

## TELEVISION



Penelope Wilton and Christopher Eccleston in the new adventures of "Doctor Who," a British show to be seen on the Sci Fi Channel.

Sci Fi Channel

By DAVE ITZKOFF

**W**HEN the television producer Russell T. Davies was growing up in Swansea, Wales, he came to a realization about himself — one that he knew might cause others to belittle him and even shun him: he loved the British science-fiction series "Doctor Who." And he wasn't ashamed of it.

"There's very classically and traditionally a strong gay fan base for 'Doctor Who,'" said Mr. Davies, 42, in a telephone interview from his home in Manchester, England. "He is a loner and a wanderer. He doesn't represent the authority — he is a man, unlike any other, doing his own thing. I think you can see the emotional connection."

From its premiere in 1963 through its 26-year run on the BBC (spanning eight different actors in the title role) "Doctor Who," the adventures of an enigmatic time-traveler known only as the Doctor, attracted a big, intensely loyal audience of viewers young and old, male and female, gay and straight. (It also earned a cult following in America when the series was rebroadcast on PBS in the 1970's and 80's.)

But as Mr. Davies's own television career began to take off in the 90's — he was, until recently, best known in Britain as the creator of the original version of "Queer as Folk" — the "Doctor Who" franchise was stuck in a state of suspended animation: aside from a TV movie that was shown in 1996, new episodes of the program had not been produced since 1989, when its meager production values lost the battle against the megabudget space operas being made in the United States. "It was rubber monsters and plastic suits," Mr. Davies said of the show, "but it was always imaginative, even when they had five cents to make it with."

Over the years, Mr. Davies has published a "Doctor Who" novel entitled "Damaged Goods" and even devised a character for "Queer as Folk" who was himself a fan of the show. Whenever the character failed to make a romantic connection in the clubs, "he'd go home and watch an episode of 'Doctor Who,'" Mr. Davies said with a laugh. "I couldn't begin to tell you what that says about me."

So when the BBC approached Mr. Davies in late 2003 to update "Doctor Who" for the 21st

## Dr. Who 2: Sexed-Up British Intelligence

The BBC time traveler who seemed too smart for mass American audiences is back. And he's a changed man.

century, he was already teeming with ideas. "It's a genuine love of mine," he said, "and loving a program means you're not blind to its faults."

For starters, Mr. Davies abandoned its serialized format, in which stories were generally told over three to four 30-minute episodes, in favor of stand-alone episodes of 45 minutes each. (When the new "Doctor Who" has its American debut on Sci Fi on March 17, each episode will run one hour with commercials.) He also assembled himself a dream team of writers known for creating some of Britain's most influential television series — if not necessarily for their science-fiction credentials — and charged them with updating the show's titular hero for a post-"Matrix," post-"Buffy" generation.

"It was very important to Russell that the Doctor not be posh," said Mark Gatiss, a co-star and co-creator of the quirky ensemble television comedy "The League of Gentlemen," who was recruited onto Mr. Davies's writing staff. "It's all about the Doctor being a kind of burning, firework personality that is incredibly attractive, but also slightly dangerous to be around."

To that end, Mr. Davies selected the rugged actor Christopher Eccleston, of the films "Shallow Grave" and "28 Days Later," to be the ninth actor to portray the Doctor, injecting the show with a much-needed shot of credibility. "When people would talk about who was going to be the next Doctor," Mr. Davies recalled, "they would mention celebrity chefs and magicians. And you'd read this stuff in the papers and think, 'How devalued has this property become?'" He then gave the Doctor a young, unmistakably female sidekick, played by the pop singer Billie

Piper. "It was a bit like casting Britney Spears," Mr. Davies said, "and then we auditioned her and discovered she was brilliant."

In the days leading up to the premiere of the new "Doctor Who" in March 2005, the British tabloid press did its best to insinuate that Mr. Davies — who is openly gay, and proud that his "Queer as Folk" series included, in his words, "more sex than any other program ever" — might somehow be an unfit candidate to reestablish a beloved cultural icon.

The faithful, however, declined to take the bait. "The vast amount of fans out there were just elated that the show was coming back," said Shaun Lyon, editor of the "Doctor Who" fan Web site Outpost Gallifrey ([www.gallifreyone.com](http://www.gallifreyone.com)). "Pointing out that Russell's gay, let's be honest, you can no longer get a story out of that. Gay is officially boring now."

The first episode of Mr. Davies's "Doctor Who," teeming with rapid edits, dark humor, and, for the first time, computer-generated special effects, drew over 10 million viewers, or about 44 percent of the potential viewing audience, something that would translate into a Super Bowl-size audience for an American broadcast.

But controversy eventually caught up with the series: four days after the premiere, the BBC published a news release in which Mr. Eccleston revealed that he would not be returning for a second season — an awkward situation made more so when he protested that the BBC had falsely attributed quotes to him and had broken an agreement to withhold the announcement until after the show's first season had ended.

"I'm sure it could have been handled better," Mr. Davies said. (Mr. Eccleston declined to comment for this story.)

Some fans were also slightly mortified by an episode involving clandestine aliens whose otherworldly identities are given away by their flatulence. Yet none complained about a scene from that same show in which the British prime minister (played by a Tony Blair look-alike) is found dead in a closet, or a sequence in the following week's broadcast in which 10 Downing Street is blown up by a missile.

And few if any eyebrows were raised when later episodes of "Doctor Who" introduced a character named Jack Harkness, a starship captain from the 51st century whose roguish banter implies that he is not merely bisexual, but omnisexual. "It felt right that the James Bond of the future would bed anyone," said Steven Moffat, the creator of the BBC sitcom "Coupling" and the writer of the Captain Jack storyline. "He's far too busy saving the universe to worry about which brand of genitals is best." In fact, Captain Jack proved so popular that the character was granted his own spinoff series, "Torchwood," now in preproduction.

Though Mr. Davies's first season of "Doctor Who" has more sexuality, both submerged and overt, than the several hundred episodes that preceded it, the show's producers argue that it is Mr. Davies's creativity, and not his sexual identity, that has made their show a hit.

"You come across the occasional nutter who will talk about Russell's gay agenda — I imagine he keeps it in a pink folder in a special leopardskin safe — but this is possibly the most heterosexual Doctor we've ever had," Mr. Moffat said. "Clearly, Russell's gay agenda is to turn everyone straight."

As he prepares for the reinvented "Doctor Who" to begin its second season on the BBC this spring, Mr. Davies said sexuality would always have a place in his science fiction, so long as it is balanced with all the other elements that constitute human experience. "People expect me to do that visceral stuff," he said, "but I don't think it's that clever to be violent and naked onscreen all the time. There's better, more intelligent and more humane stories to tell. If you want to just get silly with it, you might as well go and see a flasher movie."