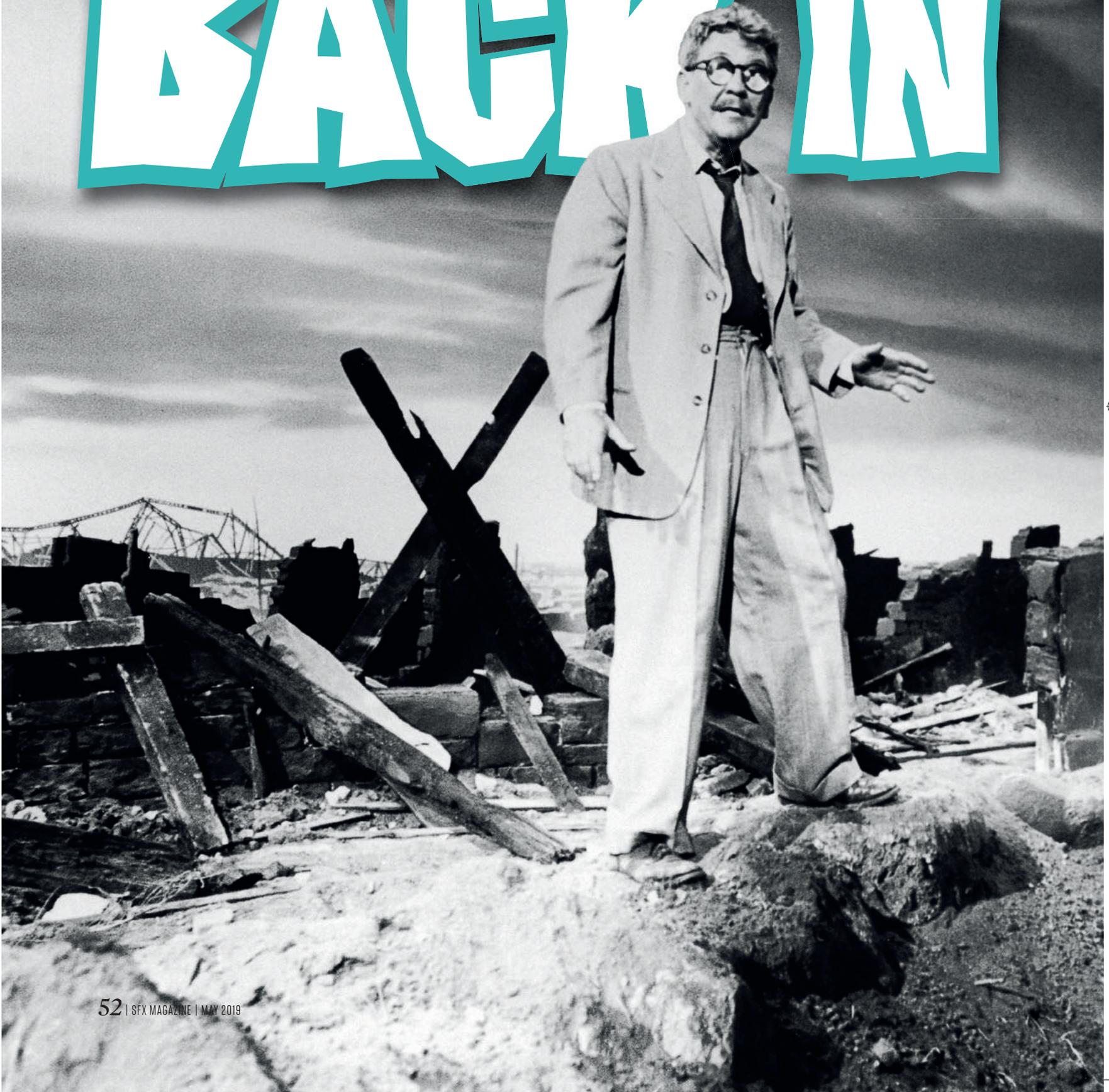


THE TWILIGHT ZONE

# BACK IN



# THE ZONE

AS **THE TWILIGHT ZONE** RETURNS TO TERRIFY A WHOLE NEW GENERATION, STEVE O'BRIEN LOOKS BACK AT ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL SCI-FI SHOWS OF ALL TIME...

IT'S A DAUNTING PROSPECT FOR ANY WRITER TO take on the mantle of being the new Rod Serling. That's why when Jordan Peele, the Oscar-winning writer and director of *Get Out* and *Us*, was first offered the job of bringing back the late writer's most iconic series, he turned it down flat. "I was terrified," Peele told *Variety* in an interview last year. "Why would I ever jump into the most established, pristine shoes in all of the genre?"

A few months later, Simon Kinberg, who, for some years had been attached to a mooted *Twilight Zone* revival at CBS, called Peele. The two promptly hooked up, only to geek out over their love of Rod Serling's brilliant, clever and passionately political anthology series. By the end of the meeting, Peele's mind was changed. He was on board.

"The realisation, for me, was that it was an opportunity to attempt to continue with Serling's mission," Peele went on to say. "If we approach it without ego and sort of bow to Serling, that will hopefully suffice for our fellow *Twilight Zone* fans but also bring back a show that I think is needed right now. Because it's a show that has always helped us look at ourselves, hold a mirror up to society."

## IN ROD WE TRUST

Though *The Twilight Zone* has been resuscitated twice since the original series bowed out on 19 June 1964, it's those first five seasons, masterminded by the greatest television writer of his generation, that remain the reason this quietly subversive anthology show is held in such stellar regard.

We're used now to the idea of writers being in charge of TV shows. But the word "showrunner" wasn't even a thing back then. Television wasn't considered a writer's medium, →

© GETTY (1)

## THE TWILIGHT ZONE

it was the producers who were in charge – when *The Invaders* shouted in its title sequence of being “A Quinn Martin Production”, it wasn’t because Quinn Martin was the show’s writer. But it wasn’t like that with *The Twilight Zone*, which is perhaps the main reason why, unlike so many of its cookie-cutter contemporaries, it’s endured.

Serling would pen 92 of the 156 episodes of *The Twilight Zone* between 1959 and 1964. But it wasn’t just his name that the telly viewing public came to recognise. Serling himself would present each episode, in voice only for the first series, and on camera for the rest. There he’d stand each week, introducing the characters we were about to follow in his tailored black suit and an ever-present cigarette hanging from his fingers, his silky, solacing voice promising to take us on a journey “into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination”.

He appeared so amiable, so gentle, that no one would ever guess what a firebrand he really was. In his early years, he’d been a boxer, but his more lasting bruises had come later, battling it out with lily-livered TV networks and culture-phobic corporate sponsors.

Serling was a radical working in a medium dogged, at the time, by a stifling conservatism. But by 1959, he was tired of butting heads with his paymasters. Once he was forbidden from referencing the Holocaust because a gas company sponsored the show he was working on. “I got tired of battling,” he said in 1959. “You always have to compromise your script, lest somebody – a sponsor, a pressure group, a network censor – gets upset. The result is, you begin to skirt the issues.”

From that point on, Serling stated that he would purposely dodge the issues. His days as an Angry Young Man were over, he declared categorically. This would be the new, mellower Rod Serling, he reassured CBS when pitching *The Twilight Zone*.

Don’t believe a word of it.

### CAMPFIRE STORIES

*The Twilight Zone* was every bit as politically charged and socially aware as his previous work, only camouflaged this time by its SF and fantasy trappings. This was Serling’s way of sneaking brain-chewing entertainment past a thick-skulled network and direct into people’s homes. Without compromising his principles, Serling was suddenly the most free he’d ever been.

*The Twilight Zone* was a show that bigged up the little man in society. If the series had any direct influences, its largest debt was probably to the movies of Frank Capra. Though Capra made only one fantasy-dyed flick – *It’s A Wonderful Life* – it was the liberal and humanistic morality his movies espoused that were woven in the fabric of *The*

© GETTY (4)

*Twilight Zone*. From Burgess Meredith’s meek myope in “Time Enough At Last” to William Shatner’s neurotic airplane passenger in “Nightmare At 20,000 Feet” to Billy Mumy’s kid-god from the suburbs in “It’s A Good Life”, these were stories of ordinary folk, the everyman and everywoman, dropped into fantastical situations.

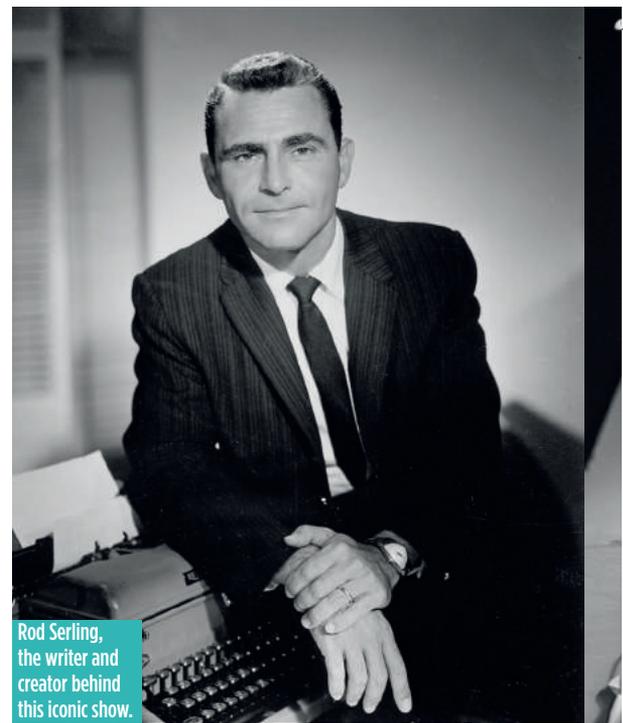
“*The Twilight Zone* would take things they were concerned about in the present moment and crank them up,” *Black Mirror* showrunner Charlie Brooker told *SFX* in 2013. “It would present these irresistible, ‘What if’ ideas, and then play them out in a way that when it would hit the right height was really chilling. And those episodes are still equally chilling today – if not more so, because you get the added ‘archive assist’, where it becomes slightly creepier just by nature of the fact that it’s 60 years old. They were like good little campfire stories, and TV doesn’t do that very often.”

Ratings were initially low, but word of mouth spread and the critics began to notice this strange little anthology show. Gradually, the ratings rose as Serling unveiled stories of a hitch-hiking Grim Reaper (“The Hitch-Hiker”), suburban paranoia over a suspected alien invasion (“The Monsters Are Due On Maple Street”), hapless Guardian Angels (“Mr Bevis”) and a robot baseball pitcher (“The Mighty Casey”), among other stories of the fantastic. Each episode delved deep into human emotion – the fears, the joys, the triumphs and the downfalls of everyday living.

“We must not forget that Rod Serling was a playwright,”

*Twilight Zone* writer George Clayton Johnson told *SFX* in 2009. “He was writing for the stage, and then along came this new phenomenon, television, and why not write stage plays for the television camera? What he was interested in was basically the idea that we’re writing a realistic story in every detail, except for one touch of the imaginary, one touch of odd, strange, disconcerting. But everything else is perfectly as it is in real life.”

Serling’s Trojan horse of radicalism became a popular hit from the beginning of its second year, but *The Twilight Zone*’s production was always to be troubled. During its second season General Foods ceased their sponsorship and Colgate-Palmolive and



Rod Serling, the writer and creator behind this iconic show.



Burgess Meredith (left) and director John Brahm in “Time Enough At Last”.



Richard Kiel plays an alien with a confusingly named cookbook in “To Serve Man”.

## ANTHOLOGY OF ANTHOLOGIES

Rod Serling's show has spawned many imitators...

### THE OUTER LIMITS

1963-1965, 1995-2002

Launched by ABC in 1963 as their answer to *The Twilight Zone*, *The Outer Limits* promised its SF-hungry audience a calorie-rich diet of bug-eyed monsters and shiny spaceships – Serling's series was always more earthly in its approach to science fiction. It was *The Twilight Zone*, only louder and brasher.



### NIGHT GALLERY

1969-1973

Rod Serling's *other* anthology show remains less celebrated, though there's still some top-tier writing contained within its 43 episodes. It doesn't have quite the consistency of its predecessor, however, as Serling failed to secure complete creative control over this one. It lasted three seasons.



### BLACK MIRROR

2011-present

If the original *Twilight Zone* reflected the fears and concerns of the era it was made in, certainly Charlie Brooker's acclaimed anthology does the same for 21st century audiences. Chillier and more fatalistic than *The Twilight Zone*, *Black Mirror's* stories focus on the impact of new technology on our lives.



### PHILIP K DICK'S ELECTRIC DREAMS

2017

Commissioned by Channel 4 to fill the gap when *Black Mirror* moved to Netflix, there's as much Rod Serling DNA in this series as there is Philip K Dick. Its standout episode, "The Commuter", is a tale that could fit comfortably into any *Twilight Zone* season.



### INSIDE NO 9

2014-present

Although Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton's dark-hearted anthology only occasionally dips its toe into fantastical waters, it's clear that *The Twilight Zone's* penchant for twist endings has proved a big influence on this BBC Two fave. Unlike all the other series here, it's the only anthology which has a running time similar to those early *Twilight Zones*.

Steve O'Brien



Beauty norms are challenged in 1962 episode "The Eye Of The Beholder".



Chesterfield cigarettes came and went. Over the show's televisual life, sponsors entered and exited on a revolving door basis, panicking network execs and pushing Serling into ever-greater anxiety.

With no sponsor forthcoming for its planned 1961 series, *The Twilight Zone* was axed after its third season. Serling, who felt he'd been running on low gas for much of season three, left to teach at Antioch College in Ohio. But it swiftly transpired that *The Twilight Zone's* replacement on CBS schedules was a ratings bomb, and soon the network's suits were mulling over the return of Serling's anthology series.

To generate more advertising revenue, CBS planned to inflate *The Twilight Zone* to hour-long episodes for this season. But *The Twilight Zone* wasn't *The Outer Limits* (ABC's monster-heavy answer to *The Twilight Zone*), and Serling's whimsical tales lost their momentum at 50 minutes. The series returned to its half-hour roots by its fifth season, but by then *The Twilight Zone* had lost much of its lustre to the men at CBS. Serling was weakening his involvement with the show, sponsors were becoming more difficult to find and audiences began to slip away. *The Twilight Zone* was quietly dropped in 1964, this time for good. "We've been on the air for five years," Serling remarked, "and I think the show took on a kind of aged look." →



# ON A WING AND A SCARE

## THE MAKING OF CLASSIC TWILIGHT ZONE EPISODE "NIGHTMARE AT 20,000 FEET"

**O**NE EPISODE OF JORDAN PEELE'S *Twilight Zone* revival, "Nightmare At 30,000 Feet", pays homage – while telling a different story – to a much-loved episode of the original series: the 1963 chiller "Nightmare At 20,000 Feet". Starring a pre-*Star Trek* William Shatner, the classic episode centres on an airplane passenger who spots a furry gremlin out on the wing... but cannot convince anyone that it's not a figment of his imagination.

The script of "Nightmare At 20,000 Feet" was adapted by Richard Matheson from his 1961 short story of the same name. Inspiration struck when the writer was on a flight himself. "I looked out and there were all these clouds," Matheson explained. "I thought, 'Okay, what if I saw a guy skiing across them?', cause it looks just like snow! Then I realised, 'Well, that's not scary', so I came up with the idea of the gremlin being on the wing."

Thirty-three-year-old director Richard Donner – later to helm *Superman: The Movie* and *The Omen* – was able to make use of an impressive existing set of a plane interior and wing on the MGM lot, which (to collect the water being blown in to simulate rain) was suspended over a water tank.



The gremlin's mask was the work of William Tuttle, the man behind the Morlocks in 1960's *The Time Machine*, while its woolly body was sourced from the MGM wardrobe – a gorilla suit was another, rejected option! Inside the suit, suffering as it soaked up water, was Nick Cravat, formerly Burt Lancaster's partner in his days as an acrobat. Matheson was distinctly unimpressed by this "fuzzy bear", but as Donner explained, "It's a TV show and it's done for \$11... You just don't have the time and the money to design a costume and build a proper one."

The list of problems Donner had to contend with was formidable. "A man flying in on wires. Wind. Rain.

Lightning. Smoke, to give the effect of clouds. You couldn't hear yourself think because of the machines outside... It was just unbearable. If any one of those things went wrong, it ruined the whole take."

Worse still, on the penultimate day of filming, a producer broke the news that the set would not be available for the final day, as a feature film production was coming in to use it! Cue unexpected overtime for the entire cast and crew. "We stayed all night," Donner recalled. "We walked out when the sun came up!" **Ian Berriman**

## ZONING OUT

Rod Serling died in 1975 from complications during heart surgery, mere months after ABC turned down an offer from Serling and producer Aaron Spelling to revive his most famous series. He was only 50.

It was only in the years after his death, however, that *The Twilight Zone's* reputation truly bloomed. Steven Spielberg, John Landis, Joe Dante and George Miller teamed up for 1983's *Twilight Zone: The Movie*, which remade three classic stories from the series' canon – “Kick The Can”, “It's A Good Life” and “Nightmare At 20,000 Feet”, along with one new story, about a far-right bigot who finds himself first in Nazi-occupied France during World War II, and then on the receiving end of a braying bunch of racists in the Deep South of the 1960s. That four of Hollywood's starriest directors would lend their names to a portmanteau movie based on an old TV show was a testament to its cultural power, and in 1985 a new *Twilight Zone* series made its debut on CBS. Produced by a pre-*Game Of Thrones* George RR Martin, it offered up adaptations of stories from the likes of Harlan Ellison, Stephen King and Ray Bradbury and is let down only by its smudgy, edited-on-videotape 1980s production values.

Another revival dropped in 2002 on the UPN network. Though it lasted just a single season, one episode piqued the interest of long-time *Twilight Zone* fans, a sequel to the original run's “It's A Good Life”, featuring a

© GETTY (4)

now-grown Bill Mummy returning to a role he'd last played 42 years previously. The rest were simply “meh”.

Those two revivals may have tarnished the brand slightly – and the movie will always be remembered more for the deaths of three of the cast in an on-set helicopter accident than for its stories – but it's important to note that CBS All Access's forthcoming version will be the first time since the original that the series has had a burningly talented and visionary writer as its figurehead. Like Serling, Peele himself is front and centre of this series, introducing each episode, and even going as far as presenting the prestigious Superbowl trailer in February.

That Jordan Peele, one of the most thrilling and provocative names in cinema, is working on a TV show would be front page news in itself – that he's the man in charge of *The Twilight Zone* is even more exciting. In order to stand shoulder to shoulder with the original, this new series has to confront current day fears and paranoias, to combat hate and division with love and empathy, to take a much less innocent 2019 audience into the world of the uncanny, the fantastical and the unexpected. We are about to re-enter *The Twilight Zone*... ●

*The Twilight Zone 60th Anniversary box set is released on limited edition Blu-ray on 15 April by Mediumrare Entertainment, available to buy exclusively from [www.thetwilightzone.co.uk](http://www.thetwilightzone.co.uk).*

## ZONE HEADS

Our favourite *Twilight Zone* moments in popular culture

### THE TWIGLET ZONE

In the late '80s, some advertising execs spotted the similarity between the name of a British savoury snack and Rod Serling's show – a match made in heaven.



### POP WILL EAT ITSELF: “DEF CON ONE”

The iconic *Twilight Zone* theme gets a sample here in this pop culture-laden dance track from future movie composer Clint Mansell's former band.



### FAMILY GUY: “LOVE THY TROPHY”

Rod Serling makes an animated appearance in this “Monsters Are Due On Maple Street”-influenced episode of Seth MacFarlane's cartoon sitcom.



### THIRD ROCK FROM THE SUN: WILLIAM SHATNER AND JOHN LITHGOW COMPARE NOTES

Original “Nightmare At 20,000 Feet” actor William Shatner meets big screen “Nightmare At 20,000 Feet” actor John Lithgow. “I looked out the window and I saw something on the wings of the plane,” says Shat. “The same thing happened to me!” replies Lithgow.



### SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE: “NIGHTMARE AT 20,000 FEET”

2013 comedy skit with Jude Law in the William Shatner role and Bill Hader as a pitch-perfect Rod Serling. **Steve O'Brien**



William Shatner in 1960's “Nick Of Time”.



Buster Keaton, complete with time helmet, in “Once Upon A Time”.

Unlikely headwear in “Mr Dingle, The Strong”.



# SEEING THE TWILIGHT

## EXECUTIVE PRODUCER SIMON KINBERG TEASES A NEW ANTHOLOGY FOR AN UNFIXED WORLD

IT MAY BE 60 YEARS SINCE ROD SERLING FIRST transported us to *The Twilight Zone*, but we're about to cross back into a dimension, not only of sight and sound, but of mind. That might sound like heresy to those who love the anthology series that still defines everything that followed, but for series exec producer Simon Kinberg (also the guiding light on the *X-Men* movies), now is the best time to bring the concept back.

"For worse, in terms of our society, but for better in terms of the necessity for a new *Twilight Zone*, our society hasn't come that far since *The Twilight Zone*," Kinberg tells *SFX*. "Especially when you look at the world we're living in right now, it kinda feels like, we're actually living in a twilight zone."

"A lot of the moral and social justice issues that were relevant and troubling in Rod's time, are equally so in our time," Kinberg continues. "We just felt the world needs a new *Twilight Zone* to try and tell these moral parables within a fun, super entertaining genre platform."

This will actually be the third reboot of Serling's series, and one that has been in the works for several years. Kinberg says he loved the original show, and when the idea was brought to him, they initially couldn't crack how to present it to modern audiences. "Then I had a general meeting with Jordan Peele [who's serving as executive producer and on-screen host] a few years ago, and in that

EXCLUSIVE  
INTERVIEW!



meeting I brought up *The Twilight Zone*. He really sparked to it, because he was a fan of it as well."

Kinberg says the pair worked through some ideas on the spot. "We wanted to do something that isn't just a reread, or remake," he explains. "We wanted to make it fresh and different. So, we came up with an idea, that I won't give away, and it got us both really excited about what we could do. It would honour the original, but also innovate on the original."

The pair continued to work on the series even while both of them were directing their own films. "We had a writing room that was here in Los Angeles, and we were getting outlines and scripts, and hiring directors even as we were each in post on our respective movies," Kinberg explains.

And as to how Peele became the new Serling, so to speak, Kinberg says they had a list of actors but he eventually suggested Jordan do it. "He really didn't want to do it at first," he smiles. "They are such huge shoes to fill, but then the truth is, he is to the show what Rod was, which is one of the primary creative voices. Rod wasn't an actor on the show. Rod was the creator and writer. Jordan and I co-wrote one of the first episodes together. I think that's what got Jordan to say yes, and I'm so glad he did, because he's extraordinary as the narrator of the show." **Tara Bennett**

*The new Twilight Zone* airs on CBS All Access in the US from 1 April. UK broadcast is TBC.

© GETTY (1)