TELEVISION REVIEWS

Glimpsing the Wolf: *Red Riding*

(Channel 4/ Optimum Home Entertainment, March 2009)

A word of advice. If you happen to buy the DVD box set of the *Red Riding* trilogy (*1974*, *1980* and *1983*, based on the novels by David Peace and directed by Julian Jarrold, James Marsh and Anand Tucker respectively), skip the interview with Jarrold that is one of the special features on the first disk. Better known for his work on *Becoming Jane* and, as he admits himself, for period drama and comedy in general, his description of the product of his labours as "very fast-moving thriller *noir*" and as "staccatto" and "edgy" is jarring in the extreme, not to mention simply inaccurate. If, like me, you find yourself completely gripped by Tony Grisoni's script and the show's stunning yet thoughtful visuals, which combine to create an effect which is unsettling, even Gothic, rather than "edgy", it may even feel as if Jarrold's comments go some way towards undermining the power of the three films as a whole. Thankfully, however, the sheer brilliance (which I have no qualms about proclaiming loudly and often) of these five gruelling hours of television drowns out the inappropriateness, even (in the context) the frivolity of the "thriller" label.

Where it comes from, however, I suspect, is from the fact that, in the wake of the *Saw* and *Hostel* franchises, and the films which they have inspired and been inspired by, even spectacles of extreme violence such as those featured in, for example, David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995) have come to seem almost quaintly restrained. What *Se7en* has in common with the *Red Riding* trilogy is the way in which the graphic and highly disturbing images around which the plot revolves are often nearly out of frame, half obscured by out-of-focus shots or darkness, or flashed across the screen with unnerving rapidity. Combined with the concerns with narrative and visual innovation (rather than merely wondering how much more gore, screaming and inventive torture can be squeezed into a two-hour slot, not that both *Red Riding* and *Se7en* exactly skimp on any of the above), both texts (if we can indeed take *Red Riding* as a single text) often come across as somehow more high-brow than the more straightforward examples of the "torture porn" genre. Indeed, several reviewers have remarked on what they see as *Red Riding*'s conscious literariness, the product primarily of Grisoni's commitment to sticking as closely as possible to Peace's books (despite leaving out *1977* altogether and tweaking some of the plot details in order to facilitate the transition to television). This quality has led some online commentators to express their disappointment that it isn't *more* violent (though frequently in terms which suggest that they wish it was indeed a "fast-moving thriller"), while others are horrified and outraged by what they see as a gratuitous display of blood and guts.

The reality, as these disparate reactions imply, lies somewhere between the two – and with good reason. The subject of the trilogy is the disappearance and murder of a number of young girls in West Yorkshire in the early 1970s, which become entangled with the Yorkshire Ripper case, only to re-emerge in the early 1980s in a community still reeling from the revelations of his horrific crimes. While these events would provide ample enough material for a disturbing drama series, what makes *Red Riding* special is its thoroughly dystopic engagement with high-level corruption and the effects that it can have on the lives of those who the criminal justice system ostensibly protects. Its fictional West Yorkshire is peopled by police officers for whom brutality is standard procedure (and be warned, this goes far beyond a bit of slapping around of prisoners – there are cigarettes involved, among other things), paedophiliac clergymen, and powerful property magnates possessed of monstrous appetites, and everything in between. By charting the ways in which these characters become entangled with (or are intrinsically implicated in)

real-life events, *Red Riding* presents us with a world saturated with meaningless, endless violence that seems to serve little purpose beyond its own perpetuation and concealment. The murderer who rapes, tortures and sews swans' wings onto the shoulders of little girls, and indeed the actions of Peter Sutcliffe himself, are by no means aberrations or the invasion of the cosy world of bourgeois normality by alien horror. Instead (in manner which can even be compared with the second season of *Ashes to Ashes*, also reviewed in this issue), horror irrupts from within, is the product of the everyday practices of a bigoted, patriarchal and fiercely secretive society and flourishes there unchecked.

To go into any real detail regarding the plot of the three films would be to reveal rather more than is desirable in a text which relies on the confusion of both characters and audience, a confusion that permeates both the dialogue and the often highly impressionistic, even dreamlike camerawork of the trilogy. That said, according to James Marsh, director of *1980*, in a "Making of ..." feature on the same DVD, Grisoni's original script was even more "delirious" and "weird", characteristics which Marsh toned down in order to ground the work more fully in a sense of the "real world." This is particularly evident in one of the deleted scenes from *1974*, which offers the audience an alternate ending. Instead of the cataclysmic car crash (which begins to occur but is never fully portrayed) with which this first film comes to a typically devastating but grimly triumphant conclusion, this deleted scene brings us far deeper into the stygian realms exploited by the films' villains as the theatre for their unspeakable (and, indeed, in keeping with the trilogy's chilling restraint, never fully spoken) crimes than in the finished product even dares to do. Terrifying but characteristically ambiguous, this blood-soaked, grime-encrusted, horribly suggestive climax would indeed have brought the series unequivocally into the terrain of Gothic horror. Somehow, however, the refusal to do so in the films as they stand heightens rather than detracts from their impact *as* Gothic – or, as has been suggested in a review on Channel 4's *Goldplated* in issue two of this journal, a programme with which *Red Riding* has much in common, including visuals and thematic concerns, as secular Gothic. While many commentators have expressed their discomfort at the films' (and indeed the books') apparent efforts realistically and faithfully to represent West Riding in Yorkshire as it was in the '70s and '80s, the power of *Red Riding* lies in its ability to straddle an acutely painful line between the "delirious" fantasies of the horror genre and the appalling realities of the true-crime genre. Based on actual events and yet fictionalised beyond mere name changes and imaginative reconstructions, what we have here is a nightmare world that literalises the horrors that underpinned (and, as the films' less-than conclusive endings imply, continue to underpin) British society.

Where this becomes most evident is in the repeated appearance of characters who appear to be possessed of psychic powers. In *1974*, Marjorie (Cathryn Bradshaw), the disturbed wife of John Dawson (a corrupt, hideously wealthy property developer excellently played by Sean Bean), tells Eddie (Andrew Garfield), the reporter who is as close as the piece comes to having a hero, that he smells of death, despite knowing nothing of what he has seen or understood. *1983* revives this idea, in the form of psychic Mandy Wymer (Saskia Reeves) who holds a séance and insists repeatedly that she is in contact with both the dead children and Hazel, the little girl who is missing throughout the film. Both women repeatedly exhort the male characters to look "beneath the beautiful new carpets" for evidence of where those who have disappeared may have gone and who is responsible for their deaths, a phrase also repeatedly by Michael Myshkin (played by an expertly cast Daniel Mays), the intellectually impaired young man accused of the murders. This refrain, along with each of these three characters' insistence that the girls were killed by "the wolf" and the sing-song poem recited by BJ, the rent boy who has seen too much and comes to play a central role in the closing minutes, which merges with the words of a nursery rhyme ("One, two, three, four, five, six, seven,/ All good children go to Heaven") which is also a motif of the final instalment, adds to the Gothic atmosphere. There is more here than the events of a single time and place, these elements seem to imply. Instead, we have been privy to the most extreme manifestation of the more disturbing

aspects of the relationship between adults and children, between the "safe" world of daily life and the dangerous territory of the systems of power and authority which dictate and cannot be disentangled from that world.

Adding to this sense that the films have somehow tapped into a darkness that extends beyond the narrator confines of the particular is the choice of subject matter for each individual film. While *1974*, the most visually gritty of the three, focuses on the original slew of disappearances and the subsequent murders of a number of little girls, *1980*, mixes actual television footage from coverage of the Ripper case with overtly hallucinatory camerawork. By contrast again, *1983* goes some way towards uncovering the conspiracies hinted at in the previous two, even offering some possibility of redemption at the end, though without permitting any true revelation of the misdeeds which many of the male authority figures have committed – and certainly no sense that they will be brought to justice in the way that Sutcliffe was. It does so by concentrating on a disappearance which mirrors perfectly those which dominate *1973*, and the subsequent fallout, lingering mercilessly on the impact which the recurrence of these events have on those innocent men accused of the crimes.

Moreover, *1983* eschews many of the aesthetic and narrative flourishes of the two previous films, and presenting a vision of the early '80s which, in terms of iconography and *mis-en-scène*, could at times easily pass for the '90s or even 2009. The horrors that *1974* locks safely away in a vanished era of neon-lit bars, big moustaches and council estates reminiscent of Blur's "Park Life" video are thus dragged uncomfortably into the familiar world in which the viewer lives. And yet, it must be remembered, *1983*, unlike *1980*, features the medium, Mandy Wymer, a woman somehow connected to preternatural forces. This is not to say, however, that the events portrayed in the film are any less believable or that the corruption it depicts should be dismissed as nothing more than a conspiracy theory founded on mere superstition and irrationality. Indeed, what Mandy, Marjorie and Michael (an alliterative linking that cannot be accidental) pick up on is, in the world conjured up in each of the films, all too real indeed. By mingling this depraved, generally hopeless reality through the lens of a dreamy yet psychotic fairy tale (as, indeed, so many fairy tales are), through the quasi-supernaturalism upon which the Gothic as a genre relies heavily, but also simply by its hypnotically compelling images and plot, *Red Riding* beckons us closer to show us what we wish we had never seen – the rot that lurks beneath the swirling patterns and rich hues of beautiful carpets.

DARA DOWNEY

Empty Vessels: *Dollhouse*
(Fox, 2009)

One of the most eagerly awaited television shows of 2009 – at least for the vocal legion of diehards who are convinced that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator Joss Whedon is some kind of secular messiah – was *Dollhouse*, which, after considerable behind-the-scenes tinkering, finally debuted in February. Was it worth the wait? Well, yes and no. The show certainly has an interesting premise, but despite some promising elements, its uneven nature was such that I am frankly surprised that it was recently renewed for a second season.

The basis gist of the show is as follows. Echo (played by Eliza Dushku, formerly of *BTVS* and the insufferably dull *Tru Calling*) is a so-called "Doll," a kind of sentient zombie whose original personality has been wiped so that she has become a blank slate, ready to be imprinted with any personality (or "imprint") assigned to her. Echo and her fellow "Dolls" are playthings for the rich and the powerful, hired out on demand to fulfil the dreams of others and controlled by employees of the mysterious Rossum corporation, whose property they are for the duration of their "contract". Many of the tasks undertaken by the dolls make them, essentially, prostitutes unaware of the very fact of their own exploitation: after a bespoke personality has been implanted into their head by computer geek Topher (Fran Kranz) each active can become whoever the client wants – be that trophy girlfriend, extreme sports enthusiast/ sex kitten or dead-wife substitute.

Occasionally – and rather less plausibly – the Dolls are imprinted with personalities designed to fulfil other tasks, such as hostage negotiator, bodyguard, spy, or, registering most highly on the silliness scale, *midwife*. When not out on an active mission, the Dolls – all codenamed after a letter of the NATO phonetic alphabet – spend their days in the luxurious underground 'Dollhouse' in a state of mindless childlike innocence which renders them docile, and apparently content to spend their time lounging round in pyjamas, eating salads, and exercising. We are told that each Doll has chosen to surrender of their own free will their original personality and become an active for a fixed period of time, although whether this decision is truly a voluntary one becomes increasingly questionable as the series progresses. Echo – whose original personality was named Caroline – certainly seems to have joined the programme for much the same reason that fugitives from justice used to join the French Foreign Legion: because she had good reason to want to stop being herself for a while (personally, I find that reading a good book is enough to do that for me, but perhaps that would make for a less exciting television show).

The show is an admittedly visually stylish melange of elements – there's a strong dash of Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (the Dolls are, to recall Betty Friedan's resonant phrase, essentially "biological robots"), a hint of Paul Verhoven's *Total Recall*, and in Dushku's endless dressing up and occasional penchant for ass-kicking heroics, a suggestion of J.J. Abram's Science Fiction inflected spy show *Alias*), as well as an *X-Files*/*Fringe* style lone-wolf FBI agent (Tahmoh Penikett) who is determined to find out the TRUTH. The show is also, for its first five episodes at least, a bit of a dog's dinner – a bit of a problem when the first season only runs to twelve outings.

So, where do the problems begin? Firstly, there's the fact that this is essentially an acting showcase for someone who can't really act. Required to take on any number of different personae during the course of an episode, Dushku can only really muster about four basic expressions: "sexy" (for the many assignments apparently designed to get her into as skimpy an outfit as possible); "thoughtful" (for the plots in which she must inevitably, wear glasses to reinforce the fact that she's been imprinted with an

"intellectual" personality); "tough" – for the times when she unleashes her inner Vampire Slayer and kicks ass; and "child-like incomprehension" for her scenes back in the Dollhouse. Only the ass-kicking is done with any real feeling, a reflection of the fact that Dushku's best role to date remains that of Bad-Girl Slayer Faith, Buffy Summer's blue-collar nemesis. Tellingly, even when playing a blank slate, Dushku struggles to convince, and the gulf between her abilities and those of the actors playing her fellow Dolls – in particular the outstanding Enver Djokaj as "Victor" – becomes increasingly obvious as the season progresses.

As one would except with Whedon, the supporting cast here – apart from the reliably wooden Penikett, who played a boring and self-righteous character in *Battlestar Galactica* and does the much the same thing here – is rather good, and when allowed more screen time, as in the later episodes of the season, really gets to shine. Head of the Dollhouse – well, the LA branch anyway – is the ruthless one-time Scientist Adelle DeWitt (Olivia Williams), whose right-hand man (and security chief) Laurence Dominic (Reed Diamond) seems to have a particular grudge against Echo. Echo's so-called "handler" – the bodyguard/minder assigned to each active via a process of imprinting which leads then to instinctively trust this person – is a morally conflicted cop named Boyd Langton (Harry J. Lennix) who finds the entire concept of the Dollhouse extremely distasteful and has a strong sense of paternal protectiveness towards his charge. Annoying computer genius Topher is essentially a slightly darker take on Whedon's standard geek character, whilst former *Angel* regular Amy Acker plays the psychologically and physically scarred Dr Claire Saunders, who is in charge of patching up the actives when they return from their assignments.

Crucially, Saunder's scars were inflicted by an at-large and psychotic male Doll named "Alpha", whose murderous activities and relationship with Echo, along with her gradually dawning sense of self-awareness, form half of the first season's major story arc. The other key arc is that in which FBI Agent Paul Ballard (Pennikett) obsessively tries to uncover the truth about the Dollhouse, which is officially viewed as an urban legend. Though Ballard's scenes are often the dullest in the show, his relationship with nice-as-pie next door neighbour Mellie (played by the rather good Miracle Laurie) actually becomes one of the most interesting strands of the show as the plot develops.

So what of the episodes themselves? Well the trouble is that the first half of the season, aside from some intermittently humorous moments and concessions to the overall narrative arc, isn't all that interesting unless you're going to be satisfied by Dushku playing dress-up for an hour. Unsurprisingly, these episodes were received poorly by critics and viewers alike, leading Whedon to assure fans that things would greatly improve by episode 6 (in itself a bad sign). But to be fair, that episode, entitled "The Man on the Street," is a real turning point for the series, and concludes with a genuinely surprising revelation which is as good as anything Whedon has ever done. In addition, by focusing on the sexual abuse perpetrated upon one of the Dolls whilst in her vulnerable, and decidedly childlike inactive state, the show finally confronts the darker implications of the Dollhouse and all those who avail of its services (as well as facilitate its operation). The episode which follows, "Echoes", is also one of the highpoints of the series, and for the first time showcases the engaging streak of wit and silliness which runs through the best of Whedon's oeuvre. The release of a hallucinogenic drug which causes all non-Dolls to act like they're quite drunk but which reactivates old memories in the Dolls themselves provides us with some much-needed background on Echo's former personality, but best of all makes for some very funny scenes in which usually restrained characters such as DeWitt, Langton, and Dominic get to behave in a very erratic (and humorous) fashion – the scenes between Williams and Kranz back in the Dollhouse are particularly good here.

Of the rest of the season, "Spy in the House of Love" – in which DeWitt's character is fleshed out a bit more and the identity of a secret mole within the Dollhouse is revealed – is probably the best, and we also get to find out what the ominously named "attic" to which rogue operatives are sent really is. Unfortunately, despite building up some promising momentum at last, the concluding episodes of the season, "Briar Rose" and "Alpha" – in which the increasingly unhinged Ballard finally closes in on his White Whale and Alpha returns to wreak havoc once more – aren't as good as they might have been, perhaps in large part because these episodes depend upon us empathising strongly with Echo (aka Caroline). In fact, the revelations made about the true nature of another, ostensibly more minor character, are actually much more affecting and poignant those involving Echo, whose role in the climax descends into a lame "Natural Born Killers" style rip-off which allows another Whedon alumnae, Alan Tudyk, to ham it up unashamedly. The truth is that original personality Caroline – in the brief scenes in which she is shown in flashback – is such an arrogant, self-righteous, and downright irritating person that it is difficult to care whether she ever gets to retake possession of her own body. Essentially, the problem with these episodes – as with the show in general – is that the lead characters, (Echo/Caroline and Ballard) – are actually the least interesting people in the show. As the occasional moments of real narrative daring and wit present in the show demonstrate, there is promise here, despite the inherently questionable premise (the Dollhouse, is after all, essentially a souped-up brothel for the super rich). However, like Echo herself at the end of the first season, Whedon still has a long way to go, and one suspects that without some major revamping the show itself won't escape the real-life "attic" of permanent cancellation for long.

BERNICE M. MURPHY

It was acceptable at the time: *Ashes to Ashes,* Season 2
(BBC1, April-June 2009)

As horror clichés go, the "Oh my god! I was dead all along!" reveal (of which the "it was all a terrible dream/bad drug trip" plot devices are closely-related variations) is surely one of the most overused. Though the trope provided the premise for the atmospheric classic *Carnival of Souls* and a few other reasonably good genre pieces (amongst them *The Sixth Sense*, *The Others* and *Dead End*) it has all too often been utilised by lazy film makers and writers who want to have all sorts of strange things happen without necessarily coming up with a proper explanation for them. Horror enthusiasts are well aware therefore that if a character has some sort of near-death experience in the first twenty minutes of a horror film, it no doubt eventually transpire that they'd really kicked the bucket early on and the rest of the story was some sort of dying hallucination or disturbing glimpse into the afterlife (yes, I'm referring to you, *Jacob's Ladder*).

From a genre perspective then, there's nothing particularly original about *Ashes to Ashes*, the cop-show meets Sci-Fi/afterlife fantasy mash-up which has just completed its second season on BBC1, save perhaps the fact that the main character knows from the *outset* that what she's experiencing isn't real. The modern-day protagonist, police psychologist Alex Drake (Keeley Hawes), is shot in the head about ten minutes into the first episode and wakes up in 1981. The fish-out-of-water premise of course replicates that of the show's immensely successful predecessor, *Life on Mars*, in which Detective Inspector Sam Tyler, a by-the-book 2004 lawman, was hit by a car and woke up in the drab and decidedly non- PC 1970s Manchester of his childhood. The main difference between the shows – apart from the fact that *Ashes to Ashes* has a female lead, a London setting, and takes place in the early 80s – is that whilst Sam Tyler was never quite sure whether he was dead, in a coma, a time traveller, or insane (at least until the final episode, which seemed to confirm the coma theory), Drake, who knows all about Tyler's case, is convinced from the outset that everything she experiences in 1981 has been conjured up by her badly-injured brain.

Though it received a mixed reception upon its debut, and was often unfavourably compared to critical darling *Life on Mars*, to my mind at least, *Ashes to Ashes* is actually an even more enjoyable viewing experience. This may partly be down to the fact that whereas Sam Tyler's 1973 was before my time, I do (just about) remember the early 1980s milieu in which Ashes to Ashes takes place, and the decade-appropriate trappings (including soundtrack, fashions and pop culture references) strike a nostalgic chord. Whilst self-consciously 'gritty' '70s cop shows such as *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals* were knowingly evoked by *Life on Mars*, the altogether more garish *Ashes to Ashes* owes much instead to the gloriously shallow *Dempsey and Makepeace*, in which unfeasibly large guns were brandished on a regular basis, stacks of cardboard boxes were driven though by fast cars, and for some reason, the same waterfront warehouse featured every second week or so. In other words, this is a show about how we chose to remember the 1980s (and how that remembrance has been filtered through the era's pop culture), rather than a show about the *actual* 1980s.

It's a conceit highlighted by the contrast between the *mise-en-scene* of the rather drab "present" and that of the (supposedly) fictional past highlighted in the first episode. The way in which modern-day London is presented to us in the opening moments of the first episode suggests that something is oddly colourless and out of kilter here from the start: eerie music plays on the soundtrack, the sky is grey, and as the skyscrapers of the financial district flash by, they're viewed not head on but from a disconcertingly askew angle. One of them even has a figure standing on the roof as if getting ready to jump off, in a clear

reference to Tyler's fate at the end of *LOM*. When Alex awakens in 1981 however (whilst dressed, for some reason, as a high-class prostitute on a Thames party boat full of coked-up yuppies) everything suddenly becomes brighter, louder, and more gleefully outlandish in a manner that highlights the show's (and its protagonist's) metatextual awareness of its own fictionality.

As in *LOM*, Alex receives messages and updates from the "real" world through her television set. The use of a television as a conduit to another world evokes 1980s films such as *Poltergeist* and *Videodrome*: like the protagonists of these films, Drake spends a lot of her down time peering at the screen in the hopes of receiving a communiqué from the other side. The fact that many of these messages are delivered via children's television shows such as *Jackanory*, *Roland Rat*, *Rainbow* and *Grange Hill* also reminds us, that like Tyler, Drake has returned to a time, when, in real life, she was a child. Much of the first season of *Ashes to Ashes* therefore involves Alex's adult self discovering that many of the things she'd taken for granted as a youngster weren't quite as clear cut was they had first appeared – a literal revisiting of the past through adult eyes. In her frantic efforts to prevent the deaths via car-bomb of her rather annoying parents, Alex comes to realise the hard way that family life was not quite as idyllic as it seemed at the time. The climactic first-season revelation that the creepy pierrot Bowie-esque clown figure (of course, both *Ashes to Ashes* and *Life on Mars* take their names from the titles of David Bowie songs) which had appeared to her throughout that series was in fact her father, and that he was the one responsible for the bomb in the first place is an effective one, reinforcing the universal truth that events which may have seemed straightforward to us as children often become a great deal more complex when we revisit them as adults.

Similarly, the second season of the show is also concerned with revealing dark truths, in this case the fact that the Metropolitan Police is a hive of corruption and institutional abuse (yes I know: shocking news indeed). There are episodes dealing with murder, sexual abuse, black mail and nefarious Freemasons, who, whilst not quite engaging in *From Hell* style prostitute murders, nevertheless have a lot to answer for. What is also interesting is the fact that Alex's condition in the real world – hovering on the boundary between life and death – is interwoven rather neatly with the conspiracy plot which drives most the season's better episodes. The writers of this season have shown a greater willingness to explore the possibilities of her predicament by introducing into Alex's world Martin Summers (Adrian Dunbar), who is himself from the future as well – an intriguing development which calls into question the exact nature of this reality in a way largely glossed over by *LOM*.

The crime-of-the-week plots are usually fairly standard – Alex and her colleagues must deal with an evil loan shark, a ring of car thieves, a bent cop – but it's the way in which these plots intersect with Alex's own predicament which makes them truly interesting, and it's the increasingly well-observed character development and witty dialogue which make them enjoyable. Initially criticised for being a rather shrill and smug character by some, Drake is actually quite likable this season, and even if the whole "modern career woman versus sexist male colleague" dynamic which exists between her and her old-school superior Gene Hunt (Philip Glenister) is hardly an original one, is does lead to some of the series' funniest exchanges. Though she can be an irritating know-it-all, the fact that, unlike Sam Tyler, Drake has a very good reason to want to get back to the present, means that her character has an even stronger melancholic streak than he did. Drake also has a penchant for alcohol consumption which is actually quite notable: in practically every scene in which she's not engaged in detective work, she's downing a glass of wine whilst gazing rather mournfully into the middle distance. Maybe the show will actually turn out to be some sort of bizarre meditation upon the perils of binge drinking for the modern career woman?

Unlike *Life on Mars*, which ended after two seasons, *Ashes to Ashes* will return for at least one more run, which is why the second season ends on an outlandish cliff-hanger which wouldn't have been out of place in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Having been (accidentally) shot by Hunt, Drake wakes up – or rather, *appears* to wake up – in her own time: it seems as though death in 1982 means a return to the real world. But then, with the final few seconds of the episode, in which Hunt appears to her on the TV screen in her hospital room, it becomes clear that all is not as it seems: Drake may in fact now be in a coma within a coma (!), and her "return" is possibly a secondary reality created by her now-unconscious 1982 self. Yes, it all sounds rather silly, and perhaps it is, but *Ashes to Ashes* is still an entertainingly tongue-in-cheek confection which isn't afraid to include darker elements as well. What I'd like to see next though is an Irish take on the premise, in which a child of the Celtic-Tiger era Republic gets run over by the Luas, and returns to the dark old days of the 1980s. There, they could receive eerie messages through a two-channel TV set from the scariest hand-puppet of all time, Bosco, and experience at first hand what mass unemployment, emigration, high taxes and a deeply unpopular government are really like. Nothing like a glimpse into the distant past to really make you appreciate the present, is there?

KELLY GRANT

Reaper
(e4, 2008 to date)

In the short autobiographical piece "The Custom House" which is generally prefixed to his romance *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne describes how, due to the vicissitudes of political life, he found himself suddenly deprived of a job. His sudden ejection from the Custom House was, in his terms, effectively a form of decapitation, one in which the press took a great interest, leaving him, as he puts it, "careering through the public prints, in my decapitated state, like Irving's Headless Horseman; ghastly and grim, and longing to be buried, as a political dead man ought."

For those of us living on this side of the Atlantic, *Reaper*, the creation of Tara Butters and Michele Fazekas, belongs even more firmly than Hawthorne's professional self in the ranks of the undead. Having been cancelled by the CW Television Network, its second season, which ground to a somewhat unceremonious halt in May 2009, runs to a truncated 13 episodes (the first season consisted of 18 hour-long episodes) and, despite talks with ABD and the SciFi channel, it seems unlikely that it will return for a third. As far as viewers in the Ireland and the UK are concerned, however, Season 2 is still in full swing (having already shown roughly half of the episodes, e4 promises on its website that the show will return in July). If *Reaper* were a person, he (it's undeniably, even gleefully masculine, which is somewhat confusing, considering the gender of its creators) would be feeling decidedly strange right now. While being more or less dead in one country, he is somehow still alive in the other, with the knowledge of his impending death hanging over him like the tactless words of an unpleasantly accurate clairvoyant. Fans have howled their misery into cyberspace at this unnerving state of affairs, unable to suppress the pain of watching something that they are all too aware will end abruptly in a matter of weeks.

It is for precisely this reason, however, that this reviewer feels it necessary to assess the success of the show *before* its run ends over here in Ireland and the UK, while it is still wandering around with its head cut off and before it transforms irrevocably into a corpse, safely buried in the musty mausoleum of the DVD box set. Doing so is made even more imperative by the fact that, while it may be debatable whether *Reaper* is entirely successful in terms of what it sets out to do, it certainly contains promising elements and ideas. Were these identified and extrapolated upon by other darkly comic, supernaturally-themed shows, *Reaper* could very well, if indirectly, function as a revitalising force within a genre which is being increasingly pushed aside in favour of the hard-headed rationalism and debunking efforts of programmes such as *Eleventh Hour* and *The Mentalist*.

But what, you may very well ask, is *Reaper* exactly? What, as far as it is concerned, is it trying to do or be? And these are indeed very pertinent questions, especially considering that the show in many ways seeks to be all things to all people (but more on this later). A possible answer comes from the e4 website, which announces proudly, "It's completely unlike CSI. **Stupid** stuff happens. Does ER have **satanic snowglobes**? Thought not. [...] There's **explosions** and stuff. Does The OC have **cursed cardigans**? Exactly," (emphasis in original). As this brief resumé strives to imply, *Reape*r most definitely does not take itself particularly seriously, a refusal which goes hand-in-hand with its efforts to appeal to a very specialised audience (male, late teens to mid-twenties, possibly quite well-versed in science fiction, fantasy and horror tropes and iconography). In essence, the plot (which bears many similarities to *Chuck*, another current comedy/ adventure/ male-oriented show) revolves around the character of Sam (Bret Harrison), who discovers on his 21st birthday that, before he was even conceived, his parents had promised their first-born child to the Devil, in exchange for which the latter cured Sam's future father of a

debilitating disease. Now that he has come of age, the Devil (played with pitch-perfect and unremitting smarminess by a perma-tanned Ray Wise) has returned to claim his dues, by recruiting Sam to capture the souls of sinners who have escaped from Hell. Cue a range of tongue-in-cheek, colourfully early-*Batman* style villains, and an equally multifarious range of weapons (termed "vessels" in the show's mythology) designed especially to ensnare each unique soul.

So far, so Faustian (with the added twist that Sam himself never willingly chose to sell his soul). *Reaper*, however, is far too embedded in late-'90's/ early noughties' pop culture to condemn its hero to life as a troubled loner. Despite his difficulties in keeping the details of what he does (while not struggling to hold down his dead-end job at a hardware store called The Work Bench) from Andi, the object of his frustrated affections, Sam is far from cut off from the world, supported as he is by two close male friends: Sock, a jovial, quasi-alcoholic waster, and the rather more resourceful Ben, who nonetheless seems terminally prone to being captured, injured, or both. What with friends like these, a workplace providing a ready supply of tools, plywood and electrical equipment, and unfeasibly tight work schedules handed out by Beelzebub himself, it is unsurprising that *A-Team*-esque shenanigans frequently ensure, as the less-than-heroic trio set out to vanquish the evil dead and send them screaming back to hell – without letting the world at large know what they're up to. To a certain extent, his thraldom to the Devil forces him to be far more adult and responsible than his day to day employment, to which he is less than committed, but which he chose as preferable to college which apparently made him "sleepy". At the same time, however, it also often causes him to behave in what, to those unaware of his predicament, make him seem even more of a no-good layabout than ever, missing work, failing to keep appointments (mostly with the increasingly exasperated Andi), stealing company goods to aid in catching souls. In the other direction, the demands of the "real world" mean that he often finds himself unsuccessfully asking the Devil for urgent time off at the last minute, when the safety of the world is threatened by crazed magicians or jealous undead women.

While all of this is lots of fun, in a slightly mindless, fan-boy kind of way, it often sits rather uncomfortably with the "mythology" story arcs dealing with Hell, Satan and his army of demon minions. In the later episodes of Season 1, Sam, Sock and Ben move into a new apartment, right next door to Steve and Tony, an apparently gay couple who insist on cooking fabulous meals for the main characters until it is revealed that they are in fact demons in disguise – a conflation of two different kinds of otherness which is either extremely politically incorrect or some sort of radical statement, an ambiguity which could perhaps have provided some interesting plot developments. As rapidly becomes clear, Steve and Tony are merely the tip of the iceberg. In fact, the episode "Rebellion" reveals that a whole host of demons have banded together, in a rather endearing reversal of the *Paradise Lost* scenario, to rebel against the Devil, and are planning on using Sam to lure the Arch-Fiend (who, it is hinted more and more strongly as the series progresses, may possibly be Sam's real father) into a trap. The trouble is that the demons are by no means unsympathetic, in spite of their curving horns and leathery wings – their plot is the logical conclusion of the discussions conducted in a kind of self-help group for aggrieved fiends that they have established. What is more, Sam isn't entirely convinced that he shouldn't be helping them, and his confused loyalties, and the way in which (in an ending which I won't give away) the Devil repays his indecision, make this a particularly interesting episode, which asks some fairly searching questions about those with whom we choose to side.

The rather interesting ideas about good and evil, power and subservience that this throws up are not, however, supported by any real narrative follow-through, and become tangled up with the chummy, buddy-show humour, the increasingly confused love lives of the main characters (who should have been exposed to enough *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed* to know that dating a demon never ends well),

and the goofy action sequences that are at times somewhat reminiscent of one of the sillier moments of Brian de Palma's *Carrie* – when the male characters try on increasingly ridiculous tuxedos in preparation for the prom. In other words, Reaper hasn't quite worked out what it is, except that it's got supernatural stuff, lots of running around, and protagonists who are designed to appeal to a male adolescent audience mainly because they aren't particularly cool, handsome, clever or successful.

There is also the minor issue of why on earth the rather lovely, intelligent and capable Andi (Missy Peregrym) is bothered with a loser like Sam, particularly when his after-hours commitments frequently mean that he misses their dates and cannot provide a plausible explanation, acts strangely at the best of times and is absent from their mutual place of employment far more than a responsible, potential future husband ought to. At the same time, the fact that she works hard and tends to be relatively sensible has led the e4 website to declare, "You can throw stuff at Sam's love interest. She's annoying." Admittedly, this is only going along with the show's boy-centric status and its place in a genre generally lacking in strong/ sympathetic/ well-rounded/ not bimbo-ish female characters. Nonetheless, the programme's portrayal of Andi wavers on the brink of being rather more enlightened than one might expect, or than e4's comment would imply. Once she does find out about Sam's deal with the Devil (following which her ex-boyfriend shows up, having sold his soul to Sam's otherworldly boss, which has led to him somehow channelling Leatherface from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, very amusingly but rather randomly), she becomes a far more efficient soul-catcher than any of her male companions, and displays an impressively level head in a crisis.

Again, however, this is an element of the show that is first evoked and then apparently dropped. Her participation in the retrieval of souls wanes considerably in Season 2, perhaps in recognition of the fact that, as e4's flippant comment insinuates, her presence as part of the gang undermines the cheery, gung-ho masculinity of the thing – a problem familiar from, say, *Supernatural*, which has been reviewed in issue 3 of this journal. Andi's status, then, is that of an admirably independent female role model in a show where such role models are just as out of place as the more profound philosophical questions brought up by the part played by Hell and the rebellious demons.

Be all of this as it may, it is quite difficult not to like *Reaper*. Much like *The Big Bang Theory*, which is pretty much contemporaneous with it, it presents a world where mostly useless yet ultimately endearing specimens of masculinity are juxtaposed with the concerns of non-realist genre texts (in *The Big Bang Theory*, the physicist-protagonists are ardent fans of science-fiction comics), and are teamed up quite uncomfortably with pretty, long-suffering, quick-witted girls who, like Scully in *The X-Files*, don't quite get the whole thing. If ABC does indeed decide to re-attach *Reaper*'s head and renew it for a third season, perhaps some of these difficulties will be ironed out. As it is, even as it gallops inexorably towards the doom which has already befallen it in America, it provides its viewers (and this reviewer is not the least enthusiastic among them) with a glimpse of a possible future for horror-related TV shows, one where the genre finally succeeds in escaping from the pall of quasi-religious morality which has been thrown over it by such offerings as *Ghost Whisperer* and *Supernatural*. As previously mentioned, shows such as *The Mentalist* and *Eleventh Hour* set out explicitly to counter the supernatural by relentlessly demonstrating the dangers to criminal investigations of the kinds of assumptions about conspiracies, aliens and psychic abilities that Fox Mulder made regularly. This is all very well, but, as *Reaper* demonstrates (however fleetingly), such simple dichotomies break down far too easily. As Sam struggles to understand the line between good and evil, finding himself having to send souls to Hell who only ever committed a single bad deed in their lives, around him, the show as whole shows that Miltonic, even Biblical motifs and concerns can find a place within programmes that are unconcerned with the question of whether ghosts/ aliens/ telekinesis/ God actually exist (God does seem to hover in the background, but,

to paraphrase Woody Allen, he doesn't seem to have done much lately). Instead, it simply, and quite enjoyably, works from the assumption that the supernatural happens, but knowing that certainly isn't going to solve any of the protagonists' personal problems or troubling ontological uncertainties – indeed, quite the opposite.

I suspect, however, that, apart from its other flaws, the juxtaposition in *Reaper* of leathery-winged demons and gore (it doesn't show up often, but it's great when it's there, particularly in the form of a semi-exsanguinated cow in the Season 2 episode, "The Sweet Science") with slapstick humour may be a mash-up too far for the ratings-hungry networks to feel comfortable with. I can hear the grave-yard creak of the DVD box already ...

PAT WOLFE