

REQUIEM FOR

FALLEN ANGELS

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"It's a role call of tormented souls confronting their monsters within; it's a picaresque look at Los Angeles back in the forties. It's the world of pulp on celluloid, pure translations that augment the stark power of great short fiction."

—James Ellroy, on *Fallen Angels: Six Noir Tales Told for Television*

Though many have tried, few programs captured the film noir experience as fully as *Fallen Angels*. Produced by Showtime in the 1990s, the anthology series packed enough punch to satisfy the most impassioned fans of pulp fiction. Stories were pulled from the work of luminaries such as James M. Cain, David Goodis, and Jim Thompson, while some of the decade's finest cinema talent brought them to life in 30-minute episodes. It was a weekly production where *personae non gratae* donned fedoras, trenchcoats, and a nihilistic attitude toward society. These were crime-fiction-fever dreams, tailored for addicts who craved 100-proof noir with a '40s flavor. And yet, as if it were the genre's very own Atlantean myth, *Fallen Angels* has receded into the abyss from which it sprung.



Fallen Angels series creator William Horberg

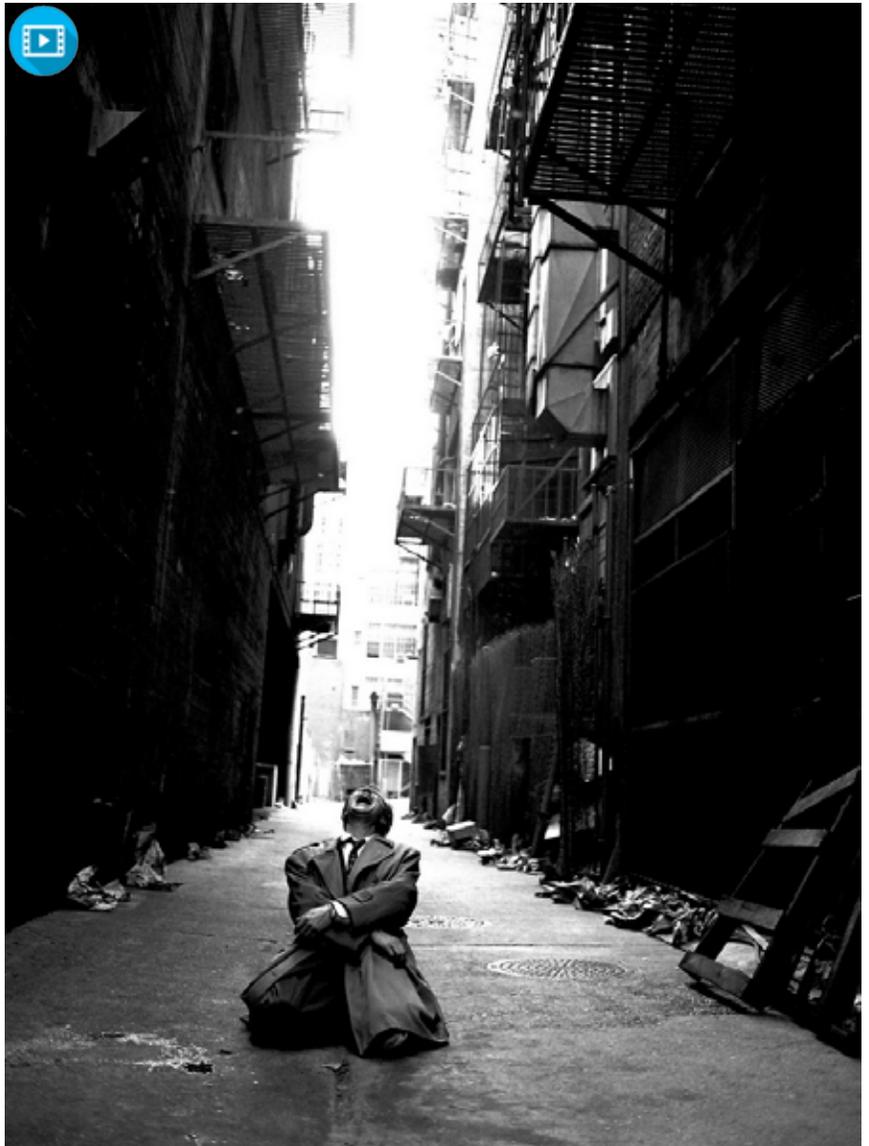


Lynette Walden as Fay Friendly, the show's seductive hostess

The show sprang, fittingly, from the adoration of a single film noir fan: William Horberg. The producer behind criminal fare such as *A Rage in Harlem* (1991), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), and the TV adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *Poodle Springs* (1998) had grown up relishing stories that exploited the absurdity of man's fate. By the early 1980s, this affinity would snowball into *Fallen Angels*, conceived as a noir variation on programs like *The Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery*. A Las Vegas encounter with Mickey Spillane provided a serendipitous platform to pitch the idea, and the iconic author responded favorably. As Horberg related to me during our correspondence, the initial concept was to have Spillane be "the host of a noir anthological format" *a la* Rod Serling—a sell that quickly lost steam without any industry connections to back it. It would be a decade before Horberg revisited his passion project, but, with the added support of Sydney Pollack, a second attempt in 1993 proved successful.

"He was very enthusiastic," Horberg said of Pollack. "We took it to Showtime and they bought it in the room and commissioned a series order." After that, it was off to the races. Horberg began assembling fresh talent to bring these refined "mini-movies" to life. Screenwriters Scott Frank, Amanda Silver, and Howard A. Rodman were brought in for research and adaptation, while a companion book, *Six Noir Tales Told for Television*, hit bookstores with a preface (and contribution) from James Ellroy. Showtime had high commercial hopes for Horberg's vision, and, along with executive producers Steve Golin and Lindsay Doran, amassed an army of specialists in its support. In the creator's own words, it was film noir "made by people who shared our love for the genre."

Viewed now, more than two decades later, *Fallen Angels* is a stunning manifestation of that love. In keeping with Horberg's original *Twilight Zone*



Detective Pat Kelley (Gary Oldman) returns to his wife's crime scene and makes a shattering discovery in "Dead-End for Delia"



Detective Nick Ballestier (Eric Stoltz) questions Ginger Allen (Jennifer Grey) in "A Dime a Dance"



Tom Hanks as the trigger-happy heavy in his directorial debut, "I'll Be Waiting"

inspiration, episodes were introduced by the tantalizing Fay Friendly (Lynette Walden). Proving far leggier than Spillane would've ever been, the sultry gatekeeper laid out the premise for each show amidst stiff drinks and cigarette puffs. Composer Elmer Bernstein created the series' theme, and his saxophone-heavy work hypnotically undercut Friendly's jagged poetry. Quips like "A hotel is just a stop on the way to some other place," and "Every man has met me, somewhere," were delivered *sans* irony, as if to assure the viewer this wouldn't be a self-conscious reflection of the past. If anything, *Angels* sought to capture the golden age with more zeal than the originators themselves.

Series premiere "Dead-End for Delia" (Aug. 1, 1993) made good on this intention immediately. Smoky alleyways and a neon sign reading *Dreamland* appear in a single unbroken shot, steeping the viewer in the world of source author William Campbell Gault. A passing comment to "shoot the works" proved slyly appropriate, as director Phil Joanou integrated flashbacks, voiceover narration, and an unreliable protagonist (Gary Oldman) to fulfill every shade of noir in the cinematic spectrum. Critics were mixed toward the episode's nostalgia, with Ginny Holbert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* citing a "self-conscious obsession with style," but industry players were intrigued. "Suddenly we were 'cool,'" Horberg recalled, "and agents were very supportive of their clients doing the show."

Acclaimed actors began plumbing the noir archives for inspiration. Oldman, in his Emmy-nominated role—redolent of '50s vintage Richard Widmark, was the first to attempt this bygone approach, and his ferocious turn set a precedent that would permeate the *Fallen Angels* who drove through town every week. Many, including James Woods (*Against All Odds*), William Petersen (*To Live and Die in L.A.*) and Dana Delany (*Light Sleeper*), had previously done neo-noir onscreen, but the show's throwback liberty enabled them to channel the likes of Kirk Douglas, Raymond Burr, and Coleen Gray with remarkable gusto. Horberg even established a stable of bit players, including Dan Hedaya and Bernard Hocke, who served as

successors to saps Elisha Cook Jr. and Percy Helton. It was a Hollywood guest list loaded with luses, losers, and loners, each of whom were vital to the show's atmosphere.

As for the rest of Los Angeles, *Fallen Angels* presented the city as a dimly lit dreamscape. "Classic film noir plays like fevered memory," noted Eddie Muller in his 1998 book *Dark City*, and the series exemplified this through set design and lucid imagery. Soft focus and sharp Venetian blind shadows took turns dominating the frame, while the visual modesty of modern noir was swapped for color schemes akin to aged, sepia-toned photographs. Expressionism was a reference point, but abstract detours—namely, "The Black Bargain" (Nov. 19, 1995) and "A Dime a Dance" (Oct. 22, 1995)—were far more common, capturing literary translations that had previously been limited by cost or capability. It was a setting built on myths; a milieu of visual and aural landmarks that refused to be tied down by its own reality. And given that L.A. is, after all, the purveyor of fantasies, this window dressing proved apropos regardless of who was behind the camera.

Fortunately, the men and women behind the camera only enhanced the show's texture. "We were incredibly lucky," Horberg gushed, "to have interesting filmmakers like Alfonso Cuarón, Steven Soderbergh, and Agnieszka Holland take part in the production." *Fallen Angels'* roster of directors was an embarrassment of riches with Peter Bogdanovich, Tim Hunter, Michael Lehmann, and others lending their talents with the eagerness of an avid fan. While stylistically varied in their own careers, the pairing of source material with the proper director made for memorable outings; be it the dark humor of Jonathan Kaplan's "Since I Don't Have You" (Sept. 26, 1993) or Jim McBride's energetic take on Walter Mosley, "Fearless" (Nov. 12, 1995).

The series was also willing, on occasion, to color outside the lines. Howard A. Rodman, who penned three of the show's scripts, reflected on *Angels'* more liberal forays during an interview with NOIR CITY, explaining: "There was no dictum to stick to, or not to

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The Continental Op (Christopher Lloyd) juggles lust, murder, and blackmail in “Fly Paper”



Philip Marlowe (Danny Glover) snoops for answers in the hour-long episode “Red Wind”



Carl Streeter (Joe Mantegna) and Sally Creighton (Bonnie Bedelia) are sadistic cops trying to play it cool in “The Quiet Room”

stick to, the original material. Some episodes were uncannily faithful, others more freely adapted.” Noted shifts like Dashiell Hammett’s “Fly Paper” (Oct. 30, 1995) ditched a traditionally stocky Continental Op for the slender Christopher Lloyd, while Raymond Chandler’s gem, “I’ll Be Waiting” (Aug. 15, 1993), fabricated an entire final act to fit its romantic leanings. While initially criticized, both have since been accepted as engaging, albeit unconventional, adaptations.

The latter episode also started a trend that saw movie stars move behind the camera, as Tom Hanks, Tom Cruise [“The Frightening Frammis” (Sept. 5, 1993)], and Kiefer Sutherland [“Love and Blood” (Oct. 8, 1995)] each made directorial debuts. Despite their relative inexperience, the results were loose, stylish, and story driven—a succinct formula that developed into the show’s signature. Here’s a cross-section of *Angels* episodes that executed it best:

“The Quiet Room” (Aug. 29, 1993)—Steven Soderbergh spins a Joe E. Smith novella into a sadistic cautionary tale for corrupt cops who also happen to be fathers. Driven by the sleaze of Joe Mantegna and Emmy-nominee Bonnie Bedelia, the episode harnesses regret into a single blood-curdling twist.

“Murder, Obliquely” (Sept. 19, 1993)—Oscar-winner Alfonso Cuarón tackles domestic despair in this Cornell Woolrich adaptation, which includes stellar turns from Alan Rickman, Diane Lane,

and Emmy-nominee Laura Dern. Having legendary cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki behind the camera didn’t hurt, either.

“The Professional Man” (Oct. 15, 1995)—Soderbergh delivers a daring take on David Goodis’ short story, starring Brendan Fraser and Peter Coyote. In altering the love interest from Pearl to Paul, Rodman’s duality-laden script depicts a doomed gay affair that according to Rodman, “broke real ground for cable television.”

“Tomorrow I Die” (Nov. 5, 1995)—Director John Dahl and star Bill Pullman breathe life into Mickey Spillane’s nihilistic knockout from 1960. Spanning buses, barrooms, and banks, Spillane’s nastiness lends itself perfectly to this overheated standoff, and the results—an unexpected bloodbath—close things out with a bang.

Despite the highest number of Cable Ace nominations ever for a Showtime series, *Fallen Angels*’ dwindling ratings and pricey production finally caught up with its creators. “The shows were like little one-off movies, in period, and were relatively expensive to make. It was a very challenging production,” Horberg admitted. “After the second season, there was some talk of continuing, but it had taken up a lot of bandwidth for our small company, which was mostly dedicated to making features.” The series concluded on Sept. 26, 1995 with an hour-long adaptation of the Chandler short story *Red Wind*.

Since then, the show’s descent into obscurity has been swift. Memories of the show are scarce in modern circles, due mainly to its unavailability. In fact, barring the rare VHS or DVD discovery (select episodes were disguised as *Perfect Crimes* in the UK), locating the 15 episodes has proven more daunting than the hunt for the Maltese Falcon. It’s become the genre’s own “fragmented memory,” scattered amidst the revered work of its filmmakers and stars.

And yet, *Angels*’ potency remains impossible to ignore. Each episode is a singular triumph of film noir tradition—a case of artistry and influence working in perfect, undeterred unison. In terms of its storytelling, and William Horberg’s vision, it is the quintessential small screen noir. Whether the series will ever receive a proper home entertainment release remains to be seen. In the meantime, *Fallen Angels* is a myth that’s well worth preserving. ■