles uncomfortably behind the wall. But finally –*

**COMBO #2:**

Can someone get that idiot off the set please?

*Marge turns to look at said idiot. Could it be?*

**MARGE:**

Guy?

*Combo grins.*

**COMBO:**

Mother!

*Combo runs over to a delighted Marge. They embrace, as Combo #2 looks put-out. Trailing behind, Lucy begins to look aggrieved.*

**MARGE:**

It's so good to see you! I can't believe you're here.

**COMBO:**

I never lef-

*Before he can complete his words, a now incensed Lucy aims at Marge.*

**LUCY:**  
(SNARLING)

Marge Comley.

*Marge suddenly spots her, and doesn't look pleased – if anything, disdainful.*

**LUCY:**

What's up Marge? You look like you've seen a ghost.

**MARGE:**

Certainly didn't think we'd be seeing you round here again.

**LUCY:**

Not after what you did.

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COMBO:

Sorry, what she did?

MARGE:

It was before your time love; I wouldn't worry.

COMBO:  
(PERPLEXED)

But there was no 'before my time.'

*Combo #2, who has been stood watching throughout, is the most perplexed of all.*

COMBO #2:

Can anyone tell me what's going on please?

COMBO:

Oh I'll tell you what's going on mate.

*He approaches Combo #2 menacingly, and grabs him by the scruff of the neck. Combo #2 puts up no resistance.*

COMBO #2:

Look, just get off me right. I don't know who you are, but I'm not here to fight.

*Combo is only angered more. Lucy and Marge look worried.*

MARGE:

Stop it!

*Lucy runs over to intervene.*

LUCY:

Let him go Guy!

*Distracted from his grapple, Combo turns to Lucy, unaware that in so doing he will trip over her foot and bang his head on the concrete.*

MARGE:  
(BLOOD-CURDLING)

Owen!

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*As blood seeps from an unmoving Combo's head to the floor, all are horrified. They have no idea what to do next.*

END

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