

Meeting Rod Serling

by Bruce Kirschner

It was the winter of 1974 and my junior year at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The student-run speaker's bureau was well funded and would bring in some pretty remarkable people to present to the large student population at the school. I had already seen the likes of Moe Howard of the Three Stooges and horror movie villain Vincent Price. But it was the appearance of Rod Serling, my long-time hero, that left the most indelible impression on me. He had created *The Twilight Zone* television series, which started on prime time when I was six years old and ended five years later.



Rod with SUNY-Oswego students, 1973.
Source: Binghamton Press & Star-Bulletin.

The show went into syndication as reruns for the entirety of my teenage years so I was able to continue to enjoy the half hour episodes. The anthology series captured my imagination with a memorable mixture of science fiction, social satire, fantasy, drama, and horror. Many of the episodes have become fixtures on the American cultural landscape. It always amazed me how Serling and his production crew could get so much into less than a half hour of television screen time. He followed up *The Twilight Zone* with *Night Gallery*, another inventive TV series. Serling was taking a break from Hollywood and teaching at Ithaca College at the time. Ithaca College was just a few hours drive from Buffalo. He probably drove up himself.

His presentation was held in the Norton Student Union building in one of the large ballrooms. The stage was about two feet high. Serling's seemingly off the cuff speech lasted about an hour or so. I don't really remember what he covered but he was certainly entertaining and made the audience laugh a lot. I do remember one reference he made to his wife describing him looking like a "five foot four inch

Sicilian boxer,” even though I learned many years later that Serling was actually Jewish. When his talk was over the crowd quickly dispersed. My high school friend, John, and I dawdled a bit for some reason. We hadn’t noticed that Serling had descended from the stage and came right over to us until he started talking to us. He said something like, “Hi, guys. How’s it going?” We were both stunned to realize that the REAL Rod Serling was talking to us, a couple of lowly undergraduate students.

Maybe what surprised me the most was how he very much appeared to be sincerely interested in what John and I had to say. I also couldn’t help but notice how much smaller he was compared to his TV image. In fact, he was a couple of inches shorter than my own five foot six inches.

We chatted with him for a few minutes, mostly small talk. One of my biggest life regrets is that as a English and Political Science double major I had not been better prepared to ask him some really good questions at that chance moment in time. It was a lost opportunity since Serling left us far too prematurely only a year later at age 50. Over the years I’ve conjured up plenty of questions I could have posed to him. Perhaps one day I’ll find myself in *The Twilight Zone* and will have another opportunity to meet and talk to my hero, Rod Serling.

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