

A monster success story

Sci-fi fans are in heaven - the success of Doctor Who has led to a galaxy of new TV shows. But why have they become so popular?

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Sci-fi fans must be wondering what they did right. Twenty-seven years after the BBC last remade Day of the Triffids for television, the corporation has announced a new production of John Wyndham's book - and this in an autumn/winter season packed with high-concept fantasy and horror treats.

In January, ITV will screen Demons, loosely based on Dracula's vampire slayer Van Helsing, starring Philip Glenister; it also has Whitechapel - a retelling of the Jack the Ripper story - and the third series of Primeval. Sky has been busy with the JJ Abrams thriller Fringe and Channel 4 with Dead Set, Charlie Brooker's zombies-attack-the-Big-Brother-house drama. Aside from its sci-fi drama Survivors, the BBC's fare includes Martin Shaw starring as a crusading exorcist in Apparitions; Dawn French in the grotesque League of Gentlemen comedy Psychoville next year on BBC2; and Derren Brown in Crooked House, ghost stories for Christmas written by Mark Gatiss on BBC4. Which, for a genre that has been abandoned for some time, is a very decent showing.

Adrian Hodges, who scripted Primeval, says writing the ITV drama "reawakened that part of me that had grown up with shows like these - that sort of genre show that had been parked by British TV for 20 years". Having cut his teeth on costume drama, Hodges says the move from frocks to shocks initially felt as if it went against the grain - but obviously didn't worry him in the long term, given that he has also penned Survivors.

But what has prompted this plethora of fantasy programming? Julian Murphy, the producer of Demons and the BBC's Merlin, views the schedules as a victory for classic British creativity rather than showing a fad for sci-fi or horror drama.

"British TV revelled in high-concept in the 60s and 70s, but we lost it in the 80s and 90s," he says. "Certainly we all owe Doctor Who an enormous debt in that it proved high-concept shows could pull in the younger viewers ... I also think reality TV is a factor. X Factor and Big Brother create some amazing human drama, and you have to ask how scripted drama can compete. As a result I think it has to offer something more, something bigger."

As Murphy suggests, it was Russell T Davies who lit the touchpaper on this autumn's explosion when his Doctor Who pulled in large audiences - showing it wasn't just nerds who loved it. "Doctor Who proved you could schedule more imaginative drama than Casualty [on a Saturday night] and still do great business," says Laura Mackie, controller of drama at ITV. Her channel was so impressed with this idea that it plucked Primeval straight out of development hell at the BBC - where it had been mothballed because of Doctor Who.

The success of both shows prompted a search for sci-fi scripts amid an apparent shortage of specialist writers. "A lot of British TV writers are scared of stepping away from social realism," says Mackie. "They don't like the idea of creating mythological stories. And they're especially scared of creatures." (Fortunately, once more, Doctor Who has stepped into the breach. The writer of Apparitions, Joe Ahearne, for instance, has form with the Time Lord.)

And yet fantasy writing often contains a core of reality. When Rod Serling created The Twilight Zone in the late 1950s, it contained subversive anti-nuclear war, anti-McCarthyite tales; at the height of the war on terror, Lost, Battlestar Galactica and even Heroes carried messages that attacked the triumph of the right. So should we expect lots of messages with the latest shows? "They're escapist but they deal with serious topics," says Ben Stephenson, controller of drama commissioning at the BBC. "Life on Mars, for instance, was able to deal with gritty issues like racism through the prism of the concept and unpick it further than perhaps a contemporary drama could. Likewise, Doctor Who has dealt with the war on terror and Guantánamo Bay. The element of sci-fi or fantasy attached to Survivors means we can ask if the human race would turn to war or slavery if we were given the chance to start all over again."

Being Human on BBC3 in the new year is a curious genre mash-up drama about a ghost, werewolf and vampire sharing a flat in Bristol, which deals more with the horror of living in modern Britain than the horror of the undead. Andrea Riseborough - who appeared in the pilot but not the series - describes the show as "spooky but you could see the ghost as agoraphobic, the werewolf as having a disease and the vampire as a drug addict - they're outsiders and it's how they deal with that".

For Hodges, a hint of realism is essential for a British audience. "There have been American shows like Buffy, X Files and Heroes, but they don't click with the mass audience," he says. "I'm not sure they're part of our culture. I don't think we're a comic book nation in the same way - our comics are the Dandy and the Beano."

The problem for Britain's new roster of sci-fi shows is that their arrival in numbers may result in overkill - and a possible return to TV's dusty storage room to re-emerge with the occasional flourish after we reach our threshold of Jane Austen remakes. Certainly the success of Demons is crucial for ITV's drama department following hints from the network's chief operating officer, John Cresswell, that the broadcaster could scale back on drama to focus on entertainment as the economic crisis deepens.

"In the US, when Desperate Housewives and Lost came along they were able to inspire all sorts of fresh new dramas and inspire what we now recognise as a golden age of US TV," says Murphy. "I suppose the crucial thing now is - how does the industry and the audience respond? Will it fire everyone's imagination and push us into more inventive approaches to everything, or will we churn out a few slasher flicks then call it a night?"