

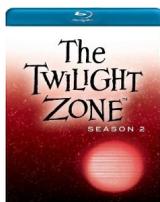
“THE TWILIGHT ZONE: Season 2” (Blu-ray review)

Written by Chris Alexander

Thursday, 18 November 2010 12:08



I dare any FANGORIA reader to sit across from me and argue against the notion that the sun rises and sets on Rod Serling's THE TWILIGHT ZONE. It does. It did when the show premiered on CBS in 1959 until its literal twilight in 1964. And even after decades or imitators, comic books, clones, movies and a few failed attempts to forge Serling-free follow-ups, it still bloody well does.



Serling's groundbreaking, lyrical amalgam of heartfelt, often jet-black morality tales smothered in a rich, pulpy science fiction/fantasy/horror veneer has stood the test of time, amassed a feverish cult of admirers (this writer is certainly one of the world's biggest) and influenced genre filmmaking all over the globe. It was also—obviously—perhaps the highest watermark for television entertainment, the gold (well actually, silvery, shuddery black and white) standard for quality small screen drama.

Since the early days of home video, THE TWILIGHT ZONE has appeared in multiple formats; as double episode big box VHS releases sold via late night TV commercials, as box set VHS on a consumer level, in laserdisc form and, of course, several times from Image Entertainment on DVD in ways that either grouped stand-alone episodes thematically or, later, as season by season collections. And, yeah, I own 'em all. It's that obsession, that wanton will to own these masterworks in every guise that has made me just as enthusiastic to amass their ranks anew, this time on the current superior format, Blu-ray.



Image did a beautiful job releasing the first season of THE TWILIGHT ZONE on Blu-ray last month, and they've done the same bang up job with the second season, out now for purchase online and at most media retail outlets. That first season was not only the brainchild of the Emmy award winning writer Serling, he also penned every episode (some based on existing stories by scribes like Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont), most culled from his own head, his own dreams and most likely his own personal encounters with man at both its basest

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and most beautiful.

The second season continues with Serling steering the ship, and though he opens up the door creatively to other writers on a few choice episodes, this is still primarily his baby in every respect. Season two is also of note because of the backfiring cost saving measures CBS requested on several episodes. See, TZ was always shot on 35mm film and that grainy cinematic noir quality is part of its strength. But because of that it was never a particularly cheap show to produce. So for a few outings in the second season, the network enforced that the show be filmed using clunky videotape, resulting in a drastic reduction in audio/visual quality and atmosphere. The powers that be soon realized that using video didn't really save much bread, so they quickly—and thankfully—slipped back to film midseason.

Image's Blu-ray presentation is immaculate, rendering every inch of each wonderful episode in shimmering hi-definition (even the video shot episodes look good for once) and supporting them with the usual cavalcade of features, many culled from the previous DVD releases but all welcome for revisits (like the incredible isolated music scores and previews for “next week's show” with Serling himself), along with several new neat bells and whistles.

Since THE TWILIGHT ZONE is like the male perception of sex in that there's no such thing as BAD TZ, just some episodes that are better than others, out of the 29 episodes in this collection, there really isn't a dud to be seen but some of the more awesome highlights include:

“The Howling Man”—Charles Beaumont's melodramatic tale about the devil imprisoned in a monastery, breaks from the traditional Serling “twist in the tale” mold, but is still a dynamite bit of creepy fun.



“Eye of the Beholder”—One of the many undisputed classics of the series, shot primarily in face-obscuring silhouette, with a young bandaged woman in an eerie hospital awaiting an operation to change her from hideous to socially acceptable beautiful. Spooky, literate and sporting a typically profound message.

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“Nick of Time”—Richard Matheson’s crackerjack tale sees a young William Shatner becoming obsessed with a greasy spoon dwelling, devil-headed fortune telling machine. Great dialogue (it is Matheson, after all), amazing “Mystic Seer” prop and a serious look at how obsession and superstition control and destroy.

“Night of the Meek”—One of the shot on video episodes, this is Serling at his most melancholy and life affirming. Art Carney stars as a drunken department store Santa who is so broken by the horrible way people treat other people that he gives up, only to be blessed with the mysterious power to bring joy into the hearts of his fellow lost souls on Christmas Eve. A moving tale that never fails to make me cry.

“Dust”—Bleak and arty bit of Serling “magic-realism,” with decency and hope once again triumphing over the evil that men do. Sad, sweet and haunting.

“The Obsolete Man”—TZ favorite Burgess Meredith stars with Fritz Weaver in this chilling future shock story about a government body that declares who is and who isn’t of value...and exterminates those deemed “obsolete.” Terrifying and cerebral two hander with a stinger of a climax.



“Long Distance Call”—Another video shot episode featuring TV sci-fi hero Billy Mumy (LOST IN SPACE, TZ episode “It’s a Good Life”) as a sweet little boy who talks to his dead granny on his toy telephone. And it seems granny wants the little darling to join her in the ether. A really dark, chilling story that essentially sees a little boy attempting suicide multiple times at the behest of a dead relative. Yikes.

“The Invaders”—Another major classic with Agnes Moorehead as an apparently mute spinster living alone in her country cottage under siege from diminutive and homicidal spacemen. Goofy and scary in equal measures.

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The big draw for hardcore fans to this Blu-ray set however is the addition of 25 brand new commentaries, recorded exclusively for this release, including usual suspect Marc Scott Zicree, who is one of the leading authorities on the show and the author of THE TWILIGHT ZONE COMPANION (a tome that I’ve always had a bit of a problem with as Zicree is often far too critical about the program he has devoted much of his life too), a cavalcade of experts and historians, legendary comic book writer Marv Wolfman and surviving TZ scribe George Clayton Johnson. Most of these audio tracks offer insight, some of which the faithful already know but of which the casual TZ fan will find revelatory and essential.

Also standing out in the new features is a Serling-penned episode of the show SUSPENSE called “Nightmare at Ground Zero,” a vintage interview with iconic FX designer Bill Tuttle and 15 of those ubiquitous (hell, we’re streaming some of them off the FANGORIA site!) contemporary TZ radio dramas that run hot and cold.

History never knew a talent quite like Rod Serling before his time, and certainly you’d be hard pressed to find anyone of his caliber today. His was a unique headspace, macabre and fantastic but also fueled by something often sorely absent from genre entertainment: humanity.

OVERALL RATING: 🍷🍷🍷🍷

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