



ROOTS, RITUALS AND PHANTASMAGORIA

Robin Redbreast

Play For Today: Robin Redbreast

Directed by: James MacTaggart

Production Company: BBC TV

Producer: Graeme McDonald

Script Editor: Ann Scott

[Written] By: John Bowen

Film Cameraman: Brian Tufano

Studio Lighting: Ken MacGregor

Film Editor: Roger Waugh

Designer: Eileen Diss

Costume: Joyce Hammond

Make-up: Sandra Exelby

[Title Music]: Joseph Horowitz

Studio Sound: Brian Hiles

Cast:

Anna Cropper (*Norah Palmer*)

Amanda Walker (*Madge*)

Julian Holloway (*Jake*)

Freda Bamford (*Mrs Vigo*)

Bernard Hepton (*Fisher*)

Andrew Bradford (*Rob*)

Cyril Cross (*Peter*)

Robin Wentworth (*Wellbeloved*)

UK 1970

76 mins

Digital

After being dumped by her partner, Norah moves to the countryside and falls for a local gamekeeper, with dire consequences. This is a perfect case study of the city-slicker moving to the country and finding themselves trapped in the ways of old. For me, Mr Fisher has always been one of the greatest villains, and a character that influenced the pagans in *Starve Acre*; it's the way he behaves without glee – his despicable acts carried out with the banal behaviour of someone milking cows.

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On 10 December 1970, with *Blood on Satan's Claw* completed but not yet released and a full two years before *The Wicker Man* would start production, the BBC's *Play for Today* strand broadcast one of the most pure distillations of 'folk horror' ever seen, the chilling *Robin Redbreast* written by John Bowen. Born in Calcutta, India in 1924 Bowen was a hugely prolific writer but he remains one of British television's least acknowledged writers of horror and fantasy fiction. During the 1960s and 70s he was responsible for *Play of the Week: The Corsican Brothers* (1965) and *Mystery and Imagination: The Flying Dragon* (1965) and later as well as creating the science fiction series *The Guardians* (1971) he would write *Dead of Night: A Woman Sobbing* (1972), *The Ghost Story for Christmas* episodes *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas* (1974) and *The Ice House* (1978) and another piece of 'folk horror' in *Play for Today: A Photograph* (1977). Good though some of those undoubtedly are (*The Treasure of Abbot Thomas* in particular), *Robin Redbreast* remains his masterpiece.

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Dead of Night + A Winter's Dale

Mon 2 Sep 20:40; Sat 14 Sep 12:30

Little Otik Otesánek

Wed 4 Sep 20:15 + intro by musician and *Starve Acre* composer Matthew Herbert; Sat 21 Sep 17:45

Against the Crowd: Murrain + intro by novelist

Andrew Michael Hurley + Omnibus: Whistle and

I'll Come to You

Sat 7 Sep 18:20

Play for Today: Robin Redbreast

Mon 9 Sep 18:30

Don't Look Now

Tue 10 Sep 20:45; Thu 26 Sep 20:50; Sun 29 Sep 18:10

A Ghost Story for Christmas: A Warning to the

Curious + Beasts: Baby

Fri 13 Sep 18:15

Eraserhead

Fri 13 Sep 20:45; Tue 1 Oct 21:00; Mon 7 Oct 18:10

Screenplay: *White Lady* + intro by filmmaker and season curator Daniel Kokotajlo + *Children of the Stones* (episode 1)

Mon 16 Sep 20:40

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

Directed by James MacTaggart, *Robin Redbreast* stars Anna Cropper as BBC script editor Norah Palmer (entirely coincidentally, the name now can't help but remind us of Laura Palmer from *Twin Peaks*) who decides to sell up and move to a house in a small village in the south of England. There she meets many of the eccentric locals and begins a relationship with Rob (Anthony Bradford), a very strange young man who practices martial arts in his underpants in the woods. She soon becomes pregnant and, after a last-minute change of heart, cancels her planned abortion to return to the village where it becomes clear that she's been the pawn in a strange conspiracy and begins to fear for her life and that of her unborn child.

Robin Redbreast suffers the usual problems of a *Play for Today* (stuffy middle-class characters with their odd ideas – everyone drinks at every slight opportunity and with everything else that's going on Norah is more concerned that she and Rob are 'not on social terms' – there's a theatricality to some of the studio scenes that contrasts sharply with the more naturalistic scenes shot on location in the village and the cool, detached cynicism of the city-dwellers – 'Something boring has happened: I appear to be pregnant' – become a little wearing after a while), but it remains one of the most powerfully affecting of all of the many plays broadcast in the long-running strand. It was daring too – the conspiracy hinges on the disappearance (we later find out that it was stolen by the villagers) of Norah's contraceptive diaphragm, a development that was too much for the BBC when Bowen first brought them the script for a different strand. It was rejected then but found its natural home in the more progressive *Play for Today*.

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Bowen took inspiration for his script from a real-life ritual murder of a farmhand in the English village of Lower Quinton on St Valentine's Day 1945, also supposedly the inspiration for David Pinner's 1967 novel *Ritual* which would be adapted as *The Wicker Man*. It also benefited from a resurgence of interest in Paganism, witchcraft and magic in the late 1960s following the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in the 1950s. Despite the inevitable *Wicker Man* comparisons threatening to tip you off as to what might happen at the climax, Bowen cleverly pulls the rug at the last minute and it doesn't quite play out as you might expect. In fact the truth of what the villagers are up to is even more insidious than what you are led to believe might be happening.

Away from the studio setting, the performances are allowed to shine – Bernard Hepton is excellent as the sinister local historian and Freda Bamford steals the show as housekeeper and font of old knowledge Mrs Vigo. She would return as the same character in Bowen's *A Photograph*, linking the two plays in a rather obscure way – she's central to the conspiracy in both but exactly how the two relate isn't quite clear. Anna Cropper's Norah is rather unlikable at first but during her increasingly frantic attempts to escape the village, thwarted at every turn by the locals, she becomes more sympathetic. Bradford suffers from being burdened with a stock BBC 'Mummerset' accent but makes a decent fist of the essentially decent (despite an obsession with Nazi history) but dull young man whose role in the conspiracy provides the play's biggest shock.

The play was repeated two months later to allow viewers who had been struck by a widespread power cut in December 1970 could finally get to see it in its entirety. It exists today only as a black and white 16mm telecine recording, the original colour videotape having been wiped for re-use, as was the norm back then. Though this would normally be a cause for concern, in this instance, the slightly soft, detached air of the telerecording adds to the weird, dreamlike atmosphere.

Rescued from obscurity by the BFI who issued it on a well stocked DVD as part of their 2013 Gothic season, *Robin Redbreast* is one of those rare previously 'lost' television plays that actually lives up to the half-faded memories of those who saw it the first time around. Its place in the still only partially recorded history of 'folk horror' has been assured and its wider availability reminds us of just how daring and provocative British television could be in the 1970s.

Kevin Lyons, eofftview.wordpress.com, 6 May 2018