

EERIE, INDIANA

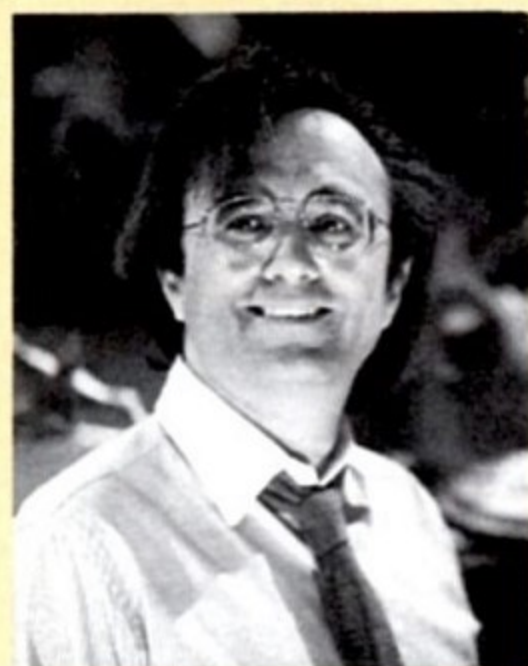
Director Joe Dante found a home in series television.

By Mark Dawidziak

Throughout the '80s, film director Joe Dante kept one foot in television by turning out episodes of such series as Steven Spielberg's *AMAZING STORIES*, *POLICE SQUAD* and the revival of *THE TWILIGHT ZONE*. Finally jumping into the medium with both feet, Dante has landed in a bizarre stretch of prime-time known as *EERIE, INDIANA*. In addition to serving as creative consultant for the 7:30 p.m. Sunday series that NBC premiered in September, Dante was to direct four of its first seven episodes.

A wacky mixture of humor and horror, sitcom and social satire, the show stars Omri Katz (J.R. Jr. on *DALLAS*) as 13-year-old Marshall Teller. The boy's completely average, middle-American family has moved from New Jersey to the seemingly completely average, middle-American town of Eerie, Indiana. Only Marshall realizes that, behind the picture of suburban perfection, Eerie is the vortex for all that is weird in the universe. With his 10-year-old sidekick, Simon Holmes (Justin Shenkarow), Marshall collects evidence of the supernatural and stores it in a basement cabinet.

The series is a tremendous kick for Dante, who grew up watching classic fantasy TV shows. "OUTER LIMITS, THRILLER, THE TWILIGHT ZONE—I saw them all, and I've worked on some of the new ones: *AMAZING STORIES* and the new *TWILIGHT ZONE*," said the director of such films as *PIRANHA* (1978), *THE HOWLING* (1981), *GREMLINS* (1984), *INNERSPACE* (1987), *THE 'BURBS* (1989), and *GREMLINS II: THE NEW BATCH* (1990). "What I like about this show is that it combines the virtues of an anthology show with the fact



Dante, at home in Eerie, Indiana

that it has continuing characters, in a way that I think is more integrated than, say the *FRIDAY THE 13TH* show, or *FREDDY'S NIGHTMARES*, or any other that had peripheral continuing characters. Our continuing characters are really the lead characters in the show, but as the stories progress, there are things that happen to other people that our characters get involved in.

"Oddly enough, that was the original concept for *TWILIGHT ZONE*—*THE MOVIE* [for which Dante directed the standout "It's a Good Life" segment]. Before the accident, the idea was that all the characters in the different stories would all appear in each other's stories. It was all going to be a kind of mosaic."

EERIE, INDIANA has been described by NBC as "Tom Sawyer lost in *THE TWILIGHT ZONE*." It could just as easily be called "THE *ADDAMS FAMILY* in reverse;" instead of a creepy family in a normal neighborhood, it's a normal family in a creepy neighborhood. "All of those shows came up in our discussions," said Dante. "Television is such a vampiric medium that it's almost impossible to do anything brand new. In this show, familiar elements are re juxtaposed in ways that comment on themselves and make a different whole."

Another series that came up during discussion with co-creators Karl Schaefer and Jose Rivers was *KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER*, which starred Darren McGavin as a Chicago reporter who each week had a close encounter with the supernatural. "This is our pint-sized Darren McGavin," Dante said as he pointed to Katz. "He should live so long and have such a big career."

Look and listen for all sorts of in-jokes buzzing around *EERIE, INDIANA*. The



Kiddie Kolchak Omri Katz (center) with (l to r) sis Julie Condra, friend Justin Shenkarow, mom Mary Margaret Humes and dad Francis Guinan, on NBC.

boy's family may be oblivious to the weird things happening around them, but Marshall knows that Elvis is living on his paper route and that Eerie is a regular stopping place for UFOs.

"The movies that I've been doing tend to be very long and complicated," said Dante of his reasons for working in television. "There's just no gratification. It's always way ahead of you. With TV, because of the speed of the medium, you can actually do things that are going to air sometime within the same time frame that you actually thought of them. And I've never found anything that I thought was as well suited to my whatever-it-is that I have as this show. I've done a lot of pictures with kids and I've done a lot of pictures that are a little odd. And they're mostly comedic. And this show seems to combine all of that, plus it has sort of an underlying sweetness that I thought was really appealing.

"I wish I could say I've been waiting all my life to do *EERIE, INDIANA*, but that's not the case. But of the things that I've seen in the past ten years that have been offered to me on television, this is the first one that I really felt a personal connection to."

The scariest thing about *EERIE, INDIANA* is its time slot. The half-hour comedy-fantasy runs opposite *60 MINUTES*, a top-ten series for CBS. And the show's lead-in on NBC's Sunday lineup, *THE ADVENTURES OF MARK AND BRIAN*, has been blasted by critics as one of the sorriest rookies in the fall crop.

Dante, no newcomer to horror, has an answer: "We're not easily scared." □

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