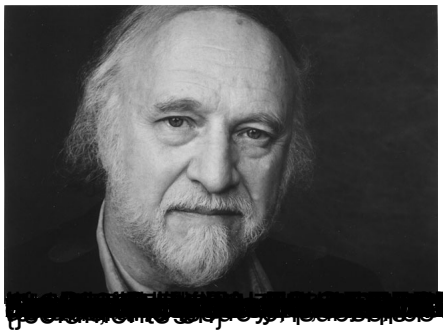
Written by Chris Alexander
Thursday, 03 March 2011 15:21

There are but a handful of individuals currently residing on the planet Earth who can accurately be referred to as “living legends”—people whose perspectives and creative output have helped alter the course of their respective fields, and in turn have inspired generations of disciples both aware and sometimes, sadly, unaware of their influence.

But when it comes to wordsmith Richard Matheson, the phrase has an even deeper resonance. Matheson’s 1954 novel I AM LEGEND turned the vampire subgenre on its fang, grafting pronounced existential allegory and ironic social commentary onto a tale of terrifying science fiction—a highbrow pulp fiction that found a devoted cult almost instantly. The grim fable of Everyman Robert Neville—lone survivor of a plague that kills the entire human race, only to resurrect them as shambling, nightcrawling, bloodthirsty ghouls—muses on loneliness, madness, the search for purpose and generally every aspect of the human condition as its hero battles the trials of a living hell.

The subject of several stop-and-start film adaptations, Legend finally first hit screens as THE LAST MAN ON EARTH, starring Vincent Price as the rechristened “Robert Morgan,” in 1964, which Matheson initially scripted and then disowned after numerous alterations. Around the same time, a Pittsburgh-based industrial filmmaker named George A. Romero read LEGEND and would eventually “borrow” many of the novel’s concepts to create one of the ultimate works of cinematic horror, NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD.

But while reinventing the vampire story and inadvertently creating the zombie genre may be Matheson’s greatest pop-culture legacy (the blockbuster 2007 studio adaptation of I AM LEGEND with Will Smith sparked a massive new interest in the source book and Matheson’s work in general), it is far from his only impact on the horror field. When television maverick Rod Serling scoped out contributing writers for his landmark series THE TWILIGHT ZONE in 1959, Matheson—along with fellow ’50s fantasy scribe Charles Beaumont—was first pick. His work on the show is some of the best the genre has ever offered.



[redacted] here [redacted] here [redacted]