

At 2.25 pm on Sunday March 27th 2016, the British broadcaster Channel 5 scheduled a special Easter screening of the 1978 film adaptation of Richard Adams' novel 'Watership Down'.

Within hours, something entirely unplanned and seemingly unanticipated occurred. Howling protests from enraged parents bombarded the station, mums and dads complaining about the fallout from the afternoon presentation, with tales of distraught, traumatized offspring whose holiday weekend had been upset and ruined by their viewing of the movie.

The animated feature had been passed uncut by the British Board of Film Classification prior to its 1978 theatrical release, and was awarded the 'U' certificate, thereby permitting unrestricted access to viewers of all ages. Even at the time of initial release, there were occasional murmurs about the leniency of this decision, but any outcry had subsided over the years – until Channel 5's high-profile revival of the movie.

Mere weeks after the screening, I was assigned to interview prominent BBFC representative David Hyman, one of the board's best-known examiners, before a live audience at a film festival. Naturally I couldn't resist kicking off the proceedings by raising the spectre of 'Watership Down'; David strategically and diplomatically offered a somewhat distanced, 'nothing to do with us, guv' response, and was quite correct in doing so, although other BBFC staff have been quoted recently as stating that the movie ought to be reclassified, feeling that a 'PG' rating may be more appropriate.

On April 16th 2017, Channel 5 fearlessly broadcast the film as an Easter Sunday treat once again! To much the same anguish and consternation. As the 'Metro' free newspaper markedly put it, "all hell had broken loose by lunchtime". A spokesperson for the broadcaster offered the robust defence that " 'Watership Down' has become a seasonal tradition on Channel 5 so we've decided not to buck the trend in 2017. Whilst suitable for transmission in its timeslot, we recognise that the film may not appeal to everyone which is why there was clear advice before transmission and every programme segment as to the nature of the content". Among the entertaining reactions on Twitter, one avoider exclaimed "far too traumatic, I'd rather watch 'The Exorcist' ", while another pondered "Has anyone at Channel 5 seen 'Watership Down'?! What psycho decided this was a good Easter film!!!"

So, what is it about this particular production that on one hand seems to offer appeal to a family audience, while simultaneously threatening to savage and bite off the other hand?! You have to go back to the source author, I guess - the uncompromising Richard Adams, whose literary output often skirted the line between nice and nasty. Martin Rosen, a former theatrical agent and producer of the Ken Russell movie WOMEN IN LOVE, planned a big-screen adaptation of 'Watership Down' which was

to have been directed by experienced American animator John Hubley. With Hubley dying during production, Rosen took up the reins as director himself, adding to his production and scriptwriting duties. A stellar voice cast was assembled – you really cannot go far wrong when your film has John Hurt, Richard Briers, Ralph Richardson, Michael Hordern, Hannah Gordon, Roy Kinnear, Zero Mostel, Joss Ackland, Simon Cadell, Derek Griffiths, Harry Andrews, Nigel Hawthorne and Denholm Elliott gathered around the microphone – and a crack team of animators was assigned to the task of bringing visual life to Adams’ creations, including old colleagues of Hubley and artists from the Halas & Batchelor stable. The heavily-stylised ‘fable’ scene which opens the movie is the work of John Hubley; thereafter the film adopts a realist style, extremely well executed but with something of an unpolished, rough-and-ready feel to it which proves a perfect match for the story’s often grim tone. It doesn’t stint on violent, bloody encounters and scenes of peril and threat, daring to depict ‘nature, red in tooth and claw’ (to borrow Tennyson’s phrase) in a way that clearly remains rather parent-unfriendly to this day! Rosen’s screenplay streamlines the plotline and excises a number of characters, but does so in such a way that seems to have been accepted by Adams fans, who have largely expressed satisfaction in the way the essence of the novel has been retained.

Malcom Williamson, Master of the Queen’s Music, was asked to pen the film’s score, but was replaced by Angela Morley after falling behind schedule - Williamson had prepared ‘The Creation’ and the main title theme, Morley then adding the vast majority of the cues. Most famously, songwriter Mike Batt (fresh from his chart successes with The Wombles!) contributed the haunting central song ‘Bright Eyes’, performed by renowned American vocalist Art Garfunkel - Art being no stranger to cinematic controversy himself, having starred in Mike Nichols’ ‘Carnal Knowledge’ in 1971, and about to embark upon Nicolas Roeg’s ‘Bad Timing’ soon after his stint on the ‘Watership Down’ soundtrack.

Martin Rosen, buoyed by the box-office success of ‘Watership Down’ across the UK, opted to tackle a further Adams novel in 1982 with an animated feature adaptation of ‘The Plague Dogs’. If anything, this was even more harrowing than the previous production! But that’s another story...

Darrell Buxton

Darrell is a cult film historian and editor of the books ‘The Shrieking Sixties: British Horror Films 1960-1969’ (nominated for a British Fantasy Society award in 2011) and ‘Dead Or Alive: British Horror Films 1980-1989’. He is a freelance film journalist and lecturer, has written reviews and in-depth articles for publications including Samhain, Shivers, and Giallo Pages, and is co-author of the screenplay for 2018 feature film *Oujageist*.

