

The Silver Archive Special #1

# THE CHRISTMAS BOX

## Sampler



By Paul Magrs

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# Christmas Spirits

**Episode Title:** Christmas Spirits

**Channel:** ITV

**Original UK Transmission Date:** 1 January 1981

**Cast:** Elaine Stritch (Julia Myerson), Ben Aris (Charles Aintree), Stephanie Cole (Mrs Purvis), Norma West (Angela Aintrey)

**Writer:** Willis Hall

**Director:** June Wyndham-Davies

*Julia, a Hollywood property scout, is looking for a house to star in a horror movie, she finds more than she bargained for at Glebes Hall.*

Someone at ITV must have looked across at the BBC and thought, 'Well, we can do that. All those marvelous **Ghost Stories for Christmas**. So chilly and creepy and full of class. Why, we should have our own ITV version. We just need a mansion and some wintry twilight. Throw in some half-hidden, frightful things. We'll conjure up an hour of unbearable tension and crank it up to a ghastly climax. Now, who shall we get to star? Denholm Elliot? Michael Hordern?

No. Let's ask Elaine Stritch.

Will she look ashen and bleakly haunted? Will she bring some gravitas to this eerie tale?

Or will she shamble about the place like a crazy lady in clumpy shoes and a beige tunic dress doing jazz hands and squawking at the top of her voice?

This has to be one of my favourite hours of TV ever. Stritch plays a location researcher for a US film company, coming to stay in the wilds of the English countryside, in order to check out a spooky mansion for a horror film. She is welcomed by a couple who are trying to make a buck out of their dilapidated stately pile. They're keen to tell the world about the ghostly, murderous children haunting their hall.

Elaine's character, Julia, is entranced by the whole place. This is real England. She sits on their sofa, knocking back whisky, smoking fags, cackling and congratulating herself on her good fortune.

The only trouble is that the resident spirits and the Mrs Danvers-like housekeeper (a completely terrifying Stephanie Cole) aren't best pleased.

Julia's hosts are a bickering couple. The willowy, aristocratic lady has married beneath herself, and he's a conniving, oiky presence, wonderfully snarky as he curries favour with their visitor. He's desperate for the cash her film folk will bring and he's bitterly resentful of his predicament, living off crumbs in the corner of this drafty estate. He takes great relish in playing up the ghostly horrors of the place, describing them until their guest has to tamp down her fear with more fags and booze.

Is it tasteless to suggest I care more for Willis Hall's characters than I do for any of M R James'? There's just something so true about this horrible lot.

Then, of course, Julia finds herself alone on Christmas Eve. Her hosts nip out on a visit, their car breaks down, and Julia has to spend an evening alone in the haunted mansion. At first she's pragmatic and full of bravado. Her interior monologue rings out loudly through the dusky studio set. Then she manages to lock herself out of the cosy living quarters. Then the lights and heating go off. Then she starts hearing the ghostly giggles from the upper rooms and soon we are racketing about with her in a full-blown nightmare.

Poor old Elaine Stritch dashes up and down the wooden staircases, rather quickly going out of her mind. She flaps and shrieks like a banshee. The whole thing is a ghoulishly silly delight.

There are at least two massive, jumpy scares. Much bigger than anything we get in the BBC M.R. James plays. Seriously. You can forget your dripping ichor and your wraithlike figures on the beach. There are two moments here that are so frightening that Elaine Stritch is struck almost dumb.

**Christmas Spirits** has more than its fair share of those delicious moments that make you want to laugh as much as you cry out in fear.

The whole thing is meant to be terribly serious, of course. It's never played for laughs. But there's something irresistibly hilarious about Stritch – this frazzled old broad – smoking and boozing her way through a nasty Christmas visitation.

# The Story Lady

**Movie Title:** The Story Lady

**Original US Transmission Date:** 29 December 1991

**Cast:** Jessica Tandy (Grace McQueen), Stephanie Zimbalist (Julie Pollard), Lisa Jakub (Alexandra Pollard), Chris Gartin (Scott), Tandy Cronyn (Meg), Richard Masur (Norm Denton), Ed Begley Jr. (Otis), Luis Avalos (Mr. Riley), Andre Rosey Brown (Security Guard), Charles Champion (Larry Freeman), Ellen Crawford (Rita), Mary Pat Gleason (Receptionist), Jeanine Jackson (Mrs. Oberg), Jean Kasem (Sensuous Witch), Michael Mitz (Ben Hodgkins)

**Writer:** Robert Zeschin

**Director:** Larry Elikann

*Grace goes to live with her daughter and son-in-law where, after reading a story out loud on public access television, a large company offers her a television series of her own.*

Jessica Tandy made this TV movie in her early Eighties, shortly after winning an Oscar for **Driving Miss Daisy**. By 1991 she'd had a long and distinguished career on stage and film, and then, very late in the day, she starred as Grace McQueen in this Christmas film. It's a sweet and gentle tale about the power of storytelling.

Grace is moving in with her daughter and son-in-law, into their smart upstate New York home, leaving behind everything of her own but a few small boxes of possessions. She is surrendering herself to a new life of ease. Her expression of quickly-hidden dismay when confronted with her saccharine pink bedroom is a delight. We know straight away that she won't settle easily for the life her daughter has planned for her. She balks at their sterile modern lives and their meagre diets. There is something so pinched and puritanical about these middle aged prigs she's living with.

Grace dons a smart outfit and puts herself right back on the job market, determined to be of use to someone. No one will have her, however. She can't even read to children in schools or hospitals because their insurance won't cover it. She has a brief moment of existential crisis – what is her role in the world if she can't be of help to anyone, or show anyone she cares?

She remembers reading fairy tales to her daughter. Always the thing she was best at and, when she randomly happens upon public access TV, it's this particular gift that she thinks of first. Seeing ordinary people with their own half hour TV programs sets her mind racing and soon she's decided to become the Story Lady, and to take to the airwaves.

Of course, everyone falls in love with her. She sits in a rocking chair and, at first stumblingly, then with long-practised confidence, she reads Hans Christian Andersen stories. All across Manhattan folk start tuning into her endearingly amateurish show. One of her loyalest fans is the neglected daughter of an advertising executive. She swaps VHS tapes of Grace telling stories with her friends. Quite quickly, it seems, there is a black market in this stuff.

**The Story Lady** is helped by a young cameraman at the public access station. Scott is quickly entranced by her talent, emerging from his bored cynicism within moments of recording her first show. He's a film graduate, thoroughly aware that he's frittering away his time in this dump; broadcasting shows about psychic witches and gay aerobics. The slightly shonky world of the TV station is deliciously presented: the wise-cracking receptionist, the bears and snakes and ventriloquist dolls. Jessica Tandy's polite incredulity when she first visits and encounters the Nineties in the raw is marvellous.

It's a film about letting yourself be enchanted: about learning all over again what enchantment means. Stories and love can melt the most frozen of hearts and it's never too late to put things right. These are sentiments all too common in TV movies of this kind, but here, somehow, it all seems fresh and urgent. We really want Grace to find a new place in the world, and we want the little girl, Alexandra, to drag her mother's attention back from her all-absorbing career.

The characters are twined together into the old, old story, when the corporate world becomes aware of Grace's show, and lures her into the big time. Alex's mother Julie's advertising company gets its clutches on Grace and she's drawn into a world of greed and compromise. Grace dotes on Alex, who clearly needs some affection, and all the while Julie's firm is primping and packaging the Story Lady. They want to fix her teeth, dress her up as a fairy tale character, give her dreadful, commercialised nonsense to read out on the air.

It's a Mary Poppins story, though, so, rather than Grace being utterly subsumed and defeated by the corporate world, we see her subtly undermine and defeat it. By the end of the movie she changes everyone's lives for the better, though there are some uncomfortable and heart-rending scenes on the way. (Julie missing her daughter's performance in – what else? – **A Christmas Carol.**)

It's a TV movie. It was probably made quite quickly, alongside a whole lot of other similar movies. It was meant to be a heart-warming couple of hours, nothing more. Just part of the moving wallpaper of daytime TV. Not very different to the hundreds of TV movies made over the years for the festive period. Just another tale in which people are reminded of quasi-Christian values of love and understanding.

I think there's something special about **The Story Lady**, though. I think it's to do with the quality of Jessica Tandy's performance, and the way she brings out the best in everyone she shares moments with. But it's also to do with the film's insistence on a belief in stories, and how the teller must always stick to the truth of their tale – and the warning always to watch out for the wolves in corporate suits.

Also, Scott the young producer in the checked shirt? Who turns up with his 'room mate' at the end? He's hot.