

# ROALD DAHL ON FILM

## TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED

UK/1979-1988/25mins/12

An aristocratic lady trapping her head in an expensive slab of Henry Moore-like sculpture. A stray cat that may be the reincarnation of Franz Liszt. A beggar who carries a prized piece of tattooed art etched into his back. A vengeful wife taking gleeful control of her domineering husband's living brain. Anglia Television was the home of hit prime time game show 'Sale of the Century' and teatime budget casino 'Gambit', but for nine years from 1979 the unassuming regional ITV franchise went weird and wonderful. Suddenly, things got a whole lot more bizarre than Nicholas Parsons...

The aforementioned oddness and more was sprung from the fervid imagination of author Roald Dahl. ITV's local regions were not averse to telefantasy, after 1976's 'Beasts' and Brian Clemens' Saturday night shocker 'Thriller' on ATV, Thames brought us 'Shadows of Fear' for adults and 'Shadows' for juvenile viewers; and HTV terrified nippers and parents alike with the Avebury-focused six-parter 'Children of the Stones'. So the commercial broadcaster was well-versed in small screen nightmares by the time the decision was taken to film 'Tales of the Unexpected' in and around Norwich.

"I ought to warn you, if you haven't read any of my stories, that you may be a little disturbed by some of the things that happen in them". With these words - delivered with enormous gravity by a gaunt figure, with thinning hair, a sly sense of black humour, and plenty of surprises up his sleeves - Roald Dahl introduced himself to millions of new fans and increased his reputation as a master of the macabre several times over. Dahl had seen his twist-in-the-tail short stories used as source material before, notably in 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents', but Anglia offered a showcase for an entirely fresh run of star-studded, colour adaptations to send the public off to work, school, or (this being 1979) job-search on Monday morning with the previous night's icy chills and shock climax still reverberating through their minds.

'Tales of the Unexpected' ran for nine seasons between 1979 and 1988, exclusively featuring versions of Dahl yarns for the first two years before branching out to include other similarly-minded scribes. The memorable James Bond-style title sequence is one of the most fondly-remembered in British television history - yellow and blue flames collide from opposite sides of the screen, the possessive title 'Roald Dahl's Tales of the Unexpected' blazes into view with the briefest glimpse of a silhouetted dancer; dissolve to a spinning roulette wheel, multiple white solarised depictions of the lady once more (sporting a fashionable 'Purdey' hairdo), the camera then panning along a gun barrel, and into those iconic flames again



CHAPTER



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as the twirling silhouetted pirouetter emerges into view, beautifully manicured hands first; image piles on image as a symbolic lion's head, a crimson devil, and an ossuary of skulls set the sinister tone, and finally our dancing lady features one last time, her shapely outline now seen to contain designs from the classic Tarot deck. A final blast of fire and we're into the intro, invariably seating Mr. Dahl in a comfortable leather armchair before a roaring hearth as he delivers a few ominous words to prepare us for the next nervous half-hour. All set to Ron Grainer's whirling calliope theme tune, this is classic telly of the highest order.

And that's before we reach the content of the shows themselves. As pointed out earlier, Anglia attracted some major talent to the programme - the first series alone claims Jose Ferrer, Michael Hordern, Elaine Stritch, Susan George and Joseph Cotten among the acting roster, and that's not even including the episode 'Neck' which starred Joan Collins, Peter Bowles and John Gielgud in thirty minutes (including ads, sans the big names) of tension and ultimate terror. Directors included Herbert Wise, later to scare a generation to death with the 1989 TV stab at Susan Hill's 'The Woman in Black'; Alastair Reid, already an old Dahl hand having directed Roald's screenplay for 1971 feature film 'The Night Digger'; and Claude Whatham of 'That'll Be the Day'/'All Creatures Great and Small' fame.

Stories for the early runs were taken from the Roald Dahl collections *Kiss Kiss*, *Tales of the Unexpected* and *Someone Like You*. Highlights included remakes of the material already adapted for 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents', most notably a new 'Lamb to the Slaughter' with Susan George as the jilted wife and Brian Blessed as the copper investigating her husband's death; another run through those 'extreme gambling' thrillers 'Man From the South' and 'Dip in the Pool'; and Siobhan McKenna stepping into the shoes (and adopting the taxidermy skills) of 'The Landlady'. And who could forget 'Royal Jelly', 'William and Mary', 'Neck', or 'Skin'? Later series ditched Dahl's collections but managed to find plenty of Roald-worthy competitors and rivals to keep the show rolling along - one of Britain's few female directors, the visionary talent Wendy Toye, remade her 1952 short film 'The Stranger Left No Card' as a 1982 Tale of the Unexpected called 'Stranger in Town', Derek Jacobi supplanting the original's Alan Badel as a flamboyant jester called Sir Columbus arriving amid a small community with a deadly mission in mind; 'Never Speak Ill of the Dead' has Cheryl Hall as a doctor's wife with a 'loose' reputation in an 'is she or isn't she dead and buried in the cellar?' routine, another 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents' retread (based on John Collier's story 'De Mortuis'); and Hammer horror mainstay Peter Cushing starred in 1983's 'The Vorpall Blade'.

The show has come in for a fair amount of undeserved ridicule, with lame jokes about "Tales of the Totally Expected" abounding to the present, although the great Peter Cook paid a smart, part-vicious, part-affectionate contemporary tribute with a sketch on his 'Peter Cook and Co.' special in 1980 - 'Tales of the Much as We Expected' was a delicious parody of Dahl's earnest intro style and patter, with our master satirist imitating the author, revealing that the dropping of an 'N' from the name 'Ronald' had brought a change in his fortunes, before the lounge set catches alight as the flickering fireplace gets out of control...

The lasting legacy, however, is one of tremendous admiration and respect for a pillar of the ITV network's history and artistic success. From that automatically recognisable theme and title sequence, to indelible memories of the frequently sick and twisted stings at the fade-out, *Tales of the Unexpected* remains legendary in the annals of small screen shock and suspense.



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