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Gene Roddenberry on Star Trek

Gene Roddenberry

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Burelbach:

These are the Voyages of the Starship Enterprise. To explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilization. To boldly split an infinitive that no man has split before.

Narrator:

Brockport Writer's Forum presents another in its exclusive and continuing series of discussions with leading literary contemporaries. Today, Gene Roddenberry on Star Trek. Here to introduce the participants and guests is today's program host, Dr. Fred Burelbach; professor of English at the State University College at Brockport.

Burelbach:

Gene Roddenberry, creating and dynamic force behind the phenomenally festival television series Star Trek. He became interested in science fiction, as so many people have done, by reading a story in Astounding Magazine. After studying engineering at UCLA, he joined the Air Force, flew missions in the South Pacific during World War II, and after the war continued flying for Pan-American, which led him to a number of marvelous adventures, I understand, including similar [inaudible] commendation for conduct during a crash in the desert. [Inaudible] to continue the writing that he had started during the war with both stories and poems, he joined the Los Angeles Police Department to get information for his material and sold scripts to a number of TV shows; Good Year Theater, Dragnet, Naked City, and Have Done Will Travel, among others. A number of the shows won awards. Star Trek began in 1966, ran for three seasons on NBC and then went into world wide release in syndication in 47 countries and hundreds of markets. It is led to spin offs of all kinds including, of course, conventions attended by thousands of people. It's the only series ever to have an episode preserved in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC and the original 11-foot model of the Starship Enterprise is also preserved there. Since Star Trek, Mr Roddenberry has gone onto a number of other activities. He had served as a member of the Writer's Guild Executive Council and a governor of the Television Academy Arts and Sciences. He belongs to the Explorer's Club of New York City, American Civil Liberties Union, and in 1973 received an honorary doctorate in human letters from Emerson College at Boston Massachusetts. Here today with me to interview Mr Roddenberry is Piers Marchant, whose passion for Star Trek has endured for most of his 15 years. Piers --

Piers:

Mr Roddenberry, the most obvious question to ask for all the Star Trek fans, will there be a new series or a new movie?

Roddenberry:

Yes, as a matter of fact there will be a new movie and I had it confirmed just before I left on this trip. It will, I will not be writing or producing this one now, but I will be executive consultant on it.

Piers:

Will it include Leonard Nimoy? Have you signed on any of the actors?

Roddenberry:

I'm not doing the signing, but I understand it will include Leonard. Leonard had asked that, I gather for part of the agreement of doing the movie that he'd be killed, that Spock be killed. I fought this and I think probably they will, in the end just have him mysteriously disappear for this episode and I object very much to Spock being killed. I feel very high of a proprietary interest in Spock, which I too created and I would not want to see him killed. I'd like to think that if 20 years from now perhaps, as been done in Sherlock Holmes [inaudible] that a new group will come around and recreate the characters and perhaps makes them relevant to those years as we tried in ours.

Burelbach:

Is that an indication, by the way, that Leonard Nimoy would rather not do anymore Spock?

Roddenberry:

That's truly it.

I, you can undtand the special agony an actor has when he becomes so well known in a character. I heard a serstand, although I disagree with him on his right to kill Spock, I do understory, Leonard came off stage, he'd sun the part of Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof and about four or five curtain calls walks off stage and he passes a stage hand that says hi Mr Spock. Now, [laughter] that's deathly to an actor. So he, enough is enough he feels.

Piers:

If Spock is killed, will Zon come in who was the original replacement for Spock in the first movie?

Roddenberry:

I don't know that it will be Zon because he wasn't to be a replacement in the movie, he was going to be a replacement in a TV thing they were trying at the time. We didn't really get an okay to do the mass movie until Star Wars was made and proved to Paramount that there were those million ticket buyers out there. Paramount kept telling me, "Well Gene, you know you don't know movies. They probably seem to you that there are millions out there, but they're probably a few hundred thousand", but Star Wars is the thing that opened the way. For the movie, we knew we had to have Leonard and I think we need him for this movie. I could see several ways of going. I, for one, if Leonard does not want to do it I think he's a magnificent Spock. If he does not want to do it and he's certain that he doesn't, we also have other magnificent actors and this has been done before in our business and I see no reason why an equally fine actor cannot create another Spock for us, his way and although it seems almost frightening and sacrilegious, now another actor may bring still new dimensions to the character. Shatner is not going to always be able to play Kirk and so on all through our cast. We can't go on over the years and have it look, or have our Starship place look like a geriatric ward [laughter].

Burelbach:

Mr Roddenberry, where did the initial idea for Star Trek come from?

Roddenberry:

I was looking for series to write and as, I think all writers do, I was looking for something where people might remember it for being, in some ways, special and I had seen science fiction on, in movies. There had been very little of it on TV and it just seemed to me that most of it, all but a very few fancy, [inaudible] primary roles. The drama is about people and that when you do science as well as if you do medicine or anything else, you do it accurately as possible and so I thought, well hey, maybe if I wrote Star Trek I would write a Good Year Theater and had identifiable people and had an essential drama between the people that, that they might buy and like that. And so it came out of that need as a writer. I also saw an opportunity, television was terribly censored, much more even than it is today, although it's still more censored than you believe. And I thought gee, if I have it happening out here on far off planets with polka dotted people, you know maybe I can talk about sex and war and politics and things that you can't talk about on the average show and in deed we were able to. I think you and everyone else know what you're talking about, but it got by the network censors.

Piers:

One of the characters, my favorite just about, Dr McCoy. He's such a good contrast to Spock. You just cannot find a better one. How did you come up with this character?

Roddenberry:

Well when you create characters for a series and they're going to be on each week, you try to orchestrate them. Really in creating Kirk, Spock, and McCoy I was trying to create the perfect individual and divide them into three parts. The captain who had administrative ability and loyal to his mission. Spock, who is total in logic and intelligence and the doctor who is the humanitarian. I thought this might also be handy by breaking up the main character into three parts because in a book you have stream of consciousness to explain things and you don't have that in television and movies. So I could have the same stream of consciousness, the captain would say our duty says to do that and Spock would say but is it logically for this reason and then doctor could say well, wait, wait just think of the humanity of it and that'd get the same thing as stream of consciousness and it worked.

Burelbach:

Yeah, reading in beautiful conflicts, character conflicts and as you indicated, has brought out a number of very good, solid ideas.

Roddenberry:

And then you copy orchestration of course, which is true in all writing too. Even when you don't have weekly shows, you need to orchestrate your characters so they bounce off one another.

Burelbach:

So many of the characters you remember though, the important characters, the officers are male. Has the show ever been attacked, criticized for male chauvinism?

Roddenberry:

Well it was, I think unfairly attacked because as you'll see when you see the first pilot, I had a female second in command of the vessel and, and the network, after they saw it they said we want you to make a new pilot and you've got to get rid of the female who is second in command. That was not totally the network, let's be fair. This was shown to test audiences and the women in the audiences, in those days, womenism had not been invented, the word, you know and female equality was not being talked about except for a few of us who happen to believe in it. And the women said who does she think she is? I don't like her. So also I had to shift 50% men and 50% women in my first layout and the network said you can't do that and I said well why not? They said well don't you see that we'll make it look like there's a lot of fooling around going on [laughter]. We had a big fight and I made them settle for 30% women. I think on the theory, the 30% helped the young women could handle the [laughter]. Yeah we, we have been attacked but that was what we could get away with in those days. We were considered very bold to have a mixed crew. So you can't have a black on the crew, a regular black female. It won't play in the south, you know? And all of these various reasons. It was very upsetting to people. It's, one nice thing about talking about this it makes you look back just a few years and say hey we do make progress. By God, we do. We stumble along and make progress, because those things aren't that bold anymore.

Burelbach:

And that mixture of races and sexes was deliberate on your part in order --

Roddenberry:

As much as we could get by with, but yes. You can push, you can't have everything that you want. There's a point beyond which, they won't let you put the show on. So what you do and what writers still do today in television is you get as much as you can and then you sort of infiltrate the rest, sneak it in you see.

Burelbach:

You think the, you know whether or not the show had anything to do with the loosening up of mixing sexes on board ships and so forth that has happened since?

Roddenberry:

Well I doubt that our show was had anything basic to do with it, but I think it certain, undoubtedly helped it happen because television is a powerful media whether it's Star Trek or I Love Lucy or what else. People, what people see on that they get accustomed to and go for it. I certainly yes, we've had something to do with a lot of things, but it's just the whole country, the whole society is staggering upwards. [Inaudible] sometime, but people like you and I, suddenly we all work [inaudible].

Piers:

I know that if someone asked me this question, put me on the spot, but do you have a favorite episode or episodes?

Roddenberry:

It's hard for a producer to have one, because sometimes your favorite is one that, you know you feel you were lucky just to had got a beginning, middle, and end together in that time. I suppose as near as it comes, I liked, I like the menagerie two-parter that I wrote, not because I wrote it, but because it was such a terrible puzzle to take a first pilot and integrate into a show with new characters. And then I think I like CITY on the Edge of Forever. I loved to be going back to the 30's. That was great fun.

Piers:

Kind of national favorite with City.

Roddenberry:

What's your favorite?

Piers:

My favorite, you're putting me on the spot. I think it would be City too.

Roddenberry:

You like City?

Piers:

But there's so many episodes, especially some written by DC Fontana --

Roddenberry:

Yeah.

Piers:

That --

Roddenberry:

Yeah.

Piers:

I find are excellent.

Roddenberry:

DC Fontana is a woman. Dorothy was my secretary. We upped her one day -- and she almost fainted -- to story editor and then she went on to become a writer and she came to me and said what, what name should I use, Dorothy Fontana and I said no, Dorothy, at this time don't. Call yourself DC because we're still in a time of people will pick up a script from a Dorothy Fontana and say by a woman and that will effect on they judge it. And so that's how she happened to use that name and then of course, once you add she kept it. That's not true today. We have marvelous female writers who are eagerly sought after now.

Burelbach:

Is that characteristic of this particular medium, because that's something that's presumably was a defect of the nineteenth century where women had to take either male names or -

Roddenberry:

Picture George Sand, you know yes. I think that sits all through anytime [inaudible].

Burelbach:

I thought it'd been changed. But apparently it hasn't in television yet.

Roddenberry:

It has to some extent now. We do have female writers now, very popular ones and very good ones that people, we've always had good ones, [inaudible].

Piers:

Star Trek has dealt with Divine Beings from time to time; Apollo and God, does it ever stay in the show that there is a Divine Being? In Whom Mourns for Adonais, Kirk tells Apollo that mankind has no more use for those Gods. He finds the one quite sufficient.

Roddenberry:

Those, references like that got past me. I tried to keep Star Trek from any reference to a Divine Being, because I thought we had, that doesn't happen to be my belief. I believe that whatever the, whatever created all of this is certainly a little more complex than a Being that you go up and meet goodness or not, you know and so, but those things, those references would get in because to do half a science fiction movie every week, I mean you just can't be on every line and very often things get by. We, Apollo is not meant to be a Divine Being, Apollo is meant to be a Being so high above us that he seems Divine to us. I have no [inaudible] with the possibility that were once visited by, I don't believe in flying saucers. I'd love to, I think if we had them we probably don't see them, but we may have been visited and if so, yeah those were some of the legends we've come from to, but whatever, whatever it is that, whatever gigantic thought is behind this, for me to, to categorize it as a Being, it would not be in the spirit of the show. Everyone has the right to [inaudible] their own belief. That's the reason you never seen a Chaplin aboard the Enterprise, because if we had had a Chaplin for every faith, then we'd have to have all the faiths on all the other planets and everything. Everybody aboard would have been a Chaplin [laughter].

Burelbach:

So it almost the faith of the series, if you could call it that, is in human progress.

Roddenberry:

Faith in the series in human progress and in affection for life in kind of love for one another, a love for all of this, and I think that's enough for a show like ours to do.

Burelbach:

And the freedom to be yourself.

Roddenberry:

And the freedom to do, if you want to roll out a rug and pray toward where ever Mecca is down there, God bless you. Go ahead and do it in the hallway, but you know we, it has no place in our show.

Burelbach:

In addition to bringing in really very strong ideas, big ideas like that which television isn't noted for by and large as a [inaudible] of medium, and I think Star Trek help to initiate this sort of thing. Another thing about the Star Trek episodes, which I think has kept them alive and vital is the depth of the characters that have been shown as they have gone through different kinds of experiences and particularly the experience of being in love. I think each one the three major, major male characters, wow all of them perhaps have been shown in love. Has, had these shows been particularly picked up by people as being maybe not scientific enough or, or too mushy or not hard core science fiction?

Roddenberry:

We find that the people that we're really listening to, you know like Isaac Asimov, Arthur Clark the famous scientists we've met. The astronauts, they're very broad men. They love a love story as much as they love hard core science and we had no problem at all with those things, but speaking of those things; love and divinity and, it is my hope that television in some form is eventually going to let other people come along and do shows where we can explore even further and these, in these directions. I would like to see a show come along where we can explore love as Masters have Johnson have explored at the pleasure bonding and is it right for me to touch you and what's wrong with it? And get rid of all of these, at least whether or not you get rid of the taboos to talk about these and explore what are we? And really, if, is people, such as listen to this in the [inaudible] to get us TV like this because the power of sound and image in television can do these things as, and we need them done. We need them done badly or we're not going to continue to deserve the name civilized humans, you know?

Burelbach:

What's holding back on that?

Roddenberry:

Well the things is that's held us back mostly so far is the fact that television has been really used basically as a sales device, it's been the old medicine show. You know we'll give you 15 minutes of this and you've got to hear three minutes of sink oil pitch and, which is fine and it moved us a long way. But we can't go on, in fact long ago we should've stopped. I mean the choice of our television shows and what we see on television be determined on how well it sells hemorrhoid ointment. That's, that's a terrible, a matter of fact I guarantee if we didn't have television here and you were an editor and I came to you with a plan to choose television on that basis, you would've said oh no, I don't believe that. I won't buy that. No civilized group could be that silly, but we have been, but it is changing and people are becoming more and more aware of it. You don't hear what I used to hear. Ten years ago, at colleges and

universities, very wise, supposedly wise people are saying and that's talking about television, you know what do you think? Can we change it? And they would say well I don't own a television set. As if that was hopelessly beneath them. And we don't hear that anymore. Whether one likes what's on a given channel at a given time, everyone is recognizing now the enormous energy and power in sound and imaging and saying things and affecting people's attitudes.

Burelbach:

But it's only been lately that there's been any significant force in the none commercial television being developed in terms of a quality show, basically. They just haven't been all that interesting to watch.

Roddenberry:

They're easier to do when you have the dollars that the sale of products gives you. We were able to do some of them in the old days and you were kind enough to mention Good Year Theater, Playhouse 90 we did it [inaudible] Playhouse is on, and every night, Hallmark still gives us some wonderful things and with dollars you can do those things. Until very recently, we didn't have that kind of money in, in cable TV and so on, but now it's beginning, now it's beginning to happen and we will. Because it does take money to do these things. It takes money to buy the top-flight camera man and directors and people like that. You can only, we all of use donate some of our time, but you can't keep a medium going on donated time.

Piers:

You said that you wouldn't be producing or directing or writing the new movie. What's next for Gene Roddenberry? What are you hoping to do next?

Roddenberry:

Well I have a novel going. I think it's possible to get Bonanza out and Star Trek out, any of those and also the way TV is growing right now, I wouldn't have the creative controls in Star Trek this time around that I used to have and it's not that much fun to do it unless you can, you know make it what you want it to be. I'm doing a, I'm working with ABC on a possible new show for 82 in which we'd call Breakthrough and we'd take a look at what is happening in the next 10, 20, 30 years. What's being invented, what's happening in the fields of genetics and medicine. And is it true we're getting rid of our doctors and all sorts of exciting questions and if we can be honest enough, we can have a hell of a good show. The question will be can we be as honest and brave as we need to be looking 20 or 30 years ahead. If they'll let us, we'll have a good show.

Burelbach:

Are you producing doing the scripts or are you getting the scripts?

Roddenberry:

This one I will actively produce and perhaps I'll host it, because I feel strongly about some of these things and sometimes they think it does come over the, over the picture. I have no intension of becoming a performer. I'd love to do this because I love those things, but I much prefer the writers quiet room. Not with the typewriting where I joined the twentieth

century with the word processor about six months ago -- wow. They are great [laughter].

Piers:

You had some series unfortunately that got cancelled before they actually even came out. One of them I never saw it, I have heard great reports about it. The Questor Tapes, whatever happened to it?

Roddenberry:

Well if you liked Star Trek, I wish, I wish you could see it. I'll try to let you know when it's on. What happened to it is NBC bought it and ordered 16 episodes, but then they decided maybe it's too different and so they gave me instructions that it had to be changed and made to look like a show called the Invaders they had done before and I turned them down because, you know who wants -- I don't want to make money that bad to go out and go through making a copy of something else. Maybe if I'm hungry enough, but at that particular time I wasn't. But it was a fun show. It was a story about an android and it was, really what it was although a few people realized, it was a grown-up Pinocchio. This android wanted to be human, you know. He was going around thinking, saying I think, therefore I am, am not I? [Laughter] I enjoyed making it.

Piers:

And your other two series, Spector was on, I missed it again.

Roddenberry:

Spector, it was something I did for my wife who loves spook things and wanted to play a witch and I wrote that for her. It had to do with the demoness Amadeus came back into the twentieth century and Genesis II was one that would've been fun. It was, took place after, after our civilization caved in and then we're then again trying to build up, still a new and better one and it had to do with a group called Pax, which was trying to build up this wild and, it was after, like after Rome fell, things had broken up and that would've been kind of fun.

Piers:

Did it ever get to a show? I heard it was starring Mariette Hartley, but I never --

Roddenberry:

Yeah, we made a two-hour television movie called Genesis II and then we made a follow up called Planet Earth, but CBS, about that time, found out about the, what was the science fiction thing with the monkeys in it, the apes?

Burelbach:

Oh, Planet of the Apes.

Roddenberry:

Planet of the Apes and they bought that because Freddy Silverman decided that apes would be much more interesting every week than ideas and so we didn't get to do the show. We were penciled in and I think he made, made a mistake there. Not that Planet of the Apes was not excellent movies, but it didn't have the raw material for a week to week exciting series.

Piers:

The first movie I, was helped written by Rod Serling --

Roddenberry:

Yes, gee what a loss we've had there.

Burelbach:

We're talking about the series, you liked shows that are done more or less episodically with individual units or would you ever think of, I've wondered why Star Trek, for instance, never was put together as sort of the way Dallas is or some of the afternoon soap operas with more weaving, interweaving of plots.

Roddenberry:

We didn't do that because what we were trying to do Star Trek is, see with Star Trek we were able to bring in a fine writer and, like a Ted Sturgeon and was never going to say hey Ted, what's in your [inaudible]? What really bothers you? And well go out and invent a planet where that's happening and write, take the Enterprise there. So it just became almost necessarily that I build a series. It would be fun to have another kind of science fiction that wasn't what we did. Fortunately, you know I, you know I said earlier that [inaudible], of course it was not accurate in many ways because you give up many things. But we couldn't deal with the Einstein theory or fact of the time change and we couldn't have a series where Kirk would go back to earth and meet his great, great, great grandchildren and that sort of stuff. I just had to say arbitrarily time remains the same because we were, we, our audience couldn't of handled that at that time. Also, obviously, Kirk and most of the people in there with twentieth century people, with twentieth century morals and so on. Hopefully good twentieth century, maybe twenty-first century, but they were not twenty-third century humans because if we had tried to project people ahead, I think they would've seemed so strange to our audience that that our audience wouldn't of liked them. So you selectively stay accurate and stay true and I think that [inaudible].

Piers:

One of the episodes in the third season was voted by Trek Magazine as to be the worst or one of the worst, but the Enterprise Incident, written by CD Fontana, but originally the script, according to her, was very good and it would've been one of the best third seasons. I've always wondered, what happened in the original script?

Roddenberry:

I don't remember that story with any accuracy. We would have problems from time to time whether it be something in a script that the network would not let us do and we would fight them to the law, but sometimes it would just come down to the fact that either throw away all the money you spent on it or, because they won't just run it on the air and you had to, you had to compromise and put it on. And I suspect it was one of those. Sometimes you would get a director who didn't agree [inaudible] director is a powerful man and properly has to have some say. Most of the time we didn't have that problem, but we did occasionally. And occasionally we'd get a script that just kept falling apart. We had one where we, I thought

could've been a fantastic story, where we brought Rome, Rome had not fallen in this parallel world and we were in the twentieth century with a Roman America, a Roman world and I discovered to my surprise that we had very few writers out there who really knew that much about Rome. They knew Rome had slaves and so on. We did have a little fun with Rome using television at the Colosseum, but it could've been a fascinating tale. It wasn't because we just didn't have the time to get that kind of thinking together. Thursday night used to come up so fast, you know it seemed like every other day.

Burelbach:

Well unfortunately our time has also come up very fast and we thank you very much Mr Roddenberry and thank you Piers too for joining us, for sharing some of the backstage incidents and information --

Roddenberry:

Thank you both.

Burelbach:

Thank you for looking into the future with us. Thank you very much.

Piers:

Thank you.

Narrator:

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