

"Is there a clean white shirt, dear? Ready for the bomb?"

'Protect and Survive' was published in May 1980. This government pamphlet was designed to provide information to the general public concerning preparation for a nuclear attack on the UK, as well as procedure during the aftermath. The Times newspaper had become aware of the existence of the leaflet in late 1979 and their exposure led to the government making it generally available six months later – it seems that the details contained within may have been intended for police, fire services, and local authorities but an outcry brought the booklet to wider attention. This in turn resulted in criticism from bodies like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – proper scrutiny of the guidance revealing at best a naïve outlook, at worst a bid to obfuscate and to misinform the population. Despite this, the government of the day ploughed on, with additional Home Office from Richard Taylor Animation and narrated by Patrick Allen – again, not intended for broadcast until hostilities were deemed imminent, but quickly leaked and revealed by CND and by the BBC current affairs flagship 'Panorama'.

Suitably appalled by the manner in which the official line was deviating from likely reality, the popular artist and children's illustrator Raymond Briggs published his graphic novel 'When The Wind Blows' in response. This 1982 work depicts a retired couple, Jim and Hilda Bloggs, with old-fashioned values, living a gentle everyday existence, and (with talk of conflict rife in the media) discussing their memories of having survived the Second World War. Their dogged insistence on following the advice of the authorities proves a masterstroke on Briggs' part, utterly destroying the pretence of 'Protect and Survive' and playing up the contradictions and blatant outright lies contained within, but doing so in a deceptively mild and, at face value, non-contradictory way which only serves to paper over the author's seething enragement.

With film and television turning frequently to nuclear themes at this time, a dramatized version of 'When The Wind Blows' was inevitable. American tv movie 'The Day After' (1983) and the BBC's British take on the subject, 'Threads' (1984) had caused a sensation, and the likes of 'Special Bulletin' (1983), 'Miracle Mile' (1988) and the low-key 'Testament' (1983), which won a surprise Oscar nomination for its lead actress Jane Alexander, all continued to inform audiences of the folly of modern wars that could not be won.

Jimmy T. Murakami, a Dublin-based Japanese/American filmmaker and a product of the Roger Corman school (Murakami had worked on exploitation movies for Corman and directed 1980's science-fiction adventure 'Battle Beyond The Stars') had been a prominent member of the team behind 'The Snowman', Dianne Jackson's masterly adaptation of another Briggs classic. 'The Snowman' was initially broadcast by

Channel 4 in December 1982 and has become a Yuletide institution. You probably watch it every year – I know I do. (David Bowie, who memorably introduced 'The Snowman', returns to deliver a powerful vocal on the 'When The Wind Blows' theme song). Murakami was hired to helm 'When The Wind Blows' and he and his crew made a stunning job of translating Briggs' vision to the screen. He's ably assisted by a pair of superb performances by those old dependables John Mills and Peggy Ashcroft, who bring life and humour to the central characters of Jim and Hilda, thus making it all the more affecting as we witness their poorly-informed reaction to the threat of imminent war and their post-bomb descent into confusion and, eventually, radiation-caused sickness.

Briggs himself took on script duties, ensuring that the central ideas of his original work were retained. Bespectacled, balding Jim's constant repetition of the phrase "inner core or refuge" while constructing a futile 'shelter' out of unhinged doors and scatter cushions bangs home the hopeless absurdity of the official line. Repetition works so effectively here, Hilda constantly fretting about the mess or the washing-up, Jim's cure for all ills being the mantra "I'll pop down to..." whichever local shop or public amenity has always solved minor inconveniences in the vanished routine past.

The animation team manages to capture the 'Briggs style' effectively, with that familiar round-faced look to the main characters. As with 'The Snowman', a cosy rural environment is disrupted and we work our way to the only possible outcome, but clearly any similarities in feel and tone between the two productions quickly diverges, simply due to the variant subject matter and the author's differing intentions.

It's not the done thing to give away too many plot spoilers within a programme note, but you probably already know what you're in for with 'When The Wind Blows'. If so, read on. It's a gruelling, agonising ordeal watching these lovely, uncomplicated, naïve people slowly and unwittingly die. The closing twenty minutes sees them hollow-eyed, withered, covered in boils, hungry, tired, with clumps of hair falling out, yet doggedly they cling to their belief in 'authority', still attempting to follow official guidance to the letter. Our final sight of them would be comical beyond belief if it weren't for the fact that every audience member will be experiencing inner rage while simultaneously crying their eyes out.

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