

## Repeat Performance

1898 Words.

"Not that one again," groaned Chris, my assistant. "You put that on every year. I'm surprised that the great British viewing public don't lynch you!"

"Well, chances are they would if they knew who I was," I grinned back at him. "I reckon that people enjoy it, really. I doubt they mind; it's reasonably tasteful, funny, doesn't offend too many people and is politically incorrect. Pretty good going for a TV show, even if it's fifteen years old." We often had this discussion; at least once a year, when I asked for comments on the Christmas schedules. In fact, it was getting to be something of a ritual. I'm one of the people responsible for - or guilty of, depending upon your point of view - the scheduling of television programmes over the Christmas holidays for one of the satellite channels. And not just Christmas - Easter, August Bank Holiday, Noddy's Birthday, whatever.

Chris looked back at the monitor we were watching. "Well, it's not too bad. But if you carry on like this then it'll become as much a part of Christmas as Turkey and the Queen. Good Luck with the rest of these tapes. I'll get what we've got so far to the others and see what they think. No doubt they'll agree with you - they usually do!"

He smiled and walked out of my office. Yes, I had to agree that I was well on the way to creating an institution with that program. Do you remember Harry Smart? Had the double act with Mickey Poole. Great pair of comedians and some lovely stuff. Harry was always my favourite, and he was quite a gentleman with it. Very much old school. I never met him, well, not until a couple of years ago. Let me tell you about it; you'll hopefully have a lot more sympathy with my programming choices afterwards.

We started planning a little late that year, and we'd got as far as the decision to show 'The Sound of Music' by nine on an August evening. It's not one of my favourite films; I always joked that we should get the Korean version that has all the songs removed, or dub in a voice saying 'They're in the cellar' when the Brownshirts visit the monastery, but these suggestions always seem to fall on deaf ears. Anyway, I stayed in the screening room for a while after everyone else had gone, and decided to take a look at a couple of the Christmas Specials that we'd already made for that year. I got some coffee and a tape, settled down and soon found myself engrossed in the 'Poole and

Smart' Christmas Special. I'd turned the lights down, and the room was intermittently lit by the flicker of the TV set. After a while I became aware of someone else in the room with me. I looked around and sure enough one of the chairs closest to the door was occupied by a dark figure.

"Hello there, can I help you?" I said, pausing the tape.

"Nope, quite happy with just watching."

I recognised the voice and hit the button on the remote that controlled the lights. They came up and allowed me to see the speaker clearly.

"You're Harry Smart! Great to meet you! You should have let me know if you'd wanted to sit in!" I went in to fan mode.

"No, no problems. Don't want to cause work for people. I was just....passing by...and thought I'd take a look. First time I've seen this show from this side of the TV screen." He smiled and settled back. I got the feeling that he wanted to watch the rest of the show.

"Well, you shouldn't really be here," I said. "But, enjoy!". He wasn't supposed to be in the viewing room but I didn't mind too much. I would need to go and have a word with security, though, as people weren't supposed to be able to wander in and out like that.

I dimmed the lights again and we started watching the rest of the show. As it ended, there was a quiet sigh from near the door. I turned to congratulate Smart only to find the chair empty. Harry had slipped out.

I got the news when I came in to the office the following morning. Harry Smart had died the previous evening, sometime around nine.

"Bollocks," I argued with Chris. "He was here, I tell you. Sat right there." I pointed to the chair in the screening room. "You must have got it wrong. Harry Smart was here last night between about nine and ten, watching his Christmas Special with me."

"Well, I don't know who was in here but it couldn't have been Harry Smart. He died in hospital, up in Sheffield. I'd get security to look at who did come in; probably a reporter from one of the TV weeklies."

I did check security, and was told that no-one had been in the night before. I wasn't convinced, though, because there are so many ways in and out of that place that an army of reporters could enter un-announced. I decided to take the simple approach of watching the papers to see who produced the 'insider scoop' about our Christmas Listings. Alternatively, they might just write a piece about how their intrepid reporter penetrated the bowels of a TV station and threatened national security.... But I didn't waste too much time on the fellow, whoever he'd been. He was a dead ringer for Smart, though. We decided to scratch the show from the listings as a mark of respect for Smart until we could chat with Poole and Smart's family to see what to do.

That evening I stayed behind again, looking through some more tapes to try and find something to replace the scratched show. After three hours of tedium I pushed the Poole and Smart tape back in the machine and decided to watch it again.

Half way through, I heard a faint chuckle from behind me. I knew who it was going to be, and sure enough I turned around to look in to the face of Harry Smart.

"OK. Who the hell are you - and don't say Harry Smart because Harry is very definitely dead."

"Well, I am and I know I did. And I'm pretty pleased with the obituaries I've received!"

I raised the lights again, as a prelude to phoning security. I picked up the phone and it was only then that I realised that I could see through Smart and make out the chair cover through his chest.

I must have fainted, as the next thing I knew I was looking up at the ceiling with Smart peering down at me. "You've missed the show," he said. "It was just as funny the second time around, even if I say so myself. Anyway, I have to go....". He stood back from me and I struggled upright, only to find myself alone in the screening room.

I didn't watch the video again, and didn't mention my experiences to anyone. After all, I need the job, and there was already a feeling around the place that I was working too hard and, in the words of one of my colleagues, losing the plot. So, rather than allow myself the pleasure of job hunting I immersed myself in finishing off the scheduling for Christmas. This went well, and we

even got permission from Smart's family to show the as part of the schedule. Half way through finishing stuff off we got a request to re-arrange the normal schedule to include a few films made by Walter Karlweitz, the German actor-director who'd fled to the US just before the Second World War. He'd died at the ripe old age of 93, so a retrospective was planned of his work along with some films that had been influenced by him. He'd always been a favourite of mine, so I took the job on of picking the best of his material for a late night short season. I pulled a few tapes from the library and retired to the viewing room bearing coffee, chocolate biscuits and a flask of therapeutic Scotch - the job has some perks.

I started at the beginning of his career, with 'Munich Express', his first Hollywood movie made in 1939. Not brilliant but not too bad. I poured a little of the Scotch in to the coffee and sat back to watch.

"I bet that tastes good; shame I can't smell or taste it. Anyway, what do you think of the film? I wasn't that happy with it, myself. There's all sorts of production problems, mainly caused by that idiot at the studio, Schaeffer. The ass."

I recognised the accented voice from any number of documentaries and interview. It was Karlweitz. I turned around to the seat that had been occupied by Smart on his last visit. I was surprised at how well I was taking the whole business. I even noticed that he was already pretty insubstantial.

"You're taking this very well, young man." He said. "The first fellow I visited like this, he threw screaming fit and ran from the room. Most unfortunate."

"Well, let's say," I gulped, "that I've had a similar experience before. But I would like to know why I'm suddenly seeing the recently departed more regularly than I see my next door neighbour."

"Hey, sense of humour! I like that! But it is your fault, young man. You invited me here tonight. It happens occasionally, and we always take advantage."

"We? Who's we?"

"We recently dead. When someone thinks of us we can sometimes make an appearance for you. It's easier for those of us who are recently departed. Or if we're really annoyed or emotionally

attached to the person who's thinking of us. But if our image is vivid in the mind, and the mind is open to new experiences, then we can make a guest appearance."

I smiled briefly and settled back in the chair. "I'd offer you a drink but....perhaps you'd stay with me? Maybe tell me a few insights about the films?"

"I'd like that very much. You seem quite keen to learn, and have no...what's the expression? No axe to grind about my years spent in Nazi Germany before the war. That seems to have upset a lot of people. I'd like the chance to put the record straight. Ach! That scene! Dreadful!"

He pointed to the screen and shook his head. "Please forward the tape a little. Even now that scene makes me puke."

I smiled at Karlweitz. "Can I take some notes?"

And that's my story. I always give myself a private viewing of the Smart and Poole show each year, and often have the feeling that Harry's there with me. And as to why there are a lit of Karlweitz films on air, well, let's call it thanks for all the book royalties that the book I wrote about Karlweitz gets me. And I get the odd evening visit from the recently departed stars of stage and screen. It appears that my reputation on the other side as a good listener has travelled far and wide. So, don't get too cross with the TV schedules; we schedulers have our reasons for doing what we do!