

## TELEVISION EUNY HONG KORAL

The return of  
Hercule Poirot

David Mamet once said in an interview: "The ideal movie would have no dialogue at all." He does not seem to follow his own advice, but he is correct to point out the rarity of films that can be appreciated purely as a symphony of moving pictures.

One of the few television programmes that qualifies in this regard is the Poirot series starring David Suchet, which ran from 1988 to 1994 in the UK and has since been in syndication in the US. The cast returned for the first time since the end of the series for a two-hour television film version of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (A&E, Sunday, February 13 at 8pm ET/9pm PT).

At first blush, *Ackroyd*, directed by Andrew Grieve, doesn't appear to meet Mamet's criterion: it has nary a silent moment. But the visual aesthetic of this production is so stylish that the programme can be enjoyed with the volume off. With the exception of *Twin Peaks*, no other show can make that claim.

Alfred Hitchcock pioneered the device of framing characters in doorways to make them look like hanging portraits; Poirot per-

fectured the technique. In *Ackroyd's* opening scene, we see Hercule Poirot in the distance, his silhouette framed by four open doors leading to a bank vault. As he walks through each door, the bank guard accompanying him turns on a light. The row of doors behind him becomes a receding tunnel fragmented by shades of darkness and light, like an Italian Futurist painting come to life.

Suchet said in an interview: "I had to walk in such a way that my face is clearly visible through the metal bars [of the final door]. It took about 15 takes."

The production is shot in a muted, grey-washed colour scheme, with a sporadic glint of red in a woman's lips or a *boutonniere*. Production designer Rob Harris' sets are inspired not just by period detail, but by period art: even the restaurant menus

are designed in Art Deco style, and the caftan-clad women have walked right out of a Klimt painting.

Says Suchet: "The set designer and the show's buyers comb antique shops and auctions to find period pieces and props. I myself have been known to remove pieces from the set when something looks [anachronistic]."

Christie's mysteries defy modernisation; the events described could only have taken place at a time when etiquette was so rigid, and gender roles so clearly defined, that a detective could solve a mystery by reviewing minor aberrations in the habits of ladies and gentlemen: a missing handkerchief, an unorthodox method of dismissing a servant. The stories are, if you will, tragedies of manners.

The period aspect offers another advantage: forensic technology at that time would not have permitted investigators to detect trace amounts of poison or run DNA analyses. Poirot must rely on his immediate observation and, as he repeats endlessly, on "the little grey cells". There is a pleasant purity to his craftsmanship.

As played by Albert Finney and Peter Ustinov, the meticulous and vain Poirot has been criticised as overly cartoonish. Suchet - hands-down the best Poirot ever -

has always lent the character human nuances.

"I don't think Agatha Christie created this character to give the audience a belly-laugh," says Suchet. "Poirot is meant to be a realistic character with some funny eccentricities. In Freudian terms, he's somewhat anally retentive."

In *Ackroyd*, we find Poirot retired in the English countryside, growing prize marrows. Suchet says his own Anglo-French-Russian heritage enables him convincingly to play the sort of Continental European who prefers to live in England.

"Christie wanted to create a character who only gave the appearance of being foreign. Poirot's [personality] is not very Belgian at all. His mannerisms are very English. He wears morning coats, he is fastidious and regular in his habits."

The actor based his Poirot on 93 character notes he took from the Christie books, including: "He always lays down a handkerchief before kneeling on the ground. He likes to eat two hard-boiled eggs each morning, but only if they are exactly the same size."

Christie's plots are somewhat dull and dainty, and many have not aged well. But the series and this *Ackroyd* film give the stories a new reason for living, exhibiting an attention to detail that rivals Poirot's own.

This production is as much a descendant of inter-war art movements as of Christie, and doubtless those technology-loving futurists would have been pleased to see their legacy in television production design, the most improbable yet appropriate of venues.