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REVIEW

DVD Review: *Twitch City* The Complete SeriesWritten by [Bob MacKenzie](#)

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They say that if you're inside something, fully involved with it, you can't really see clearly what it's all about, what it is. You have to stand outside to get that sort of clarity. I've lived in Canada all my life. As an artist and as a reviewer, my vision has been affected by my intimate relationship with my people and our culture. For me to have greater perspective on who we are, perhaps to verify my own conclusions, I need in some degree to rely on the observations of outsiders.

It appears that, to the world, Canadians are a conservative people in most things they - we - do. Whether this derives from our harsh northern climate, our dour Scots roots, our resistance to the rebellious attitudes of our neighbours to the south or other reasons, we appear to think things carefully through and, wherever possible, to take the safe road. Whether our families have been here a long time or just arrived (more Canadians are new immigrants than are not), we Canadians tend to believe this image and to take it to heart. Indeed, at times we seem to revel in the concept.

On closer inspection, our culture reveals great surprises. Our scientists have brought to the world wonderful innovations in medicine, in aviation and space technology, in communications, in energy creation and conservation, in the field of time itself. Our publishers and our manufacturers have become world leaders and leading innovators in many ways. Our political leaders have been innovators in health care and social support systems and the vast distances across our nation have led to fantastic innovations in transportation and communication. Yet we don't celebrate these things as another nation might. Perhaps, more than cautious, we're just humble.

When it comes to the arts and entertainment, it's a whole other matter. While at some level we do celebrate accomplishments in these areas, the world beyond our borders discovers our artists and their creations and celebrates them even more than we ourselves would dare. If we are seen as perhaps over-cautious in other areas, then we are seen in the arts and entertainment as leaders and innovators. Our novelists, our pulp fiction and science fiction writers, our poets, our musicians, our cartoonists and animators, our comics and actors, our television producers and movie makers, all have made a powerful impact, and been influential in nations around the world.

This brings us to Don McKellar. For more than a quarter century, McKellar has been making films and television programs in Canada, early on drawing the interest of critics and other artists around the world. A true renaissance man of his industry, McKellar is writer, director, producer, actor, and whatever else it may take for him to get his work to the screen. His work is original and creative, sometimes breaking down artistic barriers and sometimes simply reaffirming what's already established. As with most brilliant creators, at times McKellar can be erratic and his work uneven, but the end result is mostly interesting and has been an influence to many others in his field.

This is the man who made the Canadian television series *Twitch City*. McKellar created, wrote, and starred in this quirky series, directed by his long-time colleague Bruce McDonald. Although many talented Canadians were involved in this series, every episode is ripe with the influence of Don McKellar.

The Series

One day I arrived home from work and turned on the television. It was the local affiliate of the CBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, itself a supposedly conservative organization run by federally appointed bureaucrats. I was tuned into what appeared to be a talk show reminiscent of the worst of Jerry

Springer. That was my introduction to *Twitch City*. I watched that complete show and I was hooked. Every week, I hurried home to see the next episode. If I knew I wouldn't be home in time, I taped it.

Half a century ago, when I was just establishing my own particular perception of the world, I was continually amazed by the programs that showed up on Canadian radio and television, in particular on the CBC. Whether news-based or drama programming, it was often quirky, eccentric, or just plain weird. The ideas, the images, the wonderful use of language and imagination were a tonic to my young mind, urging me to look beyond the obvious and to seek out the unimaginable.

Canadian broadcasting in general lost that wonderful edginess many years ago, taking on more and more the bland sameness endemic to the American media beaming to us across our southern border. Over the past twenty or so years, the CBC appears to have become lumpen and middle aged, with ever-decreasing interest in supporting any programming that might approach seeming innovative or new. To me and to others, this has been a loss and a disappointment. *Twitch City* restored my joy in the strangeness of the Canadian creative mind and the ability of the Canadian audience to accept this insanity as part of normal life.

Supposedly, or so the promotional materials suggest and a lot of the reviewers buy, this series is a situation comedy about a man who is addicted to television. This is certainly a primary element of the storylines, with McKellar's agoraphobic character homebound and entranced by the characters on his television programs, mostly the Springer-like talk show. However, *Twitch City* is more controlled by an undercurrent of fantasy and weird science that takes it into the realm of the dime novel and even underground comics. While there's certainly a lot of humour in both the writing and the acting, this is not *comedy* in the American *I Love Lucy* sense, and some of the scenes and themes are not really funny at all.

Born in the land of Marshall McLuhan, *Twitch City* rides a psychological roller coaster that resides just below the conscious, its underlying metaphors and themes undercutting the norms of both society and the unreal world that is television. The stories and characters here derive less from American sit-coms than from the wildly creative animations of Norman McLaren, the innovations of Ralph Bakshi, and the exotic cartoon worlds created by Vaughan Bode and Robert Crumb. Although this series was filmed in real locations with real actors, it is in fact an underground comic come out of the closet and into public view.

Although this series aired for only two seasons totalling only thirteen episodes, and those separated by a two year hiatus, *Twitch City* has enjoyed considerable critical success and a modicum of audience appreciation not just in Canada but around the world. It's interesting to note that the series has become a cult favourite in several nations, most notably in Australia, where it became a smash hit.

This series features McKellar as Curtis, who pretty much does nothing, but does it very creatively; Daniel MacIvor as Nathan, the murderous roommate; Molly Parker as the precocious and ever-patient, perhaps over-patient, Hope; Bruce McCulloch and Mark McKinney of *The Kids in the Hall* both playing talk show host Rex Reilly; Lucky the cat in a recurring role; and a scattering of guests, including Al Waxman of Canada's hit series *The King of Kensington* and Joyce DeWitt of *Three's Company*

Here are just some of the elements that contribute to the weirdness that is *Twitch City*: scary Oriental gangsters apparently selling tainted cookies, a hit man hired by Nathan to kill Curtis, a cult of neo-Nazis who may or may not also be gay, Nathan's murder of a hopeless man by hitting him on the head with a can of cat food, a possibly psychic cat who also talks from time to time, takeover of Earth by a cabal of cats from outer space, a talk show host who completely changes appearance between seasons because he's received a cranial transplant. And there's so much more. The mind boggles.

The Special Features

The somewhat limited special features that come in this two-DVD set include compact biographies of Don McKellar, Molly Parker, and Bruce McDonald plus a scanty photo gallery that includes only five still photographs. There's also commentary available by Don McKellar and others, but only on two of the episodes, so hardly worth the bother. I'd buy the series on DVD for the programs, not the features. The two-DVD set definitely makes for interesting, mind-stimulating viewing.

Influential Canadian *auteur* Don McKellar has been involved in a number of important films only some of which include his own *Highway 61* (with Bruce McDonald) and *Childstar*, Atom Egoyan's *Exotica*, and François Girard's *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*. In the process, McKellar been the recipient of many awards, including the Tony and Genie.



For four decades, Bob has written commentary and reviewed music, painting, film, theatre, and other arts for local, regional, and national Canadian media. Since 1996, he's written [Sound Bytes](#) music reviews online. A working artist in a variety of forms and media, Bob's latest album with [Poem de Terre](#) is [War & Love](#) (July 1, 2006). With broad knowledge of the arts, Bob often takes an off-centre, quirky view, offering new insights to an artist's work.

Comments

