

## TELEVISION REVIEWS

### Dracula

BBC Wales/WGBH Boston/Granada International

Transmitted 28/12/06

Residents in the vicinity of Golders Green Crematorium should consider themselves fortunate that Bram Stoker's earthly remains were cremated; otherwise, the sound of the author's body spinning in its grave during the transmission of the BBC's latest adaptation of *Dracula* would surely have constituted a severe breach of the peace. Indeed, to describe this travesty as an "adaptation" at all is to be as guilty of gross distortion as the benighted programme makers themselves - a friend's condemnation of it as "a brutalisation" of the original work is considerably more accurate.

To enumerate here the wilful inaccuracies of narrative and characterisation inflicted on Stoker would require more space than is practicable, even allowing for the freedom provided by an on-line journal. Nonetheless, one cannot fail to mention such choice examples of "reinterpretation" as having Jonathan Harker simply wake up in a carriage outside Castle Dracula - no mysterious driver, no wolves, and the door to the castle helpfully wide open. To say nothing of the gratuitous imposition of a Lord Holmwood suffering from syphilis, a band of black magic loonies called "The Brotherhood of the Undead", Harker being killed in Transylvania, Van Helsing being presented as a gibbering, credulous cretin, and, most preposterously of all, a puerile "surprise ending" in which Dracula survives a stake through the heart and subsequent dissolution.

No doubt, those responsible for this wholesale traducement of Stoker's novel would argue that none of the major adaptations of *Dracula* have been particularly faithful to the original. This may well be true, but whatever their shortcomings in narrative accuracy, no earlier version has ever deviated from the spirit of Stoker's work quite as shamelessly as this one.

So just what did these people imagine they were doing? A visit to the BBC's website vouchsafes us the following: "Returning to the original novel for his inspiration, Stewart Harcourt's script draws both on elements of Bram Stoker's own life and Victorian society to give this version of the vampire classic a new, modern sensibility."

Overlooking the ghastly Blairite tone of that sentence ("New Labour, New *Dracula*"?), one can only conclude that Mr. Harcourt returned to the original solely to decide what he could most usefully discard, and how best to distort what little remained. As for the laughable claim that his script drew on elements of Stoker's life, what do we find? Oh, yes, there is an unsubstantiated (and unproveable) theory that Stoker may have suffered from syphilis. Well, bully for Mr. Harcourt; that certainly justifies inserting it into the narrative of *Dracula*, doesn't it? And Bram Stoker lived in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, where Mr. Harcourt sets the headquarters of the afore-mentioned loonies. And that's it. Such glib - and meaningless -

connections to Stoker's life will have carried as much weight with the general viewer as the suggestion that Mr. Harcourt may have got the job because Bram Stoker once lived in Harcourt Street, Dublin.

But wait, as they say, there's more! Here's Julie Gardner, Head of BBC Wales Drama: "Stewart Harcourt's adaptation is a visceral, sexy and bold re-telling of Bram Stoker's classic chiller which will blow the cobwebs off traditional period drama. And we've brought together a cast of thrilling young talent to bring it to life." What such fat-headed utterances from a TV executive really mean, of course, is "We have taken a much-loved classic - which happily for us is out of copyright - and stomped all over it in our Jimmy Choo shoes, while at the same time implying that anyone who might object to our bold sexiness is both a hidebound traditionalist and, like, so not cool." Yeah, baby, yeah, as Austin Powers would say. Right on.

As for the cast of "thrilling young talent", one can only say that while it may be possible, theoretically at least, that we were watching the heirs to Grant, Winslet, Fiennes, et al., on the evidence of this production, the whole bunch would be given the bum's rush by the casting director of any self-respecting amateur dramatics society. That said, however, the villain of the piece remains Mr. Harcourt, whose characterisations (to use the term in its loosest sense) may certainly be said to have left the cast well and truly up a certain creek of malodorous renown without a paddle in sight.

Jonathan Harker was presented as a disposable dweeb, while Mina got all bug-eyed and breathless whenever the dread subject of SEX! was raised, fingering her crucifix with the neurotic devotion of a true Bride of Christ. Lucy, by trite and predictable contrast, fairly burst out of her bodice in her eagerness to be Fulfilled as a Woman, while otherwise proving bossy and disagreeable. Van Helsing, described by Stoker as possessing "an iron nerve, a temper of the icebrook, an indomitable resolution, self-command and toleration", was portrayed as a babbling wreck in a fright wig by David Suchet, who joins Laurence Olivier and Anthony Hopkins as the latest illustrious actor to play the character - badly.

As for the Count himself, we knew, from the moment we saw Marc Warren sedulously aping Gary Oldman's performance in Francis Ford Coppola's bloated 1992 adaptation, that things were only going to get worse. Played with all the aristocratic bearing of a Canning Town costermonger, this was Count Dracula as compulsive bed-wetter, a creep of the first water, with dirty fingernails to boot. Attempts to make him Byronic and fascinating while mouthing fatuous inanities ("Then you deny the heart's resilience. Its strength is to cope with loss. Without it, grief would kill us all.") were risible and ill-judged - "I am Count Dracula. I feel your pain."

Since its publication in 1897, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has never been out of print, and it has been suggested elsewhere that this is due more to the many screen adaptations (and representations in other media) than to the inherent merit of Stoker's work. Vaguely plausible as this may initially seem, it is worth remembering that *Dracula* survived in print for more than thirty years before its first widely-seen film adaptation in 1931. Indeed, it could be argued that *Dracula* has survived despite its many screen adaptations, none of which, as noted before, have been models of accuracy. The only positive outcome of the BBC's latest attempt to have its cake and eat it - raising co-production money on the strength of

Stoker's creation, then treating it with an utter lack of respect matched only by an epic contempt for its audience - will be to ensure that people continue to keep Stoker's work in print – not least to convince themselves that the original could not possibly be as awful as this version on which their licence fees have been so spectacularly squandered.

John Exshaw

### “All That Glisters...”: Channel 4’s Goldplated and the Secular Gothic

Channel 4 - October 2006

In the process of coming up with a definition of what exactly the Gothic is or does, the critic Richard Davenport-Hines, in his fabulously titled study *Gothic: 400 Years of Excess, Horror, Evil & Ruin*, runs through a list of basic elements essential to any Gothic romance worth its salt. Producing the convenient side-effect of demonstrating exactly how much capacious the Gothic manages to be, encompassing a wide range of disparate elements, even in stories as perfectly concise as those of Edgar Allan Poe, this list includes:

landscapes evoking the primordial battles of good and evil; wild weather and lonely ruins evoking the puniness of human powers, [...] a castle which oppresses, intimidates and frightens [...]; a tyrant who ruins the lives of the young but whose dominion is broken by the uncontrolled excesses of his own passions; the villain more interesting than the hero; [...] death-like trances or uncanny dreams; enclosed, subterranean spaces where live burial is a metaphor for human isolation. (Richard Davenport-Hines, *Gothic*, 141)

What this list of course entirely fails to capture is the sense of creeping dread and inexorable doom without which *Macbeth* would just another history play about the trials and tribulations of a forgotten king, and *Jane Eyre* would be little more than a version of what *Pride & Prejudice* might have been like if Elizabeth Bennett had had to get a job. It is precisely this dread - and the viewer’s inability to pinpoint quite where it emanates from, even after the final devastating catastrophe - that glowers formlessly over Channel 4’s recent take on the *Footballers’ Wives* phenomenon. *Goldplated*, which ran for 8 episodes beginning in late October 2006, tells the story of the White family, who occupy a pivotal position in the nouveau riche world of Cheshire’s late-1990s property development boom. Despite several early reviewers dismissing it as little more than hyperbolic trash, the sort of programme that gets churned out regularly and cheaply by channels looking to boost their ratings, *Goldplated* actually performed badly. Originally occupying a prime time 10pm slot, which was followed each week by a “preview” of the next episode on E4 (a spin-off channel), half way through the series the entire show was quickly moved to E4 altogether, where it languished in late-night obscurity. What this suggests is that Channel 4 seem to have misjudged both the show itself and its audience. The advertising campaign was deliberately tacky, featuring close-ups of lines of cocaine, platinum credit cards and pouty lips thick with scarlet lip-gloss. Having watched the programme avidly, I can only conclude that the postmodern irony with which these ads were laden was somehow lost on many who tuned in expecting that it would actually be *Footballers’ Wives*. Unfortunately, *Goldplated* not only displays subtlety and depth of observation, but also offers a damning critique of any attempts to separate the public and the private and of what ensues when such attempts fail, nuances which potentially sit uneasily with the kind of mindless entertainment, the superficial attributes of which it has borrowed and subverted to its own purposes, and with which, therefore, it has so thoughtlessly been compared.

What is certain, however, is that television's definitions of what is and is not Gothic – or even simply horror – are becoming increasingly rigid, and tend to focus almost exclusively on mildly jingoistic quests undertaken by outsider heroes (rarely heroines), resulting in offerings distinguished only from *24* by the inclusion of supernatural elements. Possibly the worst offender on this score is *Supernatural*, which always seems to be on almost every channel right now. No matter how I try to force myself to sit through more than ten minutes of it, *Supernatural*'s commitment to the violent death (usually, somewhat arbitrarily, the spontaneous combustion) of blond, scantily-clad ladies of a clearly and narrowly defined body shape and age group continues to irritate me beyond measure. Things are only made worse by the fact that all of this is employed in the service of prompting bland, unconvincingly stubbly men to avenge the deaths of their womenfolk by killing as many (equally clearly if worryingly less narrowly defined) “bad guys” as they possibly can, bad guys whose status as “demons” or occasionally gifted psychics leaves one with the uncomfortable feeling that a profound xenophobia and mistrust of difference in general underlies what is already an appallingly conservative programme.

Apart from all of this, however, *Supernatural* simply fails to unsettle its audience in any kind of lasting way, and this failure appears all the more pathetic in the light of the spectacular success of *Goldplated* on this score. All the special effects, raven-haired temptresses and high-octane scares in the world are to this what Harry Potter's arch-nemesis Voldemort is to Ted Bundy - cheap, tame and slightly snigger-inducing, not to mention somewhat irresponsibly naïve, especially where the representation of absolute evil is concerned. The plot of *Goldplated* might superficially resemble the convoluted and contrived morass of endless complications so central to soap opera and to lengthier television series such as *Dream Team*. Its brevity, however, and relatively small cast, means that it is as tightly structured as *Phaedre*, Jean Racine's seventeenth-century tragedy of lust and betrayal (or, indeed, as *Dallas*), and just as concerned with the dangerous proximity forced upon powerful families in pressure-cooker situations, when business and personal relationships collide.

To summarise briefly, the plot is as follows. John White, the owner of a large building firm, has been mysteriously visiting a young girl in hospital for quite some time now, and we soon find out that he was instrumental in deliberately burning down the block of flats where she lived as a child, a fire which cost several lives, as it stood in the way of his plans for developing the area. Gradually we discover that John was a close friend of the girl's father, and that he saved her (but not her father) by throwing her out of a window. The girl, Naomi, is physically recovered but remembers nothing, and John is determined to atone for his crime by taking care of her and bringing her into his family. That family, however, is far from straightforward, since he has only just left his wife and taken up with Cassidy, a beautiful but socially gauche young thing from the nearby council estate, who has just given birth to his baby and who (the three evil blond trophy wives who rule the social scene whisper, not very quietly) is nothing more than a gold-digger. John's elder son Darren is involved in attempting to take over the family business with his mother Beth, in the face of his father's impending bankruptcy and the local council's suspicions about his involvement with the fire. At the same time, Darren also very nearly manages to conduct an extra-marital affair with his daughter's art teacher, until his wife Terese spreads malicious rumours which lose the teacher her job and force her to leave the area. Terese is, incidentally, pregnant by her golf instructor, and contrives to make Darren believe that it is his, but fails to win back his affection or trust. Meanwhile,

youngest daughter Lauren's boyfriend (a bona fide footballer - well, they had to get one in somewhere) commits suicide when she leaves him, and she takes dubious solace in drugs, drink-driving, and untimely revelations regarding her underage sex with her mother's new lover who just happens to be her father's greatest business rival.

There's a lot more of this, but further elaboration is unnecessary. What raises *Goldplated* above the level of its antecedents is not simply the show's grittiness and its sharp awareness of class and personal conflicts. It also graphically dramatises a tension central to the Gothic project since its inception - the survival of darker elements of the past in an apparently bright future of progress and prosperity, held against the crumbling of old institutions and of those who uphold and symbolise them. No character comes across as uncomplicatedly likeable or "good" - all are motivated either by greed, selfishness, misguidedness or simply by their own inability to know what to do. What is more, the manner in which it is edited - one scene cutting quickly to another in which the words, phrases and even minor actions shown in the previous scene are echoed, such as holding out glasses to be filled or sitting in identical attitudes - suggests similarities in the behaviour of characters in apparently unrelated situations. Marital infidelity comes to seem not far removed from Cassidy's treatment of her drug-addicted mother, who is still living in the council estate, which in turn is uncomfortably similar to John's attempts - too little too late - to give Naomi a better life, since it is a life for which nothing has prepared her. The final coup comes in the form of a refusal on the part of the narrative to allow its audience any kind of comfortable closure. Intercut with shots of Darren and Beth publicly celebrating their takeover of the firm are slow-motion shots of John being hit repeatedly by bricks thrown at him by a group of youngsters in the council estate, where he has wandered in despair after uncovering their betrayal, desperately trying to convince the old men in the local bar that he was once like them, that his expensive clothes mean nothing. Although the two events are paralleled, suggesting that somehow Darren and Beth have effectively killed him, professionally and personally (a suggestion heightened by the suggestions of a ritual stoning that overlay the scene), nonetheless the randomness of the attack refuses true or linear narrative logic. This has simply happened, even if it is metaphorically linked to other events, and, as Cassidy runs to rescue him, John dies alone and evidently in great pain, his horrified expression reflected distortedly in the perfectly cleaned windows of his top-of-the-range car.

John's death is brought about partially by his growing awareness that all that he has striven for has been destroyed by the revelation of his past actions but also of his inability to maintain his old-fashioned business in the newly clean but cut-throat world of real estate and town planning. All of this is aptly symbolised in the spectre of the profoundly ironically named Redstart flats, which, despite no longer standing, hover over the entire action and blight the lives of every character, whether directly or indirectly. The archetypal Gothic ruin, "intimidating, oppressing, and frightening", as Davenport-Hines would put it, the flats are a genuinely postmodern form of haunted house, tyrannising over innocent and not so innocent lives alike, not by its looming presence, but by the appalling fact that it is no longer standing and that John, the patriarchal figure of power and authority, has been instrumental in its destruction and that of its inhabitants. Gesturing, therefore, towards the possibility of a new era of what might be referred to as "secular Gothic", which exposes the darkness within the everyday rather than the evil which attacks the

everyday in the shape of blond girls, Goldplated, whatever the ratings might say, is undoubtedly among the best of what television has recently seen fit to offer.

Dara Downey

## Carnivàle

HBO 2003-2005 Seasons One and Two (Warner Home Video)

HBO's *Carnivàle* follows the winding and biblical path of a travelling sideshow as it weaves its way across the dusty plains of America. From dustbowl Oklahoma to depression-era California, the entourage of the carnival use their hidden gifts and talents as a means of surviving their harsh environment. Set in the 1930s, *Carnivàle* explores the desperation of the American people during a desperate time; from the Okies to the New Deal-ers, all segments of society are portrayed in a survivalist mode.

What is immediately apparent to even the casual viewer is the investment placed in the show's look and authenticity. From the use of news footage in the lavish tarot card opening credits to the well-known cast (which includes Clea Duvall, co-star of *Girl, Interrupted*, Clancy Brown of *The Shawshank Redemption* and Nick Stahl, post-*Terminator 3*), it was quite clear that the show was intended to be the flagship for the HBO Network. Unfortunately, it was only to last two seasons (twenty four episodes in all), ending on 11 May 2005 despite an enormous Internet-based campaign to save it. The most frequent argument made for the show's return being the necessity to complete its sprawling and intricate plot, perhaps finally giving the viewer a sense of conclusion. While the show had in some capacity completed the first of its story arcs (each two seasons were designed to comprise of a 'book' and writer/creator Daniel Knauf envisioned three 'books' for the show) it is by no means a complete mythology, and thus leaves many unanswered questions.

The series centres on Ben Hawkins (Nick Stahl) who begins travelling with the carnival after the death of his mother. Although he does not perform in the show, he aids the leader of the troupe, dwarf Samson (Michael J. Anderson of *Twin Peaks* fame), much to the annoyance of everyone else. Hawkins is presumed untrustworthy and is marginalized by the group, who are unaware of his ability to heal and restore life. 'Management', the mysterious and unseen patriarch whose visions predict Ben's importance, insists that he stays with the carnival to fulfil his destiny with the preacher, Brother Justin Crowe (Clancy Brown).

The preacher, who becomes corrupted by visions of leading his people into the desert and, there, assuming absolute power, also becomes aware of the existence of a young boy who can thwart his apocalyptic designs. His vision of a new church with vested political interests and bizarre ethics leaves an eerie imprint on the viewer's mind, reminiscent of the tragic events surrounding David Koresh and the Branch Davidian's siege in Waco, Texas in 1993. This adds to the overall sense of eeriness and strangeness so imbedded in *Carnivàle*, as though this particular archetype is rooted in American identity from the country's violent beginnings. Tracing back from its puritan beginnings, the apocalyptic narrative of America is still with us, whether it is revealed through news media and political rhetoric or network television shows like *Carnivàle*.

Among *Carnivàle*'s litany of characters are Sofie (Clea Duvall), the tarot reader able to psychically communicate with her mute mother Apollonia; Stumpy and Rita Sue Dreifuss, who run the cootch show

(strip show), and the elusive Henry Scudder, who acts as the avatar for the foreseen apocalypse. Eighteen characters regularly feature in this series, which has continuous plot arcs that trace the mythological path of Brother Justin and his followers, and the carnival itself. In particular, Sofie's character is central to the mythology of the show, which links the fates of Ben Hawkins and the Preacher Brother Justin Crowe. \*\*\*SPOILER BEGINS \*\*\* Acting as a crucial link to Brother Justin's past, Sofie discovers that she is the product of Brother Justin's rape of her still traumatised mother Apollonia. In addition, as the love interest of the Christ-like Ben, she draws out both nemeses to evoke their powers and inherits their gifts herself. \*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*

The history and mythology of the series, rooted in a mixture of Christian, Gnostic and Masonic lore, is so complex and far-reaching that demand spread for online guides to aid viewers. Paring away these complex outer plotlines, it is a show that draws upon biblical prophecies about the coming of a Christ-like boy (Hawkins) who must face a scripture savvy Anti-Christ (Brother Justin). It is laced with Gothic imagery, such as bleeding trees, blackened eyes, demonic possessions and apocalyptic explosions, while also depicting uncomfortable realities of rape, torture, war, abuse and murder. A sense of historical displacement is felt throughout the show, as though its setting in the Great Depression is largely coincidental within the framework of the American landscape. This series could be set at any time or place in history but it finds itself in Roosevelt's New Deal era due to creator Daniel Knauf's desire for originality and to narrate a period which arguably, despite its mythical status, has been long overshadowed by the two World Wars which bookend the era.

This matter aside, credit is due to the show's creative team who consulted carnival historians and language experts to gain a sense of accuracy, rather than demeaning the characters and setting by resorting to clichés or mere stereotypes. The use of colloquialisms from the era provides a sense of authenticity which greatly enhances the feel of the series. Visually, the show is very rich and colourful, with particular emphasis placed on blood reds and sandy yellows, and tatty costumes for the carnival's many sideshows. When the narrative leaves the carnival and brings us to the psychic visions of Brother Justin, Management and Ben Hawkins we are presented with aesthetically astounding, beautifully captured and always intriguing shots: fragmentary, hallucinatory and gothically artistic in a style inspired by Francis Bacon. This visual complexity is reflected in the carnival shows themselves. For instance, an episode entitled "Babylon" (season 1, ep.5) deepens the show's mystical and disturbing side, when one of the crotch dancers, Dora Mae, is murdered by a group of ghostly miners. After the carnies seek retribution for her murder at the hands of the town's only living soul, Frank (John Hannah in a surprisingly dark role), it emerges that Dora Mae has crossed over to the realm of the undead and is kept by the miners for sexual gratification. Her damnation is to spend eternity in Babylon, Texas (which biblically translates as confusion and distortion) for her onstage promiscuity. This episode breaks away from the show's main story arc and reveals the 'cheapness' of carnie life. It also adds considerable horror to the show by revisiting the theme of rape as a form of eternal punishment.

Such intricate plotting needed time to develop its vast and complex vision, but perhaps for that very reason, the show missed the wider audience it was hoping to draw in and it was, therefore, undervalued by the network.

In many ways, the show is an inverse of Ray Bradbury's 1962 novel, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, where a battle of good and evil is centred on the gathering of souls through the promise of eternal youth. When the Faustian pact is complete, the patrons are damned to spend eternity at the carnival as freak-show attractions. This show celebrates the carnie culture and the strange code of ethics that work within this enclosed community. With its bearded women, snake charmers, tarot readers and mystics, *Carnivàle* seeks to embrace the marginalized as a group of good people within a fractured society that rejects them. *Carnivàle* is not a casual viewing experience or for those who interpret the supernatural as primarily benevolent. With its provocative and intelligent use of violent imagery and haunting quality, the potential of the show is very clear and inevitably leaves the viewer regretting what might have been. Unfortunately the viewer will have to content him/herself with the extra features on season two's beautifully designed DVDs which explore the factors behind the show's cancellation in detail and also include a series of interviews with both the cast and the writing team. For more information on the show, episode indexes and trivia, HBO's homepage on the show is very comprehensive: [www.hbo.com/carnivale](http://www.hbo.com/carnivale). Alternatively, you may go and have your tarot read by Sofie online at [www.hbocarnivaletarot.com](http://www.hbocarnivaletarot.com)!

Sorcha Ní Fhlainn

### Number 13

BBC4, December 2006

Following the success of a short BBC4 season at Christmas 2004 centred around the 1970s Ghost Story for Christmas strand, it was little surprise that the channel relaunched the strand the following year with a new M.R.James adaptation, *A View From a Hill*. Christmas 2006's seasonal offering, *Number 13*, adapts another James story and, like *A View From a Hill*, draws not only upon the original narrative, but also upon nostalgia for the original 1970s Ghost Story for Christmas.

The story of *Number 13* centres on the academic Anderson, who is working on the history of the Reformation. His study leads him to visit a small cathedral town so that he may authentic some historical papers. Anderson stays at a local guest house in room number 12. Noticing that his neighbouring room is number 14, he puts the absence of a room numbered 13 down to provincial superstition. However, in the middle of the night, when he is disturbed by a series of noises emanating from the room beside him, he goes to investigate only to discover that there is now a room 13, and it is from behind this door that the strange sounds come. Much to Anderson's astonishment, in the morning, room number 13 is, once again, absent. A series of further nightly disturbances, the strange alterations in the proportions of Anderson's own room and the uncovering of a centuries-old witchcraft scandal bring the academic face to face with the mystery of room number 13.

The original Ghost Story for Christmas TV series ran from 1971 to 1978 with one new production each year. Four of these were M.R.James adaptations, with one Dickens story and two original narratives. These new stories moved away from the Victorian/Edwardian period of the other productions into a modern setting, and brought the series to a close. However, these modern-set stories seem largely forgotten in discussions of the Ghost Story for Christmas series, suggesting that the identity of the strand as a period adaptation was more important than its identity as a ghost story slot. This is further suggested by the fact that the Omnibus episode *Schalcken the Painter*, which filled the same slot as the Ghost Story for Christmas in 1979, itself a period-set adaptation, is regularly mistaken for part of the series.

The new productions in the series have both returned to a period setting and to M.R.James' stories, recognising these as core to the series' identity in the memories of many viewers. The producers are consciously appealing to the viewers' nostalgia, in line with much of BBC4's output. Interestingly, the original productions also appealed to nostalgia, but nostalgia for the Victorian/Edwardian setting, when the world seemed (at least to the 1970s viewer) simpler, with everything in its place. This set the protagonists of the stories against the comfortable status quo, as they sought to dig too deeply and too enthusiastically into the past and so had to be brought to judgement for their excessive curiosity.

The more recent TV productions of James' stories have continued this pattern to an extent, although less so with *Number 13*, where it is implied that the supernatural activity has been conquered rather than simply being returned to dormancy. However, the shows' appeal to nostalgia for the 1970s productions extends to direct references, knowing nods for those who remember the original productions. But even

more than the 1970s episodes, the new adaptations have looked to a previous M.R. James adaptation: the 1968 Omnibus episode, *Whistle and I'll Come to You*, adapted and directed by Jonathan Miller. This programme used the adaptation as a reflection on James' work and a meditation upon James himself, transforming the youthful protagonist of the original story into the aged and rambling Professor Parkins (Michael Horden), on the verge of a breakdown due to sexual repression.

This is the interpretation that has been carried into both *A View From a Hill* and *Number 13*, although they present their events as definitely supernatural, unlike Miller, who tried to indicate that the manifestations were all in the protagonist's mind. Nevertheless, both of the new productions have included scenes where the protagonist carefully lays out and squares up their belongings as they settle into their new lodgings, exactly as the Obsessive Compulsive Professor Parkins does in *Whistle and I'll Come To You*. The protagonists of both *A View From a Hill* and *Number 13* are shown as being rather Parkins-like uptight scholars, proud and defensive of their academic position. And all overstep the mark in their investigations of things that should not be disturbed.

Some of this comes from James, of course, but the reading of sexual repression as a major characteristic of these protagonists is very much Miller's reading. While it doesn't appear in *A View From a Hill*, it has been added to *Number 13*. Where the original story, like virtually all of James' tales, included no women beyond the passing mention of a chambermaid, the new production focuses on Anderson's repressed state. His room now comes complete with a print of Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights," and there is now a female guest at the hotel, Alice, to whom Anderson is attracted. He even dreams of her coming to him while he sleeps. Yet he never talks to her during the day, and harrumphs disapprovingly at the flirtatious behaviour between her and a fellow guest, Jenkins. This clear repression is emphasised by the fact that Anderson reacts most strongly to the sound of male and female laughter coming from the next room (which he believes to be Jenkins and a female companion). The laughter, though, is an echo of the Satanic debauchery of the past which Anderson uncovers in documents at the local cathedral archives, and is actually taking place in the otherwise absent room number 13.

To further comply with the model of the 1970s *Ghost Story for Christmas*, the location of *Number 13* is no longer Viborg in Denmark, but somewhere in Cambridgeshire. *Whistle and I'll Come to You* (1968) and *A Warning to the Curious* (1972) were both explicitly set in East Anglia, while *The Stalls of Barchester* (1971) and *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas* (1974) both filmed there, making the region the M.R.James setting of choice as far as television adaptations are concerned. As the change of setting has no real effect on the narrative, beyond excusing the actors from attempting Danish accents, this would again seem to be a choice made to more closely emulate the 1970s productions.

*Number 13* is more of a creepy tale than a particularly scary one, and the one scare of the original story is treated in a more atmospheric than startling way in this adaptation. Indeed, atmosphere is essential to the identity of these productions, alongside the recurring central narrative of the over-curious academic disrupting the status quo. Important clues as to what is happening are passed along subtly in visuals; there is no undue focus on the way that Anderson's room loses some of its volume at night, for example. Like James' story, *Number 13* instead relies on an encroaching sense of that something has gone awry in a

seemingly stable world. While this is not the best of the Ghost Story for Christmas strand, it is a worthy entry, and hopefully an indication that there will be more to follow.

Derek Johnston

### Garth Marengi's 'Darkplace'

Channel 4 2004 (Region 2 DVD)

First screened on Channel 4 in early 2004, Garth Marengi's *Darkplace* was originally shown just before another cheesy hospital-set supernatural drama, Stephen King's rambling and self-indulgent *Kingdom Hospital*, an ill-advised remake of Danish director Lars Von Trier's acclaimed original miniseries. Unfortunately for *Kingdom Hospital*, *Darkplace*'s winning, witty piss-take of the worst excesses of 1980s British television and of the self-importance of certain prominent horror writers meant that anyone who watched even five minutes of it hadn't a hope of taking King's bloated misfire seriously: the unlikely spoof was actually much more enjoyable than the genuine article.

Written by (and starring) Mathew Holness and Richard Ayoade, and based upon their 2001 Perrier Award-winning stage show Garth Marengi's *Netherhead*, *Darkplace* consists of six highly entertaining thirty-minute episodes, each of them a comic gem in their own right. It must be said though that the degree of enjoyment you derive from the show's spot-on spoofery depends to a certain extent upon your familiarity with the generic and dramatic conventions it so deftly lampoons.

The show's conceit is a promising one. Holness appears at the beginning of each episode as self-aggrandising, pompous horror writer Garth Marengi, the author of dodgy sounding novels such as *Black Fang* (which, according to Marengi, asked the question, "What if a rat could drive a bus?"), *Afterbirth*, *Crab!!* and *Slicer* (clearly, Marengi seems to belong to the James Herbert/Sean Huston/Guy N. Smith school of British horror). He is also proudly self-described as "one of the few people you'll meet who has written more books than they've read". As well as treating to us to a few selected extracts from his novels, Marengi is there to present each episode of *Darkplace*, "a hospital based horror medical drama set in pre-apocalyptic Romford" made in the 1980s but, according to its creator, considered so radical by the powers-that-be that it was suppressed for twenty years, and only received a brief run in Peru.

Of course, the series itself is all one massive in-joke, a pitch-perfect spoof of the very crappiest type of 1980s genre television, complete with cardboard sets, delightfully wooden acting, overblown dialogue, casual sexism and artfully risible special effects. Each episode also features self-important behind-the-scenes style commentary from Marengi and surviving co-stars Todd Rivers and Dean Learner (who is also Marengi's publisher).

Marengi, modestly described as "author, visionary, dream weaver, plus actor" of course plays the hero of the show, ex-Warlock "Dr Rick Dagless M.D.", veteran of both 'Nam and the Falklands. His fellow Vet and best buddy, Lucien Sanchez (Todd Rivers/the multi-talented Matt Berry) is a debonair ladies' man and hot-shot surgeon, whilst the other main players are ball-busting bureaucrat Thornton Reed (Dean Learner/ Richard Ayoade) and Liz Asher (Madeline Wool/Alice Lowe) "a lady doctor with psychic powers" whose arrival in *Darkplace* kicks off the first episode, "Once Upon A Beginning". Liz, who is prone to deliberately cheesy visions of the sort experienced by Amy Irving in Brian De Palma's *The Fury*,

soon realises that something is terribly wrong in Darkplace Hospital, which experiences far more than its fair share of supernatural incident.

Much of the pleasure in watching the show comes from the wealth of incidental detail on display in each scene – the authentically dire synth soundtrack, 80s hairstyles and fashion, erratic continuity, and bad acting (at which Ayoade in particular excels: as non-actor-Dean Lerner-playing-Thornton Reed he’s forever looking slightly to one side in each scene, as if desperately seeking a prompt from off stage. It’s worth watching the show for his calculatedly awful delivery of dialogue alone). The writing itself is often very funny, in much the same way that the original *Airplane* movie was funny. Many of the best lines in the show derive from deadpan “Surely you can’t be serious?” “I am serious, and don’t call me Shirley” style exchanges, as when Sanchez introduces himself to his new colleague:

Sanchez (with mild disbelief): “I’m Dr Sanchez. You’re a woman”

Liz Asher (in a tone of absolute earnestness): “Yes. I hope that’s not a problem”.

Or when Marengi-as-Dagless, in his role as a pioneering paediatrician, does his best to comfort a small boy in the “Kiddie Ward”: “We’re doing all we can. But I’m not Jesus Christ” (slight pause). “I’ve come to accept that now.” Or when he explains the reasons for his cynical demeanour: “Maybe if everyone close to you had died, you’d be sarcastic too”.

During the first episode, we learn that Dagless and his old friend Larry (later dispatched in spectacularly gory fashion via a shovel to the head), once opened a Buffy-style gate to hell in the canteen, which is the cause of all the trouble. The period-authentic sexism present here is further played for laughs in Episode Two, “Hell Hath Fury”, a genuinely funny Carrie rip-off in which Liz’s repressed psychokinetic abilities are violently unleashed and a number of bit-players (including Steve Merchant of *The Office* and *Extras* fame) are killed by household implements. We also learn that the goal of the “Garth Marengi Foundation” is to harness psychic abilities in underprivileged children. Episode Three, “Skipper the Eye Child” is even better, particularly when Marengi explains to us at the beginning of the episode that the story was inspired by the fact that “I was told when I was 16 that my balls didn’t work”, and that the anxieties which resulted were funnelled into this unlikely tale of a giant mutant eyeball (created when the eye of a sex offender fell into a nuclear reactor during experimental gamma-ray therapy, apparently). Rather than kill the gruesome “eye child” which results, Dagless, still traumatised by the tragic death of his own mutant son (born with the head of a grasshopper) goes on the run, and names the thing “Skipper”. As Marengi solemnly explains during the story, “this episode is about my own desire to have a son. I have four daughters, and whilst I don’t blame them as such, I don’t feel that they’re on my side”. I’m not quite sure why, but I find the dedication at the end of the episode – which consists of a photo of a golden retriever and the words, “In memory of Skipper. Killed by wasps” one of the funniest things about the whole show.

“Apes of Wrath” is a rather obvious but gloriously inept variation on *Planet of the Apes*, in which contaminated water supplies cause cast members to revert to a prehistoric state (in fact, this plot line has also been used, even more ridiculously, because

it's done in all seriousness, in practically every incarnation of Star Trek, as well as shows like Stargate: SG 1). We also learn from the commentaries here that actress Madeline Wool went missing shortly after the filming of the last episode, and that she is now believed dead, "possibly somewhere in the former Eastern Block", as Dean Learner matter-of-a-factly informs us. Perhaps best of the lot is Episode Five, "Scotch Mist", a hilarious spoof of John Carpenter's *The Fog* in which ghostly Scottish warriors descend upon Darkplace in order to "kill the Queen and end our way of life – what every Scotchman wants". Along the way, we get some extended banter between Sanch and Liz about the pitfalls of cheap batteries, and, funniest of all, we are treated to Dag's deeply xenophobic monologue about an unintended stop-over in Glasgow, the reason for the haunting in the first place.

Darkplace concludes, perhaps inevitably, with Lovecraftian spoof "The Creeping Moss from the Shores of Shuggoth", in which Sanchez unwisely falls in love with a patient infected by cosmic spores which are gradually turning her into broccoli. The highlights here are a gleefully inept bar-fight scene, the musical number "One Track Lover", performed by a love-sick Sanchez, and the unforgettable lines: "Boil Linda? Over my dead body, you bastard!" We also get a photographic montage (due to missing footage which now rests at the bottom of the Thames) of the climactic scene in which Dagless and Reed have to remove Sanchez's broccoli-infected penis.

The recent DVD release of the show comes with a wealth of bonus material, including in-character, crisp-munching, beer-drinking commentary on every episode by Garth Marengi, Dean Learner and Todd Rivers, and two amusing supplementary documentaries, "Darkplace Illuminata" and "Horrificata Illuminata" in which the main players are interviewed in more extensive detail, as well as several other witty items (including the extended "One Track Lover" single, which "sold over twelve copies") and equally amusing in-character radio ads. As a knowing spoof-within-a-spoof, one could see how the joke may well have worn off had the show lasted much longer than six episodes, but as it stands, Garth Marengi's *Darkplace* is a pleasure to watch, for the piss-taking at work here clearly derives from a real affection towards, and appreciation of, the horror genre's guiltier pleasures. It may not change the course of human evolution, as Marengi confidently predicts at the beginning of the first episode, but *Darkplace* will definitely make you laugh.

Bernice M. Murphy

EVENTS REVIEW