TELEVISION REVIEWS

"We See Dead People": Living TV's *Most Haunted* (2002 - present) & *Ghost Whisperer* (2005 - present)

Although Living TV, a British satellite/cable channel, claims to provide what it calls "women oriented entertainment," it more closely resembles a series of advertising slots for the services of numerous heroic investigator-types. A regular viewer rapidly learns that should she find herself plagued by violent crime, she should seek out a brooding, sombrely dressed man, preferably one who shuns sunlight in case it singes his undead skin, who spends his days in a windowless laboratory, or who only removes his shades when dramatic emphasis requires it. Perhaps less puzzling is the parallel implication that, should one's difficulties stem from the disgruntled dead, a young, good-looking married woman with big eyes and acute hearing is best qualified for the job. Specifically, "reality"-TV behemoth *Most Haunted* and *Ghost Whisperer*, a supernatural drama series in the *Touched-By-an-Angel* vein, both posit women as particularly susceptible to and suitable for what Edith Wharton referred to as "ghost feeling," relying upon time-honoured associations between femininity, the uncanny and the rituals surrounding death. Via these domesticated Sibyls who guide us through the televisual underworld, uncovering long-buried truths and taming unruly spirits, Living offers its viewers vicarious fantasies of impossible agency that do little to unsettle either the audience or traditional gender stereotypes.

There is more to the choice of a female protagonist than audience identification, however. Any show that claims to produce genuine, regular paranormal phenomena leaves itself vulnerable to debunking efforts, and *Most Haunted* is no exception. The bulwark of its defence against the tide of disbelief comes in the delicate, blonde form of Yvette Fielding, a former *Blue Peter* presenter, and the one member of the team who has visibly been around from the beginning. Strongly evoking the ultra-rational environment of *Blue Peter*, where even sticky-backed plastic and dangerous animals behave themselves, she provides a vital anchor for what would otherwise be literally and laughably incredible. Obviously, television can draw upon vast resources as regards special effects, editing and lighting tricks (for example the "orbs" that supposedly indicated the presence of spectral energy), while mysterious bumps and knocking sounds issuing from darkened corners are ludicrously cheap and easy to produce. Nonetheless, rather than focusing on the potential for simple image manipulation, audiences have instead seized as scapegoats the participating mediums and their incorporeal interlocutors. Wishing desperately for the ghosts to be real and yet (or maybe therefore) determined to unmask an imposter, in 2005, there were some quite successful efforts to expose the then psychic-incumbent, Derek Acorah. In response, the British communication industry's official watchdog Ofcom ruled that *Most Haunted* contains:

> a high degree of showmanship that puts it beyond what we believe to be a generally accepted understanding of what comprises a legitimate investigation. On balance, we consider that overall *Most Haunted*/*Most Haunted Live* should be taken to be a programme produced for entertainment purposes. This is despite what appear to be occasional assertions by the programme that what viewers are witnessing is real. As such this programme should be seen in the light of shows where techniques are used which mean the audience is not necessarily in full possession of the facts. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4500322.stm)

Indeed, if anything, since 2005 the show (now running to ten seasons, and supplemented by frequent live specials) has actually gone to greater and greater lengths to ensure that the audience is not "in full

possession of the facts." Following the fragmented Gothic format familiar from Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* to Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, *Most Haunted* revels in moments when sound is lost, the camera cannot move quickly enough to capture events and, occasionally, the screen goes completely black. Keeping the viewers literally in the dark was not, however, always central to its *modus operandi*. Coinciding neatly with the departure of Acorah (he was prepped with false information and then proceeded to "channel" a fabricated ghost), the visual style has altered considerably from that of earlier seasons. Eschewing a *mis-en-scène* reminiscent of Victorian phantasmagoria, which relied on fancy stage effects, showy lighting, camera tricks and dry ice (significantly, haunted theatres featured prominently in these early episodes), the editors now favour a pared-down, claustrophobic, motion-sickness inducing *Blair Witchiness*. In particular, the programme is characterised by an almost Manichean *chiaroscuro*, where the flamboyant use of night-vision photography (a current horror-film staple) clashes with occasional glimpses of strong lights in the background.

With this new streamlined style, and the absence of the one truly memorable psychic (who has been replaced by a clutch of matronly women with neat bobs and semi-emaciated men with strange accents and modest goatees), it has become increasingly evident that Yvette Fielding, whose on-screen persona vacillates between informed *reporteuse* and startled woodland creature, is the real star of the show. When the crew are wandering tensely around stygian stone corridors, dusty attics and vaulted cellars, tension is evoked by means of extended close-ups of Fielding's eyes, exaggerated far beyond their usual size by night-vision cameras and framed with spidery black lashes, which one must assume have been coated in some form of light-sensitive mascara. While Acorah and those who come after him may be the ones actually contacting the spirits, what carries the show is Fielding's strongly marked femininity, her gasps, her screams, the imperceptible sounds she claims to hear, and the spectacle of her metamorphosis from an authoritative narratorial voice to a mere cipher for innocence in peril.

What is more, as the numerous interviews with Fielding available on the Living website attest, over the years she has herself become increasingly sensitive to spirits, developing an ability to encourage manifestations and the "knocking" that the show is so devoted to, even in her everyday life. This is a canny move on Living's part – those slippery professional psychics might be lying, but our Yvette? Heaven forefend! To underline her position as an icon of virtue and sensibility, the programme is punctuated by her constant queries as to whether everyone else is OK. Her reified and constantly foregrounded figure is therefore almost Protean in its inclusiveness, encapsulating a petrified Gothic heroine, a natural-born ghost-feeler, a nurturing mother figure, and a concerned and devoted wife (her husband, Karl Beattie, being both co-creator and co-star, and, somewhat randomly, an honorary Samurai). That the show's depiction of femininity nevertheless rests on a somewhat shaky ideological basis was made clear in a recent live show from Turin – "Satan's City"! – which revolved around that old Gothic dichotomy of benevolent Protestant rationality versus Catholic corruption and sexual violence (think naked women being tied to pillars and whipped by hooded monks). This served to draw perhaps too much attention to the fact that the voyeuristic sadism directed against women all too familiar from the Gothic is never far below the surface of the show (they love their Victorian murderers and Medieval torturers). Arguably, then, Fielding serves as a refinement of Carol J. Clover's "Final Girl," the heroine who, by helping to expose and/or vanquish the murderers of other women, allows the audience conveniently to forget the gloating pleasure they have taken in the others' appalling deaths.

Centring on family conflicts instead of on historical and religious violence, Living's *Ghost Whisperer* also features a latter-day Gothic heroine who, as she announces smugly at the start of early episodes, is also married. Melinda is played by the pneumatic Jennifer Love Hewitt, whose ample feminine assets are

matched only by her melting yet highly observant eyes. Once again, central to the staging of frightened womanhood is this particular part of her physiognomy – fetishised, fringed by fluttering lashes, emphasised with dark eye-shadow and growing ever wider as Melinda gasps, faints, and pants provocatively. Unlike Fielding, however, who may be sensitive but must still rely on others to mediate between her and the spirits, Melinda is quite literally her own medium. While Fielding stares, blinded and trembling, into the darkness, Melinda can *see.*Essentially a post-mortem family counsellor, in the majority of episodes she acts as a mediator for troubled, restless souls who need messages to be relayed and interpreted to the living, so that they can "cross over" to "the other side". While the *Most Haunted* crew also engage in this form of neo-religious exorcism, the fictional format of *Ghost Whisperer* works very much in its favour, permitting the depiction of spirits moving euphorically toward "the light". In almost every episode, once the ornaments have finished shattering and livid spectres cease trying to strangle their nearest and dearest, therefore, we are shown unequivocally that everyone always loves one another and that unity, harmony and understanding will ultimately prevail. Crucially, though, this is only possible with the intercession of the Final Girl from a film that Sarah Michelle Gellar once apparently referred to as *I Know What Your Tits Did Last Summer*.

Why marital status should be so vital to media portrayals of mediumship (it also features prominently in *Medium*, staring Patricia Arquette) becomes clear in the Season 3 episode "Unhappy Medium" (2007) which pits the formidable Miranda against a flashy, professional, Acorah-esque psychic. The craze for spiritualism in the mid- and late 1800s, which inevitably involved a lot more razzmatazz in America than in the UK, created a division between public mediums (generally young, single, lower-class girls who displayed their talents in large public theatres) and private mediums – respectable middle-class ladies, often married, who "performed" only for select audiences in the comfort of their own or their clients' homes. Melinda is definitely of this second species, generally encountering ghosts in her own or other peoples' immaculate houses, and highly critical of the manipulative showman Carey, who eventually and predictably learns that telling the truth is far more important than impressing or even comforting people. Interestingly, the programme's multimedia apparatus is similarly concerned with a dual ideology that upholds both a sort of sanctified privacy and a commitment to revealing the truth. A quick trawl through Google and Wikipedia reveals a bewildering world of spin-off websites, including secret sites

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wobbly camerawork, which claim to allow us to experience what death is like for the dead. Living's decision to confine these slightly more disturbing and visually innovative episodes to the web suggests an uneasy attitude towards frightening images, which are generally only permitted a few seconds of screen-time in the programme itself. Indeed, its post-*Ring* flickering revenants produce nothing even vaguely akin to numinous dread, a situation not exactly improved by its repeated assertion that the evil dead can be transformed into the faithful departed by a perceptive young lady administering a psychic talking cure. For all its labyrinthine invocations of the mysteries of the grave, then, it would seem that the show's exploitation of Gothic iconography functions as little more than edgy window dressing.

Much the same can be said of *Most Haunted*, the Living TV website of which includes discussion forums, interviews, behind-the-scenes clips and even a page that allows viewers to send "white noise" messages to their friends that, allegedly, accurately test psychic ability. While this apparently limitless surplus of information and comment flickering across the computer screen heightens the sense that there is so much more going on than the audience can ever fully comprehend, it also serves a more reassuring purpose, suggesting that information (and, by extension, the "truth") will always be at our fingertips. Indeed, despite attempts to expose it as the fake it quite obviously is, *Most Haunted* remains a potential source of comfort, assuring its devoted audience that there is some sort of existence after death. What is more, the cosiness of the format, flipping as the live version does between a warm, well-lit studio and embedded shots of underground tunnels, reminds the viewer of his or her comparative safety while distracting from any real problems that might be lurking in the darkness surrounding the television set. And if this doesn't work, they can always log onto the website and get beauty tips, relationship advice and celebrity gossip while leaving forum posts about how scary last night's programme was.

Ultimately therefore both programmes disappoint. While a female protagonist permits an exploration of cultural unease that is rarely attached to male characters in similarly popular productions such as *Supernatural* or *Moonlight*, in which muscles and decisiveness are very much to the fore, there is little sense that either show is concerned with addressing what fear and death mean in the Western world in the early twenty first century. I am beginning to suspect, however, that this is rather the point.

DARA DOWNEY

Casting the Runes
(Network/Yorkshire TV/Granada, 1979)

Despite certain recent and generally unwelcome developments which need not detain us here, British television may still be said to enjoy an enviable reputation as the world's leading purveyor of quality programming, particularly in the field of literary adaptation. In the past, this position was achieved by the eschewal of any attempt to compete with Hollywood in terms of star performers and high production values, and by concentrating instead on the fundamentals of good writing and good performances – the "sense and sensibility" approach, as it were. Thus, while the period details of *I, Claudius* may have been rather less convincing than those of *Carry On Cleo*, the drama and acting were of the highest possible standard. And if Hollywood failed to meet expectations, as, for example, in the case of Sherlock Holmes or *The Forsyte Saga*, then British television could generally be relied on to make up for its deficiencies.

In the case of M.R. James's *Casting the Runes*, therefore, it seemed reasonable to suppose that Yorkshire television's 1979 adaptation, made for the ITV Playhouse slot and now released on DVD by Network, would differ significantly from *Night of the Demon*, Jacques Tourneur's classic film version of 1957 which, whatever its many virtues, could not be described as a model of fidelity to James's original. In a British television adaptation there would, presumably, be no poker-faced American leading man, no scenes between the warlock Karswell and his mother, no credulous peasants, and, most certainly, no twenty-four-foot-tall, fire-breathing monster. Indeed, one could almost see the story unfolding in its understated yet eerie way, with Mr. Dunning, suitably attired in Edwardian frockcoat, pointing out the mysterious blue letters on the window of a suitably period omnibus to a suitably deferential conductor and driver . . .

And, it must be admitted, with regard to differing significantly from Tourneur's film, *Casting the Runes* does not disappoint, the most obvious dissimilarity being that, while the former can justly be termed a minor masterpiece, the latter can most accurately be described as a major catastrophe on a minor scale. Set in the present-day, i.e., 1978 (so no frockcoats then), it opens with a flashback to 1968. John Harrington (Christopher Good) is walking his dog in a wintry, bleak rural setting (Yorkshire, presumably), unaware of being watched by what looks like a cardboard cut-out of Godzilla propped against a barbed-wire fence. Catching sight of the Thing, Harrington attempts to flee, only to find himself menaced by a close-up, negative-image of a man in a gorilla suit. And then, before the poor chap can even say "Yes, we have no bananas", he is suddenly seized by an invisible force and hurled repeatedly to the ground (looking, it need hardly be added, pretty damn silly in the process).

Cut back to 1978: Prudence Dunning (Jan Francis), a TV producer, has made a programme debunking various dabblers in Things Best Left Undabbled In, including "a middle-aged American of somewhat obscure background" named N.I. Karswell (Iain Cuthbertson). Later on, rewatching the programme in an editing suite, she is surprised to discover, on the end of the reel, mysterious yellow letters which read "In memoriam John Harrington 1937-1968. One month was allowed."

Researching witchcraft in a library, Prudence attaches no significance to an incident in which a large, sinister man dressed in black knocks over and then retrieves her books, but later that night, she is alarmed to find Something Horrible lurking in her bed. When she confides in her boss, Derek Gayton (Bernard Gallagher), he insists that she stay with him and his wife, Jean (Joanna Dunham), who used to work in publishing with John Harrington and who remembers that Harrington had died not long after rejecting a history of witchcraft submitted by none other than the mysterious Mr. Karswell.

Deciding to visit Harrington's brother, Henry (Edward Petherbridge), Prudence learns that, prior to his death, John had discovered a slip of paper covered with runic symbols inside a music programme given to him by a large man at a festival hall concert. Before either man could examine it further, the paper was blown into the fireplace by an inexplicable, warm gust of air, and burnt. Speaking to Derek, Prudence recalls the encounter at the library, and, sure enough, soon discovers a similar slip of paper hidden inside one of her books. Having read a chapter in Karswell's tome on "Casting the Runes", she realises she must return the spell to Karswell before the passage of a month.

Presenting herself as a member of the Council for the Protection of Rural England, Prudence visits Karswell on the pretext of giving him a questionnaire, but the warlock easily sees through her disguise. As time passes, and Prudence's nerves unravel, she and Derek finally learn that Karswell, who has since remained in seclusion, is due to leave for Caracas. At the airport, Derek approaches Karswell at the ticket desk and kicks over his case. After a brief verbal exchange, Karswell turns back and takes his ticket, only to see that Prudence has switched places with the real ticket desk clerk. Inside the ticket are the Runes. Unable to return them, Karswell proceeds to board his flight. Later on, Prudence sees a news report about the loss, over the Bristol Channel, of a Brazilian jumbo jet *en route* to Caracas.

As can be seen then, *Casting the Runes*, despite changes in time, place, gender, and nationality, certainly adheres more closely to the details of James's story than *Night of the Demon*. Unfortunately, however, a screen adaptation requires more than mere fidelity to its source material (welcome in principle though that may be) in order to be deemed a success – namely a certain inspiration in the writing (to draw out and explore elements of the subtext, for instance) and in the visual presentation (translating prose into pictures). In both these areas, *Casting the Runes* must be judged a lamentable failure.

The key, it would seem, to a successful adaptation of *Casting the Runes* lies in the character of Karswell, a fact immediately grasped by Charles Bennett, scriptwriter of *Night of the Demon*. In James's story, Karswell remains, until the final scene, an off-page presence, a device which works perfectly well in prose but which is obviously a complete non-starter for the screen. Thus liberated from fidelity by necessity, Bennett went on to create one of the great screen villains. By contrast, the late Clive Exton (who would later do such splendid work on ITV's *Jeeves and Wooster*), despite introducing Karswell early on in the story, succeeds only in making him sinister and weird, as opposed to human and compelling – a standard bogeyman, in short (why he should be an American, as opposed to a British bogeyman, is left unexplained). As for the preposterous ending (Of course! Have her change places with the ticket clerk – that's plausible), the less said the better.

The direction, by Lawrence Gordon Clark, is excruciatingly flat and heavy-handed, a surprising fact in view of his previous experience in bringing James to the screen in the BBC's annual *Ghost Story for Christmas* slot (a festive fixture throughout the early Seventies, some of which have been released on DVD by the BFI). To some extent, of course, it would be pointless to draw attention to the horrible combination of grainy, 16mm. footage used for the exteriors and the harsh, hideously over-lit interiors shot on video because that's just the ways things were done back then. Nonetheless, the director appears to have made no attempt whatsoever to convey the necessary sense of dread, either through lighting, composition, editing, or, indeed, the exercise of imagination. The performances, meanwhile, can best be described as adequate – though the imposing Cuthbertson (best remembered for the mid-Seventies' series *Sutherland's Law*) might have made a very good Karswell, given the chance.

The DVD also contains what, on brief inspection, appears to be an equally unlovely, 17-minute adaptation of James's *Mr Humphreys and His Inheritance*, made by Yorkshire TV in 1976, and a 48-minute Anglia TV documentary from 1995, entitled *A Pleasant Terror: The Life and Ghosts of M.R. James*, featuring contributions from Christopher Lee (who, in 2000, appeared as James to introduce and narrate the BBC's *Ghost Stories for Christmas*), Ruth Rendell, Jonathan Miller, and James's biographer, Michael Cox.

It goes without saying, of course, that anyone unfortunate enough to have come into possession of this sadly inadequate offering should proceed, without further delay, to place the Runes (otherwise the receipt) inside the box, and return it from whence it came. Within one month, of course. And if you later see a report about a DVD store and all its customers being mysteriously engulfed in a ball of fire, just sit back, ruminate on the Seventies' irony of it all, and remember... it could have been YOU!

JOHN EXSHAW

Dead Again: *Pushing Daisies*
(ABC, 2007-present)

For those already familiar with the work of writer/producer Brian Fuller, the odd mix of morbid black humour, unabashed whimsy and imaginative word play found in his latest show *Pushing Daisies* will be nothing new. Formerly a writer on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (which was for a couple of seasons at least, amongst the finest small-screen space operas ever, at least until the incomparable *Battlestar Galactica* came on the scene), Fuller also, somewhat less auspiciously, worked on *Star Trek: Voyager* and a made-for TV version of Stephen King's *Carrie*. More recently, he contributed to the popular but erratic Heroes, which has just about survived a poor second season.

In addition, Fuller has created two of the most interesting, if most under appreciated, fantasy television shows of the past decade: *Dead Like Me* and *Wonderfalls*. Both featured cynical, misanthropic protagonists granted special powers which obliged them, albeit reluctantly, to engage with the world around them for the benefit of others. George Lass, heroine of *Dead Like Me* was an aimless eighteen year old killed by debris from the Mir Space station is instantly resurrected as a so-called 'Reaper', one of the select group of unwitting immortals who escort the recently departed to the other side. A slacker philosophy grad with a bracingly acerbic world-view who becomes a reluctant modern-day Joan of Arc is the heroine of *Wonderfalls* (briefly shown on TV 3, but alas, not yet available outside the US on DVD). The show starred Caroline Dhavernas as Jaye Tyler, a gift store clerk whose mundane existence is upended one day when a dented wax lion suddenly begins to speak and demands that she carry out seemingly odd but cosmically significant tasks that lead those around her to seriously question her sanity. (Indeed, if the show had been granted a reprieve the second season would apparently have seen Jaye confined to an asylum – this was definitely not your typical US fantasy series then).

Dead Like Me was, at its finest, a very good show indeed, featuring as it did an likeably caustic lead in Ellen Muth (as far from the air-headed, Stepford-esque starlets of the typical US TV series as it was possible to get) and an excellent ensemble cast able to deliver the show's rapid fire, bracingly foul-mouthed dialogue with gusto. If the show had one major flaw, it was that the ongoing focus upon George's grieving family meant that far too much airtime was devoted to her irritating mother and little sister as they tried to rebuild their lives without her. Still, the show managed to survive for two seasons before being cancelled.

Wonderfalls, co-created by former *Angel* show runner Tim Minear was not quite so lucky and only managed thirteen episodes (of which just 4 where aired in the States). Nevertheless, it remains one of my favourite shows of all time: witty, inventive, silly but in an imaginative way, and, like its predecessor, an immensely humane, likable programme despite (or perhaps because) of the unalloyed misanthropy of its exhilaratingly sarcastic protagonist. For instance, consider this characteristically bracing exchange from the pilot episode:

Little Girl: You're not supposed to steal.
Jaye: You're not supposed to talk to strangers. Piss off!

So what of *Pushing Daisies* then? If anything, the show could be described as Brian Fuller-lite. Gone is the strong language of *Wonderfalls* and *Dead Like Me*, in which the phrase "mother fucker" or some imaginative variation there-of was employed roughly every two minutes or so: this is strictly

family-friendly stuff. It's also unlikely that *Pushing Daisies* will ever feature a leading character quite as messed up as George's junkie Reaper colleague Mason. However, the basic premise is very similar indeed to *DLM*, whilst the deeply whimsical and, at times, outright silliness of the shows plotlines owes much to *Wonderfalls*. Fuller's fondness for Hitchcockian pastiches is also much in evidence here as well: both *Spellbound* and *The Birds* have been playfully spoofed.

Once more, we have a leading character who has an unwanted gift that comes with a considerable catch. In a rather neat reversal of George's abilities in *DLM*, the neurotic, self-contained hero of *Pushing Daisies*, Ned (Lee Pace, who also played Jaye's Theologian brother in *Wonderfalls*) can resurrect dead things – including people – with the merest touch. The problem is, if Ned touches anyone he has resurrected ever again, they die instantly, and permanently. Furthermore, a life regained is a life lost elsewhere: if Ned doesn't extinguish the life force of someone he has risen from the dead within a minute, someone else nearby will drop dead. So far, so high concept. Having teamed up with a cynical Private Detective named Emerson Cod (Chi McBride), Ned makes extra cash on the side by waking murder victims long enough to find out whom killed them and then pocketing the reward by solving the mystery. However, when he is asked to investigate the murder of his childhood sweetheart Chuck, his heart overrides his head and Ned cannot bring himself to let her stay dead. And so, the show's main premise is neatly established: it's the story of two people very much in love who cannot so much as kiss without fatal consequences.

Given the Technicolor mise-en-scene (kind of like Tim Burton crossed with a live-action cartoon), vaguely retro-50s set design and costuming, deliberately syrupy music, and deeply sentimental premise, it could well be argued that in *Pushing Daisies*, Fuller has watered down his work with a large dose of Amelie-style saccharine in order to (successfully) appeal to a wider audience. Certainly, at least so far – and to be fair, due to the US writer's strike, the first season contains only nine episodes – the show isn't quite as bleakly funny, or as morally complex as some of his earlier work. And yet, prepared though I was to loathe it from the moment that I saw the immensely twee, calculatedly sentimental looking preview, I find myself quite liking my weekly dose of whimsy after all.

Part of this is due to the fact that Fuller has again assembled a very likable cast. As the deeply un-sentimental Emerson Cod, Chi McBride provides a much-needed dose of sarcasm to help puncture what would otherwise be an unbearably sentimental premise. Similarly, Kirstin Chernowith impresses as Ned's love struck but ruthless waitress Olive. Lee Pace is agreeably twitchy and self-contained as the melancholic hero whose unconventional abilities have rendered him emotionally retarded, whilst Anna Friel, who plays Chuck, is, if not quite as witty and bracingly acerbic as Fuller's earlier heroines, still a likable, amiable presence. Her performance is certainly much more appealing than that of fellow Brit-Soap star turned US fantasy show heroine, Michelle Ryan, whose dour and sorely miscast turn in the dull *Bionic Woman* remake was surely a key factor in that show's rapid demise.

In a twist that is again highly reminiscent of *Dead Like Me*, the newly resurrected Chuck, like George Lass, cannot allow her family to know that she has returned from the dead lest Ned's power be revealed. However, here, the ongoing presence of Chuck's grieving aunts, the magnificently eccentric Lilly and Vivian Charles (formerly known as "The Darling Mermaid Darlings" due to their previous lives as a famous synchronised swimming act) adds a tart jolt of genuinely affecting melancholy to proceedings which may otherwise have proved unbearably whimsical. Gleefully exaggerated though their costumes and dialogue may be, and despite the inherent cartoonishness of their characters, Swoozie Kurtz and Ellen

Greene still manage to convey the genuine devastation at the loss of the most important person in their lives. Furthermore, despite the use of devices which some viewers may find excruciatingly cute – the resolutely chaste and idealised central romance, the story-book style narration, constant use of alliteration, light-as-air plotting and bad puns – *Pushing Daisies* retains the core of genuine humanity and wit which characterises Fuller's work at its best. Ultimately, there's something so playfully good-natured and agreeably witty about the whole thing that it's hard to resist, although, as with any other sugary confection, the novelty may well wear off. For now, despite the risk of tooth decay, I recommend giving the show the benefit of doubt, and having another slice of morbidly cheerful whimsy after all.

BERNICE M. MURPHY

Masters of Horror: Series 2
(Showtime, 2008)

Now into its second series (and with a short-lived sci-fi based spinoff) Showtime's *Masters of Horror* represents an attempt to update the horror anthology format for a contemporary audience. While overseen by series creator Mick Garris (who will also supervise the upcoming NBC spinoff, *Fear Itself*), each episode hands over the directorial reigns to a different genre luminary who is tasked with telling a standalone self-contained story. Yet, although such a concept promises much, in practice the unique demands of television often produce less than successful results. Budgetary constraints, the need to establish likeable, nuanced characters, and the requirement to tell interesting and original genre stories has proved a difficult balancing act for many. Contributors to series two of *Masters of Horror* include both returning directors such as John Carpenter (*Halloween*, *The Thin*g) Stuart Gordon (*Re-animato*r) and Dario Argento (*Suspiria*, *Profondo Rosso*) and new participants including Rob Schmidt (*Wrong Tur*n) and Tom Holland (*Child's Play*, *Fright Night*).

The second series gets off to a decidedly mediocre start with Tobe Hooper's *The Damned Thing*. Based loosely on the creepily effective Ambrose Bierce short story of the same name, the episode fails on a number of levels. The wooden Sean Patrick Flannery plays Kevin Reddle, sheriff of Cloverdale, Texas. We are told how, as a child, Kevin witnessed his father brutally shooting both his mother and then himself in an entirely uncharacteristic outbreak of insanity. This event has made Kevin into something of a paranoiac who's convinced that one day he'll be afflicted by whatever affected his father. Sure enough, it's not long before "the damned thing" of the title begins to turn the other residents of Cloverdale into murderous psychopaths and Kevin must try and survive long enough to find out what's going on. While the basic premise of the episode is an effective one (as it should be given the source material), Hooper's execution is poor, managing to remove most of the suspense of the set-up through the repeated use of overly gory set-pieces. Hooper's attempts to instil the story with contemporary relevance (it is suggested that the town's oil money has been attained as a result of immoral practices) also seem somewhat under-developed, leading to an episode in which the audience is more likely to be gleefully cheering on the murderous townsfolk than they are rooting for the supposed protagonist.

The Damned Thing's uneven tone and quality exemplify one of the series' chief failings, namely that the confines of an hour long television format seem to allow for very little character development or depth to the storytelling. As a result, *The Damned Thing* becomes little more than a succession of ever dwindling shocks, doing a disservice to the original material and suggesting yet again that Hooper's sublime debut *The Texas Chain-Saw Massacre* may represent something of a fluke in directorial ability.

Ernest Dickerson's *The V Word* represents something of a nadir for the second series. Wildly unoriginal (the premise of suburban youngsters finding that one of their neighbours is a vampire was done in both *Fright Night* and *The Lost Boys* to much better effect) the episode seems to think it is much cleverer than it actually is. Consequently, the audience is left with a clichéd mess of a story that attempts to swing between *Scream*-style self-reflexiveness and more serious scares yet manages neither. Throw in some truly appalling dialogue and a lumpen performance by Michael Ironside and one is tempted to re-title the episode *The S word*.

Despite the series' patchiness there are, however some gems. Though perhaps not reaching the heights of the first series' *Homecoming*, Joe Dante's contribution *The Screwfly Solution* manages to successfully negotiate the potential pitfalls of the television format to tell an interesting story with political underpinnings. Based on a short story of the same name by Alice Sheldon (better known as James Tiptree Jr), *The Screwfly Solution* charts the effects of an alien-created virus that changes the male population of America into violent psychopaths. The eponymous solution becomes a device through which Dante (and the episode's writer Sam Hamm) explore the links between sex and violence in American society. Of particular interest in this regard is the episode's handling of the role that religion often seems to play in justifying violence towards women, with Dante using the infected men's concurrent increase in religious belief to critique the more conservative 'fire and brimstone' sectors of Christianity. Alongside its grander scale depiction of an apocalyptic America driven into a state of chaotic discordance, the episode humanises the problem by charting the deteriorating relationship between Alan and his wife and daughter. While Alan tries to produce a cure he must separate himself from the rest of his family lest he succumb to the virus and try to kill them. Though there is perhaps a little too much environmental moralising, Dante manages to depict a genuinely horrific situation, realising the breakdown of the possibility of loving relationships between men and women in a truly disturbing manner.

Another series highlight is Gordon's *The Black Cat*; a witty fictionalisation of the events which might have led Edgar Allen Poe to write his story of the same name. Though very different to *The Screwfly Solution* the episode works largely due to its contained and original premise, a literate and genuinely humorous script and a great central performance from Jeffrey Combs. In fact, while not terribly scary, the episode stands out when compared to the rest of *Masters of Horror: Series 2* because it refuses to substitute characterisation and good storytelling for cheap shocks and gore as many of the other episodes do.

The same can perhaps be said of Brad Anderson's taut *Sounds Like* and Peter Medak's revisionist *The Washingtonians*. The former tells the story of Larry Pearce, who is driven to violent action when he gains a hyper-sensitive sense of hearing, while the latter details one man's discovery that George Washington was a cannibal. However, while both episodes seek to avoid some of the hackneyed conventions of the genre they are arguably less successful than Gordon's with Anderson's containing a lack of characters to empathise with and Medak's episode relying a little too heavily on a camp aesthetic that seems at odds with the more gruesome elements of the story.

The overriding impression one is left with after watching *Masters of Horror: Series 2* is that of the missed opportunity it represents. While in many ways, the series must have been a dream from a marketing perspective; (with many of the directors involved – including genre luminaries such as Carpenter and Landis – producing their first significant work in the genre for a number of years) the end product fails to live up to this promise. Part of the problem may be that because of the series' over reliance on gore and violence it cannot help but seem somewhat infantile in comparison to much of contemporary cinematic horror. When judged against the more subtle chills of films such as *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Sixth Sense* or the boundary pushing of 'gorenography' like *Hostel* and *Saw*, *Masters of Horror: Series 2*'s 1980's horror aesthetic cannot help but seem tired and antiquated. Ironically, if anything, the show serves to undermine the credentials of many of those involved, proving that once-noted genre luminaries such as Hooper, Carpenter and Argento are long past their directorial best.

DAVID SIMMONS

Count Dracula
(BBC/2 Entertain, 1977)

When *Count Dracula* first aired on the BBC in December 1977, the two-part, 150-minute adaptation of Bram Stoker's immortal novel was widely acclaimed as the most faithful screen version yet seen, an accolade likely to be reiterated following its recent no-frills DVD release on the Corporation's 2 Entertain label. Not, of course, that *Count Dracula* has been unduly troubled by competitors for that particular distinction in the ensuing years, but that, as they say, is another story . . .

Since first being adapted for the screen by F.W. Murnau in 1922, Stoker's *Dracula* has tended to inspire a remarkably cavalier attitude in film-makers who have often seemed quite happy – even eager – to drive as many stakes through the heart of their source material as has taken their fancy. Thus, while Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Tod Browning's 1931 version (an adaptation of Hamilton Deane's stage play rather than the book itself) undoubtedly possessed many virtues, fidelity to Stoker was not foremost among them. Hammer's 1957 version, hampered by severe budgetary constraints, also played fast and loose with Stoker (most notably in setting the entire story in or near Transylvania, and by presenting Jonathan Harker not as an innocent abroad but as a doomed avenger), yet nonetheless remained remarkably faithful to the spirit of the book, thereby demonstrating that an adaptation need not be slavish to be successful. Twelve years later, a seemingly sincere effort by Jess Franco to present the story as written was doomed, rather than merely hampered, by inadequate funding. This was followed, in 1973, by a flaccid TV adaptation, directed by Dan Curtis, which conspicuously failed to capture both the tone and thrust of the novel. Later big-screen versions, by John Badham in 1979 and Francis Ford Coppola in 1992, proved unsatisfactory in many respects, the former being lifeless and effete, the latter overblown and preposterous, while Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu* of 1979 revealed itself as a reworking of Murnau rather than Stoker.

In 1977, therefore, former Hitchcock collaborator Gerald Savory found himself in the happy position of being able to write a version of *Dracula* that would not only keep faith with Stoker's original vision (he was a great admirer of the novel), but could also claim, with considerable justification, to be a radical departure from his predecessors' efforts by the simple – and cost-free – virtue of its very fidelity. And so it proved. The story begins, proceeds, and concludes as it should, with none of the pathetic pandering to TV executives' notions of "contemporary relevance" which so fatally blighted the BBC's astoundingly awful adaptation of 2006, while the major characters are, on the whole, more recognisably those as conceived and written by Stoker than had previously been seen.

Nonetheless, there are a few deviations – of varying degrees of importance – to be found in Savory's work, the most obvious of which is the blending of Lucy's fiancé, the Hon. Arthur Holmwood (later Lord Godalming) and her former suitor, Quincey P. Morris, into a single character named "Quincey P. Holmwood", a composite who fulfils the function of the latter as Lucy's betrothed while retaining the external characteristics of the somewhat bumptious Texan. As the novel's Holmwood is little more than the obligatory titled love interest of Victorian fiction, and Morris a supposedly colourful character largely required to dispense folksy Americanisms and Winchester bullets in roughly equal measure, this is a perfectly legitimate device on Savory's part, one which helps to focus and streamline the narrative while losing none of the essential functions of either character.

Other changes, such as the excision of the "Escaped Wolf" interlude and various other contractions and elisions, are mainly employed to tighten the storyline, though it is somewhat surprising to find Jonathan and Mina being dropped off on their return from the Continent by Dracula himself (apparently

moonlighting as a cabbie), a sequence obviously intended to replace the admittedly contentious one in the novel in which Jonathan spies the Count playing the *grand boulevardier* in Piccadilly in broad daylight. The ending too has undergone some revision, including a rather more elaborate shootout with Dracula's band of gypsies (improbably, and inaccurately, armed with Winchesters) than features in the book, the killing of Dracula being performed by Van Helsing (instead of Jonathan and Quincey), his dissolution in a voluminous puff of smoke, and the survival of the Quincey Holmwood character.

More significantly, however, the character of Dracula has been altered in a number of key scenes, most particularly his rescue of Harker from the three female vampires, and his confrontation with Van Helsing & Co. in London. In the latter, Dracula not only shows no fear of the crucifix brandished by the Dutchman but is allowed to present a defence of his actions together with a bracing contempt for Christianity in general. From a dramatic point of view, this sequence works quite well – not least because Van Helsing's fervent religiosity has becoming rather annoying by this stage – but, while the notion of vampire-as-atheist may be intriguing, it goes without saying that a supposedly faithful adaptation of *Dracula* is not an appropriate vehicle for its introduction. (Interestingly enough, in Savory's novelisation of his script, published by Corgi in 1977, Dracula not only "cowers back" from the crucifix but has dialogue different from that in the screen version – suggesting, perhaps, that rewrites were implemented by director Philip Saville during production.) Furthermore, the Count does not sport a moustache, and is not seen to grow younger as the story progresses (though both characteristics are retained in the novelisation).

With regard to *Count Dracula* as a production (as opposed to an adaptation), Saville's direction is competent and unobtrusive, though hardly inspired. The interior sets are what one would expect from a BBC drama of the late Seventies, functional rather than elaborate, but the exterior work is generally excellent, in particular the decision to film the Whitby and Highgate cemetery sequences on location (the latter, though not mentioned by name in the novel, can reasonably be assumed to be the location of Lucy's tomb). The special effects, on the other hand, which mainly consist of an over-reliance on negative-imaging more appropriate to a contemporary edition of *Top of the Pops* (and which looked pretty cheesy even in 1977) cannot be said to have improved with age.

The casting, and the performances, of Bosco Hogan as Jonathan, Judi Bowker as Mina, Susan Penhaligon as Lucy, and Jack Shepherd as Renfield may be considered definitive, while Mark Burns and Richard Barnes, as Dr. Seward and Quincey P. Holmwood respectively, both provide solid support. Frank Finlay, not always the most subtle of screen actors, judges his performance as Van Helsing to perfection, in addition providing an interesting contrast to the better-known interpretation of Peter Cushing. Whereas the late Hammer star chose to play Van Helsing principally as a man of science and to dispense with his Dutch accent, Finlay not only tackles the accent with aplomb but is much closer to Stoker's delineation of the character as a rather unlikely combination of scientist and surrogate priest – with the latter so much to the fore that at times one wonders whether Stoker meant to put D.D. rather than M.D. after the character's name.

With so much excellence on display in *Count Dracula*, it is with a real sense of regret that one turns to the casting of Louis Jourdan in the title role – a choice so horrendously misjudged as to threaten to render the many attributes of this otherwise outstanding production null and void. More than anything else, the part of Dracula requires what is known in theatrical parlance as a King actor – that is to say, an actor who can not only be viably cast as a focus of power and authority but one who would also be unable to convincingly play characters of more humble origins. While it is accepted that Stoker based aspects of the

Count on his overbearing employer, Sir Henry Irving (very much a King actor by all accounts), the only actor to play Dracula who has undoubtedly possessed this quality has been Christopher Lee – which is why his performance, despite the liberties taken by Hammer with Stoker's original story, tends to be regarded as definitive. On the other hand, one need look no further than the casting of Gary Oldman and Marc Warren in the role to illustrate the essential idiocy of casting proletariatian actors as princes of darkness.

Louis Jourdan, it need hardly be stated, is not a King actor, so the paradoxical fact that his performance as the Count can be regarded as a highpoint of a career otherwise as shallow and insubstantial as the characters he has tended to play does nothing to negate his essential wrongness for the role. Feline instead of vulpine, creepy instead of terrifying, Jourdan lacks both the physique and the presence to accurately embody Count Dracula, warlord of the Carpathians, Hammer of the Turks, and Lord of the Undead. Interviewed in 1977, the actor offered the following observation: "I think that something like the Devil is only convincing if he is not played like the Devil. He is an angel, a fallen angel. I think Dracula should be played as an extremely kind person who truly believes he is doing good. He gives eternal life. He takes blood and he gives blood. Therefore, he gives an exchange which is symbolic of love and the sexual act . . ." Spoken, one might think, more like a true Frenchman than as an actor with any real understanding of what is required for a faithful portrayal of Dracula as written by Bram Stoker.

In the same interview, Jourdan stated that ". . . this is a *new* concept of Dracula. Our version is based on Bram Stoker's book which he wrote in 1835 [*sic*], and we are doing an almost exact adaptation." Except, he might have added, for his own interpretation, one which often seems to owe more to the Marquis de Sade than to Stoker. This is particularly evident in the scene with the three females vampires alluded to previously, in which, far from displaying either Dracula's "wrath and fury" (as described by Stoker), or even his "blazing passion" (from Savory's novelisation), Jourdan addresses the miscreant fiends in the chiding and suggestive tones of a de Franval or Dolmancé. Why, it is legitimate to wonder, did Philip Saville not instruct his star to play the scene correctly, as was almost certainly indicated in the original script? To which the most likely answer would seem to be that Jourdan was simply incapable of doing so convincingly, and that this scene, and to some extent the entire production, had to be altered to accommodate the miscasting of its ill-chosen star.

And it is that fatal flaw in the casting process – arguably the most important element in any version of Dracula – which ultimately leads to the regrettable conclusion that, despite its many virtues, *Count Dracula* remains a missed opportunity instead of the classic – and faithful – adaptation it was so clearly intended to be.

JOHN EXSHAW