

Vanishing Media: Space Command

“Space Command” was an early and intriguing part of the Canadian invention of television. It was a space adventure / science fiction weekly series for children that began broadcasting in March 13th, 1953 with 150 episodes produced over its two seasons. It was the first original dramatic series of Canadian television and introduced a formidable cast and crew to Canadians, and them to television. Sadly, it has virtually vanished from our documentary, or even remembered, past.

“Space Command” was shot live in a tiny studio at the CBC in Toronto with limited budget and special effects. Most of the ‘extra-terrestrial’ travel was suggested by dialogue and gesture, reinforced by dramatic music and rocket sound effects. ‘Space walks’ were executed with the space travellers perched precariously on saw-horses, draped with black velvet, and pulled with ropes across the stage with a black curtain studded with stars. Space ship models were devised in the producer/director’s home work-shop and then filmed flying and/or exploding in an abandoned gravel pit, with such footage inserted when it looked believable. Fred Rainsberry, original head of CBC Children’s Television observes: “Many of the techniques employed would not be acceptable to present-day audiences but at the time the show was the most popular dramatic series on the air.” (“A History of Children’s Television in English Canada”, 1952 – 1986, Scarecrow Press, 1988- p. 117)

It was written by Alf Harris , who began his career in broadcasting with CKWS radio in Kingston in the 1940’s writing dozens of dramas for CBC radio and television over the years. He was a science fiction aficionado and took pride in projecting recognized scientific principles logically into the future with “Space Command”. Harris was part of the Canadian television migration to Hollywood in the 1960’s that included Paul Almond, Loyd Bochner, Lorne Greene and Austin Willis. Harris there wrote episodes for the television series “Mission Impossible”, “Bonanza”, “The Wild West”, “Barnaby Jones” and 7 episodes for “Dragnet”. Harris also ventured into science fiction publishing in a collaboration with Arthur Moore, publishing “Slater’s Planet” in 1971 and “The Marrow Eaters” in 1972 under the ‘nom de plume’ Harris Moore. He collaborated with his LA-based Canadian friends on a murder mystery “The Joseph File” (1974) and then did write some further episodes for the Canadian television series “Starlost” and “Adderley” in the 1980’s.

“Space Command” was produced and directed by Murray Chercover, who went on to establish the CTV network. The series introduced Andrew Anthony, Joe Austin, Bob Barclay, James Doohan, Harry Geldard, Cec Lindner, William Shatner, Aileen Taylor, and Austin Willis to television. Of particular interest would be to see James Doohan and William Shatner in their space adventures before their roles on “Star Trek”. Sets were designed by Richard Knowles with special effects by John Lowry.

“Space Command” was shot live to kinescope so that it could be shipped across the country. Those kinescopes were systematically returned to CBC English-language network headquarters in Toronto where they were routinely disposed of, if no re-use was

foreseen. Unfortunately, no further use could be imagined for this series and only a single episode survives from November, 1953. A nasty rumour once circulated that these kines, along with hundreds of others, were junked in the early 1970's for their silver content, but this has not been confirmed.

“Space Command” has been requested of the CBC dozens of times. Follow-up queries have been made with Chercover, and the actors, in the hope that someone kept copies as part of their personal memorabilia. But none have surfaced. Even scripts would be of great interest and perhaps this plea will bring some to light.

We cannot make any claims for exceptional innovation or popularity for “Space Command” but we also don't know. It was undoubtedly an admirable component of the Canadian invention of television and deserves to be preserved and known for that alone. “Space Command” also was the learning ground for the production team, actors, and technician and would be fascinating to re-examine from that perspective. Unfortunately, “Space Command” truly is a part of our vanishing media!

7th July, 2006

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- visuals include a nice variety of stills available from CBC Design Library – Linda Barnett 416 205-3241