



EVENTS

Blake's 7: Seek Locate Destroy & Orac

+ Q&A with actors Jan Chappell and Sally Knyvette

Blake's 7: Seek Locate Destroy

Director: Vere Lorrimer
Production Company: BBC
Series created by: Terry Nation
Producer: David Maloney
Script Editor: Chris Boucher
Script: Terry Nation
Designer: Robert Berk
Music: Dudley Simpson
Cast:
Gareth Thomas (*Blake*)
Sally Knyvette (*Jenna*)
Paul Darrow (*Avon*)
Jan Chappell (*Cally*)
Michael Keating (*Vila*)
David Jackson (*Gan*)
Peter Tuddenham (*Zen*)
Stephen Greif (*Travis*)
Jacqueline Pearce (*Servalan*)
Peter Miles (*Rontaine*)
John Bryans (*Bercol*)
Ian Cullen (*Escon*)
Peter Craze (*Prell*)
Ian Oliver (*Rai*)
Astley Jones (*Eldon*)
BBC1 tx 6.2.1978
UK 1978
50 mins

Blake's 7: Orac

Director: Vere Lorrimer
Production Company: BBC
Series created by: Terry Nation
Producer: David Maloney
Script Editor: Chris Boucher
Script: Terry Nation
Designer: Martin Collins
Music: Dudley Simpson
Cast:
Gareth Thomas (*Blake*)
Sally Knyvette (*Jenna*)
Paul Darrow (*Avon*)
Jan Chappell (*Cally*)
Michael Keating (*Vila*)
David Jackson (*Gan*)
Stephen Greif (*Travis*)
Jacqueline Pearce (*Servalan*)
Peter Tuddenham (*Zen*)
Derek Farr (*Ensor*)
James Muir (*phibian*)
Paul Kidd (*phibian*)
BBC1 tx 27.3.1978
UK 1978
50 mins

Courtesy of BBC Studios

Blake's 7: The Collection – Season 1 will soon be released on Blu-ray by BBC Studios.

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Britain's answer to the worldwide success of *Star Wars* (1977) didn't come from cinema – despite George Lucas' blockbuster having been partly shot in the UK and many of the subsequent SF films also making use of British technicians and facilities, the UK largely gave this sort of space opera adventuring a wide berth – but from Terry Nation's four-season television series. First broadcast in January 1978 and running until December 1981, it was a typically impoverished BBC production that frequently overcame its lack of resources with smart writing, great performances and some proper, big, hard science fiction ideas.

The main thrust of the plot changed over its four years though it was always, at heart, what Nation – who had created the Daleks for *Doctor Who* (1963-1989) and whose post-apocalyptic series *Survivors* (1975-1977) had only recently ended, albeit without his involvement – called “*The Dirty Dozen* in space.” Set in a future galaxy ruled by the corrupt and authoritarian Federation, it initially pitched the eponymous freedom fighters against the ruthless forces of Supreme Commander Servalan (Jacqueline Pearce) and her frequent henchman Travis (played first by Stephen Greif, later by Brian Croucher). Roj Blake (Gareth Thomas) is a political dissident whose memories were wiped, now framed for child abuse and sentenced to imprisonment on the harsh penal colony Cygnus Alpha. En route he organises an escape and starts assembling the first incarnation of the seven – thief Vila Restal (Michael Keating), smuggler Jenna Stannis (Sally Knyvette), murderer Olag Gan (David Jackson), computer hacker and embezzler Kerr Avon (Paul Darrow), alien telepath Cally (Jan Chappell) and eventually the computer Zen (voiced by Peter Tuddenham), which controls an alien spaceship that the group commandeers and rename Liberator.

The first set of thirteen episodes establishes the basic framework, culminating in the acquisition of cantankerous supercomputer Orac (voiced first by Derek Farr, then by Tuddenham) while the second has a thread about the search for Star One, the Federation's elusive controlling computer. Along the way, Gan is killed – his place aboard Liberator is taken by Orac – the first of several deaths among the group. The second series culminates in the Liberator standing off against an alien invasion fleet from Andromeda and series three picks up the thread in the aftermath of the battle which brings the Federation to its knees. Blake and Jenna are missing (Avon assumes command of the group), replaced by Dayna Mellanby (Josette Simon) and former Federation officer Del Tarrant (Steven Pacey). The fourth and final series begins with the Liberator destroyed, Servalan believed dead (she isn't). Soolin (Glynis Barber) and Slave (again voiced by Tuddenham), the computer aboard their new ship Scorpio replacing Cally, who is killed in an explosion, and Zen.

The series culminates in the marvellous *Blake*, which sees the return of the group's erstwhile leader and offers one of the most memorable series finales ever – the group are seemingly betrayed by Blake and gunned down by Federation troops – though there's long been debate among the programme's large and loyal fanbase as to what really happens and whether or not any of the final seven, especially Avon, could have made it out alive.

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

SIGHT AND SOUND

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

Blake's 7 rarely surmounts its financial restrictions completely – the effects are pretty much what you'd expect from a late 70s/early 80s BBC space opera, though the sets are more solid than most and the costumes pleasingly outrageous and silly. Elements of camp crept into later seasons and with Blake gone, it lost some of the focus of the earlier episodes. But there was still much to enjoy here. Its ambitions were huge. The fact that the budget could barely run to one spaceship on screen at a time didn't stop producer David Maloney greenlighting a full-on alien invasion (though in fairness the actual fighting takes place mostly off screen) and the stable of writers – among them Nation and fellow *Doctor Who* alumni Chris Boucher and Robert Holmes and actual science fiction writers like James Follett and Tanith Lee – were constantly coming up with ideas that stretched the resourcefulness of the shows designers and effects technicians.

Best of all there were some of the performances. The title suggests that it should have been Thomas' show but the writers soon settled on the double act of Vila and Avon, the only characters to make it through almost every episode. Keating and Darrow are excellent as the constantly bickering reluctant travellers, Vila's cowardice and chirpiness in stark contrast to Avon's intense brooding. Darrow in particular is fantastic – he may chew the scenery from time to time but his intense demeanour, self-serving cynicism, easy sarcasm and occasional sardonic smile when things seem to be going against him proved hugely popular among the fans. Avon was an unusual freedom fighter, far less idealistic than the crusading Blake and more inclined to use the rest of the seven for his own ends. His will-they-won't-they relationship with Servalan gave the series a degree of sexual tension unusual for such ventures and Pearce rose to the occasion magnificently, one week camping it up shamelessly, the next effortlessly inhabiting the role of the most evil woman in the known universe.

Much of the grittiness of the early episodes – which were about a political dissident framed for crimes he didn't commit by a fascist system willing and able to crush any resistance to its power using deadly force who gathers together a band of criminals to fight back – was lost in later seasons but the fact that crew members were so easily, almost callously, killed off kept viewers on their toes. Particularly after Blake disappeared, it was never certain that any of the seven would make it to the end of any given series.

And it was that sense of jeopardy that goes some way to explaining the appeal of *Blake's 7*. It was all done in deadly earnest, the odd joke or throwaway quip tossed in here and there but for the most part it was an effort to do serious hard science fiction at a time when, post-*Star Wars*, both cinema and television were taking an increasingly jokey approach to the genre (*Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (1979-1981), *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980), *Flash Gordon* (1980)). Its po-faced approach was derided by some critics at the time but it was refreshing to find a programme that, even at its campiest, still kept a straight face and never started poking fun at itself.

The series was hugely popular at the time and remains much loved today. Several attempts have been made to reboot it over the years and stories continued in audio plays produced by Big Finish and others. The story of Blake and his seven continues to endure and it's surely only a matter of time before the long-threatened/promised overhaul.

Kevin Lyons, The EOFFTV Review, eofftvreview.wordpress.com, 4 January 2021