Day of the Doctors

When you choose a Doctor, you want somebody who is attractive in a very odd way

STEVEN MOFFAT, SHOWRUNNER

I don’t think I’ve ever worked on anything that was as difficult, terrifying and as much of a responsibility as writing the 50th anniversary episode of Doctor Who. I wanted everybody to love it. I knew that was impossible, but I wanted people – from those who had never seen it, to the absolute diehard fans who hate every episode I’ve written – to love it. So it was monotonously stressful and very hard: the uncastable cast, the impossible brief, the unwriteable script... I can remember sitting with my wife saying, “I can’t tell if it’s good any more, it could be rubbish - I’ll have to leave the country. I’ll have to fake my own death.” And then going for a meeting with the producers the week I was meant to hand the script in, and we were still trying to assemble the cast. We all just sat there, thinking, “This is impossible, this can’t ever work!” All of these problems, of course, had been 50 years in the making. There was, I reasoned, only one story to tell if the Doctor was to meet himself - this had to be the day when he saved himself. And in the whole history of Doctor Who, there was only one day he needed saving from.

Of course the Doctor is always capable of darkness – he makes terrible decisions throughout the show – but this war involved the deadliness of the decisions because the stakes were so much higher. The Doctor is a good man, always doing things for a good cause, but at this point he is no longer the happy-go-lucky wanderer; he’s a dark warrior. The Doctor has always been able to solve problems. Here he admits defeat, saying, “I’m going to have to descend to the level of my enemies in order to fix this.”

Of course we’d decided on getting more than one Doctor involved we wanted David back. David’s Doctor was struggling to move on from the Time War, Matt Smith’s Doctor had sort of got over the Time War so, add a mysterious Doctor who’s about to commit the crime _ to which his two future selves have slightly different attitudes, and you have a very...

DOUBLE ACT
The new Doctor (Peter Capaldi) with companion Clara (Jenna Coleman)
made you so ashamed of being a grown-up? They both look at him... it's him! They don't want to be like him, and have rejected every single thing he's like. At which point a lot of things become clear. You suddenly see David and Matt as men trying to repress the memory of the brutal old warrior they once were, and puppying around the place in order to prove that they're charming and lovely and more human than ever, almost as a denial that they'd ever done anything so dark.

But now all that is over. In Matt Smith's final episode he spent a thousand years on a planet watching everybody else age to death, while he ages very slowly. The Doctor is being taught a lesson. He's not a human being, however much he larks around pretending he is. He is different and it's time to stop play-acting. He goes back to being the trickier and strangest looking man from another. You need that oddity; you need somebody who is carved out of solid star, really. Doctor Who is a whopping great star vehicle, despite the fact it changes star every so often. And so it really is built around the abilities, the charm, the magnetism of a succession of different actors. I've cast Matt Smith, Peter Capaldi and John Hurt, but the truth is, they all cast themselves - the easiest thing to spot in the world is sheer brilliance.

I always thought Matt, while a very young man, had something of the demeanour of a much older man, whereas Peter is a man in his 50s but is terribly boyish and young at times. I like the Doctors to have mixed messages about what age they are - you can't really pin them down. The Doctors are all the same Doctor really, at the end of the day, but you can slide the faders up and down. And to emphasise the senior consultant over the medical student for once reminds people that he's actually a terrifying old beast. Typically, Matt's method would do that, too: occasionally just turn cold and you'd think, "You're not really a puppy are you?" Just like Peter Capaldi's Doctor will sometimes remind me he's a big kid at heart.

AS TOLD TO STEPHEN ARMSTRONG