

‘SUBMITTED FOR YOUR APPROVAL...’

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Rod Serling was interested in writing meaningful drama that probed human nature and the ills of modern society. The problem with that: He chose to work in television — which, in the 1950s, worked hard to shy away from controversy in favor of not offending viewers or sponsors.

Serling chose to turn his back on TV drama and instead delve into the realm of science fiction and fantasy. This allowed him to weave the tales he wanted to tell, but in a way that allowed him to be subversive on national television.

His brainstorm, the anthology series “The Twilight Zone,” debuted on CBS-TV on Oct. 2, 1959.

CREATING ‘THE DIMENSION OF IMAGINATION’

“How do you put on a meaningful drama or documentary that is adult, incisive, probing,” TV writer and creator Rod Serling once asked, “when every fifteen minutes, the proceedings are interrupted by twelve dancing rabbits with toilet paper?”

Serling was an Army paratrooper in the Pacific during World War II and the recipient of a Purple Heart. He also boxed in Army events, competing as a flyweight. He fought in 17 bouts and quit when he broke his nose.

He attended college on the G.I. Bill and began writing scripts. He circulated 40 before he made his first sale. By the time he graduated Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, in 1950, Serling had sold scripts to radio and television.

He went to work for a Cincinnati TV station but, before long, set out to make a living as a freelance writer. In 1955, “Patterns” — Serling’s teleplay about overambition in big business that aired on the “Kraft Theater” anthology show, won him his first Emmy Award.

A year later, another anthology series, “Playhouse 90,” broadcast “Requiem for a Heavyweight,” Serling’s play about a boxer reluctantly facing the end of his career. The teleplay earned Serling his second Emmy and a Peabody Award. Six years later, “Requiem for a Heavyweight” was adapted into a feature film starring Anthony Quinn, Jackie Gleason, Mickey Rooney and Julie Harris.

In 1957, “Playhouse 90” aired yet another Serling story, “The Comedian,” which earned Serling his third Emmy Award in three years.

Yet, Serling was frustrated by the limitations of commercial television. Once, producers cut the words “American” and “lucky” out of his script because their sponsor, a cigarette company, feared those words would make viewers think of their competition. Another time, he was told he couldn’t mention Hitler’s gas ovens because one of the sponsors was a gas company.

In 1957, Serling wrote “The Time Element,” in which a man in 1941 dreams Pearl Harbor will be attacked on Dec. 7 and unsuccessfully attempts to alert the Army. Not so fast, said CBS: Its sponsor, Westinghouse, held a lot of defense contracts. The network insisted the man try to alert a newspaper instead.

Serling wasn’t happy with the request, but complied. The show pulled more fan mail than another show that season, so CBS requested Serling make a second pilot episode.

He responded with “Where is Everybody?,” in which a man wakes up in a town where coffee is percolating and car engines are idling but all the people are gone. The story ended with one of Serling’s surprise twists.

The network was sold. But not everyone was convinced. Shortly before “The Twilight Zone” premiered, CBS’ Mike Wallace asked Serling on the air: “You’ve given up writing anything important for television, right?”

“The Twilight Zone” would last five seasons on CBS, winning four Emmy Awards. Serling would go on to adapt a screenplay for “The Planet of the Apes” and to host another anthology series — containing elements of horror — called “Night Gallery,” in 1970. It would last for three seasons.

‘YOUR NEXT STOP: THE TWILIGHT ZONE’

Of the show’s 156 episodes, Serling wrote 92 himself and 35 more with his two favorite co-writers. Serling would dictate into a tape recorder. A secretary would type up his dictation and he’d go back and tighten up the story. He was known to keep a tape recorder by his bed so he could get up in the middle of the night and work on a story idea.





In one memorable episode, “To Serve Man,” an enormous alien — played by Richard Kiel, who’d go on to fame in James Bond movies — arrives on Earth, offering aid to end energy and food shortages and warfare. Life indeed improves worldwide ... but only later does someone successfully translate an alien book and discover their true motive.

Serling originally wanted Orson Welles to provide narration for the show’s opening credits and over its first scenes and ending. He eventually hired Westbrook Van Voorhis, but producers felt Van Voorhis sounded too pompous. Serling himself took over narration duties and did them throughout the life of the series, eventually appearing on-camera as well.





“Time Enough at Last” starred Burgess Meredith as an antisocial bookworm who survives a nuclear holocaust and soon realizes he’ll finally be able to read all the books he’s ever wanted to read, without interruption from other people or his job. His delight is short-lived, thanks to yet another trademark Serling twist ending.

Episodes for the show’s first three seasons and fifth season were 30 minutes long. In late 1962, however, CBS held off on renewing the show until midseason. When Season four was finally green-lighted, it was as a midseason replacement for an hour-long series. The 18 episodes for that one season — in 1963 — were an hour long.





A number of actors who would later become big movie or TV stars appeared on “The Twilight Zone” early in their careers: Robert Redford, Burt Reynolds, Carol Burnett, Robert Duvall and Leonard Nimoy, for example. A young William Shatner appeared on two episodes, including one in which his character sees a creature on the wing of an airplane.

One episode of the final season of “The Twilight Zone” was a French-made short film: “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” in which a civilian sentenced to hang by Union troops during the American Civil War manages to escape and make it back home to his wife. It had won an Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film in 1963.





After “The Twilight Zone” was canceled in 1964, Serling went on to create and host “Night Gallery” for three seasons starting in 1970. “The Twilight Zone” was brought back as a movie in 1983, a revival series in 1985-89, a TV movie in 1994, another series in 2002-03 and a third series in 2019-20. In addition, the BBC aired a radio version from 2002 to 2012.

Sources: “Fantastic Television: A Pictorial History of Sci-Fi, the Unusual and the Fantastic” by Gary Gerani and Paul H. Schulman, “The 100 Greatest TV Shows of All Time” by the editors of Entertainment Weekly, Internet Movie Database, Mental Floss, ScreenRant, MeTV.com, ListVerse.com, Facts.net

PHOTO OF THE 1983 TWILIGHT ZONE MOVIE FROM WARNER BROS. ALL OTHERS FROM CAYUGA PRODUCTIONS INC. AND CBS PRODUCTIONS.