



# Don't look now

Mark Gatiss is hailed as one of TV's biggest talents – but he's not celebrating, he's on the warpath

THE RT INTERVIEW BY ALISON GRAHAM

# ‘Episodes of *Bake Off* and *X Factor* will never be watched again – *Doctor Who* will be watched in 100 years’ time’

MARK GATISS



## TIME TWO

Peter Capaldi and Jenna Coleman face new dangers this Saturday



MARK GATISS URGENTLY wants to get something off his chest. He's a polite, affable man, but there's a furious fire burning in his breast – about ratings. “The ratings system is insane and iniquitous. I've seen grown men crying because their show got 6.3 million [viewers] instead of a hoped-for 6.5. They make a difference to a person's career.”

His scorn has been stirred by the muffled bells ringing quite audibly during this current series of *Doctor Who*. (He's written Saturday's episode starring his old *League of Gentlemen* mate Reece Shearsmith.) In September, mirrors were turned to walls and curtains were drawn as observers sorrowfully/gleefully announced that so-called “overnight” ratings saw *Doctor Who* slump to a “ten-year low” (against *The X Factor* and Rugby World Cup on ITV) with fewer than five million viewers.

**B**UT GATISS, STAGE, film and TV actor, documentary-maker, author and co-creator with his great friend Steven Moffat of the stratospherically successful reimagined *Sherlock*, is having none of it. “These overnight figures are based on a system of 5,000 set-top boxes, which is essentially a Gallup poll and we all know how accurate *they* are. If they provided a thumbnail sketch of what people are watching, fine, but people's careers and projects rise and fall with them. This is nuts. Everybody watches television in a different way from the way they did four, five years ago. Yet the people who make a fuss about overnights are the same people who go home and watch TV in an entirely different way.

“That's the modern world we live in and I'm not being defensive, but when you add everything together – timeshifting, plus iPlayer – [*Doctor Who's*] ratings are the same as they ever were. But there is no capital in saying ‘*Doctor Who's* ratings remain roughly the same’, so people make a story out of it.”

*The Great British Bake Off* final was recently handed the most-watched show of the year crown with more than 15m viewers, but Gatiss won't roll over: “There's a huge difference between the temporary popularity of a game show or factual entertainment show and something that has a proper legacy.

Those episodes of *Bake Off* or *The X Factor*, and their virtues are manifest, will never be watched again. Yet *Doctor Who* will be watched in 50 years' time, 100 years' time. It's a marathon, not a sprint. I love things to be popular, I want things to be watched, but this sort of scrutiny is deadly.”

Gatiss is so angry because he loves, and has always loved, television. >

# THE MANY FACES OF MARK GATISS

◁ Growing up happily in County Durham, he was obsessed by *Doctor Who*, horror films and horror stories. They provided a refuge from hated PE lessons. In his recent *Who Do You Think You Are?*, where he found he's descended from Irish royalty, he held up his career as "a long revenge against PE... children who are not necessarily sporty should take a bit of heart."

"Television was a huge friend to me. Anything supernatural I would just hunt out, and I loved all of those great big dramas like *Poldark* and *The Duchess of Duke Street*, and that Brian Clemens series *Thriller*. As a kid I really wanted to be in something like *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* [BBC's 1970 historical blockbuster with Keith Michell as the axe-happy monarch]." Though Gatiss satisfied that particular Tudor ambition when he appeared in *Wolf Hall* as master of the dark arts Stephen Gardiner.

**D**ODGING THE EYE of their PE teacher, Gatiss and a friend would walk around the football pitch talking about horror. He even made "a small living from writing unbelievably gruesome stories about murdering all the teachers we hated". Bloody tales about javelins being inserted into brains were favourites. "I used to dream of not having to go outside in the cold to play football and instead sitting in the library. I think you can do that now, so maybe the pendulum has swung too far the other way."

Of course, *Doctor Who* was little Mark Gatiss's favourite TV show – and it should still be on at teatime, he insists, not nomadically some time after 8pm: "Put it on at a proper time, put it on where it should be, when *Pointless Celebrities* is on. That's where it belongs, otherwise you are almost perversely cutting off your key audience, which is children."

This is particularly important for Gatiss:

**'Alan Bennett sent me a postcard after my *Desert Island Discs*'**

"I learnt my entire moral code from Jon Pertwee [the Doctor, 1970–74], and also what TV still should be about, which is a very Reithian thing. I learnt so much from TV in the best kind of osmotic way. I absorbed morality, I absorbed a kind of scepticism and enjoyment of story, and oddness, and narrative. These days it's so hard to get those things through; it's almost become a dirty word to say 'culture'. Education should be so much more than getting a good job."

I first met Mark Gatiss in 2000 in a chilly disused hospital in Manchester when he and his friends Reece Shearsmith, Steve Pemberton and Jeremy Dyson were filming series two of *The*



## 1 THE LEAGUE OF GENTLEMEN

With Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton in the spooky BBC sitcom (1999–2002)

## 2 COALITION

Earlier this year he was a dead ringer for Peter Mandelson in C4's *Coalition*.

## 3 SHERLOCK

As well as co-writing and producing the hit show, he guest-stars as Mycroft Holmes.

## 4 DAD'S ARMY

He's Colonel Theakes in the all-star, big-screen revival coming next year.



*League of Gentlemen*, the one where an epidemic of nosebleeds strikes down the grotesque population of that weird northern town, Royston Vasey. The four of them became friends and performers after meeting on a drama course at Bretton Hall, then a part of Leeds University. "We had a totally shared sensibility. Sometimes people talk about the League as if we spotted a gap in the market and filled it. But basically it was just what made us laugh, horror tinged with all of those things we loved, like *Rising Damp*, *Porridge*, Mike Leigh films and Alan Bennett, who is an absolute copper-bottomed god.

"After my *Desert Island Discs* I got a postcard from him. I was so touched. He said he was in a real hole and stuck on something and I'd said something about him on the show and he told me it completely bucked him up. I thought... if I've done that for Alan Bennett..." Of course, he doesn't have to end that thought.

Gatiss, who's 49 and lives in north London with his husband, actor Ian Hallard, is currently writing scripts for the new series of *Sherlock*, in which he also stars as Sherlock's ascetic brother Mycroft – but anticipation for the Christmas special, *The Abominable Bride*, is heady. "It's a Sherlock ghost story for Christmas, but that's all I'm going to tell you." Unless the trailers are

particularly obtuse, it's set in the Victorian era. Why take Sherlock back to his original chronological habitat? "Steven [Moffat] and I realised that now, and at no other time, we would have the chance to do what Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce did [in the Sherlock films, 1939–46], which was modern *and* period."

**G**ATISS AND MOFFAT'S shared love of Doyle's books and the Rathbone/Bruce canon sparked many meandering "wouldn't it be nice if" conversations between the two before the decision to go ahead with a modern Sherlock was made.

"We confessed that the modern-day-set Rathbones were our favourites of all, which was heretical. We talked and I said, 'Isn't it funny that in *A Study in Scarlet* Dr Watson is invalidated home from war service in Afghanistan and we were going through another Afghan war. We looked at each other and the light bulb went on."

Benedict Cumberbatch, whose star has rocketed to the highest reaches of the heavens, was their only choice. Casting Watson took a bit longer. "We saw about half a dozen people but as soon as Benedict and Martin [Freeman] were together, Steven leant over to me and said, 'There's the show.'"