

Even after death Serling takes viewers into 'Twilight Zone'

BY TED KUSIO

Within moments of hearing the familiar, eerie theme music, viewers know what awaits them: a trip into a dimension of sound, sight and mind; a journey into a land of shadow and substance, things and ideas; a visit to a place called "The Twilight Zone."

Fans of the original show may, however, approach this particular journey with skepticism. Tame remakes, flaccid new tales and real-life tragedy have been part of reincarnations of the series, such as 1983's "Twilight Zone - The Movie" and the 1985-87 CBS revival.

Carol Serling, widow of "The Twilight Zone" creator Rod Serling, sums up the failure of or lukewarm response to these previous works by saying "Hey, Rod wasn't there. What can I say?"

But Rod does return, in a way, as CBS presents original, never-before-seen stories from the late "Twilight Zone" master himself. To insure authenticity, Carol served as supervising producer.

"Twilight Zone: Rod Serling's Lost Classics," airing Thursday, May 19, offers two new productions based on recently found material from Rod's pen. The first, called "The Theater," features Amy Irving

as an artist who sees images from her past and future intertwined with a theatrical showing of an old film. It's based on a story, or treatment, written by Rod.

The second segment, entitled "Where the Dead Are," stars Jack Palance in an eerie death-defying post-Civil War tale based on an actual script by Rod. Carol explains it "was a total, absolute, screenplay, and it was shot basically the way Rod wrote it."

The story deals with a Boston doctor (Patrick Bergen) who seeks secrets of longevity created by Palance's character.

"Where the Dead Are," the one with Jack in it, was written in 1975, the year that he (Rod) died," says Carol. "The other one was a short story, just really a vignette, and I'm not positive when exactly it was written."

"I discovered them because I had moved, and I lived in the hills, where the fires had come, and I decided that it would probably be a good idea to get this material out of my garage."

This discovery led to finding producers willing to bring Rod's tale to life, and the results can be seen in the film.

For Irving, starring in a "Twilight

Zone" project was a chance to star in something that she admired.

"It is very cool being in a 'Twilight Zone,'" Irving says. "It's something we all grew up with. And 'The Theater,' the title, caught me to begin with, as a child of the theater. But it was just classic Rod Serling 'Twilight Zone.' It was a really good one and I just wanted to be a part of it and have some fun."

Irving's feeling that Rod's name lends a certain authenticity and sense of quality to "The Twilight Zone" is shared by many people, which Carol realizes.

"You know, people have said, 'Well how do they expect a second 'Twilight Zone' to be good; Rod wasn't there to do it,' she says. "He had a special approach to the writing - he really had stories he wanted to tell. And he really wanted to deal with certain themes and felt this was a way he could do it, couched in the phraseology of fantasy and that sort of thing."

"What was the special secret? I don't know. If I knew or anyone knew, you know, we'd be doing it again. But I think you'll find it in these stories, 'cause he did them."

Of the two segments, the first serves, at best, as a warm-up to the second. The story may have been original and intriguing when written, but years of "The Twilight Zone" and similar stories have made it seem like old hat.

But the second one cuts deep, thanks to Rod's razor-sharp writing. When listening to his dialogue one realizes why he was considered to be a master: Two-dimensional characters don't merely reveal plot details, but they breathe personality and realism.

With this in mind it's easy to understand why "Twilight Zone: Rod Serling's Lost Classics" is worth watching. Although Rod died nearly 20 years ago, his talent is immortal.

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