

TelevisionDebuts1959TextTVS

By Tim Van Schmidt

Television Debuts

1959 featured a landmark television premiere- Bonanza. This show, broadcast in color, above all others, would bring families together on Sunday nights all over the country. The show featured the adventure of the Cartwright men- a father and his three very different sons. It was rough-hewn western adventure with bad guys, perilous situations, a little romance and plenty of family values.

Another landmark premiere in 1959 was "Twilight Zone," the mind twisting mystery show that dabbled in the weird and unexplained, all narrated by the calm, matter-of-fact master of ceremonies Rod Serling. Serling was also a writer- with the eye and mastery of the language of a poet.

The first episode of "Twilight Zone" features a familiar face from "Forbidden Planet," Earl Holliman. He plays an amnesiac airman wandering around in a strangely deserted town. The twist here becomes more mundane and more insidious at the same time. What a great item on your resume as an actor- the first episode of "Twilight Zone"!

What I discovered is that "Twilight Zone," in its first season at least, is just great television, even fifty some years later. The episodes are only 24 minutes long, but within each, Serling and company churn out detailed and developed little stage plays. Often that's how the writing is credited here: "teleplay." Added to this is a high quality, edgy soundtrack.

But more, Serling's "teleplays" featured not just one or two, but a whole army of the day's great actors. That includes characters like Ed Wynn, Jack Warden, Gig Young, Burgess Meredith, Rod Taylor and more.

The stories are often apocalyptic. There is a sense of karma here- and the justice is often dark, as dark as the devil in some cases. But further, it is a constant reference to the unknown that keeps working here. By reaching out to create stories on the edge of sanity and logic, a certain vitality surges from the project. In "The Twilight Zone" that vitality not only questions what people generally believe for shock value, but it also has a moral purpose, punishing greedy and mean people as the universe sees fit.

I watched the first few episodes of "Twilight Zone" out of curiosity- as artifacts. I continued to watch the entire run of 1959 episodes because I found new qualities in each one that kept me going. There isn't much about what I saw that needs to be updated- the original "Twilight Zone" episodes are crisp pieces of work, full of wonder and meaning. They are just excellent television- setting a high standard.

Other 1959, first season "Twilight Zone" episodes:

Episode 2: Ed Wynn, Murray Hamilton. (A salesman works his magic on Mr. Death.)

Episode 3: Dan Duryea, Martin Landau (as a really nasty cowboy!), Jeanne Cooper. (An odd stranger comes to the aid of a town drunk in the Old West, as well as to the aid of a young gunslinger.)

Episode 4: Ida Lupino, Martin Balsam. (A faded film star wishes herself into her own glorious past.)

Episode 5: Gig Young, Frank Overton, Ron Howard. (A stressed out urbanite returns to his hometown- and to an important summer of his youth.)

Episode 6: David Wayne, Thomas Gomez. (A hypochondriac makes a deal for immortality without considering all the angles.)

Episode 7: Jack Warden, John Dehner, Jean Marsh. (A convict on an asteroid establishes a relationship with a female robot.)

Episode 8: Burgess Meredith, Vaughn Taylor. (A bookworm survives the apocalypse but fate deals him a blow.)

Episode 9: Richard Conte, John Larch, Suzanne Lloyd. (A man is frightened he'll be killed by an exotic woman in his dreams. This episode is particularly intense, even for "Twilight Zone.")

Episode 10: Nehemiah Persoff, Patrick Macnee. (A confused man become agitated about the fate of the ship he finds himself on during World War II.)

Episode 11: Rod Taylor, Jim Hutton. (The members of the surviving crew of a spacecraft crash seem to be inexplicably disappearing.)

Episode 12: Steve Cochran, Ernest Truex, Read Morgan, Arlene Martel. (An old peddler catches the eye of a thug looking for an easy angle.)

Also premiering in 1959: Dennis the Menace, featuring Jay North as Dennis Mitchell, Herbert Anderson as Henry, Gloria Henry as Alice, Joseph Kearns as George Wilson and Gil Smith as Joey. The first episode tells you what is to come- the ever-active adventures of a youngster too full of energy to keep tabs on. He might be a kid they would give drugs to today, but back in 1959, he was simply precocious.

Dennis is clever and creative with every situation that comes his way- from trying to fix the kitchen table to helping the neighbor paint his house. But he is also easily distracted. Plus, Dennis's ambitions are bigger than his skills and nearly everything he comes into contact with gets upset. North plays Dennis just like the little Dennis icon in the opening credits- a tornado in a fireman's outfit.

I liked Dennis's parents- especially his Dad's warm, wide smile. But the character who gets my sympathy is "good old Mr. Wilson," played with plenty of vinegar by Kearns. He is bedeviled by this little monster, yet likes him just the same.

Above all, though, my favorite character of the bunch in the first episode is the little friend named Joey. He doesn't say a word- just smiles and does what he is told by devilish Dennis- and is very refreshing for it. Joey becomes a stand-in for Dennis at home with a babysitter while Dennis sneaks into the movie theater to see the Western his folks have gone to, disrupting things in the theater, of course.

Other new shows: Rawhide, The Rebel and The Untouchables.