

Magic an enduring theme of television history

An era has passed. In the realm of television sitcoms, a generation passes with every sweeps week. So it's not surprising that the fads and fashions of television land are as ephemeral as dew. Things move quickly on the other side of the tube. Still, there have been enduring shows — and even more enduring motifs — in the course of television's brief history. One of these latter might be called "the magical companion motif." It must've begun with an old show called "Topper." At least that's my guess. But maybe the most enduring older show that featured the magical companion was none other than "Mr. Ed."

"Mr. Ed," like "Topper" before it, showcased the magical companion par excellence. But whereas "Topper" featured a wisecracking pair of invisible ghosts — undetectable except to the long-suffering Topper — Mr. Ed was a horse, of course. This element of secrecy gave a new twist to the magical companion motif — and set the mold that would be followed by generations of shows. "My Favorite Martian" starring Bill Bixby as an unwilling host to a cranky and irascible Extra Terrestrial (Ray Walston as "Uncle Martin" — with rabbit-ear antennas rising mysteriously out of his head) stranded on earth and dying to get home. "Bewitched" was the first show featuring a magical companion to make the move to color. The late Elizabeth

Montgomery was cute as Samantha — a young witch who married a mortal for love. She also had a cute little tick, a wiggle of the nose, that showed up when she worked that ol' black magic. The creator of "Bewitched" went on to create "I Dream of Genie" for a rival network. Barbara Eden was luscious as the scantily clad genie and slave to an Air Force dork played by Larry Hagman. She had her own tick (she tossed her hair petulantly) and her own identical "cousin." She also added an air of eroticism

that even "Bewitched" had never attempted. She became a standard adolescent male fantasy. Hagman would, of course, go on to play J.R. Ewing — while his clownish pal Major Healey (anyone's guess how this was spelled) would eventually play Howard Borman. It was his destiny to hold the title of wackiest neighbor until the advent of Kramer — possibly the wackiest neighbor of all time. Which is no surprise really. The wacky neighbor is a close relation of the magical companion as a little careful thought will reveal. But while its cousin, the wacky neighbor, thrives on almost every sitcom — the magical companion has disappeared from television, or is

quickly disappearing. Have we outgrown our need for fantasy? This seems hardly possible. Perhaps the magical companion will resurface. It has been an enduring image in the glassy retina of television. Shows like "Alf" and "Small Wonder" — as different from each other as "Mork and Mindy" and "My Mother the Car" — all owe a debt to this little-respected sub-genre of television history.

— Mark Baldrige

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