

# Decade of DREAD

The Seventies is seen as the heyday of spooky TV in the UK. Steve O'Brien remembers some of the scariest classics of the era

**W**hat television programmes do you most remember from your youth? For many of us, it's the shows that terrified and disturbed us, that got under our skins, that linger longest in our minds, and Seventies TV offered more than its fair share of scares.

In fact, that decade is now seen as the golden age of spooky TV. From the soul-freezing ghost tales of MR James that were a staple of the Christmas schedules, to one-off plays such as Nigel Kneale's *The Stone Tape* (1972) and John Bowen's *Robin Redbreast* (1970), through to children's favourites such as *Children of the Stones* (1977) and *Sky* (1975), it was a time when horror seemed to be as much as part of the TV landscape as police procedurals and sitcoms.

'There were great supernatural shows in the Seventies because literary snobbery had not become entrenched at the BBC and ITV,'

says horror screenwriter Stephen Volk. 'The Seventies were not more scary than any other decade, it's just that the commissioners were more open and daring. As a result, the programme makers had a freer rein to be imaginative.'

In British cinema, horror was having as much of a renaissance as it was on television, with chill-fests such as *The Wicker Man*,

*Don't Look Now* (both 1973) and *To the Devil a Daughter* (1976), but there's something arguably more impactful about horror on the small screen. Maybe it's the medium's more intimate nature that allows it to burrow into our psyches with such force.

But why was TV suddenly getting into themes of the supernatural, after a decade in which its



*Sapphire & Steel* was originally intended as a children's TV show called *The Time Menders*, but when Joanna Lumley and David McCallum were cast, costs spiralled and the target audience shifted to young adult

worthiest programmes – *Z-Cars* (1962-78), *Cathy Come Home* (1966), *Up the Junction* (1968) – were defiantly realistic? For author Jon Dear, who's currently writing a book about the BBC's *A Ghost Story for Christmas* (1971-78) series, it's to do with the age of the writers and directors who were coming up through the system.

'This was a time when the first generation of TV makers not to have fought in the Second World War were getting into positions of influence,' he says. 'New scientific breakthroughs go hand in hand with spiritual bunkum and can produce good drama – *The Stone Tape* (1972), *The Breakthrough* (1975) and *The Mind Beyond: The Daedalus Equations* (1976) all focus on practical science's encounters with ghosts, the soul and spiritualism.'

Whereas horror today can mean anything from the blood 'n' guts of the Saw movies to the subtler chills of *The Conjuring* films, the TV shows of the Seventies prioritised suggestion over explicitness, shadows above gore. A slasher film can gross you out, but something more suggestive, more creepy, will remain with you long after the end credits have rolled. That's why so many modern-day TV writers hark back to those

or *Play for Today* (1970-84) to *Thirty-Minute Theatre* (1965-73), the channels were awash with one-off dramas that changed their casts from week to week. So it was only natural that the BBC and ITV would create their own horror anthologies, from *Dead of Night* (1972) to *Beasts* (1976) and *Shadows* (1975-78) and *Leap in the Dark* (1973-80). These shows contain some of the era's most nightmare-inducing moments – Doctor Who showrunner Russell T Davies has said of the *Beasts* episode *Baby* that its ending was, 'the most frightening thing I've ever seen'.

## HORROR WITHOUT HYPE

Those shows, then, inspired many of the TV writers of the next generation. 'The *Stone Tape* by Nigel Kneale was a watershed moment for me,' reflects Stephen Volk. 'It showed me horror could be intelligent and adult and was a huge influence when I created *Ghostwatch* (1992).'

There are elements of Seventies horror in many of Russell T Davies's most acclaimed Doctor Who episodes, *Midnight* and *73 Yards* among them, while the *A Ghost Story for Christmas* series continues every December, thanks to Mark Gatiss's love of that original run. And it's hard not to see

**DID YOU KNOW?**

The *Stone Tape* and *Beasts* were written by Nigel Kneale, the creator of *Quatermass*. *Children of the Stones* was remade by BBC Radio 4 in 2010, starring The League of Gentlemen's Reece Shearsmith.

echoes of *Children of the Stones* in such modern-day folk horrors as Dennis Kelly's *The Third Day* (2020) and Toby Whithouse's *The Red King* (2024).

Though the supernatural drama is far from dead on television, it's not the mainstay now as it was 50 years ago. 'From the Eighties the popular genre was looked down upon by commissioners and seen as "niche" even though the audience still remembers such series to this day,' says Volk. 'The received wisdom was, "If they wanted horror they could go and see films: it's really not our kind of thing." You were laughed at if you pitched anything that wasn't cops, docs or social realism.'

For Volk, part of the power of those dramas was that they arrived without hype, and without a torrent of pre-publicity telling audiences what to expect. This was TV that unsettled its audience by nature of surprise.

'What's missing in today's infinite, streamery landscape,' he says, 'is everything is so manufactured and pre-sold, and spoiled by the internet. Nothing can creep up on you... Literally!'



Iain Cuthbertson was the sinister Rafael Hendrick in *Children of the Stones*