

# DIMENSIONS OF IMAGINATION

The Official Newsletter of the Rod Serling Memorial Foundation



FALL 2025 | SERLINGFEST



## NOTES FROM NICK

### An Update from RSMF President Nick Parisi

Hello, and welcome to the latest installment of Dimensions of Imagination. If you were unable to attend SerlingFest 2025, this issue may provide both good news and bad. Starting with the bad, if you had been experiencing FOMO while SerlingFest was underway, this issue will likely validate that fear: you missed a GREAT time. On the other hand, in the pages that follow, you will find reproductions of several presentations that were delivered at SerlingFest, and we hope that reading them will prove to be the next best thing to having been there.

SerlingFest 2025: In His Own Words was held from September 19-21 in Rod's hometown of Binghamton, New York, as always. A few days

after it ended, and the members of the RSMF's Board of Directors had all had a chance to catch our breath, we unanimously agreed that this was our best, most successful SerlingFest to date. The reason for this assessment is difficult to quantify - certainly attendance and total revenue play a part - but more significant is the tremendously enthusiastic response from not only those who bought tickets, but from those who attended as our special guests.

On that note, I would like to use this space to offer yet another heartfelt thanks to each of those guests: Frank Spotnitz, Joe Dougherty, David Bianculli, and Jonah Tulis, as well as each member of our own Board who



participated: Tony Albarella, Mark Dawidziak, Mark Olshaker, Amy Boyle Johnston, Anne Serling, and Jeff Serling. The contributions of these people make SerlingFest a yearly affirmation of our mission to promote and preserve Rod

Serling's legacy. Will you be joining us next year? Nicholas Parisi President, The Rod Serling Memorial Foundation



### OUR PLEDGE

Rod Serling's achievements in playwriting, speech making and broadcasting are considerable and important. As members of The Rod Serling Memorial Foundation, we dedicate ourselves to promote and preserve this great man's contributions to the Arts and Humanities.

We pledge to educate the public about Rod Serling's genius and his passion, hoping that they will understand and appreciate his mastery of the creative arts, his unique understanding of human relationships, his esteem as a writer, his generosity as a speaker in and around Binghamton, and his uncompromising commitment to quality.

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## NEWSDESK

### Ohio Historical Marker Honoring Rod Serling Unveiled at Antioch College



RSMF board members Mark Dawidziak, Anne Serling and Doug Sutton

By Mark Dawidziak

An Ohio Historical Marker honoring Rod Serling was unveiled at Antioch College on Oct. 2, 2025, the 66th anniversary of the premiere of *The Twilight Zone*. Among those speaking during the dedication ceremony at the Yellow Springs college were

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, Antioch President Jane Fernandes, and RSMF board member Anne Serling.

"The marker that we are placing here today commemorates a man who used television and writing to share his profound understanding

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# FOUNDATION

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of human nature and a strong sense of social justice,” Fernandes said. “It is essential that we honor and preserve the history and legacies of people like Rod Serling . . . May this marker inspire us to find what connects us as human beings.”

Reeling from his hellish experiences as an Army paratrooper in the South Pacific during World War II, Serling enrolled at Antioch on the GI Bill in 1946. He planned on becoming a physical education major, but, realizing that writing provided a cathartic outlet, switched to language and literature.

Handling the actual unveiling duties were Antioch College archivist Scott Sanders and Antioch student River Esquivel (Class of 2026). One side of the marker details Serling’s connections to Antioch and Ohio. The other side summarizes his writing career.

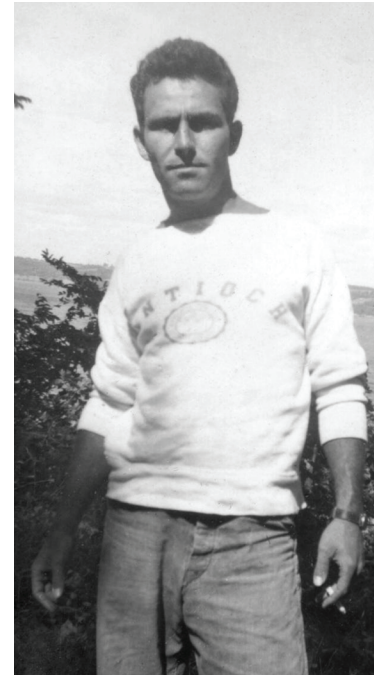
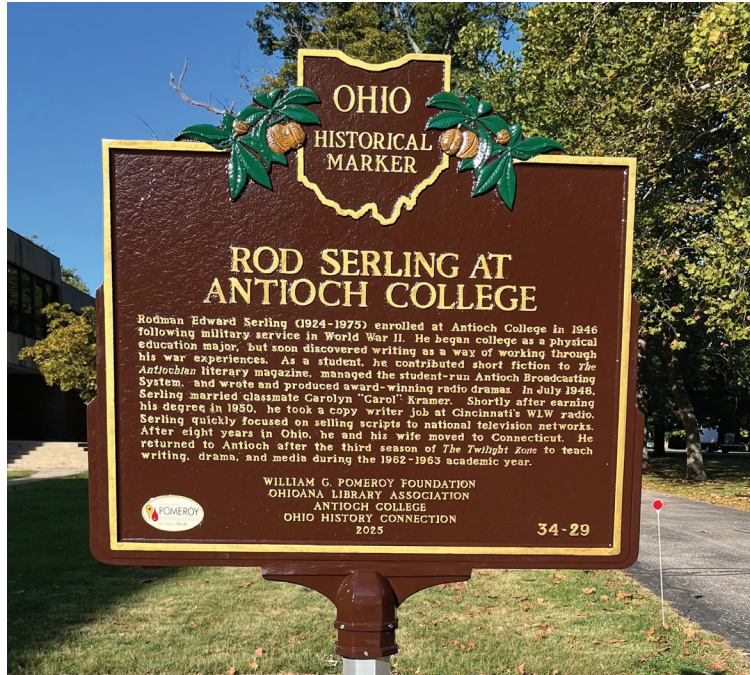
Serling’s true apprenticeship as a writer began when he was named manager of the student-operated campus radio station. He was writing and directing a new show every week, often acting in productions broadcast on Springfield stations WJEM-FM and WJEL-AM. He also managed to sell scripts to national radio anthology shows while at Yellow Springs.

“My dad loved Antioch, particularly the work study program,” Anne Serling said. “His decision to confront his war trauma by switching his major to language and literature was likely in no small measure life-saving. As he said in an interview, ‘I had to write it down. Get it off my chest. Out of my gut.’ Thank you for bringing him home again today. Though my father would have never been accused of being at a loss of words, this event would have challenged that. Frankly, I think he would have been so surprised, so honored and touched, he would have been speechless.”

Located outside of Antioch’s South Hall, the Marker was a joint effort by the Ohioana Library Association, Antioch College, Yellow Springs Film Festival, and Anne Serling.

During his first year at Antioch, Serling met Columbus native Carolyn Louise “Carol” Kramer, a 17-year-old education major. They were married on July 31, 1948, in Columbus.

“It was here that dad was conditioned to explore the



horizons of writing that he would later use to menace the public consciousness,” Jodi Serling said in written remarks read by Kim Kiehl, executive director of Ohioana. “He was so much more than just a talented creative artist and a unique storyteller. He was also a kind and caring gentleman and a loving husband, father and friend.”

After graduation in 1950, Serling moved to Cincinnati, where he found work as a staff writer at AM radio station WLW. He soon was selling scripts to both local and national live drama series.

The Serlings moved to Connecticut in 1954. Serling, who only lived to be 50, spent eight of his adult years in Ohio. He also returned to Antioch in 1962, accepting a teaching position after the third season of *Twilight Zone*.

“We are very proud to claim him as an Ohioan,” said DeWine, who shared a picture of Serling as an Antioch student attending a seminar in the home of English professor Albert Liddle, the governor’s maternal grandfather.

The unveiling also commemorated Serling’s addition to the Ohioana Library Association’s Ohio Literary Trail, which charts the state’s rich literary traditions and spotlights such writers as Toni Morrison, Hart Crane, James Thurber, Louis Bromfield and Paul Laurence Dunbar.

RSMF board member Mark Dawidziak is the author or editor of more than two dozen books, including “Everything I Need to Know I Learned in *The Twilight Zone*.”



Top left: The Ohio Historical Marker honoring Rod Serling stands on the campus of Antioch College in Yellow Springs; Top right: Rod proudly wearing an Antioch College sweatshirt during a late 1940s stay at the family cottage on Cayuga Lake in upstate New York. (Photo courtesy of Anne Serling) Middle: Carol and Rod Serling Carol and Rod in a student group photo; Bottom: Rod Serling, right, at a seminar type class at the home of his Antioch English professor Albert Liddle (this photo was displayed at the Ohio Historical Marker unveiling by Governor Mike DeWine, Liddle’s grandson). Photo courtesy of Antiochiana, Antioch College

## The Enduring Impact of Rod Serling

By Nicholas Parisi

"I don't like picking favorites in anything – favorite food, favorite color . . . but if I had to pick my favorite TV series ever, I would say *Twilight Zone* – the original *Twilight Zone*. I would have loved to have met Rod Serling."

Vince Gilligan, creator of *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, said this at the Paley Center in New York City while promoting his latest series, *Pluribus*, which began streaming on November 7. The series' premise (and its classic "ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances" foundation) is vaguely *Twilight Zone*-esque: an alien virus has caused the bulk of humanity to become interconnected, each individual sharing the thoughts, memories and abilities of everyone else on Earth.

Rhea Seehorn stars as Carol Sturka, one of very few who is immune to the virus and, thus, remains capable of independent thought. Gilligan explicitly acknowledged that he took his protagonist's surname from characters in *The Twilight Zone*'s "Third from the Sun." One YouTuber has since posted a detailed analysis, positing that the series is a sequel to that episode. However accurate or inaccurate that theory may be, we can safely add *Pluribus* to the ever-growing list of television series, films, and even music, that owe a debt to Rod Serling and his most famous creation.

If you attended SerlingFest 2025 and arrived early enough on Saturday morning, you heard me discuss a handful of other recent examples illustrating how Rod Serling's influence and impact continue to be demonstrated. And so, my apologies to those who will find the rest of this piece familiar.

In the literary world, 2025 brought a significant tribute to Rod Serling in the form of Joseph Dougherty's book, *Rod Serling at 100: One Writer's Acknowledgement*. Joe was a first-time guest at SerlingFest this year, and you can find my review of his terrific book in the Fall 2024 issue of our newsletter.

One of the more prominent *Twilight Zone* references and



Ariana Grande Halloween 2019; Rhea Seehorn as Carol Sturka in *Pluribus*; Jess Bush, Rhys Darby and Ethan Peck, *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*

tributes in 2025 was the April release of Ariana Grande's single "Twilight Zone," which reached *Billboard*'s top 10. This was not Grande's first foray into the *Twilight Zone* – some years ago she publicly appeared as one of the "beautiful" people from "The Eye of the Beholder" for Halloween. Grande has sold an estimated 90 million records. She was born nearly 30 years after *The Twilight Zone* aired its final original episode. The level of fandom that she has displayed is pretty good evidence of how tremendously relevant Rod Serling's creation still is.

*Pluribus* may now own the mantle of hottest streaming series (so many people accessed Apple TV to stream the debut that it briefly crashed the Apple servers), but for the past few years this title would have to go to another Apple TV series, *Severance*, created by Dan Erickson. On March 13, 2025, the series released an episode written by Erickson, titled "The After Hours." In his script, Erickson made obvious his debt to that Serling-penned *Twilight Zone* episode with an exchange of dialogue referencing Marsha White (mannequin-turned-human in the *Twilight Zone* episode), the department store's mysterious ninth floor that Marsha visits, and the gold thimble that she was

shopping for.

On April 18, 2025, *Sinners*, a supernatural horror film from writer/director Ryan Coogler was released in theaters. When asked to cite the inspiration for the film, Coogler said, "My favorite thing ever made is *The Twilight Zone*, and my favorite episode is 'The Last Rites of Jeff Myrtlebank' . . . probably (Stephen King's novel) 'Salem's Lot' and 'The Last Rites of Jeff Myrtlebank' are the biggest influences." If nothing else, Coogler's comment demonstrates that it's not only the "classic" episodes that persist in the collective consciousness; even a relatively obscure episode like "Jeff Myrtlebank" has the power to inspire more than 60 years after it first aired.

*The Twilight Zone* and *Star Trek* have shared multiple pieces of connective tissue, from Richard Matheson and George Clayton Johnson having contributed to both series, to dozens of actors appearing in both. A few years back, one of the creators of *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, Akiva Goldsman, said this about his series:

"One thing we try to do is to use science fiction as a lens on a modern dilemma. And in the

'60s, *Star Trek* was the first among equals to really do that well. But it owed a great deal to *The Twilight Zone* in that respect, creating these kinds of O. Henry-style stories for science fiction. I think the original *Star Trek* owes a small debt to Rod Serling, and all the *Trek* series after that owe a debt to both."

The first-season finale of *Strange New Worlds* was titled "A Quality of Mercy." Whether that was a reference to Shakespeare or to the *Twilight Zone* episode by that name is anyone's guess. In its second season, *Strange New Worlds* introduced a starship named the USS Cayuga. Again, whether that name was chosen as any kind of tribute to Rod Serling (his production company was named Cayuga Productions) is uncertain. But in its *third* season, on July 17, 2025, *Strange New Worlds* went the distance and directly referenced a *Twilight Zone* episode, "It's a Good Life."

The episode, "Wedding Bell Blues," involves the impending wedding of Mr. Spock and Nurse Christine Chappel – an event that Dr. Roger Corby (and eventually Mr. Spock) realize is only happening because of the manipulation of a being who combines God-like powers with child-like mischievousness. Although unnamed, it is implied that this character is Trelane, who had been introduced in the original *Star Trek* episode, "The Squire of Gothos." When Spock and Corby resist Trelane's wedding machinations, he threatens to *send them to a cornfield*.

We're all aware of Rod Serling's famous quote that "Nothing I have written will be remembered 100 years hence." Well, with a single reference, *Star Trek* has established that not only will *The Twilight Zone* (and by extension, Rod Serling, of course) remain relevant at least 200 years from now – it will have expanded its reach to the point that is being quoted by *alien cultures across the galaxy*.

Far-fetched? Not by a long shot. It sounds perfectly reasonable to me.

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RSMF President Nick Parisi is the author of *Rod Serling: His Life, Work, and Imagination*.

# SERLINGFEST 2025

## Rod Serling: Not only a Great Artist, But a Great Man

This article served as the keynote address of the 2025 SerlingFest.

By Frank Spotnitz

Rod Serling imagined entire worlds spinning out of control. So it feels particularly appropriate for us to be talking about him right now.

My family and I moved to London 15 years ago. I haven't really kept up with the news here in the States since I left. I have the impression that a few things have changed...?

OK, maybe I have noticed a few things.

Times have changed. And they're still changing.

We're living in an age of profound anxiety. About the direction our country is headed in... the rise of right-wing authoritarianism, not just in the US, but around the world... the seemingly unchecked acceleration of climate change, and its consequences... and the incredible power and peril of artificial intelligence, which seems certain to disrupt every aspect of our lives in ways good and bad – soon, perhaps very soon.

How will we meet these challenges? What kind of lives will our children and grandchildren lead? What should we as individuals do when the problems we face seem so vast? What can we do?

Questions. So many questions. I'll come back to them. But first I want to talk a little bit about "The Twilight Zone." About what makes it such a remarkable series. And about an even more remarkable man.

Certain works of art defy time. They remain relevant, generation after generation. Great paintings can do this. Great books and plays, too. But movies and especially television are the most perishable of art forms. So many things about them can cause them to date rapidly. Whether they're shot in black and white or color. Recorded on film, video or kinescope. The pace of the editing. The style of the lighting. Of the music. Of the acting.

There are a handful of movies that have what I call "grace." They seem imperishable, no matter how much the times have changed. I would put *The Wizard of Oz* on



Television writer and producer Frank Spotnitz delivering the keynote address at SerlingFest 2025.

that list. *Casablanca* and *The Godfather* as well. But when it comes to television? Honestly there's only one show I would put on that list. Of course it's *The Twilight Zone*.

When I was a kid, I saw hours and hours of TV. I watched everything, indiscriminately. TV and movies were my lifeline. They shaped how I saw the world, who I would become.

As I grew into teenage years and adulthood, the series I returned to again and again, more than any other, was *The Twilight Zone*.

I didn't really know what gave the show its special power. Not even after I became a television writer myself and got my first job writing for *The X-Files*, a series that in no small measure was inspired by *The Twilight Zone*.

It was only after I had been working on the show for a few years that I began to understand just how great a debt I owed to Rod Serling. In *The X-Files*, and in all the writing I've done since, from *The Man in the High Castle* to *Medici* and beyond, I realized that I had internalized the lessons I learned from his incomparable storytelling and tried to apply them to my own.

Anyone in television will tell you that the format of *The Twilight Zone* – the anthology – is the most difficult to pull off. I've never attempted it, and most broadcasters are scared to death of it. That's because you're starting from scratch each week, with a completely new cast in a completely new situation.

You don't have the emotional investment in returning characters to earn the loyalty of your audience.

Rod Serling was a master craftsman. Even without series regulars, he understood how to entertain an audience. To engage their emotions. And, more than that, to make them care. And how to do all of that in the minute or two before the opening titles and first commercial break. Take it from me, it's incredibly difficult.

Mr. Serling didn't stop there, of course. Because he wasn't just a master craftsman. He was a great artist. Once he engaged our emotions, he kept us engaged throughout the entire episode. And then each episode invariably led to an ending that felt both surprising – and inevitable. That's not only difficult, it's astonishing.

But even that – even the power of a great ending – was not his greatest achievement. I believe that Rod Serling's greatest achievement in *The Twilight Zone* – and really all the writing he did, from "Patterns" and "Requiem for a Heavyweight" straight through *Planet of the Apes* and *Night Gallery* – was this:

He made us think. He didn't tell us what to think. He made us think, by telling stories that asked questions. Interesting questions. Difficult questions. Heartbreaking questions. Questions that Mr. Serling himself may not have known how to answer. But ones that he cared deeply about. And that he wanted us to care about, too.

That's what great art does. It enlarges your understanding of others, and yourself. It touches your heart. Engages your mind. Moves your soul. And makes you think about the places you and other people hold in the world. Stories are our only chance to experience life through someone else's eyes.

That's why *The Twilight Zone* stayed with me – and still stays with me, all these years later – when so many other series haven't.

Who were the characters Rod Serling made us care about? Rarely the rich, the famous. Almost always the humble, the plain, the everyday. People in whose ordinary lives Mr. Serling saw something extraordinary. In whose lives he saw meaning. And value.

It was important to me to be here this evening, not just to celebrate *The Twilight Zone*, a show that has given me so much and for which I will always be grateful. But more than that, to celebrate Rod Serling. A man who has given us all so much.

Many of you may have seen the interview Mr. Serling gave Mike Wallace. He talked about his struggles with network sponsors, how excruciating it was being forced to bowdlerize stories he desperately wanted to tell about social and racial injustice.

People might think of Rod Serling as liberal or progressive, what today we might call a "blue state" kind of guy. And that may well describe his politics. But I don't believe it describes Mr. Serling's art. Or explains its incredible, lasting power.

Rod Serling's great insight was that by leaving behind strict reality – by entering "the Twilight Zone" – he could get at deeper truths. About the quality of kindness. The power of mercy. And the dangers of fear. And ignorance. And hatred.

*The Twilight Zone* shows us that good doesn't always conquer evil, and that life is not about happy endings. Victory means nothing when it costs us our humanity. And triumph lies in holding to a moral code, even in the face of fear, temptation, or death. Especially then.

By entering "the Twilight Zone,"

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# SERLINGFEST 2025

## Riding the “Walking Distance” Carousel Unlocks Childhood Memories

By Joseph Dougherty

I'll tell you about the most surprising part. The part I've been considering ever since I left Binghamton after presenting at this year's SerlingFest. And I don't see that consideration fading any time soon. Or ever. It's one of those things you keep turning in your mind, the way you'd turn a glass paperweight, looking at it from different angles.

The thing I wasn't expecting was Recreation Park. I expected the events, the people, the personal pilgrimage of the Fest. And certainly Recreation Park was going to be part of that. I knew I was going to visit the statue. I knew I was going to ride the carousel. I warned myself to make the effort not to “pre-feel” my emotions before I got there. Sometimes that works, other times not so much.

Sunday morning, we gathered at the bandstand, said our thank yous and farewells. Then I rode the carousel. Twice. Once with as open a mind as I could muster. I wanted the machine to create the moment as well as the motion. My thoughts were not profound. I was trying to avoid that, trying to avoid pouring amber all over the experience. I held on to the pole of the horse I rode. I looked at my hands holding on to the metal of “Rod Serling's carousel.”

The carousel of my childhood was at Nunley's Carousel and Amusement Park on Sunrise Highway in Baldwin, Long Island. That carousel, originally called Murphy's Carousel, was built in 1912 and operated on the Brooklyn waterfront until it was moved to Long Island in the spring of 1940.



It was a beautiful thing. The horses were carved in “Coney Island style” which, according to The New York Times meant they “eschewed the look of docile ponies and prancing fillies and produced much more muscular, ferocious creatures with bared teeth and heads often lifted in motion.”

And as you were spun around on your ferocious mount, you could actually reach out and grab for an honest-to-God brass ring.

Nunley's closed in 1995. The carousel languished in storage until it was fully restored at the turn of the century. It is once again possible to grab for the brass ring.

I need to go back to my carousel.

After my rides on the Recreation Park carousel, I sat outside the pavilion and listened to the Wurlitzer #146-B Military Band Organ. There is a special

poignancy to band organs. The way they turn everything into a naive mechanical waltz, accented by bells.

I called my wife back in California so she could hear the band organ. While we were on the phone, some people who'd seen my presentation at the Fest came over to say hello and tell me they enjoyed the screening.

There's nothing like being on the phone with your wife when people come up and say unsolicited nice things about you. You can take that straight to the bank.

As grand as it was to ride the carousel, that's not what crept so deep into my head.

What surprised me most was the grove of oak trees. More than the trees, it was what it felt like to walk among them or simply stand, surrounded by them. Surrounded by the trees and listening to the

random thumps of acorns hitting the ground, the breeze making that incredible shimmering sound as it navigates the leaves and branches overhead.

You experience something like that with great clarity even while you know you'll never be able to completely recall the moment. You can remember how you felt, but you really can't feel it again. Not exactly. But you have to try. You know this is important. This is something you're going to want to hold on to. This is something you'll need in ways and in moments you can't imagine.

So I stood there among the trees. Not completely understanding what I was feeling or why. I felt an almost audible click of confirmation. Confirmation and gratitude.

The tricky part is trying to separate what was there in the park with me from how much was simply me. If we start toying with the idea that what was coming from the breeze and the light was a presence, things can get treacherous. We like the idea of there being a tangible presence left by someone, something we catch out of the corner of the mind's eye. Maybe we need this more than we like it.

It was Rod Serling who told us, convincingly, that such things can happen. Visitations. Imbuements. The residue of time. And while we wait for those things to happen to us, we make up stories about such things happening to us. Because that is what we're supposed to do

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*Emmy-winning writer Joseph Dougherty (thirtysomething, Pretty Little Liars) is the author of Rod Serling at 100: One Writer's Acknowledgment.*

### SPOTNITZ: FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

Rod Serling not only freed himself of the censors, but of politics. He got at the deeper, richer questions that have never been more important than they are now, in our own troubled times.

We are facing so many challenges. So many questions. There are plenty of politicians, propagandists and prognosticators out there who will give you answers. About

immigration, about climate change, and A.I. They are more than happy to tell you which way to vote, how to spend your money, and what to think.

Rod Serling was too great an artist for that. Too great a man.

Rod Serling suffered, he knew loss. He was a decorated veteran who survived the horrors of war. But he was a man who refused to surrender his ideals. Who saw the incredible reach and power of television and fought and

sacrificed his entire career to try to make the medium live up to its promise. He never gave up. In the 50 short years that he was on this planet - in the conduct of his art, his career and his life - Rod Serling showed us not only what it meant to be a great artist, but to be a great man. He is the patron saint of television. And quite simply, a hero.

In one of his most famous episodes, “The Monsters are Due on Maple Street,” Mr. Serling wrote

that the tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions. Sometimes, they come with fear. This weekend, in celebrating his work, we honor not just his vision, but his courage. And may we carry both forward.

Thank you for having me.

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*Frank Spotnitz is a television writer and producer whose works include The X-Files and The Man in the High Castle.*

# SERLINGFEST 2025

## Zone Reboots and Imitators: Can Lightning in a Bottle Strike Twice?

By Jonah Tulis

My name is Jonah Tulis, and I am the director of an upcoming documentary on Rod that is tentatively titled *Serling*.

We've spent several years on the project and are in the final months of production on the film. The film was produced alongside Leonardo DiCaprio and his Appian Way Productions, as well as Chad Verdi and his team at Verdi Productions.

Anne and Jodi Serling have also been instrumental in getting this film made and helping make it the best and most honest film it could be. And it's truly been a privilege to be given the honor to tell their father's story.

I had been a fan of *The Twilight Zone* since I was very young. I would watch the episodes on repeat with my dad. "Time Enough at Last" was our favorite episode and continues to be mine to this day. I must have watched it at least a dozen times as a kid.

I had seen some of Rod's other work over the years, but it wasn't until a few years ago when I really began to understand the scope of his importance beyond television. I went down a rabbit hole of trying to track down every live TV show he made and really dug into some of these earlier works.

And it was through these works where I really started to see what Rod was all about: He was a pioneer of freedom of thought and someone who tried to make a difference through his writing. So much of his work resonates today more than ever. And that is what set me on a path to make this film.

We're doing something a bit different than a traditional documentary. Our story is told almost exclusively using Rod's own voice. No talking heads, just Rod taking us through his life in his own words. Our aim (and we hope we've accomplished this!) is to make sort of an intimate first-person journey through his life and career.

Visually, we also did something a bit outside-of-the-box. We shot

the film in stark black and white with a 4:3 aspect ratio much like *The Twilight Zone*, which we aimed to weave seamlessly with the archival footage of that time.

Several years ago my producing partner, Blake Harris, and I had a meeting with Phillip Watson and Taylor DiGilio at Appian Way. It was one of those meetings in Hollywood they call "a general" where a producer likes your work and wants to meet you and see if any of their ideas interest you. At the same time, you tell them what you're working on and so on. We talked for a while, and it felt like we had similar sensibilities with the team over there. They were also just a great and creative group of people.

Typically, Leo and Appian focus on their larger-scale mega movies - *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *The Revenant* and most recently *Killers of the Flower Moon*. You know, those massive Hollywood blockbusters that made Leo a movie star. Then they mentioned that they were in early discussions about doing a documentary on Rod Serling. It wasn't 100 percent clear where they were in the process, but it was very clear that they all were huge Rod Serling fans and wanted to tell his story somehow.

I had just seen the original live TV version of *Patterns* for the first time. Then I went on a little live TV run watching *Requiem for A Heavyweight*, *The Velvet Alley* and a few other notable shows from that era. That led me to a whole bunch of his speeches online. This was a whole new side to Rod Serling that I found fascinating. And with all the madness going on in the world today, I wondered what Rod would say in these times.

If you listen to some of his speeches where he touches on racism, war and social justice, they resonate today more than ever. So, I asked Phillip and Taylor at Appian if I could give them my take for a Rod Serling documentary, and thankfully they obliged.

First thing I did was to head to Ithaca College to look at their collection. The Serling family had donated countless papers and other items to the school many



years ago. Rod has always had a special place in his heart for Ithaca and upstate New York in general, so I thought it was a good place to start.

There were a lot of interesting things in the archives, but what jumped out at me immediately was a small sampling of Dictabelt

recordings. For those of you who don't know, Rod dictated everything: his correspondence, his scripts and their subsequent notes. It seemed his whole life was in these recordings, or so I hoped as a filmmaker hunting for archival footage.

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# SERLINGFEST 2025

TULIS: FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

The correspondence was incredible, as it had letters to colleagues and friends that just put you in Rod's mind, as well as the time and place he lived in. He was also very funny. It was a joy to listen to him. And Rod would talk into the machine daily for decades and his secretary (first Pat and then Margie) would then transcribe the notes. They were all so personal and dynamic. Rod's voice is sort of magical.

After I started listening to more, I had my "ah ha" moment for a potential film. Who better to tell this story than Rod himself? This could be an intimate portrait of Rod in his own words. We could keep the entire film in his present time and build the film around his voice. This suited my tastes for documentaries. I like the sort of films that feel like they're time capsules of a specific time, place, and world.

Then I did a bit more digging and found more of these recordings at both UCLA and Wisconsin. Nearly 100 hours of Rod dictating. It was clear there was more than enough here to make a truly special documentary. But then there was another challenge: We have all this great audio to shape the story, but how are we going to make this dynamic visually?

This idea came rather quickly and just felt right: We would shoot "atmospheric" recreations of Rod's life - in 4:3, black-and-white, that could seamlessly be cut with the archival footage of the time. It would keep things grounded in the era and would be a lot of fun to shoot.

As I kept listening and learning more about Rod, another thing stood out to me: Rod's activism throughout his life really resonated with me. The struggles of society, humanity and politics that he fought so hard to recognize were still very much relevant today. Hearing him speaking it almost seemed he was responding directly to the events in the world of the past decade. This wasn't just a story that *should* be told - it was a story that *had* to be told.

So, with all this in mind, I properly pitched the concept to the Appian team with a short "sizzle"



reel and a pitch deck with more details about the vision for the project. And they were on board. The next step was to talk further with Jodi and Anne Serling and see if they were on board with my take on the project. And it seemed like they really liked the vision for the project, which was very reassuring.

So, it looked like we were on our way. The next part was going to be the hardest: making the movie!

We doubled down on the research and really tried to learn everything we could about Rod. We dug into every archive we could find and talked to as many Rod Serling fans and experts as we could. At the same time, Appian started speaking with possible producing partners and financiers.

As with most Hollywood projects, we waited. And waited some more. And then there were multiple labor strikes that all but paralyzed the film and television industry.

About a year went by, and while we were confident in telling Rod's story, we were less confident in the industry's ability to rebound. And then on one fateful day, the Appian team had their own "general" meeting with a company called Verdi Productions. The company, run by Chad Verdi, financed and produced dozens of films, including several from Appian friend and collaborator Martin Scorsese. And in this general meeting, Chad and his team jumped at our Serling project.

Within weeks we had agreed to produce the film with them. And we were off...

That was last fall. Here we are, nearly a year later, and we're closing in on completing the documentary. We spent the fall and winter in intense archival research and organization. It was a Rod Serling Christmas for me, and my presents were the hours and hours of recordings I needed to go through.

There was wonderful insight into his process, his life in the TV industry and his experiences trying to tell the important stories. It was honestly an incredible look into his psyche and understanding of the world around him. So, after all the audio and other archival media was organized, we could really start digging in and shaping the story.

Our first rough assembly was over three hours. At the same time, I continually talked with Anne and Jodi about their father and his amazing life to make sure we were getting his story right. And we kept on editing and shaping the film as we prepared for our recreation shoot. We assembled a team to shoot a few weeks of period recreations back in April. We shot on location in the Providence, Rhode Island area, thanks to some generous help from the Office of Film and Television of Rhode Island.

Then we did some additional shooting in both Binghamton and the Ithaca area. In Rhode Island, we built out old live-TV



sets as well as one to represent the *Twilight Zone*-era. We used period lighting and equipment and built out every set with props from Rod's era. We even created reproductions of Rod's "home" offices throughout the years from Connecticut to Pacific Palisades to his lake house in Interlaken. All the while trying to stick to the look and feel that he made famous in his work.

After we finished shooting, we went back into the edit, and now we're at the point where we're getting ready for the finishing touches and hoping to have it ready to show distributors at the top of 2026. We're excited for everyone to see what we've been up to and could not be prouder of the film.

.....  
*Jonah Tulis is a producer and director known for such works as *Gamestop: Rise of the Players* (2022) and *Console Wars* (2020).*

## EDITOR'S NOTE

About two months after Jonah presented this talk to the 2025 SerlingFest, the RSMF's Tony Albarella got to see a not-quite-finished draft of the film. Here's what he had to say:

"I had the opportunity to watch an early rough cut of Serling, and I think everyone is really going to enjoy it. The first-person, literally in-his-own-words narration works well and sets this apart from other documentaries or retrospectives. It's a balanced and engaging tribute to Rod."

# ROD SERLING

## Rosendale Relishes Rod Retrospective

By Tony Albarella

Perhaps it was inevitable that I, a devotee of vintage movies and vintage movie theaters, would eventually cross paths with Bob Esposito. Bob shares several of my childhood (and adult) obsessions: vintage genre television, Ray Harryhausen films, monsters of all shapes and sizes (but especially of the rubber-suit Kaiju variety), old-school ghost and supernatural classics and 50's/60's sci-fi, horror, and fantasy flicks.

He is also the programming committee member for the Rosendale Theater – a quaint movie house and performance venue. Nestled in the center of New York's Ulster County, the Rosendale began showing films in 1920, and today, like the Rod Serling Memorial Foundation, operates as a 501(c)3 nonprofit.

The aforementioned path-crossing occurred in May of 2024, when Bob programmed a Ray Harryhausen double-feature as part of the "Saturday Creature Features" series at the Rosendale. Thanks to Bob's tireless social media efforts, I found out about the event, we connected, and he kindly welcomed me to introduce the screenings.

I had met the incomparable Harryhausen a few times and, having once interviewed the stop-motion icon for a magazine interview, had behind-the-scenes anecdotes I could share. But my primary qualification was as a fan who wanted to experience these films as they were intended to be seen: on the big screen and with an audience. It was so much fun that we rinsed-and-repeated with a different pairing of Harryhausen movies back in January of this year.

From our earliest meetings, Bob and I jawed about presenting a Rosendale event centered around Rod Serling. A mini-marathon of *Twilight Zone* episodes was an obvious and logical choice, but strange indemnity and rights issues involving nonprofit theaters prevented this from happening. We discussed, and continue to discuss, screenings of films in which Rod was involved, such as 1962's *Requiem for a Heavyweight* and/or 1968's *Planet of the Apes*. Nothing has been scheduled yet, but as our favorite Mystic Seer



might predict, "It is quite possible."

These talks evolved into what became the Rosendale's "A Rod Serling Evening." Fortuitously and quite unaware of the date's significance, Bob scheduled the event for October 2, 2025: the 66th anniversary of the premiere of *The Twilight Zone*. Bob and I reasoned that a focus on *Twilight Zone*, *Night Gallery* and *Planet of the Apes* would fit under the "Creature Features" umbrella and also appeal to a wide audience.

Solid turnout is, after all, a measure of an event's success, and quite important for a nonprofit entity. Yet when I gave Bob a synopsis of Serling's overall career, he agreed with me that it was equally important to inform the audience about the writer's non-genre, lesser-known works (a goal, incidentally, that is one of the RSMF's primary functions). Thus, the plan gelled into a retrospective that balanced Serling's popular work with accomplishments unknown to a general audience in 2025...a full century after Serling's birth and a half-century after his passing.

I was confident that using photos, interviews, and audio and video clips, I could distill Serling's career down to a two-and-a-half-hour presentation. I was less sure that I could adequately entertain an audience for that long with my verbal skills, which are virtually non-existent. I'm essentially a creative technician, adept at editing and writing, but certainly not a comfortable or dynamic lecturer.

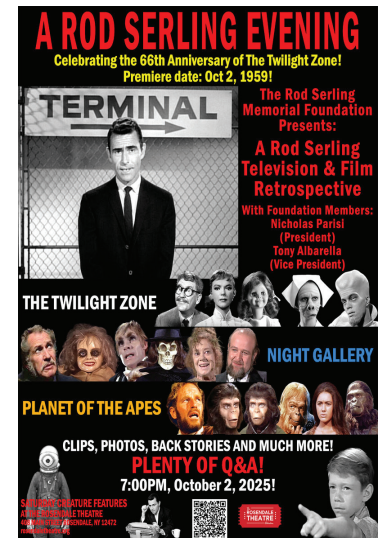
To fill that considerable gap, I

reached out to someone who is both well-versed in Serling's full canon and one of the best extemporaneous speakers I know: RSMF President Nick Parisi. To my relief, Nick obliged, and with enthusiasm, despite the distance to Rosendale (a two-hour trip for me, even longer for Nick). We were off.

Frankenstein-like, I prepped the presentation in the dark recesses of my lab, and Nick was the lightning that brought it to life. We stitched together the touchstones of Serling's life and career: his idyllic childhood; his war experience; entry into radio and television; *Kraft Television Theatre's* "Patterns"; *Playhouse 90's* "Requiem for a Heavyweight"; *The Twilight Zone*; *The Loner*; Rod's various screenplays; *Planet of the Apes*; *Night Gallery*; and a wrap-up segment, followed by Nick's nod to Serling's enduring influence and an audience Q&A.

Since the event took place on the anniversary – almost to the hour – of the premiere of *The Twilight Zone*, I also played audio segments, never before shared in public, of an interview I did with the pilot episode star, Earl Holliman.

It all went swimmingly. Over 150 patrons attended the event, and we raised funds for both the Rosendale and the RSMF. This was a considerable crowd on a fall Thursday evening in a quiet little upstate burg. And on a holiday, to boot: the conclusion of Yom Kippur, which I heard kept some from attending. A few friends and familiar Binghamton faces made the trip, including Ralph Carusillo,



Kevin Maher, Jeff Feyerabend and Andy Polak, the RSMF's former president and current treasurer.

Most of the audience, however, was made up of strangers, most of whom had no prior knowledge about the depth and breadth of Serling's prodigious output. We received local media coverage, and audience feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

"It was like a mini-SerlingFest," Andy commented. "An entertaining and informative night watching Tony and Nick do their thing to a near full house. To this day, I'm still learning stuff about Rod Serling!"

Now that we have a presentation in the can and some real-world experience co-presenting it, Nick and I can easily adapt this retrospective, should the opportunity arise. It would work well in a library or community theater setting, doing what the RSMF was designed to do: keep Rod's memory alive, his work relevant, and inform the public about the scope of his legacy.

The Rosendale's "A Rod Serling Evening" has already spurred at least one Serling fan into action: Bob Esposito has volunteered to help promote SerlingFest 2026 via his social media skills and local connections. And so, the snowball rolls on, and continues to grow.

RSMF Board Member Tony Albarella is the editor of numerous books on Serling's work, including the 10-volume series "As Timeless as Infinity: The Complete Twilight Zone Scripts of Rod Serling."

# ROD SERLING

## The Mountain Makes a Comeback: Serling's Boxing Tale Retakes the Stage

By Tony Albarella

On October 12, 2025, during a state of emergency declaration due to an encroaching nor'easter storm, my wife and I drove from central New Jersey to Norwalk, Connecticut, to attend a matinee of Rod Serling's *Requiem for a Heavyweight*. Crystal Theatre's production ran for six shows on October 10-12 and 17-19.

Only once, years before, had I seen the stage version of *Requiem* – to which Serling added tweaks and flourishes that differentiate it in minor degrees from its teleplay and screenplay counterparts – and I was eager to again experience this version of the story. Director Mark Ferguson and the cast and crew of Crystal Theatre did not disappoint, making our outing most enjoyable.

That *Requiem* excels on the stage is not particularly surprising, given that Serling rose to fame helping shape the era of live, staged television plays. The 1956 *Playhouse 90* version is, in my opinion, the best and brightest version of this powerful drama. Given the limited sets and physical scope of the story, the 1962 film adaptation is almost superfluous; *Requiem* was born and bred for the intimacy of live production, which boils this tragedy down to its two best, elemental aspects: writing and acting.

Crystal Theatre's production played into these strengths with minimalistic set design, unobtrusive lighting, and sparse, well-placed interludes of jazz piano, all of which allowed audience focus to remain on the words and the performances. This adherence to detail did not extend to all departments, as some anachronistic props (Velcro glove fasteners, modern folding chairs, sneakers instead of vintage boxing shoes) called attention to the stagecraft of this period piece. This, however, is a common limitation in community theater and an easily forgivable slight. On all the critical production fronts, Crystal Theatre got it right.

Getting it right carried over into the casting. *Requiem* revolves around four main characters: aging prizefighter Mountain McClintock, smarmy manager Maish Resnick, sympathetic trainer



Gus Bottazzi (Mountain McClintock) and Jennifer Prescott (Grace Miller) in *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, at the Crystal Theatre, Norwalk, CT

Army Hanks, and supportive unemployment worker Grace Miller.

Gus Bottazzi led the cast as the titular heavyweight in a well-rounded and meaty performance. For my tastes, Gus hit Mountain's emotional highs a little too hard, but I realize that subtlety and nuance do not always translate well on the stage. What Gus did with the fighter's quieter moments were what I really admired, as he brought out all of Mountain's naiveté, vulnerability, and emotional complexities.

If one were to distill this play down to the single most impactful character, it would be Maish, as the decisions he makes and the conflict he feels truly propel the story. John Bachelder did a marvelous job in the role. The emotional turmoil of his Maish was wholly believable because he grounded it in the character's basic nature: crude, frightened and guarded, a man honed by an uncompromising life to fend, first and foremost, for himself. Bachelder conveyed this very flawed but innately decent human being with self-assurance and apparent ease.

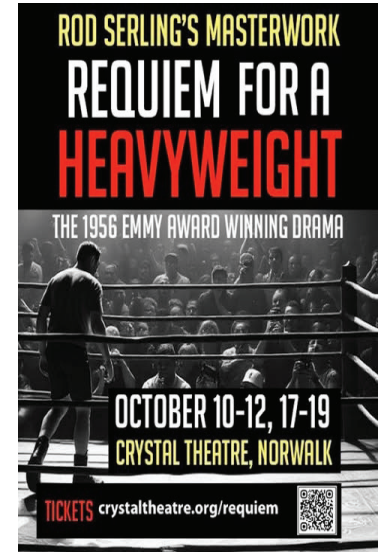
Army is a more low-key, even-keeled character, resigned to the life he leads, and Ray Szwec played him in the quiet manner the role demands. His outbursts of anger rang true because they were not overused or overplayed. In comparison to Maish and Mountain, Army's role is a bit

undercooked, especially in this stage version, where Serling gives one of Army's best emotive lines (the "Maybe the next thing this kid hungers for, he should get" scene) to Grace Miller. But Army retains his surrogate father-like love and protectiveness of McClintock, and Szwec embraced that persona.

Jennifer Prescott did the same for Grace. Of the four main characters, the extent of Grace's arc is second only to The Mountain's. She starts out a shy newcomer to the many underworld of boxing, and graduates to a woman of agency, capable of both confronting Maish and offering an emotional life preserver to Mountain. In the condensed timeframe of a live production, conveying this range of character growth requires no small degree of skill, and Prescott was up to the task.

The stage play features a role not written into the other versions, that of Golda, the hooker-with-a-heart-of-tarnished-gold. She lives as seedy an existence as any of her fellow characters, yet serves only as an unappreciated crutch on which Maish can occasionally lean.

Golda is a typically-underwritten Serling female character, lacking in any growth or development, and both the television and film versions fare better without her. This is my biggest gripe with the proscenium version of *Requiem*, which seems to shoehorn Golda in for the sole reason that the



less-restrictive medium of the stage allows for the inclusion of a prostitute. This, however, is not the fault of actress Janine Wolfe, who injected Goldy's limited stage time with appropriate attitude and humor.

Ensemble parts also performed well, as these players did not overstep their bounds in adding background life and business to various scenes. When called upon, they stepped up with a line or a scene or two without stealing the spotlight from our main event characters. Two standouts of note played the piece's pair of slimy promoters. Both Bruce Crilly (as Perelli) and John Fatteross (as Leo Loomis) leaned into the archetypes of their characters and played them with the sort of over-the-top energy that defines serio-comic roles of this nature.

From Director Ferguson on down, Crystal Theatre should be commended for going the distance on *Requiem for a Heavyweight*. This remarkable play about resilience and the basic dignity of a broken-down fighter thrives on the immediacy of the stage, and the cast and crew of this particular production did proper justice to Rod Serling's script. It was well worth the trip.

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RSMF Board Member Tony Albarella is the editor of numerous books on Serling's work, including the 10-volume series "As Timeless as Infinity: The Complete Twilight Zone Scripts of Rod Serling."

# ROD SERLING

## Interview with Director Mark Ferguson

By Tony Albarella

TA: How did your association with Crystal Theatre begin?

MF: The Crystal Theatre is renowned for its children's theatre program where young people can take classes in music, acting and dance. After decades of producing children's shows, the executive director of Crystal, Cheryl Kemeny, decided to branch out and offer more "adult" fare that would appeal to a wider and older audience. Around this time, Gus Bottazzi (star and producer of *Requiem*) and I were shopping *Requiem* to community theaters. The people at Crystal liked the script, and off we went.

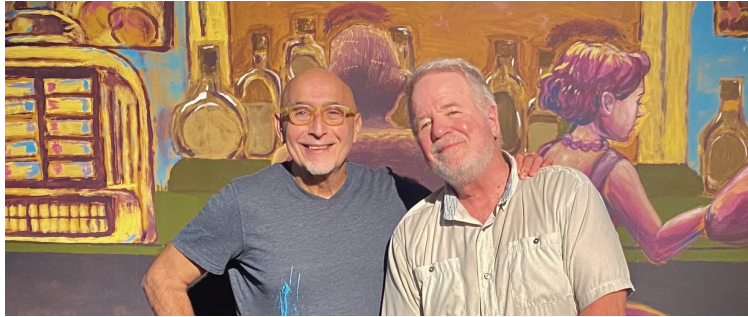
TA: What made you choose *Requiem for a Heavyweight* for this production? I understand you're an admirer of Serling's work – was that a primary factor?

MF: I grew up watching *Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery*. Every episode provided unexpected pleasures to this grade-schooler. So, yes, I am an admirer of Rod Serling, but the reason I chose *Requiem* is a different story. When I was in high school, I was a member of the competitive speech team (back then we called it "Forensics"). I competed in an event called Dramatic Interpretation which required me to memorize a scene from a play and perform it at various high school speech competitions.

I guess you know where this is going – the piece I selected was the climactic scene from *Requiem for a Heavyweight* where Maish, in a moment of unguarded rage, admits that he had bet against Mountain in what was to be Mountain's final match. There's such raw power in this scene, with its juicy and relentlessly brutal language and Mountain's "You Fink" monologue bringing the scene to a close. I had great fun giving voice to the three characters in the scene: Mountain, Maish and Perelli.

TA: What did your actors think of Serling's somewhat stylized approach to dialogue and the gritty setting of the piece?

MF: I received enthusiastic feedback from my actors and many audience members. They loved the set, the music, the costumes and the acting, but many made a point to



Scenic designer Tom Nimen and Director Mark Ferguson

share their fascination with the writing. Serling went "full noir" on *Requiem* – every line lands a punch. You can't misinterpret Serling's intentions. The language is raw and brutal and cuts to the chase. What you see is what you get.

TA: From decision to casting to rehearsal through to the show's run, how long did the process take? Were there any special or unexpected challenges to staging the play?

MF: I held auditions from August 10-11. Rehearsals ran eight weeks, and we opened on October 10. That was a marvelous coincidence – the day after we opened, October 11, marked the 69th anniversary of the premiere of *Requiem* on *Playhouse 90*. How cool is that?

The Crystal Theatre has its limitations. It's a converted auditorium with no fly or wing space, so I decided early on that the five main settings of the play (the locker room, the corridor, Charlie's Bar, Maish's hotel room, and Grace's apartment) would be permanent fixtures on the stage. Five 12'x12' panels provided the backdrop, which was designed and painted by Tom Nimen, a graphics artist from Brooklyn.

*Requiem* takes place in the 1950s, but the universal themes of trust and betrayal and the exploitation of humankind still resonate strongly, so I wanted to give *Requiem* a contemporary feel. For the painted panels I asked Tom to forgo realism in favor of abstraction. The magnificent Jackie Warren – the "Queen of Jazz" in Cleveland, Ohio – improvised the edgy, punchy piano music I used as interludes between scenes. Before the official start of the play, I staged a "pre-show" featuring boxers sparring and shadow-boxing while

the sound of a distant AM radio station broadcast a round-by-round account of a boxing match, which was voiced by the great Howard Lester from his podcast studios in Houston.

As for the cast, I'm a very lucky man. Some of the finest actors in Western Connecticut auditioned for *Requiem*, lured by the bigger-than-life characters and gritty text. I cast them all! The Crystal Theatre became a staging ground for some truly inspired and brilliant performances: John Blanchard as Maish, John

Fatteross as Leo Loomis, Bruce Crilly as Perelli, Jennifer Prescott as Grace, Ray Szwec as Army...every actor created forceful yet highly nuanced characters.

Even smaller roles such as Janine Wolfe's Golda and Peter McLoughlin's Doc were imbued with a sense of heartfelt gravitas. Quick to trust but also quick to give vent to unexpected anger, Gus Bottazzi portrayed Mountain as a "man child" sent reeling over his best friend's betrayal. Blanchard and Bottazzi – Maish and Mountain – made it work, as evidenced by the gasps heard from the audience at the great reveal.

TA: Were you satisfied with how everything turned out?

MF: Absolutely! One small regret was that due to scheduling conflicts, we could only stage *Requiem* for two weekends, six performances. A longer run would have given more people an opportunity to witness Rod Serling's masterwork.

## "Requiem" Counts Out Fast on Broadway

by Gail Flug

*Requiem for a Heavyweight* stands as one of Rod Serling's most prolific teleplays. The original 1957 *Playhouse 90* broadcast won a Primetime Emmy Award for Best Teleplay Writing, and was adapted for the big screen in 1962. Naturally, a Broadway production would be a smash.

Its first and only Broadway run in 1985 featured an extremely talented cast, with John Lithgow as the washed-up, broken boxer Harlan "Mountain" McClintock and George Segal as manager Maish Rennick. It was housed at the Martin Beck Theatre (now the Al Hirschfeld Theatre) under the direction of Arvin Brown, a Tony Award winner whose later work included successful stage and television productions such as *Everwood*, *The Closer*, *NCIS*, and *Leverage*.

The Broadway production opened on March 7, 1985, and closed just two days later, on March 9, after only three performances and several previews. This extraordinarily short run places it among the shortest-running productions in Broadway history.



Not much has been reported about its commercial failure. Perhaps 1980s New York audiences were being drawn to large-scale musicals at the time – yet it did leave its mark. The cast was widely praised, and Lithgow earned a Tony Award nomination for Best Actor in a Play, along with a Drama Desk Award win. Would modern Broadway audiences be more receptive to a gritty, realistic play is only a guess, as it's very unlikely to return to the Great White Way anytime soon.

# ROD SERLING

## You've Got to Believe: Serling's Search for Magic in a World of Concrete

By Christopher Benedict

Rod Serling was a man of uncompromising conviction whose complex worldview was shaped by learning to navigate myriad battlegrounds.

From the dense forests of the Philippines to the concrete jungle of Hollywood soundstages, from cigarette smoke-filled boardrooms to the roped-off confines of the boxing ring, Serling locked eyes and engaged in skirmishes with Japanese soldiers, network executives, corporate sponsors, blue-pen-wielding censors, and pugilists standing in opposing corners.

Not all of Serling's conflicts originated from external sources, however. Some came from within. Wrestling with feelings of grief, frustration, inadequacy, and inner discord is not a character flaw. Rather, the persistent struggle to put one's intellectual and emotional houses in order is a signpost pointing to a high-functioning, sensitive and empathic human being, a deeply critical thinker unable to settle for complacency and unwilling to surrender to conformity.

"The ultimate obscenity is not caring, not doing something about what you feel. Not feeling," Serling once said. "Just drawing back and drawing in, becoming narcissistic."

From his teenage years on, Serling was concerned with the greater good and fought for causes bigger than himself. Because he felt compelled to diagnose societal ills through his storytelling, Rod was consequently branded "television's angry young man," a catchy but somewhat reductive term to convey that he was a writer with something important to say. Many important things, specifically pertaining to civilization's unacceptable lack of civility.

"I was bitter about everything and at loose ends when I got out of the service," confessed Serling. "I turned to writing to get it off my chest." As is the case with many writers, his characters were sometimes proxies for Serling himself, manifested and filtered through the author's imagination and self-reflection in equal



Top: Anthony Quinn, Jackie Gleason, Mickey Rooney, 1962 movie  
Bottom: Keenan Wynn, Jack Palance, Keenan Wynn, Playhouse 90, 1957

measure. Rod's personal tug of war between sentimentality and cynicism, for instance, would prove to be a recurring theme woven painstakingly throughout much of his writing.

The most frequently discussed examples are Serling's semi-autobiographical *Twilight Zone* companion pieces "Walking Distance" and "A Stop at Willoughby." Burned-out businessmen Martin Sloan and Gart Williams, respectively, act as Serling's fifth dimension stand-ins and, interestingly, are assigned very different fates.

Martin Sloan not only revisits the Homewood of his youth, but his youth itself—the carousels, cotton candy, and band concerts of an idyllic childhood. Commuting by train from the home he shares with a domineering wife to his soul-crushing job at an advertising agency, Gart Williams dreams about the imaginary hometown of Willoughby, where "a man can slow down to a walk and live his life full measure."

Homewood and Willoughby, as Serling enthusiasts are well aware, both symbolize Binghamton, New York, where Rod enjoyed his

formative years romping around Recreation Park where a statue of him now stands, reading pulp magazines and watching movies and putting on plays in the family home at 67 Bennett Avenue, editing his high-school newspaper, and boxing at the Washington Street YMCA, before shipping off to war.

"Maybe there's only one summer to every customer. That little boy, the one I know – the one who belongs here – this is his summer, just as it was yours once. Don't make him share it," the grown-up Martin Sloan is advised by his father. "Maybe you haven't been looking in the right place. You've been looking behind you, Martin. Try looking ahead." He does as he's told and opts to focus on the promises the future may hold rather than become imprisoned by his nostalgia for the past.

Gart Williams, on the other hand, is eulogized in Serling's closing narration as a man "who climbed on a world that went by too fast" desperately searching for "a place around the bend where he could jump off." Willoughby was that place, only it didn't exist except in Gart's fantasies. He sacrificed himself in the forlorn

hope of maintaining the illusion of a sort of promised land that he manufactured to escape from the relentless drudgery of the real world.

A typewriter and Dictaphone had not always been Serling's weapons of choice. As mentioned earlier, he knew his way around "the sweet science" and was quick with his fists as a young man when the occasion called for it. During his acceptance speech for the second-place prize awarded for his submission to the nationwide *Dr. Christian* scriptwriting contest in 1949, a prizefighting story called "To Live a Dream," Serling alluded to making a run at the Golden Gloves – apparently to no avail, although he later competed in a boxing tournament while going through airborne jump school in the Army.

Pugilism is a generations-old tradition that Rod was intimately familiar with and a fan of, but – as evidenced by his many writings on the subject – one he had grave doubts about.

The stark tonal contrast between the conclusions to both versions of Serling's boxing masterpiece "Requiem for a Heavyweight" is perhaps the most visceral representation among Rod's entire body of work of his skeptical nature going toe to toe with his sympathetic tendencies. In the *Playhouse 90* broadcast of "Requiem," Serling permitted Jack Palance's Harlan "Mountain" McClintock to do precisely what Martin Sloan, Gart Williams, and Rod himself yearned so badly to do and go home again.

Home for Mountain McClintock was Kennesaw, Tennessee. There he will reopen an old chapter in his own personal book of life while simultaneously beginning a new one, having exercised free will and good sense in putting distance between the hopeful future he is heading toward and the fatalism of submitting to a destiny of remaining a pawn in his crooked, debt-laden manager's fight game and assuming his inherited place among the washed-up, beaten-down palookas who haunt "the graveyard" in the hotel bar, telling and retelling the same old ghost stories of long-gone days spent

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# ROD SERLING

## BOXING: FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

in a boxing ring. The *Playhouse 90* episode ends as Mountain's journey back home commences and he playfully shadowboxes with a young boy aboard the train.

"I think the train sequence with the little boy spelled out the finish too blithely and too patly," Serling remarked with the type of sardonic criticism he was known to level at himself. "The play should have ended when Mountain leaves Grace and heads for the railroad station. To have carried it a step beyond this was unnecessary and diluting. I had always had qualms about this scene but was willing to let it go in the hope that it would play better than it read. Unhappily, it was as anticlimactic as I feared."

Given the opportunity to take another swing at "Requiem" as a feature film six years later, Serling reworked the finale so that it ended on a maudlin down note by presumably taking a cue from the real-life degradation of the great Joe Louis, Rod's all-time favorite boxer, who had been heavyweight champion of the world but was made to humble himself by turning to professional wrestling to try and get the IRS off his back.

It's doubtful that the grim kick in the teeth delivered to the renamed Louis "Mountain" Rivera in the movie was merely an artistic choice in response to what Serling viewed as an unsatisfying coda to his *Playhouse 90* teleplay. Instead, it seems to have been deliberately rooted in what Rod referred to in his foreword to the reading version of the dramatic script, published in tandem with the movie's theatrical release, as "the strange poetry of human anguish, the mystifying gentleness of pain."

With Serling behind the wheel, *The Twilight Zone's* jaded, over-the-hill journeyman prizefighter Bolie Jackson and his wide-eyed but wise 10-year-old admirer Henry Temple personify the opposing forces in a conceptual head-on collision that occurs when the endeavor to retain the enchantment of childlike wonder clashes with the temptation to succumb to the heavy burden of world-weary pessimism.

Bolie's odds of winning what amounts to a last-ditch comeback



Left: Walter Burke, Ivan Dixon; Right: Stephen Perry; *Twilight Zone Big Tall Wish*, 1960

fight are not terribly promising, but little Henry has the ability to call upon "The Big, Tall Wish" to magically overturn any outcome to the bout that is unfavorable to his "good and close friend." Here's the rub: Bolie Jackson, as Serling explains in his closing narration, "shares the most common ailment of all men—the strange and perverse disinclination to believe in a miracle, the kind of miracle to come from the mind of a little boy. Perhaps only to be found in the *Twilight Zone*."

Bolie has long since had whatever remained of his unguarded innocence beaten out of him by virtue of both his hardscrabble profession and the hardships endured by a Black man struggling for survival in pre-Civil Rights Act America, although we the viewers are left to infer that last part by reading between the lines scripted by Serling.

"Little boys with their heads full up with dreams. When do they find out, Frances?" Bolie asks Henry's mother rhetorically. "When do they suddenly find out that there ain't any magic? When does somebody push their face down on the sidewalk and say to them, 'Hey, little boy, it's concrete. That's what the world is made out of. Concrete.' When do they find out that you can wish your life away?"

Bolie finds himself flat on his back on the canvas at St. Nick's Arena with Joey Consiglio standing over him, but they trade places seconds later after Henry summons the magic of "The Big, Tall Wish" and it is Consiglio who is counted out by the referee. He can hardly wait to get home and share the almost inconceivable turn of events with his little friend Henry, who is waiting for his hero on the roof of their tenement where he tells Bolie that it was

his wish that set the boxer's serendipitous victory into motion. It wouldn't have been possible otherwise. But Bolie is incapable of comprehending or accepting this revelation.

"Listen, kid. I've been wishing all my life. You understand, Henry? I've got a gut ache from wishing, and all I've got to show for it is a face full of scars and a head full of memories of all the hurt and misery I've had to live with and sleep with all my miserable life," says Bolie. "Henry, I can't believe. I'm too old and I'm too hurt to believe. I can't, boy. I just can't. Now, Henry, there ain't no such thing as magic. God help us both, I wish there were."

That bus to glory Bolie talks about spending his whole adult life trying to chase down has seemingly backed over him, littering the road with the shattered remnants of his dreams, like so many eroded shards of the concrete his world is made of.

"You got to believe. Please believe," Henry repeatedly implores Bolie, who can only keep lamenting in response, "I can't. I can't." They are crying and embracing for the duration of this exchange, almost as if both the boxer and the little boy are as physically unwilling to let go of the other as they are emotionally unwilling to let go of their own beliefs – because the alternative is too painful for either of them to endure the thought of. This heartrending scene transitions back to St. Nick's Arena where Bolie takes the 10-count and the melancholy walk back to his building to break the bad news to Henry.

"I ain't going to make no more wishes, Bolie. I'm too old for wishes. And there ain't no such

thing as magic," a sleepy Henry yawns. "Is there?" he adds with a last, fleeting glimmer of hope for affirmation.

"I guess not, Henry," says Bolie. "Or maybe, maybe there is magic," he concedes. "And maybe there's wishes too. I guess the trouble is... well, I guess the trouble is, there's not enough people around to believe."

Many have argued that the tough love Bolie dishes out to Henry throughout the episode is too harsh to subject a 10-year-old to, and that the boxer's despondency is responsible for tearing away the integrity of the little boy's existential safety net. Fair enough. But I would counter that critique with the suggestion that in this last telling bit of dialogue in Henry's bedroom, Serling brings about a reconciliation between the two contrasting mindsets of romanticism and defeatism by having Bolie and Henry meet one another, and themselves, halfway philosophically.

"I was deeply interested in conveying what is a deeply felt conviction of my own. This is simply to suggest that human beings must involve themselves in the anguish of other human beings," theorized Serling, a man who always punched above his weight creatively, athletically, and ideologically. "This, I submit to you, is not a political thesis at all. It is simply an expression of what I would hope might be, ultimately, a simple humanity for humanity's sake."

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*Christopher Benedict is a boxing writer and historian. He is the author of The Twilight Rounds: Rod Serling Explores the Dark Side of Boxing and was a guest speaker at SerlingFest 2024.*

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