



ROOTS, RITUALS AND PHANTASMAGORIA

White Lady + Children of the Stones

Screenplay: *White Lady*

Directed by: David Rudkin
Production Company: BBC Pebble Mill
Produced by: Carol Parks
Production Associate: Andrew Smith
Production Manager: William Hartley
Assistant Floor Managers: John Greening, Monica Heath
Production Assistant: Judy Alpe
Script Editor: Roger Gregory
[Written] By: David Rudkin
Photography: John Kenway
Film Lighting Electrician: Roy Carn
Film Grips: Jimmy Monks
Film Editor: Greg Miller
Designer: Michael Edwards
Graphic Designer: Ann Jenkins
Properties Buyer: Michael Preece
Costume Designer: Al Barnett
Make-Up Designer: Gill Hughes
Special Sound by: Elizabeth Parker, Radiophonic Workshop
Film Recordist: John Gilbert
Dubbing Mixer: David Baumber
Cast:
Cornelius Garrett (*Gil*)
Sophie Thompson (*Amy*)
Jessica Martin (*Tess*)
Meg Wynn Owen (*White Lady*)
BBC2 tx 26.8.1987
UK 1987
47 mins
Digital

Children of the Stones

Episode 1: Into the Circle

Director: Peter Graham Scott
Production Company: HTV
Executive Producer: Patrick Dromgoole
Producer: Peter Graham Scott
Script: Jeremy Burnham, Trevor Ray
Designer: Ken Jones
Cast:
Iain Cuthbertson (*Hendrick*)
Gareth Thomas (*Adam Brake*)
Freddie Jones (*Dai*)
Peter Demin (*Matthew*)
Veronica Strong (*Margaret*)
Katherine Levy (*Sandra*)
June Barrie (*Miss Clegg*)
Ruth Dunning (*Mrs Crabtree*)
Ian Donnolly (*Bob*)
Darren Hatch (*Kevin*)
Gary Lock (*Jimmo*)
ITV tx 10.1.1977
UK 1977
30 mins
Digital

A woman in white holds a scythe and watches over a father repairing his rural home with his two daughters. I love *White Lady* – not just for its symbolic storytelling and rural setting, but for its bold editing. The way it flips between landscapes and macro photography was something I aspired to with *Starve Acre's* macro work. The use of child actors helps stress that our actions have consequences – trauma is passed down, in various forms, be it real horror or folktales.

Daniel Kokotajlo

One of the less commented upon fantasy works of writer David Rudkin (mainly down to it having been so hard to see) was his contribution to BBC Two's *Screenplay*, a strand of one-off plays and films that ran from July 1986 to October 1993. Rudkin not only wrote *White Lady*, it marked his sole gig in the director's chair and for the occasion he brought back production designer Michael Edwards who had helped director Alan Clarke achieve the singular look of his 1974 Rudkin adaptation *Penda's Fen* for *Play for Today*. *White Lady* continues Rudkin's exploration of the mythology and landscapes of the English countryside, making it a close relation not only of *Penda's Fen* but his other work in what today has come to be described – however inaccurately at times – as 'folk horror': *The Stone Dance* (1963), *The Ash Tree* (1975), his contribution to *A Ghost Story for Christmas* (1971-), *...Artemis 8..1....* (1981) and *Gawain and the Green Knight* (1991).

Broadcast on 26 August 1987, *White Lady* initially follows a dysfunctional family – father Gil (Cornelius Garrett) and two young daughters, Amy (Sophie Thompson) and Tess (Jessica Martin), are living in an isolated country house following the breakdown of Gil's marriage. He's absorbed with trying to keep the ramshackle house from falling apart and alternately neglects and abuses his daughters. Almost immediately, the story starts to be intercut with strange and disturbing slides that show showing medical photographs and X-rays of animals that have either been experimented upon or maimed by pesticides, and later, slides presenting a stark description of just how many of those pesticides had been found in British picked fruit in 1984. Gil wants the girls to live not wanting much and being happy with what they've got but is still too controlling to not stop them from playing on land belonging to others.

Gil becomes aware of a presence in the countryside around the house but never sees anything, unlike the girls who can see the eponymous 'white lady' (Meg Wynn Owen), ominously carrying a scythe and watching them from afar. They eventually find her waiting for them in the woods, offering them a feast of naturally grown fruit and vegetables ('Daddy could never buy those...').

Though shorter than *Penda's Fen* and certainly nowhere near as long as the epic *...Artemis 8..1....*, *White Lady* still manages to cram in a huge amount of thought-provoking material. Its ecological concerns, centred around Rudkin's ruminations on the extensive use of pesticides, bring to mind the growing debate around genetically modified foods at the time (less than a year after the film was broadcast, the use of genetically modified microbial enzymes in food production was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration). Beneath the surreal trappings of the *White Lady* lies a very rooted fear about the way that farming and food production was heading, a fear even more prevalent today than it was in 1987.

ROOTS, RITUALS AND PHANTASMAGORIA

The Shout + Lonely Water (aka The Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water)

Wed 18 Sep 18:10 + Q&A with filmmakers Daniel Kokotajlo and Mark Jenkin; Sat 21 Sep 15:00; Wed 2 Oct 20:50

The Hunger

Thu 19 Sep 20:35; Sun 6 Oct 18:10

Little Otik Otesánek

Sat 21 Sep 17:45

Don't Look Now

Thu 26 Sep 20:50; Sun 29 Sep 18:10

Eraserhead

Tue 1 Oct 21:00; Mon 7 Oct 18:10

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Quite who or what the *White Lady* is remains pleasingly vague. She carries a scythe, traditionally associated with the personification of death though here one suspects that she does so merely as a reference to a scene in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), a favourite film of Rudkin's – he wrote a *BFI Film Classics* monograph on it first published in 2007. The origins of the mysterious woman are never elaborated upon. That Gil can't see her suggests that she's a supernatural force, a protector perhaps of the countryside against the excesses of Mankind, though why she would target this family in particular when they can barely afford pesticides let alone have the wherewithal to deploy them is unclear. At one point she tells the girls that 'my white ship comes to children', suggesting perhaps that's she's of extra-terrestrial origin, related perhaps to Asrael and Helith the alien angels from ...*Artemis* 8.1.... Wherever she's from, she certainly isn't human. Referring to Mankind in general, but possibly to Gil in particular, she tells the sisters that 'once he lost the land he lived from. Next, he lost his country. Now he is losing the Earth.'

She may also simply be their guardian angel. A shocking moment occurs early in the film when Gil, thankfully off camera, slaps one of his daughters for a minor transgression. His mental state is highly questionable throughout and his suitability for looking after the children is in doubt from the off. His attempts to control the girls and pry them from the land that he's so seemingly in love with is what appears to summon the white lady in the first place. She frees them from this, frees them from his controlling ways perhaps suggesting a feminist subtext at play too.

It's too easy to fall into the rut of simply bemoaning the fact that British television has changed beyond all recognition in recent decades, leaving behind its more daring and experimental roots. But it is very true that the television landscape in the UK has been redeveloped in such a way that something as widely experimental and challenging as *White Lady* is unlikely to be seen again any time soon. Rudkin films in long takes, often without dialogue, the character of the countryside taking centre stage as often as the humans and, as ever, makes no concessions for any viewer not willing to put in the work to make something of it. There's no one right interpretation of what happens in *White Lady* – there are many and all are valid – and Rudkin himself offers only the vaguest of clues: when asked by one of the girls what a parable is, Gil tells them 'A sort of story with something in it... Strange... to help you remember it, and think about something important.' And that is a pretty good way of summing up his entire fascinating oeuvre.

White Lady hasn't been repeated nor has it surfaced on home video, relegating it to an 'almost ran' in Rudkin's body of work. Which is a tragedy as it's as weighty, intellectual and vital as any of his better-known works and is in dire need of rediscovery.

Kevin Lyons, The EOFTV Review, eoftvreview.wordpress.com, 23 June 2023

Children of the Stones

On the theme of youth in folktales, *Children of the Stones* ranks highly as an ode to the curiosity and intelligence of our younger generation, with the children of a small village aware that something is amiss. The show packs a considerable punch with its 1970s folk-horror soundtrack and freakish cliffhanger. The ending never fails to bring a smile to my face, while also sending a chill down my spine. It's pure folk horror.

Daniel Kokotajlo