It’s about Time

No more waiting! *Doctor Who* is back with a geek-chic Time Lord and revamped Tardis, plus a striking new companion. *RT* quizzes the Who recruits, while series boss Steven Moffat gives us an exclusive sneak preview.
THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH

Below: Amy Pond (Karen Gillan) meets the "raggedy Doctor" (Matt Smith) after the Tardis crash-lands in her garden. Far left: regeneration complete and suited and booted in his new look, the Doctor's ready for anything from Weeping Angels to a sinister crack in time...
Regenerating is a tough gig. Filling the shoes of the most popular Doctor in the history of the world's most popular sci-fi show is hard enough. When you have precisely 65 minutes to foil your first intergalactic threat, you need to hit the ground running.

"Yeah, no pressure," laughs Matt Smith, the 27-year-old actor who came, appropriately enough, from nowhere to scoop the title role in the new series of Doctor Who. "My Doctor is like a new-born lamb, trying to discover what these limbs are on his body, but he's straight into active service. It's a bit like trying to save the world with flu."

It seems a safe bet that eight-year-olds all over Britain will soon be plaguing their mums for a bow tie. There's a fogeyish charm to the eleventh Doctor (Smith prefers "geek chic") with his worn tweeds and flapping fringe. Smith's own manner is a likeable blend of puppyish and professorial, with a tendency to talk in italics. Playing the Doctor, he points out, is a little like "giving your Hamlet. You have to make the part your own."

"I mean," he says, "the Doctor has always been, and he always will be. But how many parts are there in world TV that could be played by a 27-year-old or a 60-year-old? It's been wonderful, just exploring the multitudes of him, but it takes a while to evolve a strong identity."

A graduate of the University of East Anglia, where he studied drama and creative writing, Smith has his own way of accessing this enigmatic character. "I had the part six months prior to shooting anything on camera - and for much of that time it was all a big secret - so I had to find a way of channelling my energy and excitement, my lust, as it were, for creating this persona. I was thinking, 'Who in the world has a brain and a silliness which is close to the Doctor?' and then I saw that photograph of Albert Einstein poking his tongue out and it just clicked. I found this book of quotes by Einstein - which I recommend as a life choice, he was such an insightful man - and I started writing short stories about Einstein and the Doctor, where the Doctor was getting irritated with the great man's buffoonery. He'd be saying, 'Come on, Albert, keep up!' and I think that, more than anything, was my way in to the part."

With new head writer and executive producer Steven Moffat on board, the role could be tailored to Smith's own personality as the season developed. "There's a slight sort of madness and a great tenderness to the Doctor. I don't know if that's me, but he's also very clumsy and that's definitely me," says Smith. "It helps, too, that I've always been completely fascinated by the time/space continuum. I was never that into sci-fi - I grew up in that barren age when Doctor Who was taken off the air - but I once shared a house with an obscenely clever guy who was doing his doctorate for Cambridge on the subject of time, and ever since, it has seemed to me the great, omnipotent force of the world. The new series plays so cleverly with the concept of time travel. I don't know how Steven does it; you think there's no way he's going to be able to join those dots and tie the whole thing up but, by God, he does. For me, to go to work and be in touch, on a daily basis, with that crazy, time-bending magic is just incredible."

Smith needed all his enthusiasm - supplemented by weapons-grade Vitamin C - to carry him through the series' seven-month shooting schedule at Cardiff HQ, where he featured in practically every scene. "If you're ill, it's just tough. I think your head would have to be twisted to alien brains even to imagine what the Doctor's going through."

Fortunately, Smith is used to pushing himself to the limit. Long before he thought of acting as a career, he was set to be a professional footballer. Selected for Northampton Town under 11 and 12s, Nottingham Forest under 12, 13 and 14s and Leicester City under 15s and 16s, he was on course for the premier league - he remembers playing against Jermaine Pennant who went on to play for Liverpool - when a serious back injury knocked him out of the game. "That was a difficult time for me, for sure. But you know, what doesn't kill you... And my dad was always very keen to drill into me that it's not the disappointment that counts, it's how you react to it."

Smith was switched onto acting by Jerry Hardingham, his drama teacher at Northampton School for Boys. "I can remember his first drama lesson," says Hardingham. "He possessed this raw power and presence. I knew that if that power could be harnessed, he could go places. I cast him in Twelve Angry Men while he was holiday, without auditioning him. I rang his mum and told her to tell him he's doing it; he hasn't got a choice! He did and he loved it - he got a taste for it."

In other words, Smith discovered his soccer skills were eminently transferable. "So much of what I do, instinctually, as an actor, comes, I'm sure, from my footballing background," he says. "There's supposed to be this divide between art and physical culture, but I look at someone like Zinedine Zidane and I see the pure expression of artistic grace. The courage needed to be a great sportsman applies equally to art in general and acting in particular. So much of acting is about summoning courage and confidence and, as in sport, there are lots of elements of your life that have to be put on a back burner because there's only one real focus: Not to mention the need for timing, rhythm and balance."

Rising through the ranks of the National Youth Theatre, Smith appeared in the second run of Alan Bennett's The History Boys, the play that was a springboard for a new wave of British talent including James Corden, Russell Tovey and Dominic Cooper. "They were in the first run," Smith points out, scrupulously. "I've just been working with James [for episode 11 of Doctor Who] - God, he's funny - and he's constantly going on about how he was doing History Boys in New York and I was doing it in Milton Keynes. Nothing against Milton Keynes - Smith seems genuinely concerned not to give offence - "there's a wonderful theatrical culture there, but New York it ain't."

Does he hope to follow previous Doctors David Tennant and Christopher Eccleston to Hollywood? "Why the hell not?" says Smith. "I could do with a bit of poolside. I'd take my mum - she'd love it." Certainly he's keen to pursue new projects in shooting breaks from Who, but he's not going anywhere before mastering the sonic screwdriver. "I've broken four of them," he confesses. "I like to have it about my person at all times, just twirling it around and flicking it. It's all part of the magic, isn't it?"

For Smith, for now, Doctor Who is where he wants to be. "I feel very safe, literally safe, in the Tardis," he says. "I can't quite explain it. Maybe it's because I know that once it lands, the adventure is about to begin." E. Jane Dickson

THE NEW COMPANION

Karen Gillan

Karen Gillan doesn't scare easily. But she's working on it. The wattage dims in her laser-green eyes and her smile sags a mask to a mask of startled horror. With the wavy red-gold hair and pearl-white complexion, she looks like a Botticelli nymph aghast at some mythological outrage. Botticelli in biker boots. Then, with a hoot of laughter, she's "back in the room": "That was my default scared face," she says. "But I try not to flip it into too often. Keeping the fear fresh: that's the big challenge of playing Amy."

THE NEW DOCTOR

Matt Smith

THE NEW DOCTOR

Matt Smith has a kickabout with James Corden during a break in filming.
“She’s funny, clever, gorgeous and sexy. Or Scottish, which is the quick way of saying it”

Head Writer Steven Moffat

< Gillan is the girl who grabbed the role every actress would die for: the companion to the eleventh Doctor. The 22-year-old from Inverness may be cheerily blase about working with Weeping Angels and Daleks, but when it came to auditioning for the iconic role, the fear was real. “I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone what I was up for – not even the staff on reception at BBC Television Centre. I had to say I was up for something called ‘new series’.

But when once started reading together it just seemed to work. It’s really deep, one woman to another, rather than just listening. That’s just the start. When the new series airs and Gillan falls through space and time, people are not just an actor, you’re kind of a role model – but as Amy is about to discover, not blinking might just be the worst thing you can do...

“Is River Song your wife?”

“I know who you are. There’s only one person in the universe who hates me as much as you do”