



The Golden Age of Hollywood “B” Movies

Lobby Cards from the Bob Burke Film and Autograph Collection

University of Central Oklahoma Art Collections

Archives and Special Collections
Max Chambers Library

Edmond, OK
April 13, 2017

Cover, *Whispering Smith vs. Scotland Yard*, Lobby Card, RKO Radio Pictures Inc., 1952.

SPECIAL THANKS

The Chambers Library, Archives & Special Collections seeks to provide opportunities for students to experience learning through direct engagement with rare or unique items, or materials whose arrangement and organization illuminates, instructs, or delights. Courses from across the curriculum may be enriched through assignments, experiences, and activities that draw upon or incorporate local or unusual items, primary sources, or material culture such as the Bob Burke Collection on exhibit here today. The Special Collection primarily supports teaching, research and learning in local and regional history. A special thank you to all those who made this exhibition and presentation possible:

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DR. SPRINGER
BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Dr. John Springer earned his Ph.D. in English from the University of Iowa. He was a Visiting Assistant Professor of English and a Visiting Lecturer in the Film and Video Studies Program at the University of Oklahoma before coming to UCO in fall 2000 to direct the Film Studies Program.

Dr. Springer's principal areas of research are film history and theory, 19th and early 20th century American literature, and the broad, interdisciplinary field known as Cultural Studies. He has written numerous articles and reviews for journals such as *Genre*, *Iris*, and *Literature/Film Quarterly*.

In 2000 Dr. Springer published his first book, *Hollywood Fictions: The Dream Factory in American Literature* (University of Oklahoma Press). This work integrates Dr. Springer's interests in film and literature by examining a genre of American fiction specifically concerned with the Hollywood film industry and its effects on American culture and society.

In all of his scholarly work Dr. Springer explores the multiple intersections between visual and print cultures, and he is interested in discovering how a broad range of cultural practices (film, literature, visual arts, music) are embedded in specific social and ideological contexts.

BOB BURKE FILM AND TELEVISION AUTOGRAPH COLLECTION

In order to understand film as an art, it is necessary to recognize that it is also a business. In teaching the history and critical analysis of film, it is important to remind students repeatedly of this fact and to demonstrate the ways in which it has shaped the development of film as an artistic medium and as a form of entertainment. It is easy for teachers and students alike to get swept up in discussions of film and lose sight of the fact that movies are the products of an industrialized system that aims to produce marketable commodities as well as works of art.

The Bob Burke Film and Television Autograph Collection, which includes film posters, lobby cards, photographs, film scripts, and other materials produced by the film and television industries, helps to ground the teaching of film at the University of Central Oklahoma by recognizing this basic economic fact. The poster for a film, along with the lobby cards and photographs displayed in theater lobbies, are, in fact, part of the overall text of a film, and increasingly scholars and students have sought to consult such sources as a way of deepening our understanding of a given film and the publicity and marketing practices of Hollywood studios.

Posters and other promotional materials prepare us as viewers for the experience we will have when we watch a film and often help us to form expectations and make initial interpretations of a film's meaning. Understanding how films are promoted, marketed and sold to audiences is a vital aspect of contemporary Film Studies research and the Burke Collection helps both the faculty and students to expand their analysis of film at UCO into this vital area of study.

What makes this collection even more special is the fact that almost every artifact has been signed by the director, actor or actress who made the film or

television program. As a result the Burke Collection also represents a fascinating sample of American celebrity culture, showcasing the personalities, the styles, and the images that have dominated our collective popular imagination through movies and television.

Dr. John Parris Springer
Director Film Studies Program
University of Central Oklahoma

LOBBY CARDS

SELECTIONS FROM THE BOB BURKE FILM AND TELEVISIONS COLLECTION

The exhibit includes a small selection of lobby cards from the over 400 cards that are part of the Bob Burke Film and Television Autograph Collection. Bob Burke is a noted Oklahoma Attorney, Author and Historian. He has written more historical non-fiction books than anyone else in history. Mr. Burke is also an avid collector who donated his Film & Television Autograph Collection to the UCO Chambers Library, Archives and Special Collections in 2008.

13 FRIGHTENED GIRLS!

Dir. William Castle

Cast: Hugh Marlowe

Production Company: WilliamCastle Productions, 1963



AWAY ALL BOATS

Dir. Joseph Pevney

Cast: Jeff Chandler, Lex Barker

Production Company: Universal International, 1956



BIG TOWN

Dir. William C. Thomas

Cast: Phillip Reed, Hillary Brooke

Production Company: Pine Thomas Productions, 1946



BLONDE BLACKMAILER

Dir. Charles Deane

Cast: Richard Arlen, Susan Shaw

Production Company: Charles Deane Productions, 1955



THE BRAIN MACHINE

Dir. Ken Hughes

Cast: Patrick Barr, Elizabeth Allan

Production Company: Merton Park Studios, 1955

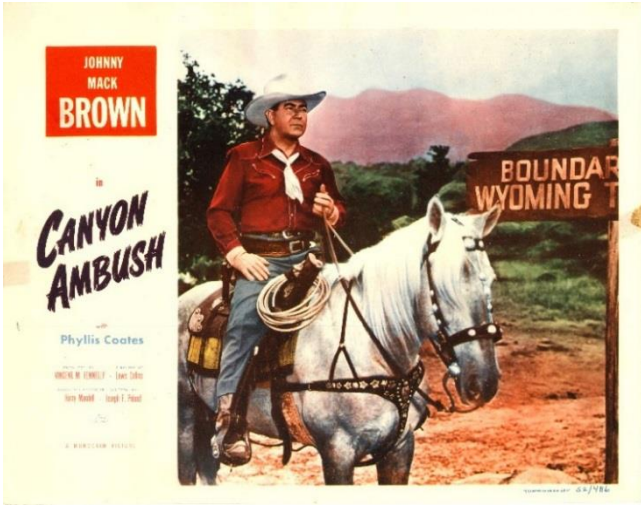


CANYON AMBUSH

Dir. Lewis Collins

Cast: Jonny Mack Brown, Phyllis Coates

Production Company: Silvermine Productions, 1952



CHINA GATE

Dir. Samuel Fuller

Cast: Gene Barry, Angie Dickinson

Production Company: Globe Enterprises, 1957

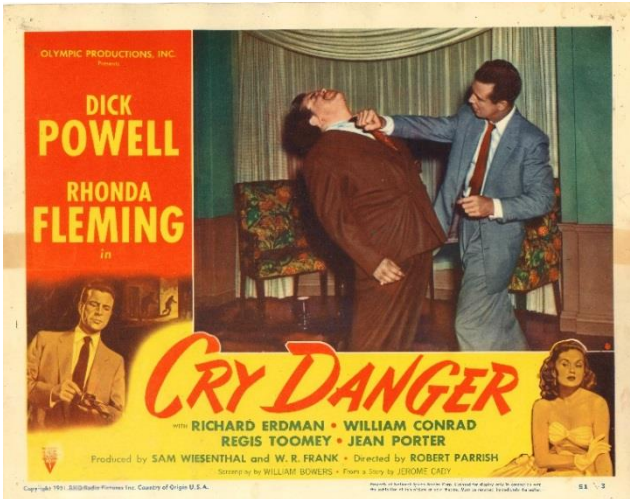


CRY DANGER

Dir. Robert Parrish

Cast: Dick Powell, Rhonda Fleming

Production Company: Olympic Productions, Inc., 1951

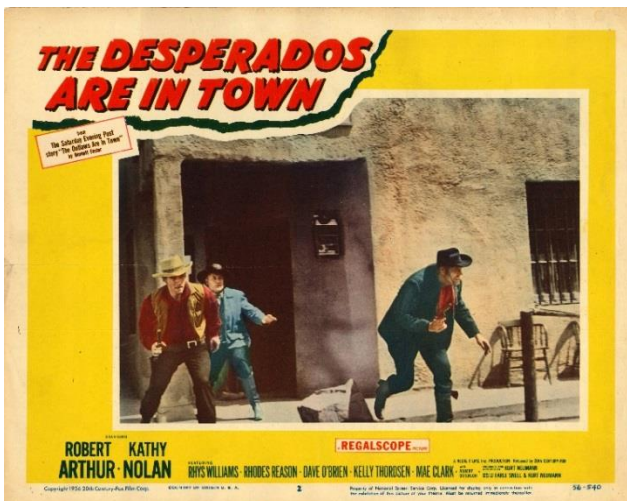


THE DESPERADOS ARE IN TOWN

Dir. Kurt Neumann

Cast: Robert Arthur, Kathy Nolan

Production Company: Regal Films, 1956



THE GOLDEN HAWK

Dir. Sidney Salkow

Cast: Rhonda Fleming, Sterling Hayden

Production Company: Esskay Picture Corporation, 1952



GUNPLAY

Dir. Leslie Selander

Cast: Tim Holt, Joan Dixon

Production Company: RKO Radio Pictures



THE HAWK OF WILD RIVER

Dir. Fred F. Sears

Cast: Charles Starrett, Jock Mahoney

Production Company: Columbia Picture Corporation

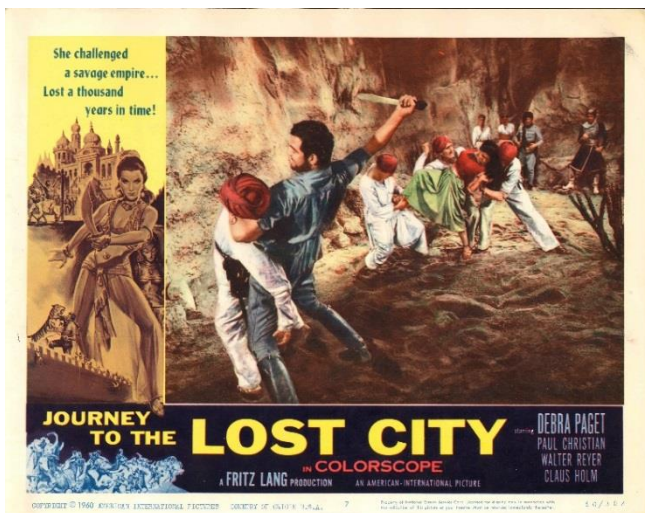


JOURNEY TO THE LOST CITY

Dir. Fritz Lang

Cast: Debra Paget

Production Company: Criterion Productions, 1960

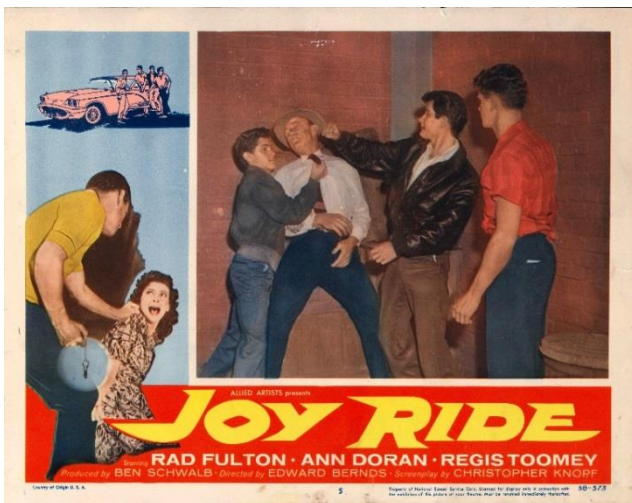


JOY RIDE

Dir. Edward Bernds

Cast: Regis Toomey, Ann Doran

Production Company: Allied Artists Pictures



THE LONE RIDER AND THE BANDIT

Dir. Sam Newfield

Cast: George Houston, Al St. John

Production Company: Sigmund Neufeld Productions, 1942



LURE OF THE WASTELAND

Dir. Harry L. Fraser

Cast: Grant Withers, LeRoy Mason

Production Company: Al Lane Pictures



RENDEZVOUS 24

Dir. James Tinning

Cast: William Gargan, Maria Palmer

Production Company: Sol M. Wurtzel Productions, 1946



RIVER GANG

Dir. Charles David

Cast: Gloria Jean, John Qualen

Production Company: Universal Pictures, 1950



RUMBLE ON THE DOCK

Dir. Fred F. Sears

Cast: James Darren, Laurie Carroll

Production Company: Clover Productions, 1956



SANTA FE PASSAGE

Dir. William Witney

Cast: John Payne, Faith Domergue

Production Company: Republic Pictures, 1955



SPECTER OF THE ROSE

Dir. Ben Hecht

Cast: Judith Anderson

Production Company: Republic Pictures, 1946



THE SQUARE JUNGLE

Dir. Jerry Hopper

Cast: Tony Curtis, Ernest Borgnine

Production Company: Universal International Pictures, 1956

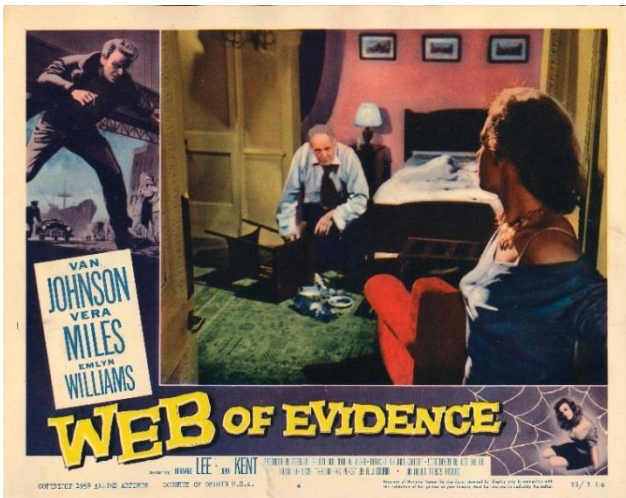


WEB OF EVIDENCE

Dir. Jack Cardiff

Cast: Van Johnson, Vera Miles

Production Company: Georgefield Productions, 1959



WHISPERING SMITH VS. SCOTLAND YARD

Dir. Francis Searle

Cast: Richard Carlson, Herbert Lom

Production Company: Hammer-Lesser, 1952



**THE GOLDEN AGE OF HOLLYWOOD B MOVIES:
LOBBY CARDS FROM THE BOB BURKE
FILM AND AUTOGRAPH COLLECTION**

Flaming Frontier!
Blonde Blackmailer!
Texas Terrors
Rumble on the Docks!

These films may never have received much critical attention or risen to the level of Academy Award status, but to American film audiences from the 1930s through the 1950s, B movies like these promised action, adventure, romance and an evening of solid entertainment. In this selection of movie lobby cards curated from the Bob Burke Film and Television Autograph Collection housed in the Archives and Special Collections of the UCO Chambers Library, we celebrate the enduring legacy of the Hollywood B movie. For those old enough to remember the neighborhood theaters and drive-ins that used to be such familiar features of 20th century American cultural life, B movies evoke fond memories of Saturday matinees spent in darkened theaters, the aroma of fresh popcorn, and the thrill of larger-than-life heroes battling and overcoming impossible obstacles in ways that were entirely predictable but satisfying nonetheless.

B MOVIES AND THE HOLLYWOOD STUDIO SYSTEM

In April of 1896 Thomas Edison presented his company's latest invention, the Vitascope, which permitted the projection of motion picture images onto a large screen. The venue was a New York City vaudeville theater and the effect on audiences was electrifying. From this exchange of money for the visual pleasure of seeing photographic images in motion the American film industry was born. The movies had arrived.

However, the specific commodity form of the motion picture that we are all familiar with—the feature film—had not yet appeared. In fact, at first it was not at all clear what form movies would take. The first motion pictures were short, one-shot films that could do little more than display movement, and initially that seemed to satisfy audiences. But gradually audiences demanded more for their money and ambitious filmmakers turned to filming staged narratives, sometimes based upon well-known novels and plays, as a way of keeping audiences in their seats.

Initially there were scores of competing production companies and the only requirement for getting into the “movie game” was a working camera and access to film stock. But by 1909 the largest firms, led by the Edison Manufacturing Company, combined to form the Motion Picture Patent Company (MPPC) in order to regulate the industry and drive smaller competitors out of business. Among those competitors were a number of businessmen, all first-generation Jewish immigrants, who had gotten into the movie business by operating theaters and theater chains in major cities. When the Motion Picture Patents Company began to cut-in on their profits by demanding royalties, these enterprising exhibitors decided to diversify by getting into the film production business themselves. Labeled “independents” because of their refusal to comply with the increasing economic demands of the MPPC, individuals like Adolph Zukor (Paramount), William Fox (Fox), and Carl Laemmle (Universal) formed their own motion picture production companies and competed head-on with the MPPC. Eventually the independent production companies sued the MPPC in federal court and in 1916 the Motion Picture Patents Company was dissolved for its monopolistic practices. The production companies associated with the MPPC, including Edison, eventually went out of business and the so-called “independents” became the major production companies, the foundation of the Hollywood studio system and the American film industry.

From the mid-teens through the 1950s, eight production companies, led by the “Big Five” of Paramount, MGM, Fox (20th Century Fox after 1935), Warner Bros. and RKO, and the “Little Three” of Universal, Columbia and United

Artists made up the American film industry, or what was euphemistically referred to as “Hollywood.” Low budget “poverty row” studios, like Republic and Monogram, operated at the bottom of the film industry and built the majority of their release schedule around popular B movie genres.

In this period the film industry was arguably the most important cultural institution in American life. As the production center for the largest entertainment industry ever created, Hollywood enjoyed a unique capacity to shape the dreams and desires of its mass audience. The studio system was producing an average of 385 motion pictures a year, delivering them to the public with all the publicity and ballyhoo expected from a business that had built itself on spectacle and showmanship. At the same time a colorful array of fan magazines and trade papers fed the public’s appetite for behind-the-scenes information about the film industry and the glamorous lives of those who worked in it. By 1928 an estimated 20,500 movie theaters were showing Hollywood films in towns and cities across the country. By the late 1930s the Hollywood press corps had become the third largest in the country (trailing only those in New York and Washington D.C.), with a contingent of nearly four hundred newspapermen, columnists, and feature writers covering the Hollywood beat for the press and major magazines worldwide. Hollywood had become America’s “dream factory,” the center of an unparalleled curiosity and interest on the part of movie-goers.

The Hollywood studio system was a vertically integrated commercial enterprise within which the production, distribution and exhibition of motion pictures as commodities was standardized with the goal of minimizing costs and maximizing profits. The Hollywood mode of film production can be described as hierarchical and bureaucratic. Production was organized from the top down by a studio chief of production who oversaw the work of multiple production units, each with its own producer and director supervising individual projects. Film crafts, such as wardrobe, prop and set design and construction, writing and music, along with more prosaic yet equally necessary tasks such as carpentry, electrical work and painting, were divided among as many as forty different studio departments, each supervised by a department head answerable to the director and the producer.

Hollywood executives rarely thought in terms of a single film, rather each film would be regarded as merely one component of the studio's annual output, a portion of the yearly production budget. Within this yearly release schedule, the studios grouped films within three or more categories, according to their importance and expense. The top group—"specials" some studios called them—featured the studios' leading stars and directors and received the largest production budgets. These films were frequently based on best-selling novels or popular stage plays, for whose screen rights the studio had paid hundreds of thousands of dollars. Next were the feature pictures—the studios' standard releases—using contract players and directors, and based on original screenplays or adapted from magazine stories, and receiving smaller production budgets. At the bottom came the category eventually known as "B pictures" which were most often genre films such as western or detective stories based on familiar narrative formulas that could be cranked out by the studios on predictable schedules at low-cost and with a guarantee of profit. These films often featured up and coming new talent and many highly-respected Hollywood filmmakers began their careers making lowly B movies, including John Ford, Nicholas Ray, John Huston and Edward Dmytryk.

According to film historian Leonard Maltin:

B movies came into existence in the mid-1930s with the advent of the double feature. Originally, some enterprising exhibitors offered the Depression public two movies for the price of one, but the studios (most of whom were aligned with major theater chains) figured out a way of *appearing* to give two for one, by producing low-cost movies specifically designed to be shown with the regular releases. The main feature thus became the A movie, and the second feature the B. The B movie was never intended to do anything but fill up screen time as economically as possible." (Foreward, *B Movies*, by Don Miller)

Though historically accurate, Maltin's account does not do full justice to the cultural and aesthetic impact of B movies, many of which continue to exert a dream-like fascination for students of American popular culture. As commercial products, B movies generally display a rigid adherence to the aesthetic norms, industry standards, and generic conventions dominant within the studio system consistent with the rules of Classical Hollywood filmmaking. But because of their low-budget—and low-brow—cultural status, B movies were also sometimes more open to innovation and experimentation. Despite their often bad acting and low production values, their predictable plots and laughable special effects, at their best B movies tap into the same cultural and ideological concerns present in more artistically ambitious films. And even the most self-evidently “bad” B movies often display a charm and innocence, or a camp sensibility that may strike some as surprisingly self-reflective or strangely surreal.

LOBBY CARDS AND MOVIE PROMOTION

For this exhibit we have selected twenty-four lobby cards from the Bob Burke Film and Television Autograph Collection. The use of lobby cards to promote movies dates back to the 1910s, when the “independent” film production companies broke the monopolistic control of the Motion Picture Patents Company. Among the restrictions imposed by the MPPC on production companies was a prohibition on advertising the names of the actors and actresses who appeared in motion pictures, fearing such publicity would lead to a demand for higher salaries. The independents fought this restriction when it became clear to them that audiences were eager to learn more about the “picture personalities” whom they enjoyed on the screen. After the MPPC had been dissolved by court order, motion picture production companies were free to promote their films as lavishly and in as many formats as possible, and the heyday of movie advertising had begun.

Gorgeously printed in full color with bold graphic designs and featuring an idealized image of the stars, often in a dramatic scene from the film, movie posters came in a variety of sizes ranging from the familiar one-sheet (27”x41”) to a three-sheet (41”x81”) to the billboard-sized six-sheets (81”x81”). These larger poster sizes were displayed in theater lobbies, but

they could also appear on the sides of buildings or roadside signs. Smaller poster formats included half-sheets (28"x22"), inserts (14"x36"), window cards (14"x22") and lobby cards (14"x11"). Inserts and window cards were generally printed on a heavier card stock and because of their smaller size they were often placed in the windows of drugstores or diners in order to attract movie patrons to the local movie theater. Lobby cards were usually printed in sets of eight, although sets of four, ten or twelve were sometimes produced, depending on the importance of the film. Lobby cards were displayed in specially designed cases in theater lobbies.

According to film historians John Kobal and V.A. Wilson, "The lobby card—garish, lively, electric, vulgar, often silly—was a form of advertising that revolutionized the look of graphics" (9). One of the eight cards in the set was known as the "title card" because it displayed the title of the film along with the central design elements from the one-sheet poster, and for that reason they are among the most highly valued lobby cards by collectors today. The rest of the seven cards would present photographs of key scenes from the film, often tinted or colored, along with some representative design element framing the scene. Over time lobby cards became more adventurous, with imaginative and kinetic designs surrounding the images and colorful tag lines stoking the audience's expectations.

Because they gave audiences a preview of what they were about to see on the screen—or could look forward to seeing next week—lobby cards were always eagerly studied by the audiences that would gather around these displays on their way into or out of the theater. Favorite scenes from the film could be revisited as you exited through the lobby, or your curiosity could be aroused by an interesting lobby card promoting a film "coming soon" to your local theater. Tag lines often screamed for movie-goers' attention, as they teased them with hints about the film. For instance, the tag line for *Whispering Smith vs. Scotland Yard* in this exhibit—"MURDER no one can prove!... A BODY no one can find!..."—announces the film's genre (a murder mystery) while hinting at the film's premise and suggesting the thrills awaiting movie-goers.

Over time movie lobby cards have become as iconic as the forgotten films they once promoted. The selection of images, the imaginative artwork bordering the images, the lively subjects and brilliant colors, the hyperbolic tag-lines, all combine to produce a piece of advertising artwork that could eloquently convey the mood and subject matter of a film while also helping to sell tickets. As Kobal and Wilson have noted: “While it might seem ironic that lobby cards were printed in blazing colors for what were after all, with a few rare exceptions, black and white films, the point of posters and lobby cards was to convey the excitement of the product that they were selling” (12). In achieving that goal lobby cards proved to be one of the most effective and fondly remembered artifacts of Hollywood’s golden age.

Dr. John Parris Springer
UCO Director Film Studies
Edmond, OK
2017

OUTSIDERS: THE STORY OF *MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000*

Cult-classic comedy series *Mystery Science Theater 3000 (MST3k)* made an art out of wisecracking at bottom-barrel B-movies. Any discussion of the “Golden Age of Hollywood B-Movies” is incomplete without mentioning the television show that restored the B-movie genre to the forefront of popular culture in the late 20th century. The countercultural cable network phenomenon ran from 1988-1999, airing nearly 200 episodes and producing one feature-length film, *Mystery Science Theater 3000: The Movie* (1996).

MST3k had a simple premise: a mild-mannered Midwesterner is marooned in space by evil scientists who need a test case for their world-domination experiment. The unfortunate earthling (originally Joel Hodgson, later Mike Nelson) is subjected to screenings of horrible B-movies in an attempt to find a film that the scientists can weaponize to brainwash humanity. The audience observes the “experiments” as Joel and Mike maintain their sanity by quipping jokes at each film, a practice known as “riffing.” Smart-alecky robot pals Tom Servo and Crow T. Robot are along for the ride, contributing their own stingers.

Stand-up comic Joel Hodgson conceived the idea for *MST3k* after abandoning the Hollywood scene in the late 1980s. He said, “I’d seen other people compromise, and I felt that once you gave up on what you wanted to do, you couldn’t go back.” Returning to his native Minneapolis, Minnesota, Hodgson met Jim Mallon, the production manager at a local station called KTMA.

Hodgson believed the station's dusty library of old B-films provided a ready-made opportunity for a fresh television concept.

Debuting on Thanksgiving Day 1988, the show quickly developed a strong local following. Soon after, Mallon and Hodgson pitched the show to Comedy Central. The fledgling network's desperate need for programming gave Mallon and Hodgson the leverage they needed to retain ownership of the show. They also fought to keep production in the Twin Cities, recruiting a staff of aspiring local comics and writers, including future series host Mike Nelson. Their Midwestern location insulated them from meddling television executives. Long-time cast member Kevin Murphy said, "The reason the show got to grow was because nobody wanted to come out to Minnesota."

MST3k's meat-and-potatoes charm lent the show an irresistible air of authenticity. Hodgson later stated that "The reason *Mystery Science Theater* succeeded was it was outside the LA/New York culture, and people thought it was a very fresh thing." In a 2010 series retrospective, *Time Magazine* wrote, "Throughout its run, *MST3k* retained its outsider-edge and Midwestern niceness." The "outsider-edge" that resonated so strongly with audiences fueled the show's creative purpose.

Transforming the B-movie into a new form of entertainment was an important goal of the show. However, Hodgson also wanted to prove that film and Hollywood itself, with its inflated self-image, were not above reproach. In 2010, Hodgson explained that movie riffing is based on a simple principle: "When you're presented with something insane or silly, the human reflex is to speak out." Indulging that "human reflex" and upholding "the liberty for people to know that not everything on TV is correct, or the final word" were the show's cornerstones.

In many episodes, the cast was forced to view "shorts" preceding the feature films. These short films offered guidance on the most mundane subjects, telling audiences how to practice good hygiene, budget an allowance, and host a proper family dinners. In many cases, these films suggested their way was not only how things *could* be done, but also how they *should* be done. The

show's blatant refusal to take these films seriously further evidenced its underlying belief: that just because something was said or done on screen, the audience did not have to embrace it or believe it.

After jumping from Comedy Central to the Sci-Fi Channel in 1996, the show was canceled in 1999. Eighteen years later, *MST3k* is revived thanks to a record-breaking Kickstarter campaign and streaming giant Netflix. The new series is set to debut on April 14, 2017, featuring a fresh cast and team of writers. Joel Hodgson is once again steering the ship, his "outsider-edge" still evident. In regards to the reboot, Hodgson said, "I don't want to say I'm the showrunner because that's a Hollywood term, and *MST3k* has its own culture." Its unique, outsider "culture" is what enabled it to satirize the entertainment system without ever fitting comfortably in its box. The new series will once again drag Hollywood's cheesiest B-movies back into the spotlight, and hopefully it will continue to challenge audiences to think critically and intelligently about the media it consumes.

Josiah Cogan
Edmond, OK
2017

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