“There’ll be no flirting, that’s for sure”

The new Doctor Who reveals all
Exclusive interview with Peter Capaldi
He’s going to be trickier, fiercer, madder. In his first interview as the new Doctor Who, Peter Capaldi talks to Matt Rudd about time travelling, saving galaxies and what he’ll be getting up to with his beautiful assistant. Photographs: Paul Stuart
it’s almost translucent. He’s hugging his ribs like he’s fighting Daleks since January (which, technically, he has).

"Are you intimated?" I ask, because it won’t do either of us or the BBC’s multimillion-pound franchise any good if he needs to renege before he’s even begun. "No, I’m just happy to be here," he says, "Basically relaxed." He shakes his hand for as long as he appeared in the Christmas special (20 seconds), before floating off to the window to look out across sprawling St Mary’s cemetery. We have dragged him from his home in Crouch End, northeast London, to a studio in Kensal Green, northwest London, but, it transpires, this is where he first lived when he was a child. He drags his feet to look out of the window to see sprawling St Mary’s cemetery.

The Thick of It. He is a will-o’-the-wisp, gentle and soft-spoken, small for his 5ft 9in, an old codger like Hartnell? Will he be a more modern fiftysomething, a time lord who can’t even pour his own coffee? "It’s quite a fun relationship, but no, I did try to get the coffee," he says. "It’s not what this Doctor’s concerned with. It’s quite a fun relationship, but no, I did try to get the coffee."

"I did call and say, ‘I want no Papa-Nicole moments.’ There was a bit of tension with that at first, but I was absolutely adamant."

It’s a good cardigan, he says, defensively. "You haven’t seen the cardigan. A cardigan doesn’t sound good, but it can look very good."

"It was a good cardigan," he says, "I tried on everything anybody suggested. "I did call and say, ‘I want no Papa-Nicole moments.’ There was a bit of tension with that at first, but I was absolutely adamant.""
PETER CAPALDI

"Magician look? I think it's quite a hard look. I always wanted him to be in black. Not tweed. I wanted to strip it back. Be very stark"

Not that he was ever going to say no. 

"I thought, 'You've loved this since you were a kid, how can you not be Doctor Who?'"

It would, however, be wrong to say Capaldi was always destined to play the part. His life has been too mercurial to allow anything approaching destiny, as a quick time-travel through his CV demonstrates. He stole the show in 2011 as the obsessive-compulsive BBC executive Randall Brown in The Hour. He won awards as the profanity-spouting Malcolm Tucker in 2006. But before that he spent a full year out of work, a defaulting mortgage on the immediate horizon. His wife, Elaine Collins, a producer, kept the wolves from the unemployed actor's door. What went wrong that year?

"I don't know," he says. "In the same way I didn't know why I started to work again the next year. That was one of the key learning points in my life. I hadn't done anything different. I didn't start writing letters or putting myself out in the world. I didn't start attending parties. I didn't pull myself together. This work just started coming in and I thought, I have no control over this."

Before that and before years as a jobbing TV actor (a prime suspect in Waking the Dead here, a Songs of Praise producer in the Vicar of Dibley there), he won an Oscar in 1995 for whisky drinking, middle-class Vicar of Dibley there, he won an Oscar in 1995 for whisky drinking, middle-class Grant doing a Withnailish Kafka struggling to inhale smoke from his menthol cigarette. So was Capaldi really a fully fledged pop star with groupies and everything?

"Well, Craig was great," he says, "but he's from Cumbernauld so he thought Glasgow was a metropolis. None of us had any money and were always dirty, cold and uncomfortable, and I loved it."

He portrays Capaldi as a born performer, tall, very thin and very handsome, with thick carrotty hair, eyeliner and, on their first meeting, "talking to some excited girls who seemed to be fighting over the right to inhale smoke from his menthol cigarette."

"Are the twirls a punk thing?" I ask.

"I do," he replies, twirling. "I do."

"It's graphic shapes," he says, twirling some more. "That's why being in black is so great. You can make these spidery shapes. It's like German expressionism or Sixties caricatures. They're very graphic lines."

As he changes, a strange thing happens. His eyes are firing lasers around the studio while he's not on set and our camera is clicking for the full Doctor. On goes the waistcoat. He's not on set and our camera is clicking while he's not on set and our camera is clicking. On goes the waistcoat. His eyes are firing lasers around the studio while he's not on set and our camera is clicking.

We will never know if the Dreamboys' big break was just around the corner because Capaldi got his own break at 21. Returning to his flat one night after a gig, he found the film director Bill Forsyth charting to his drag acts in Glasgow clubs at Christmas ("It was more pantom than drag"). They even shared a venue with U2 ("I don't think we supported them, but we somehow got involved").

"There are so many films I've tried to make," he says. "They've collapsed for one reason or another, so why carry on?"

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"Do you feel like the Doctor now?" I ask.

"I don't."

"Are the twirls a punk thing?"

"It's graphic shapes," he says, twirling some more. "That's why being in black is so great. You can make these spidery shapes. It's like German expressionism or Sixties caricatures. They're very graphic lines."

"I'd have liked that, but it was just getting too tough," he says. "It was getting hard to be so unsuccessful. The great thing about being in a band is that you create your own world, your own kind of palette, but I don't know if I had the stamina to hang on in there."

The rest is history. Or the future, depending on the direction in which we're time-travelling. Whichever it is, we have reached the point in the day when Capaldi swaps T-shirt and jeans for the full Doctor. On the waistcoat, the DMs, the magician's jacker. On too goes the signet ring, specially constructed to hide his wedding band, which he doesn't ever like to take off. 'I see you don't have a wedding ring,' he says, in a tone so gently disapproving that I decide I'll buy one on the way home. "Very modern."

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