

Strange but True...

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On October 31st 1992 television audiences were shocked and terrified at the 'live' coverage of investigation into the supernatural, *Ghostwatch*. The BBC had no idea that the programme aired on Hallowe'en night would receive such a backlash from angry viewers. Now nearly twenty years on, writer Stephen Volk laughs. 'Producers I meet nowadays tell me, the first thing they tell me, is that they watched it and were traumatized by it!'

Sitting at BAFTA in London, you would not believe that Stephen Volk was the creator of one of the most debated film dramas of the last two decades in television. Saying the one word, *Ghostwatch* brings a smile to the scriptwriter's face. Clearly proud of the programme, Volk states that 'It wasn't trying to fool people, it was about telling a drama in a certain way'.

Ghostwatch was a 'live' broadcast of an investigation into a haunting in a house owned by Mrs Pamela Early and her two daughters, apparently the victims of a ghost by the name of 'Pipes'. Hosted by Michael Parkinson and with Sarah Greene and Craig Charles, the story unfolds on screen for all of Britain to see, and develops into the children being possessed and the studio being demolished by the end of the programme. This being years before supernatural 'reality' television such as *Most Haunted*, the programme received over 30,000 complaints from angry viewers stating it had traumatised them and their children. When asked whether the reaction was unexpected, though, Volk nods and says 'I think it erroneous to say that kind of outrage represents the whole audience, because I always believed there would be an audience that would get it, and would understand what I was trying to do.' Keeping a smile on his face whilst reliving the situation, Volk laughs and says 'The result of it was that Sarah Greene had to appear on TV and say she wasn't dead and vicars would say you've conjured up demonic forces!'

However, ten years on from the first and only viewing on television the BFI released a ten year anniversary edition of *Ghostwatch* on DVD and the programme finally received the acclaim it deserved.

Volk remembers 'I got a wave of people who responded to it in a really positive way. It was ten years old and I didn't get that kind of acknowledgment from fans at the time, but when the DVD was released, all these fans came out of the woodwork.' Now, nearly twenty years on, Volk comments 'People often ask, how would you do it, if you were to do it now? And I say, well, number one, I wouldn't do it now, and number two, if you did it now you would just do it for real, you wouldn't do it as a drama because the whole TV landscape has changed between then and now.'

When asked about whether the success of Hollywood supernatural soon-to-be-trilogy *Paranormal Activity* and whether he thought the paranormal/horror genre was on the rise, Volk laughs. 'I did read an interview in *Time Out* with the director of *Paranormal Activity* and they asked him to give selections from his DVD collection and one of the things he said he would like to see re-released was the *Ghostwatch* DVD. So it's on record that he knew about it, you might even say it's on record that he was a little inspired by it!'

But Stephen Volk's love of the fantastical and science fiction genre stemmed from childhood. 'I used to like reading comics, I used to like the visual side of comics, even comics based on famous novels, I used to love like the Marvel classics,' he recalls. The most appealing part of the science fiction genre, Volk states, is that 'it's a heightened reality, really. If you stick to kitchen sink realism, there is only a number of things that can happen, there are certain parameters in realism and a certain way people can behave. But in a ghost story a whole new set of possibilities come into play'

Stephen Volk began his career in Graphic Design at Art College. A massive fan of films, Volk majored in Film in his third year, spending most of his time in the Film Department specialising in animation. 'I liked the idea of animation, for fluidity of the ideas, but I didn't like being stuck in a room pressing a button all the time!' After graduation, he moved more in the direction of film and was enrolled for a Post-Graduate diploma in Radio, Film and Television Studies at Bristol University Drama Department. Completing his year helping make student films, Volk was at a loss of what to do next. So down the pub it was. 'We ended up sitting around the pub and we were like what do we do next? That's when someone said you can get a job at an advertising company as a copywriter,' recalls Volk. That's exactly what he did, sending out applications in bulk. He was lucky enough to get a job at prestigious London advertising company Ogilvy and Mather (OBM at the time). It would be at this job that Stephen Volk's career as a writer would begin.

The first of a number of encounters that would fuel Volk's career came earlier, in Bristol, in the form of Bill Stair, a scriptwriter and production designer whose portfolio included working with John Boorman on films such as *Point Blank* and *Deliverance*. It was Stair who first pointed Volk in the direction of screenwriting for films. Volk remembers 'It was the first time someone took the two things I was interested in – art and writing - and put them together in a rather obvious way. I remember it was Bill who had that conversation with me.' He goes on to say that 'The idea of writing movies was like Cloud Cuckoo Land, of course - but I thought to myself *someone's got to write them*, so even though I thought it was impossible I thought it can't be *that* impossible if someone's name is up there on the screen!'

So that is exactly what he did. 'Working nine to five in advertising I would come home, have my tea and then work for three to four hours on a screenplay.' Volk recalls. Skip ahead ten years in the future and Volk would meet the Richard Loncraine (*Brimstone and Treacle*, *Firewall*), a director who would introduce him to his agent for the next twenty five years, Linda Seifert. At the point he met Linda, Volk had already got himself (so far unproductive) meetings with the likes of John Boorman and Ridley Scott. He also had a number of works ready to show. Volk advises: 'I always tell young screenwriters, you need more than one script, you need a

few. Agents need to know you are in it, like Linda said to me, “Well I can see you are in it for the long haul!””

The long haul contains a collection of works including recently-made and soon to be released feature film *The Awakening* and two series of the ITV paranormal television series *Afterlife*, the latter being Volk’s self-professed most proud achievement. He says that, ‘On the one side it was a really good experience because I was involved all of the way through, and secondly it’s the thing I am most proud of because it felt to me like just a well-made quality piece of work’. Being involved all the way through the production process is any scriptwriter’s dream, however in the film industry that not always possible. ‘The director is the person whose film it is, in feature films that is, so then you become a lower-class citizen in the process and the director is completely in charge of your fate. You can be fired by the director any time.’ Volk laughs, going on to say, ‘They might be polite enough towards you that they will ring you to tell you it’s been released or something... I mean that literally, they might just tell you that it’s *been* released. I’ve been in the position where they don’t even bother telling you.’ So television seems to be the way forward - but what does the future hold for the supernatural master?

Volk thinks. ‘I have a couple of things that I have to follow up with certain people at the BBC for a new TV series...’ So television appears to still be on the agenda: and in terms of film? Volk’s *Telepathy* is struggling to get off the ground, with a director and lead actor signed up. ‘The producer is trying to jigsaw together various bits of money. At the last count, it was a Welsh, Irish, English, Latvian, Russian and German co-production!’ laughs Volk as he counts off on his fingers. *Telepathy* is about the Soviet ESP experiments in the 80s, and clearly follows nicely along the supernatural line that has made Stephen Volk the name in the paranormal.

With the success of films like *Paranormal Activity* is there a place in Hollywood for Volk’s style of writing? Pausing to think, he smiles. ‘All Hollywood want nowadays is a remake of a sequel of something you saw two weeks ago’. So maybe he isn’t set for Hollywood but with groundbreaking, risk-taking works like *Ghostwatch* and exciting television dramas such as *Afterlife*, maybe Hollywood’s loss is our gain?