



**“TALES OF TOMORROW”  
TV Sci-Fi Experiment in the 1950’s**

Retrospective by Dr. John L. Flynn

*Tales of Tomorrow* was the first television series to treat the science fiction genre seriously. Many of its scripts were adapted from stories by masters of science fiction (such as H.G. Wells and Mary Shelley), and its production values were highly technological for 1951. It was a forerunner of *The Twilight Zone*, *Science Fiction Theatre*, and *The Outer Limits*, and with its unique format as an anthology series. *Tales of Tomorrow* was flexible enough to offer a full range of science fiction, fantasy and horror stories.

Late in 1950, creator Mort Abrahams (first producer of *Tom Corbett-Space Cadet*) and producer George F. Foley Jr. came up with the revolutionary idea of involving science fiction writers in the production of a series. They organized a semi-commercial group, known as the Science Fiction League, and employed

writers such as Fletcher Pratt, Horace Gold and Alvin Sapinsky. They then approached several network executives with a unique format proposal, and sold ABC-TV a science fiction series that would showcase the most talented writers, artists and technicians in the field.

First telecast on Aug. 3, 1951, *Tales of Tomorrow* was critically acclaimed for its excellent stories and first quality production values. Its half hour segments were highly innovative (considering the restrictions of "live" television) and included adaptations of classics such as *Frankenstein* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* as well as original stories. Abrahams insisted, as a rule, that all episodes focus on human drama played against the backdrop of science fiction and that technical effects never be substituted for first class writing!

But the audiences at the time were less sophisticated in their viewing tastes and preferred the comic book exploits of *Captain Video* or the juvenile fantasy of *Tom Corbett-Space Cadet* to Abrahams' vision. They were unaccustomed to stories that provoked thought, and they did not respond favorably to this unique experiment in television programming.

*Tales of Tomorrow* ran for two seasons on ABC-TV (on Friday nights at 9:30 E.S.T.) before the network realized its gamble had failed, and it was canceled on June 12, 1953. The program was resurrected for a short time on radio during the summer of 1953: but it wasn't until the 1980's, when it resurfaced in syndication,

on the USA Cable Network, that it has acquired a following of science fiction fans. In much the same way that special interest groups revived *Star Trek*, *Tales of Tomorrow* become a cult phenomenon. Fans, at science fiction conventions, discuss episodes, swap video-tapes and search for stills, scripts and other items from the series. Fanzines (magazines written by fans) about the series have been produced and sold. And several major companies have begun to merchandise products, such as books and tapes, for that renaissance.

Nostalgia Merchant issued a special two-volume videotape set (\$5.95 each) which features eight of the best episodes. The segments include "Frankenstein" (with Lon Chaney Jr.), "Dune Roller," "Crystal Egg," "Past Tense" (with Boris Karloff), "Appointment on Mars," "A Child is Crying," "The Window" and "Ice From Space" (with Paul Newman). The B & W quality of those early kinescopes transfers well onto video tape. *Leisure Books* purchased the literary rights to *Tales of Tomorrow* and commissioned David Houston to write a series of novels based on the original episodes. To date, Houston has produced *Invaders at Ground Zero*, *Red Dust*, *Substance X*, and *Ice From Space*. The books are well written and reflect the quality of the series.

Negotiations, with the major cable companies, for the production of a new series, have been in the works for several years. HBO, Showtime, USA Cable Network, and others have been fighting over the rights to *Tales of Tomorrow*, and

it is hoped that it will be returning to television soon with new episodes. Until then fans will have to be content with the books and video tapes of original shows. But then, with such an intelligently written series, the episodes call be viewed again and again.

*Tales of Tomorrow* stands as one of the high points of early television, with some of the medium's finest writing, directing and acting (by the likes of Boris Karloff, Lon Chancy Jr., Veronica Lake, and Lee J. Cobb). With superb sets by James Trillipo and art direction by Arthur Rankin Jr., the series still has a most sophisticated look. In fact, many of the episodes are probably more relevant today than they were sixty years ago.

Copyright 2003 by John L. Flynn, Ph.D.