America Loves The Doctor
A Report from the 1st "Dr. Who" Con

By ALAN BRENDER

Close to a thousand people jammed the Continental Hyatt House on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood for the first Dr. Who convention in North America early in December. Organizers of the one-day event had only expected no more than 500 people to turn up for the con that featured the British SF-TV show which has been airing for 17 years in the U.K.

Partaking in the program were Terrance Dicks, author of the Dr. Who novelizations and producer of the series for five years; Gerry Davis, a writer of the show and creator of the evil Cybermen; and Don Gallacher, the British record producer of Disco Dr. Who.

Early in the morning, as fans formed serpentine lines in the narrow corridors to register for the con, rumors began to fly that Tom Baker, the current star of the series, was flying in from England to make a special guest appearance. The rumors were soon verified—his plane was to land that afternoon; he would appear that evening.

While awaiting the arrival of Baker, the fourth actor to play the part, fans were treated to 15 continuous hours of Dr. Who serials (after all, "fan" is short for "fanatic"), including one episode that featured the first of the flamboyant Doctors—William Hartnell. And there was even a complete adventure with actor Jon Pertwee.

"The focus of the con," says Lucy Chase Williams, one of the organizers of the event, "was on the series as a whole—to acknowledge the years before Baker as well as the ones in which Tom is featured."

In addition to showing the serials—in sequence—(unlike the nefarious practice of many local TV stations which show them in a helter-skelter manner) there were panel discussions, a costume contest, a film program and a dealers' room where fans could purchase various Dr. Who literature and paraphernalia. A number of people roamed the halls wearing the long flowing scarves for which the current Doctor is known, while munching on jelly babies—the Doctor's favorite sweet. A menacing Dalek meandered through the corridors, followed by K9, the Doctor's mechanical canine. And some people even bumped into a Cyberman (in reality, Gene Turnbow, who had perfected the costume for himself).
When the announcement finally came over the PA that Tom Baker had indeed arrived, more than 450 Who fans crammed a small meeting room upstairs.

Baker, impressed by the size and intensity of the crowd, had a look of astonishment on his animated face when told that another 400 people were waiting for him downstairs. The flamboyant actor played up to the audience, and they loved him. The crush for autographs was overwhelming. Finally, Baker told the enthusiastic group that he had to dash off to meet the throngs downstairs, and exited. Baker then entertained the second audience, and when it became apparent to the travel-weary actor (he had just spent 16 hours flying in from London) that he couldn’t possibly sign all the autograph books thrust before him, he suggested that an autograph session be held the next day.

And it was—at the beach...sunny Venice Beach to be exact. Approximately 300 people showed up to get their hero’s signature.

Baker was thrilled by the recognition, and so was author Dicks. It was all the more worthwhile since both men flew to California from the U.K. at their own expense, according to Williams.

When the con was being organized, some six weeks earlier, it appeared as if Baker would not be able to attend. Williams had contacted Baker about that possibility when she attended Pan Opticon in London in mid-September. Baker indicated interest at the time, but noted that he might be too involved filming the series to make the 7,000-mile trip to the convention. A strike against the BBC, however, freed Baker at the last minute. He notified the organizers of the con the day before the event that he would appear. They were ecstatic.

The con-organizers call themselves the Gallifreyan Irregulars and first got together a year ago when they independently came to recognize the merits of Dr. Who. In the first stage, the group merely met to discuss the merits of the show. Then Lucy Williams decided to telephone the local TV station airing the program to complain that the serial was not being shown in sequence. She reached Alan Maretsky, director of operations at KBSK Channel 52, and talked him into putting the serial in sequence and at a reasonable hour. Los Angeles then became the first (possibly still the only city) in which the serial is shown as BBC intended. (Imagine seeing the old Flash Gordon serials out of sequence!)

The idea of a Los Angeles Dr. Who con was born in London, at the Who Pan Opticon. And the con in California proved to be more successful than the one that was held on home turf. Opticon drew approximately 400 Britons—and most of the British fans were quite young—under 16. The Hollywood con, in contrast, drew nearly 1,000 people and most of them in the 16 to 28 year old age range.

The Gallifreyan Irregulars feel the con was extremely successful in all respects—they even met their not-insignificant costs. And now they plan to hold a three-day Dr. Who con in Los Angeles this spring (March 1 and 2 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Los Angeles). They hope the interest and enthusiasm they have for this British science-fiction series will mushroom. And there is a good possibility it will—given half a chance. Afterall, what American SF TV show has lasted 17 years? The BBC must be doing something right!