



## **From the Inner Mind to *The Outer Limits***

Retrospective by Dr. John L. Flynn

### **Introduction**

“There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmission. If we wish to make it louder, we will bring up the volume. If we wish to make it softer, we will tune it to a whisper. We will control the horizontal. We will control the vertical. We can roll the image; make it flutter. We can change the focus to a soft blur, or sharpen it to crystal clarity. For the next hour, sit quietly and we will control all that you see and hear. We repeat: There is nothing wrong with your television set. You are about to participate in a great adventure. You are about to experience the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to THE OUTER LIMITS. . .”

Those few chilling words, when first heard on September 16, 1963, introduced what many consider the best anthology series of its kind to American audiences. The three major networks produced few exceptional television shows during the decade of the Sixties, and even fewer ones with a science-fictional premise, yet widespread acclaim for *The Outer Limits* has continued more than thirty years after its untimely cancellation. Like its predecessors, including *Tales of Tomorrow*, *Science Fiction Theatre* and *The Twilight Zone*, *The Outer Limits* offered some bewitching excursions into the realm of science fiction; but it also journeyed beyond the limitless regions of time and space into the human soul. Nearly everyone who remembers the series fondly recalls the monsters that appeared in their living rooms week after week. Each new episode not only brought terrifying aliens into the homes of middle America but also complex themes and ideas about nuclear holocaust, racism, political subterfuge, jealousy, obsession, revenge and forbidden love. The show and its social conscience, often represented by the disembodied Control Voice, were the creation of two brilliant writers, Leslie Stevens and Joseph Stefano.

### **Please Stand By**

The careers of Leslie Stevens and Joseph Stefano, leading up to the creation of *The Outer Limits*, run nearly parallel to one another and seem to cross at several key points. Stevens was born on February 3, 1924, in Washington, D.C. At the age of fifteen, Stevens found a summer job touring with Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre as a gopher, and when the company moved on from Washington to Philadelphia, he ran away from home to keep the job. He gradually drifted into performing, and wrote six plays while on the road to New York. After a three-year stint in the military, he worked as a copyboy for

*Time* magazine to support himself, and continued to write dramas. He was introduced to Joseph Stefano by a mutual friend, and collaborated on several experimental projects with him to no avail. In 1954, Stevens' *Champagne Complex* debuted on Broadway to less than favorable reviews but brought him into the public eye. His next play, *The Lovers*, was optioned by Franklin Schaffner as a vehicle for Charlton Heston. Not long after, he was writing scripts for anthology series like *Kraft Television Theatre* and *Playhouse 90*, which ultimately led to his formation of Daystar Productions. His first major accomplishment as the president of Daystar was the television series, *Stoney Burke* (a contemporary Western for ABC).

Joseph Stefano was born on May 5, 1922, in South Philadelphia, and began performing at the age of seventeen as a singer and dancer in local productions. After being rejected by the military (for two punctured eardrums), he went to New York City to join the touring company of *The Student Prince*. He gradually drifted into songwriting, and wrote a number of nightclub revues for some of the more popular stars of the day. He even wrote songs for recording artists Sammy Davis Jr. and Eydie Gorme. While living in Greenwich Village, Stefano first encountered Leslie Stevens. They began marketing several projects to the networks, including a musical soap opera, but nothing much came from this early collaboration. In 1956, Stefano tried his hand at screenwriting, and produced *The Black Orchid* for an hour-long anthology series. Carlo Ponti saw the completed show, and purchased the film rights for his then-wife Sophia Loren. Not long after, Stefano was a hot property, writing dozens of scripts which ultimately led to his assignment to write *Psycho* for Alfred Hitchcock. That singular script made his name and reputation.

By 1963, both men were firmly entrenched in the Hollywood system; both were highly regarded and respected for their writing talents, and both had followed the other's career with equal enthusiasm. So, it was only a matter of course that when Stevens first approached Daniel Melnick, the twenty-eight year-old vice-president of programming at ABC, with his idea for a science-fiction anthology, he turned to his old friend to make the show a reality. Too busy with his other commitments (including *Stoney Burke*), he relied on Stefano to rough out the canons of *Please Stand By* (the original title for the series) to clinch the deal with the network.

In his fifteen-page "bible" for the series, Joseph Stefano wrote: "If you believe in something, if you are angry or disturbed about something . . . be it conformity, discrimination, politics, censorship, patriotism, capital punishment, disarmament, man's inaccessibility to man, or fame or famine, moral or physical slavery, or addiction, mass culture, or fanaticism or isolation, or peace, you have the thread . . ." He was not only responsible for the show's creative vision but also for its trademark hook, which came to be known as the "bear." "Each play must have a Bear. The Bear is that one splendid, staggering, shuddering effect that induces awe and wonder, or tolerable terror, or even merely conversation or wonderment. There must be no apology or smirk; each drama, no matter how wordless or timeless, must be spoken with all the • seriousness and sincerity and suspension of disbelief that a caring and intelligent parent employs in spinning a tale to a child at bedtime . . ."

As the central ideas of the series came together, the title was changed from *Please Stand By* (fearing that the opening might be mistaken as a real emergency alert) to

*Beyond Control* to eventually *The Outer Limits*. Leslie Stevens originated the idea of a "control voice" as a device to introduce each program, and completed work on the pilot episode. *The Galaxy Being*, written and directed by Stevens, embraced most of the themes that were to become hallmarks of the series; in fact, prospective writers were instructed to base their own contributions on this first episode. In the pilot, Cliff Robertson played a scientist who makes radio, and eventually visual, contact with an alien being from another galaxy. Obsessed with his discovery, he neglects both his wife and radio station, and later must leave his work unattended in order to atone at a social function given in his honor. When an unexpected power surge strikes the station, the "galaxy being" is transmitted via radio waves to earth. The creature's unusual appearance terrifies the townspeople. Frightened and largely misunderstood, the alien commits suicide to prevent his capture by a mob of petty, small-minded humans. In his final words, he warns that there are strange and awesome powers in the universe that man may soon encounter.

The pilot episode for *The Outer Limits* did not look like the kind of mass market program that the networks usually churned out. The one-hour show was actually about something, and its message of anti-racism, though allegorical in nature, was very clear. The episode also had the requisite menace and enough action and suspense to satisfy the network. Melnick and the other executives at ABC-TV liked what they saw, and gave final approval for the series. Leslie Stevens concedes it was probably the optimism of the Kennedy era that encouraged Daystar "to made some dent in the mass mediocrity of television." Only now, in retrospect, do his words seem truly prophetic and strangely unsettling.

## **Beyond Control**

The mysterious, otherworldly Control Voice of *The Outer Limits* first took command of American television sets in the Fall of 1963--a turbulent year that was like no other in history. Earlier that year, Martin Luther King, Jr. had delivered his now-famous "I have a Dream" speech on the mall in Washington, D.C., sketching out his utopian view of racial equality; Great Britain, the United States and the U.S.S.R. signed a nuclear test ban treaty limiting but not ending their dangerous experimentation with atomic weapons; Soviet Cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in orbit, upping the stakes in the space race; the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam led to escalating tensions in Southeast Asia; the Rolling Stones formed as a rock band in England, and author Sylvia Plath died shortly after completing *The Bell Jar*. Within a few months of the show's first broadcast, John F. Kennedy was gunned down in Dallas by Lee Harvey Oswald, football running back Jim Brown set a record for rushes (of 1,863 yards), and the Beatles left Liverpool for the United States and the launch of their own invasion. The year 1963 was like no other in history; it was the end of the age of innocence, and the beginning of a decade of great change and social unrest, the Sixties.

Leslie Stevens and his collaborator Joseph Stefano wanted their series to reflect the turbulent changes happening in the world around them. They set very high standards of content and presentation and, more often than not, the series achieved a high degree of sophistication and expression. Some of the better episodes, those not meant to be taken literally but as allegories, struck right at the very foundation of society, by dealing with issues other shows were far too timid to address.

"The great appeal of doing a science-fiction show was the ability to write about things you could never write on any other show," Stefano recently explained. "If you wrote just a straight drama show about racism or atomic war without the gimmick of either horror or science fiction, people wouldn't watch it. You know, the moment you did you'd be preaching."

With the limits of its weekly budget, most of the shows concentrated more on complex ideas and themes rather than splashy special effects. In fact, the best of the episodes not only dealt with the very real concerns and problems of the day but also raised questions about their long-ranging implications. *O.B.I.T* (first aired on 11/4/63) anticipated the Watergate scandal (nearly a decade later) by presenting a senatorial investigation into the misuse of electronic surveillance equipment. *Nightmare* (first aired on 12/2/63) examined the cruel and inhuman treatment of prisoners of war long before revelations about POW camps in Korea and Vietnam came to light. *Production and Decay of Strange Particles* (4/20/64) addressed the fears of a nuclear reactor leak and meltdown more than fifteen years before Three Mile Island. Other episodes dealt with issues that were equally prophetic and disturbing, including disclosures about a military industrial complex within the government in *The Invisibles* (2/3/64), the mishandling of energy in *It Crawled out of the Woodwork* (12/9/63), the fearful consequences of nuclear war in *The Architects of Fear* (9/30/63), the insanity of eugenics experimentation in *The Sixth Finger* (10/14/63), racism and ethnocentricity in *Children of Spider County* (3/2/64).

## The Production Team

Stefano ensured the quality and sophistication of the series by hiring the best professionals of the day; in fact, those connected with the show had influences and interests that extended beyond traditional Hollywood styles and approaches. He chose to ignore science fiction writers in favor of mainstream authors like Robert Towne (who would later write *Chinatown* and *Shampoo*), Anthony Lawrence (*Roustabout*), David Duncan (*The Time Machine*) and Dean Riesner (*Dirty Harry* and *Rich Man, Poor Man*). Stefano felt that mainstream authors would concentrate more on character development and less on hardware. And his instincts were correct. The better episodes, like Towne's *Chameleon* (4/27/64) and Lawrence's *Man Who Was Never Born* (10/28/63), were gripping tales about men trapped by the circumstances of their birth or occupation. In the first season of the show, Stefano also wrote eleven episodes, while Stevens contributed three others.

*The Outer Limits* proved to be a showplace for talented directors, musicians and actors as well. Gerd Oswald, who had directed dozens of feature films since emigrating from Germany, brought with him the best of the German expressionist movement. Byron Haskin, who had made a handful of classic science fiction films with George Pal, endowed each of his segments with the terror of *War of the Worlds* or the wonder of *Destination Moon*. Oswald directed twelve of the finest episodes of the first season (a total of sixteen from both seasons), while Haskin helmed three of the others (six total). One of the show's many strengths was also its eerie, and often hauntingly romantic, score, and each episode showcased the brilliant compositions of Dominic Frontiere. ABC-TV liked the music so much that it was later recycled, almost note-for-note, as background



for *The Fugitive* and *The Invaders*. Of course, the show would have been merely style and substance without the contribution of its actors. Skilled performers like Cliff Robertson, Robert Culp, Martin Landau, Robert Duvall, David McCallum, Don Gordon, Barry Morse, Carrol O'Connor, Edward Mulhare, Warren Oates, Martin Sheen, Edward Asner, Sally Kellerman and Shirley Knight added a certain intensity to each episode.

The special effects and makeup were also an important factor in the success of the series. A typical episode was budgeted at \$150,000, and nearly \$40,000 was spent on realizing the "bear" and its otherworldly environs. Joe Stefano employed the Ray Mercer Company and Projects Unlimited, two small companies that specialized in unusual effects. Twenty-three year-old Jim Danforth (who would later distinguish himself as a stop-motion animator), Gene Warren, Wah Chang and others were ultimately responsible for creating that "one splendid. . .shuddering effect" that sold the series--its monsters.

More than any other factor, the cinematography used throughout the first season gave the series its dark, brooding and distinctive style. "I wanted these episodes to have the look of foreign films. . .foreign films at the time had a very special quality about them," Stefano revealed. "Whether they were Bergmanesque or Japanese in feeling, there was something we were not doing over here, and certainly not in television. I wanted, and got, a dramatic look to those shows."

In fact, much of *The Outer Limits'* unique visual style was owed to its two most prodigious cinematographers Connie [Conrad] Hall and John Nickolaus. Both Hall and Nickolaus had already worked for Stevens' Daystar Productions, and were familiar with the creative limitations of a weekly deadline. By alternating episodes, the two were able

to spend more time on each new show. They employed certain photographic techniques--like the use of slanted camera angles, extreme close-ups or hand-held cameras--that had never been used on television. They also experimented with Vaseline-smearred lens or super-wide-angle shots in order to distort images for an unsettling effect. No other single contribution was as essential to capturing the "awe and mystery" of *The Outer Limits*.

### **The Awe and Mystery**

During its first season, the series aired on Mondays at 7:30 p.m. (EST) opposite *To Tell the Truth* and *I've Got a Secret* (on CBS) and a movie (on NBC). The ratings were not spectacular, but they were strong and solid. They were particularly high with the demographic groups the network targeted its advertising (notably the young and those who were well-educated). Though the critics were deliberately harsh in their appraisal of the series, it soon became a cult favorite, one of the must-see shows of the week. Younger viewers thrilled to the inventive monsters and special effects, while older watchers--some of whom were science fiction enthusiasts--willingly followed the show on whatever excursion it took into the unknown.

Joe Stefano and his production staff gradually built up a certain trust with the show's audience, and maintained that trust throughout the first season with quality episodes which were also highly literate. While the show was not entirely without faults, a weak episode was still light years ahead of its competition. "The very awesome and wondrous nature of Science, especially when fused with imaginative and inventive Fiction, would seem to beg and perhaps inspire high-level thinking and writing," Stefano outlined for his writers. Many of his own scripts were among the best of the show,

pushing the outer envelope of literary conventions with stunning narratives and poetic imagery. In *A Feasibility Study* (4/13/64), rather than let an alien race enslave all of mankind, a select few join hands and welcome certain death. In *The Bellerophon Shield* (2/10/64), the classic tragedy of Macbeth is replayed when a scientist accidentally captures a space creature and the scientist's wife plots to steal its protective, force shield. In another one of Stefano's scripts, *The Forms of Things Unknown* (5/6/64), which was filmed twice (once as an unsold pilot for a suspense series), a "tinkerer in time" resurrects a philandering husband to face the wife and the mistress who murdered him.

But not all of the episodes were dark and brooding. One of the more imaginative outings of *The Outer Limits* was actually a comedy. *Controlled Experiment* (1/13/64), a "bottle" show written and directed by Leslie Stevens as a cost-cutting measure, featured two Martians who have been sent to earth to study our peculiar notion of homicide. By using a machine that could alter or rewind time, they examine the aspects of a murder in slow and reverse motion. The comic re-showing of film footage at varying speeds not only brought the episode in well under budget but also proved the series had a sense of humor. At the half-way point in the season, network executives still didn't seem to know what their strange new show was about, but it had proven successful, and was renewed for another season. However, just before production began on the second season, ABC-TV announced that their popular series would be moved to Saturday nights, opposite the formidable *Jackie Gleason Show*. Their decision would spell ultimate doom for the series.

"I left the show at the end of the first season because of the change in time slots," Stefano confessed. "I told the network if they made a move like that the show was dead. I thought we had established that Monday night hour as ours, and it was insane to use us to try to knock off the big boy down the street. It was pointless to work my ass off eighteen hours a day producing and writing a show that was going to be killed. You know, I was in such firm disagreement with the schedule change that I refused to be involved. The show went half a season, and the network cancelled it."

*The Outer Limits* was replaced by Irwin Allen's *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, which ran for four years (only one of those years on Monday nights). "If they had left the show where it was, in its original time slot, it would have had a five-year run," he speculated. "Instead it just went down the tubes. . ."

### **Fall from Grace**

Joseph Stefano's resignation was followed shortly by the departure of Leslie Stevens, who simply washed his hands of the project. As co-creators of the show, they would continue to receive residuals, but neither wanted any more to do with it. Ben Brady, who had guided *Perry Mason* through its early years, was brought in by the network to replace Stefano. Brady had been one of the executives at ABC who had given approval to *Please Stand By*, and had been at odds with Stevens over budget and the general direction of the show throughout the first season. When he assumed control, he began rethinking most of the classic elements of the show. Brady very quickly dispensed with the bears, perhaps in response to critics, and shifted the emphasis from gothic character studies to hard science. The makeup budget was slashed, and every effort was

made to limit the number of special effects. Dominic Frontiere's main theme music and haunting melodies were replaced by the harsh, discordant sounds of Harry Lubin. Brady fired both Conrad Hall and John Nicholaus, concluding that their film-noirish cinematography was far too strange for contemporary audiences, but retained Kenneth Peach (who had photographed a few of the less-inspired episodes). In essence, Ben Brady totally remade *The Outer Limits* into a completely different show.

Perhaps the only inspired change in direction the second season took was in its selection of writers. When Brady made the decision to shift emphasis in story content, he hired Seeleg Lester to recruit science-fiction writers. Lester, in turn, sought out A.E. Van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon, Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont, and ended up buying stories from Ib Melchoir, Otto Binder, Jerry Sohl and Clifford Simak. Roughly half of the seventeen episodes of the second season were derived from published science fiction. One of Lester's great discoveries was a young Harlan Ellison, who wrote two of *The Outer Limits*' finest episodes, *Soldier* (9/19/64) and *Demon With a Glass Hand* (10/17/64). Both stories went on to win the prestigious Hugo award for science fiction, and years after, *Demon* was honored at the Trieste Film Festival.

Unfortunately, not all of the episodes from the second season were as good. Some episodes, including *I, Robot* (11/14/64) and *The Duplicate Man* (12/19/64), succeeded as fairly routine examples of science fiction. Some, like *Counterweight* (12/26/64), were inferior copies of first season favorites, while others, like *Cry of Silence* (10/24/64) (which introduced sentient tumbleweeds) and *The Invisible Enemy* (10/31/64) (sand sharks), were simply laughable. *The Inheritors* (11/21 & 28/64), the series' only two-part

episode, and *The Premonition* (1/9/65) looked like they belonged to another show. (To this day, fans still confuse *The Premonition* as an episode of *The Twilight Zone* or *One Step Beyond*.)

The series lost ground during its second season when ABC-TV placed it in competition with Saturday night's most popular show. *The Outer Limits* struggled not only against *The Jackie Gleason Show* (on CBS) but also *Flipper* and *The Famous Adventures of Mr. Magoo* (on NBC). Its once loyal following, comprised of the young and intellectual, were busy with other activities. Saturday night was, after all, a big date night. By January, the series had dropped so significantly in the ratings (as Stefano had predicted) it was cancelled.

### **The Legacy of the Outer Limits**

Ultimately, *The Outer Limits* thrived in syndication, and is more popular today than it was over thirty years ago. Fans of the show still discuss the merits of Stefano's vision over Brady's at science fiction conventions, while computer geeks rate individual episodes on the Internet. A recent, unofficial poll on American On Line (AOL) found that most fans consider Harlan Ellison's *Demon with the Glass Hand* to be the best, with *Nightmare*, *The Zanti Misfits* and *It Crawled Out of the Woodwork* as distant seconds. (Ellison has announced that fans of *Demon* will soon be able to find out what befalls Trent in a novel version.)

Those who were involved in the show have carried its legacy to other science fiction projects. Stevens went onto develop *Search*, *The Invisible Man*, its spin-off *Gemini Man*, and worked on *Battlestar Galactica* and *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*.

Stefano wrote *Eye of the Cat* (based on his never-filmed *Outer Limits* script, *The Cats*), and one of *Star Trek-The Next Generation's* most popular episodes, *Skein of Evil*.

Dominic Frontiere composed the theme music for *The Invaders*, and Conrad Hall won his first Oscar for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Before retiring, Byron Haskin directed *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* and *The Power*. Gerd Oswald helmed several *Star Trek* and *The New Twilight Zone* episodes. Many other alumni, including Robert Justman, Fred Phillips and Wah Chang, also took permanent positions on *Star Trek*.

*The Outer Limits* gave television some of its finest, most literate and intelligent moments. Its continued popularity not only inspires other shows (like *The X-Files*) but also speculation about a feature film or a brand new series. Back in 1985, in a year that saw the return of *The Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, Leslie Stevens and Joseph Stefano were asked to prepare a two-hour pilot. Stevens chose to remake his own *Controlled Experiment*, and Stefano dusted off Robert Specht's original script for *Fun & Games* (titled *Natural Selection*) for a new version of the classic story. The pilot never made it beyond the planning stages, and was once again cancelled by ABC. In 1995, however, Showtime revived *The Outer Limits* with a new series of episodes. Joseph Stefano was asked to serve as a creative consultant, but had very little impact on the actual selection of the episodes. Some were very good, while others failed to live up to the task of controlling our television sets and taking us on excursions into the unknown.

Individual episodes play every couple of months on the Sci-Fi channel. The new Blu-Ray Boxed Set packages both seasons together, and features some of the classic show's finest programs including *The Galaxy Being*, *The Architects of Fear*, *Soldier*,

*Demon With a Glass Hand, The Zanti Misfits, The Sixth Finger, A Feasibility Study* and *The Duplicate Man*. The transfer to Blu-Ray--particularly of the film-noirish *Don't Open Till Doomsday*--provides a "crystal clarity" unseen since their first telecasts in the early Sixties. Each disc also captures the brilliant cinematography of Conrad Hall and John Nickolaus. Crescendo Records has also released Dominic Frontiere's haunting music from the series on tape and CD. Included in the recording are selections from *The Man Who Was Never Born* and *Nightmare*, as well as the opening and closing narrations and sampler of the show's sound effects. A graphic novel from DC Comics showcased Ellison's revised script for *Demon*, and Dell comics also produced a handful of comics based on the series.

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