

There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. For the next hour, sit quietly and we will control all you see and hear in. . .

# THE OUTER LIMITS



An Appreciation by Jon Abbott

**T**he Sixties produced a few exceptional television SF series, yet widespread acclaim always seems to settle on Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*. Jon Abbott looks at the latter, the brainchild of co-producers Leslie Stevens and Joseph Stefano.

One thing that most SF television series have in common is that they're loved by some and hated by others. Every major SF series has had its admirers and detractors, with *Star Trek*, *Lost In Space*, *Space: 1999* and *Battlestar Galactica* all having come under critical fire at one time or another. . . yet in all the articles, magazines and reference books on SF, in all the casual throwaway references made in newspapers or other non-SF publications, it seems that no one has ever had a bad word for the general quality and sophistication of *The Outer Limits*. This is a reputation that no other SF show, save perhaps its companion anthology series of the period, *The Twilight Zone* has ever enjoyed or, for that matter, deserved. *The Outer Limits* was, and still is, unique.

Whilst neither series is entirely without faults, a weak episode of either is still light years ahead of anything ever presented on such relatively recent fare as *Space: 1999* or *Battlestar Galactica*. Ironically, the latter series has one interesting link with *The Outer Limits* – Leslie Stevens. He was a creative force on both series, which suggests, given Steven's



later association with such diverse fare as *The Time Tunnel*, *Search* (a.k.a. *Search Control*) and *The Invisible Man*, as well as mainstream productions like *It Takes A Thief*, *McCloud*, and *The Name Of The Game*, that the guiding light behind the distinctive look of *The Outer Limits* was his partner in the series, Joseph Stefano.

## SETTING THE STANDARD

The pilot film, "The Galaxy Being", inevitably embraced most of the SF themes that were to become hallmarks of *The Outer Limits*, and was the model on which the series' writers were instructed to base their own contributions. "The Galaxy Being" starred Cliff Robertson, only recently out of his *Rod Brown Of The Rocket Rangers* spacesuit, who played a scientist who makes radio, and eventually visual, contact with an alien being. He becomes obsessed by his discovery and, when his experiments attract the attention of his neighbours and the authorities, the alien, who has already been transmitted via the radio waves to Earth, commits suicide rather than let himself fall into human hands. In the true spirit of extra-terrestrial visitors, the alien bears mankind no grudge, but looks forward to the day when he and his kind will be greeted by something other than weapons and hostility.

Stevens is justifiably credited with creating the style of *The Outer Limits*, and making the series possible. Although his later contributions to U.S. TV (including "The Black Answer", a pioneering anti-racism episode of *The Name Of The Game* that paved the way for such exemplary civil rights dramas as *The Bold Ones* and *Hill Street Blues*) earn him a place in the industry's Hall of Fame, his input in *The Outer Limits*, following the scripting, direction and production of "The Galaxy Being", was minimal. He worked on only three of the weaker episodes in the first season, with most of the load being carried on the able and willing shoulders of Stefano.

## STAMP OF STYLE

The careers of Stevens and Stefano leading up to their creation of *The Outer Limits* reads like a fantasy of a different, but no less extraordinary kind. At the age of 15, Stevens found a summer job touring with Orson Welles as a "gopher" (a sort of glorified tea-boy - "you go-fer this, go-fer that"), and later ran away from home to keep the job. Stevens received a valuable and unique apprenticeship that would have been the envy of many. Stefano, on the other hand, was an established writer of screenplays, but it was his script for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* that made his name and reputation. Thus, with a combined educational background that boasted the experience of working for the two most distinguished film-makers of their time, Stevens and Stefano were well equipped to handle the demands of a series such as *The Outer Limits*, and to



Opposite Page: The Spiders from Mars? No, the deadly *Zanti Misfits*, alien criminals exiled on earth. Above: Trading Places; intellect and emotion, in *Keeper Of The Purple Twilight*.

*If you believe in something, if you are angry or disturbed about something, or exasperated with joy or shaken with worry about something, be it conformity, discrimination, politics, censorship, patriotism, capital punishment, disarmament, man's inaccessibility to man, or fame or famine, moral or physical slavery, or addiction, mass culture, or fanaticism or isolation, or peace, you have the thread. And all the rest is craft and art and intellect.*

Joseph Stefano

muster up the technical enthusiasm and knowledge to make it work.

Stefano was brought in as a co-producer by Stevens shortly before production on the actual series commenced, while Stevens, as president of Daystar, and wearing several other hats as executive producer, writer and director, went on to oversee further pilots for hopeful future series.

*The Outer Limits* set itself very high standards of content and presentation and, more often than not, these were achieved. Stefano ensured the quality and sophistication of his creation by using writers familiar with, or active in, the SF genre, such as Meyer (Mike) ▶



Far Left: An alien captain welcomes an unsuspecting passenger aboard his craft in *Second Chance* (aka *Joy Ride*). Above: "Not Guilty!" Morgan the Robot on trial for murdering his creator in *I Robot*.

# THE OUTER LIMITS

► Dolinsky, David Duncan, Harlan Ellison and Jerry Sohl. Many of them (and the other *Outer Limits* writers) went on to write for other SF television productions, including *Star Trek* and those of Irwin Allen, most notably *Voyage To The Bottom Of The Sea*, which not only inherited *The Outer Limits*' original time-slot but also a number of its writers and directors.

*The Outer Limits* did not look like the conventional U.S. TV product, as many of those connected with Daystar had influences and interests that extended beyond traditional Hollywood styles and approaches. In an interview with American writer Steven Spires in 1980, Leslie Stevens put it down to the optimism of the Kennedy era and the belief fostered by those years that they'd (Daystar) "really be able to make some dent in the mass mediocrity of television".

*The Outer Limits* owed much of its visual style not just to the pilot by Stevens, and Stefano's clarity of vision, but also to the expressionist influences and film noir preferences of cinematographer Conrad Hall and director Gerd Oswald. The latter directed 16 of the 49 episodes, helming at least half of the show's 'masterpieces' and none of the few real duds.

Naturally a title as original for the series as *The Outer Limits* did not come out of thin air, and Stevens and Stefano were constantly toying with the name for their new anthology show right up until airtime, as were the network. The series was known under several names during pre-production, including *Please Stand By* and *Beyond Control*, before it eventually became *The Outer Limits*.



Above: An Ebonian about to submit his earthling captives to some intensive interrogation in *Nightmare*. Bottom Left: An unlikely looking father comes to reclaim his brilliant earth offspring in *Children Of Spider County*. Above Right: "I am the greatest!" A boomerang wielding contestant fights to the death in *Fun And Games*.

## FALL FROM THE HEIGHTS

The episodes in the first season usually moved along at a cracking pace, with the bizarre camera angles, dramatic musical score and straight-faced, yet larger than life, performances creating a constant mood of suspense, hysteria or desperation. The ratings grew steadily, and the ABC network found themselves with an unexpected hit on their hands.

Unfortunately, the verve of the first season didn't carry through to the second, which was produced by Ben Brady after Stefano resigned. Stefano's resignation came as the culmination of a long standing dispute with the network over their continual refusal to allow him to direct, and eventually over an ill considered shift in the show's time slot from Monday night to Saturday night.

Episodes from the second season that might have succeeded as routine examples of SF film, watchable entertainment

to while away a rainy afternoon, were disappointing, and even laughable, simply because the first season showed such tremendous promise. Had Brady's episodes appeared as an entirely different series, they might have been regarded more favourably, but they still could not have matched Stefano's *The Outer Limits*.

Ultimately, the more traditional toned-down approach to science fiction proffered by Brady failed to attract enough viewers away from the more mainstream Saturday night fare, and the show's audience fell away severely. *The Outer Limits* was cancelled in mid-season.

## THE BRITISH VIEW

In Britain the show was originally broadcast by ITV, which inevitably meant that it became lost around the various ITV regions. With the advent of colour televi-



sion, and its novelty and status toward the end of the Sixties, there was no opportunity for a black and white series receiving a rescreening at any hour. Consequently *The Outer Limits*, together with a number of many other classic TV shows, disappeared from circulation.

When the BBC purchased the series after a considerable absence from UK screens, the show was used as a follow-up to the Commission's rapidly diminishing supply of Fifties monster movies and Hammer films for its Saturday late night film slot. All 49 episodes sat on the shelf for well over a year during the limited period the BBC had acquired the rights for them, and could be shown only once before they realised they had something special on their hands. To the BBC's surprise the series turned out to be a phenomenal success. It became a cult show with younger viewers, who naturally hadn't seen the series before,

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*Each play must have a Bear. The Bear is that one splendid, staggering, shuddering effect that induces awe and wonder, or tolerable terror, or even merely conversation or wonderment. There must be no apology or smirk; each drama, no matter how wordless or timeless, must be spoken with all the seriousness and sincerity and suspension of disbelief that a caring and intelligent parent employs in the spinning of a tale to a child at bedtime. Humour and wit are honourable; the tongue in cheek is most often condescending and gratuitous. When the tongue is in cheek it is almost impossible to speak in anything but a garbled foolish fashion.*

Joseph Stefano

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as well as with SF enthusiasts and TV buffs, who had only hazy recollections of the episodes.

The episodes were shown wildly out of sequence, with second season episodes mixed in with the first season's (a problem which has been mostly rectified for the *Twilight Zone* re-runs). For those without an episode guide to hand, the second season episodes could be distinguished by their more melodic and haunting closing theme by Harry Lubin, as opposed to the more threatening, other-worldly theme by Dominic Frontiere for the first.

Although they were aware that they were broadcasting the series out of sequence, the BBC made an effort to start the show with a distinguished episode by beginning their screening of the series with the award-winning "Demon With A Glass Hand", and followed it with "Keeper Of The Purple Twilight" the following week.



Above: It was peace through terror when this bug-eyed beastie was designed by *The Architects Of Fear*. Right: Gary Merrill and Harry Guardino exchange brains when an experiment goes awry in *The Human Factor*.

