

# SERLING'S 'PATTERNS' AN ICON OF LOST ERA

BY TOM SHALES



Anyone who seriously wonders why they call it the Golden Age need only screen a play like "Patterns,"

which a young upstart named Rod Serling wrote for "Kraft Television Theatre" in 1955, to enjoy a lovely epiphany. Everything about it seems so gratifyingly right.

Unfortunately, there has to be a touch of melancholy, too. Some people thought live TV was the beginning of a truly new story-telling medium—one uniquely suited to intimate, unadorned, psychological dramas—but it turned out to be a beginning with a tiny middle and a rushed end.

The Golden Age lasted, really, only until the early 1960s at the latest. It was done in by many factors that don't need to be reiterated here, but when there are many factors and one of them is money, that's the one that's usually most to blame. So it was that Madison Avenue's priorities won out; less pricey filmed series with continuing characters replaced the ambitious anthologies. And when videotape became as easy to edit as film (now more easily edited than film, of course), the death knell was deafening.

Serling wrote "Patterns" not as an imitation movie but as a real television play, a work that fit perfectly the contours and criteria of the medium. The play turned out, by its excellence, to be a television event as well, winning for Serling the first of his six career Emmys and establishing him as one of the brightest lights among the new breed of TV dramatists.

"Patterns" was so well-received that Kraft mounted a live repeat of the show a month later, and the intimate TV show was turned into a less intimate (and somehow less satisfying) movie in 1956. Except for the use of terms like "mimeographed" and "teletype," little about the drama seems dated, unless one is of the opinion that corporate politics and boardroom bloodletting no longer exist.

True, there are no female executives in



Richard Kiley, left, and Ed Begley in a tense scene from "Patterns."

the corporate world that Serling creates, but one of the women serving as a top executive's secretary has considerable power within the organization, as well as keen eyes and ears when it comes to knowing what's going on and who's doing what to whom.

With minimally judicious scene-setting (shots of clocks, a building directory, a switchboard) and a rapid introduction of characters, Serling pulls a viewer almost immediately into his story, a tale of corporate morality—or the lack of it—and such everyday battles as the ones waged between conscience and ambition.

There are no wasted words or gestures, but then Serling had to keep things tight; he had only an hour to tell the story, not 90 minutes or two hours. Virtually every edition of "Kraft Television Theater" was a mere 60 minutes, with two two-minute breaks (four commercial minutes in the whole hour—wow).

The sponsor's breaks also made clever use of television: recipes from the Kraft Family Kitchen read by an off-screen announcer while a pair of female hands did the preparation.

In the first act of "Patterns," after early-morning preliminaries at Ramsey & Co., somewhere in Manhattan, Richard Kiley arrives as Fred Staples (after whom the later chain of office supply stores was presumably not named), a bright young executive plucked from obscurity in the Midwest by Mr. Ramsey himself, played by Everett Sloane. "Oh Fred, we're going to love it here," says Staples' too-eager wife, Fran (June Dayton).

The rest of the act covers Staples' first morning, mostly bonhomie and high hopes. The second act takes place a month later, with the cheeriness already eroding. Staples discovers he was really recruited to replace Andy Sloan, a vice president whom the ruthless, Machiavellian Ramsey wants to force out. Ed Begley (Senior, of course) is subtly poignant in the part.

Sloan has, among other crimes against bureaucracy, reached the creaky old age of—get this—56. Does that detail age the play? Probably not. The theme of experience being swept aside in favor of youth is more relevant now, not less, even if 56 is the new 46, or whatever.

Some of the most intense, confrontational scenes are shot in extreme close-up, faces filling the screen. It required a kind of acting that had to be skillfully calibrated and devoid of false emotion or hyperbole, scaled way down from theatrical or cinematic styles and far more realistic. More like life. Real life.

The supporting cast includes Elizabeth Wilson, who probably played 10,000 executive secretaries during her career but makes the one in "Patterns" a veritable prototype; and a very young, heart-meltingly pretty Elizabeth Montgomery, making an early and brief appearance (way pre-"Bewitched") in the role of Ann Evans, a business novice whom Serling gave some of the elementary exposition.

In the pure, artful integrity of a work like "Patterns," and in the unmistakable electric tension of a "live" performance (even when watched via recording more than half a century later), goldenness is evident and still aglow. There was a Golden Age—many bronze, silver and plastic ages ago. ●



Rod Serling



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