TWILIGHT MAN

Premise for a Film/Novel

by Marc Scott Zicree
(revised 5/3/10)

It’s Christmas 1964, and Rod Serling is turning 40.

It’s not a happy time for the famed writer – his show THE TWILIGHT ZONE is winding down its final season and he’s feeling old and burnt-out, empty of ideas and nostalgic for the past, worried his best days are behind him.

To try to rekindle the spark and convince himself he’s not over the hill, on his 40th birthday he rejoins his old Airborne Squadron – the 11th – and jumps out of an airplane, just like he did over twenty years earlier when he was a World War II paratrooper in the Pacific. But instead of proving his manhood to him it all seems hollow, a celebrity publicity stunt. He wants to feel his life has meaning, that it’s not just empty gestures.

Here’s what Rod has going for him, despite his depression and doubts – he’s rich and famous, quick witted and inventive, in great shape despite how hard he drinks and smokes (he still follows the exercise regimen he learned in the military, is lean and muscular and hard), has quick reflexes and burns with anger over injustice, has empathy for the underdog, for those suffering without a champion, is out to change the world for the better, has a sharp and clever tongue, knows his way around cars and boats and planes and still has the old instincts for boxing (he was Golden Gloves in the Army), hand-to-hand combat, wielding a knife, bayonet, pistol and rifle, explosives (he was part of the 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment’s demolition platoon, nicknamed “the death squad”), is tan and blazingly handsome (despite the wrinkles and lines setting in across his face like gouges in a map), charismatic, one might even say classically heroic.

But in his heart of hearts, he feels he’s at the end of his road.

Mainly he keeps this to himself – he doesn’t want to alarm his lovely wife Carol or his pre-teen daughters Nan and Jody, who are shaping up to be every bit the head-turner Carol was when he met her at Antioch College.

(We should mention that it’s the Sixties, and both his daughters are soon-to-be nascent hippies, assuring their father he’s old-hat and not “with it” – which only reinforces Rod’s feeling of the parade having gone by.)
Interestingly, Rod doesn’t believe in many of the tropes presented in the TWILIGHT ZONE – UFOs and ghosts and the Devil and so on. He’s a clear-eyed and hardheaded skeptic. He wants to see the proof.

This all changes one night when a frantic young woman comes to Rod pleading for his help – as the creator of THE TWILIGHT ZONE she felt he alone might believe her. She’s been stalking him, has eluded Rod’s secretary and all the other gatekeepers designed to keep the quacks and kooks away from him.

But something about this frightened, breathtaking girl stops Rod from calling security and having her escorted away. There’s a quality of honesty and intelligence about her – she’s not your garden-variety lunatic (and Rod’s seen his share).

The girl is clearly terrified, and she claims that something is pursuing her, a force dark and inhuman and malignant. More than that, it’s out not just to destroy her but all of humanity, the entire world. It’s been reawakened and will have blood.

She sets about proving her case to Rod, but before she can get far she’s killed in a horrible, supernatural way that convinces Rod she was telling the truth. But now this Evil is aware of him… and wreaking a path of destruction in its attempt to eradicate him before he can stop it.

A gate has been opened and a power unleashed that can call forth terrible monsters and take over unwitting souls, turning them to its purpose (so friends and co-workers of Rod’s can suddenly turn deadly and try to kill him – especially agents).

In saving himself and his family – not to mention the world – Rod has to become a man of action again, to come fully alive and reclaim his passion and his soul. In an epic story that covers the United States as Rod alternately flees, pursues and engages this dread force from Pacific Palisades, California and the back lots of MGM to Ithaca, New York and Cayuga Lake, to the far-flung forgotten jungles of his Pacific War days (perhaps this Dread Creature is something that was unwittingly unleashed there during the war, perhaps even by Rod himself), Rod is forced to employ his keenest wits and most steely courage.

In this journey – which essentially retraces the ground of Rod’s own path from the Pacific to Hollywood – Rod enlists the aid of old cronies and war buddies, of those versed in arcane disciplines, of teachers and sages and mentors from his past.

In thrilling action set pieces involving Rod’s high-end Excalibur automobile, his state-of-the-art Chris Kraft boat, and a variety of cutting-edge 1960s airplanes, we see Rod taking on the forces of darkness with fists, blades, guns, explosives, whatever comes to hand (not to mention the sequence where he has to dive out of plane being torn to shreds by something akin to a gremlin as Rod struggles to pull on a parachute). And of course
there’s all that weird and outré knowledge he’s picked up in writing five years and ninety-two episodes of THE TWILIGHT ZONE.

In the end, Rod manages to save his own life and that of his wife and daughters, not to mention the rest of mankind, while banishing the Dark Foe once more to the realms of nothingness. He decides to keep the whole thing quiet – after all, with his reputation as a fantasy writer, who would believe him?

But reinvigorated as a man and re-energized as a creative spirit, he tells Carol the experience has given him the idea for a new show, one that will deal with the unknown and supernatural, with all the ghosties and ghoulies and things that go bump in the night.

He’ll call it… Night Gallery.

FURTHER THOUGHTS:

I think this should be something from Serling’s past come to reclaim him, something that he inadvertently awakened.

We can weave this from two facts from Serling’s real life, from his wartime experiences, the four years he spent from age seventeen to twenty.

Serling experienced hard fighting at Leyte Gulf and Manila in the Phillipines. One photo of him in the jungle as a young soldier shows him smiling while holding a human skull.

He also once related the experience of being in the jungle when suddenly a Japanese soldier sprang up in front of him, aiming his rifle point blank. Rod had no time to do anything, he knew in that moment he was dead. Then an American soldier behind him – a soldier he had not known was there – shot the Japanese soldier and Rod was saved.

So if we follow these incidents, Rod finds the skull in the jungle, gets his photo snapped, then realizes it isn’t a recent Japanese casualty it’s very old. Some ancient tomb or temple has been unearthed by artillery fire. Jokingly (or perhaps seriously, if it’s a native) someone suggests it might be magic, encourage Rod to make a wish on it. “All I want,” Rod says, “is to get out of this fucking war alive.”

Not long after, Rod has the experience with the Japanese soldier almost killing him. But when he turns to thank the American G.I. for saving his life, the figure evaporates like smoke, a mirage. In reality, it was Rod’s wish being magically granted, but he rationalizes it must be heat-stroke making him think he saw the man disappear.

Thus the beautiful young woman who comes to Serling to enlist his help is a Fillipino, and she’s sought him out to tell him that when he found that skull and made his wish he
reawakened an old horror that has been wreaking havoc ever since, gaining in power, and now the whole world is in danger. Rod must set things right because he himself started this all in motion.

And a final fillip – when Rod dispatches the creature, it somehow puts a time limit on the wish he made (maybe good forces/characters are able to delay the wish being unmade, but only to forestall it for a time, not stop it). As one of them says, “You’ll get ten more years. You’ll see your daughters come of age. You’ll see the current war end. You’ll see that you made your mark on the world.” (Maybe the reason so many things are going terribly wrong in the Sixties is due to this dark force, that’s an interesting thought….)

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