Convention's theme is out of this world

By CHRISTOPHER ROSE
Staff writer

They are the Companions of Dr. Who, 1,200 strong, and they have turned the International Hotel into their own private galaxy for the weekend.

It's a cosmic Mardi Gras ball, the 1985 North American Time Festival, informally known as the Dr. Who convention.

It's as unconventional as a convention gets, with costumed conventioners swapping tales of the travels through time by their off-beat oracle, Dr. Who.

For those haven't seen the British science fiction series, "Dr. Who" is the story of an intergalactic traveler and his adventures through time and space.

"I guess you could call him a hero," Poney Otto said. "But I've always thought of him as a friend."

Otto, 23, is the Chancellor of the Companions of Dr. Who in Corpus Christi, Texas. She wore a maroon velvet cape, much like those the worn by the Time Lords, the rulers of Dr. Who's birthplace, Gallifrey.

Otto admitted some folks think she's a bit odd, especially her brother.

"He thinks time is in a straight line and you cannot circle back or go forward," she said. "But I believe time goes in circles and if you know where the circles intersect, you can cross over to another time."

The wisdom of Dr. Who, "It's a fantasy," she said. "And it's a whole lot of fun."

The 22-year-old Who series has featured six actors in the lead, each bringing an individuality to the role. Hundreds of curious creatures have passed through Who's life and endeared

STAFF PHOTO BY JIM SIGMON

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Dr. Who fan Poney Otto
Who

From Page 1

themselves to his fans, who call themselves “Whoies.”

The program itself is a low-budget mesh of “Flash Gordon,” “Star Trek” and Jerry Lewis in “The Absent-Minded Professor.” According to the British Broadcasting Corp., Dr. Who was conceived as an adolescent fantasy about a man who left Gallifrey in a time machine he never really learned how to operate. Each episode brings him to new lands, past and present, where he invariably discovers evil and conquers it.

The show’s formula has not changed since the BBC premiered it in 1963, except for one thing — non-adolescents embraced it as their own and propelled it to cult status.

They are a festive sight, these Whoies, bedecked in robes and gowns, the standard garb for the singular Dr. Who and his quirky band of time travelers.

Whoies say things like “Let’s redirect the polarity in the neutron flow” when they want to stop an elevator and “Make the circuit with me” to indicate amorous intentions.

“Dr. Who is for geeks who like to sit at home and watch public television,” Clinton Raacke said. “We’re geeks.”

Raacke, 17, is vice president of Tanti Tardis Travelers in Hammond, a Dr. Who fan club.

He wore a hand-knit 20-foot multicolored scarf and a floppy hat, the costume of the fourth Dr. Who, Tom Baker, the one most recognizable to American audiences. While Raacke spoke, a horde of Whoies bumped him as they poured from a 16th-floor ballroom where 29 hours of Who flicks will show during the weekend.

“A lot of us are smarter than most people,” Raacke said. “Not me. I’m an F student. But it takes

an advanced knowledge to understand Dr. Who. It took me a year to understand.”

He gestured to a band of merry men and women around him, playing recorders and waving celery sticks, two props used by former Dr. Whos.

“Look at us,” Heather Williamson said. “We’re not normal. We’re used to being picked on.”

Williamson, 21, is a poet for the Intergalactic Archivist, a Cleveland science fiction magazine. She is on her first vacation in three years.

“And I’m going to do it right, do it in style,” she said. “It’s a relief to know I’m not alone. There are hundreds of people here to talk about Dr. Who and to imagine the future.”

On Thursday night, 125 of 133 rented rooms at the International became “leisure hives” — Whoiespeak for places to relax. A hundred more rooms were reserved for revelers who arrived Friday, said Jack Goldstein, convention services manager at the hotel.

As for the eight non-convention rooms, “I guess they’re wondering if they’ve been time warped,” Goldstein said. “They’re probably calling psychiatrists.”

Goldstein and his staff watched Friday afternoon with wide eyes and open mouths from their glass office on the fringe of the convention center on the second floor.

“This is a good group,” he said. “They’re just a bit on the non-conformist side, that’s all. You see, that’s how Dr. Who was in school at Gallifrey many years ago. He was always a non-conformist, a class clown.”

Fandom. It catches on.

The convention runs from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday, featuring movies, skits, panel discussions, merchandise, a reading room and a lot of fun and fashion. Admission is $20 Saturday, $15 Sunday. Children 12 and under are admitted free with adults.