

**O**n a cold and rainy winter night in Vancouver, an accident has snarled traffic on a busy thoroughfare. Suddenly, an attractive woman and a handsome, long-haired man wearing a velvet Victorian jacket burst from the back of a stalled ambulance and sprint past the line of waiting cars, only to be intercepted by a motorcycle cop. As the man in the period clothing thrusts a hand into his pocket, the officer goes for his gun.

"No, stop!" the woman pleads with the cop. "He's, he's...British." Smiling, the gentleman proffers a small brown bag filled with candy. "Jelly baby, officer?" he politely asks the bewildered policeman.

At this point, you may well be asking yourself, "What is going on here?" Actually, the operative word is *who*—*Doctor Who*. Seven years after being cast into oblivion by executives at the BBC, the time-traveler with the sweet tooth—for decades one of Britain's most popular television exports—is in front of the cameras again, this time for a Fox TV-movie.

British actor Paul McGann ("Withnail & I") stars as the Doctor, an eccentric explorer from the planet Gallifrey. The movie pits him against an old nemesis, the Master, played here by Eric Roberts ("It's My Party"). Daphne Ashbrook costars as a heart surgeon who lends support to the Doctor in his struggle to save the universe from the Master's villainy.

♦ Doctor Who will air Tuesday, May 14, at 8 P.M./ET on Fox.

Set in a gang-plagued San Francisco on New Year's Eve, 1999, the sci-fi adventure is budgeted at about \$5 million, putting it among the priciest Fox TV productions to date.

For the uninitiated, *Doctor Who* is the saga of a 950-year-old alien who speeds through time and the cosmos in a vehicle called a TARDIS (an acronym for Time And Relative Dimensions In Space)—which is stuck in the shape of a battered blue English police call box. On the outside, this booth is roughly the size of a Porta Potti, but the interior is magically spacious. The Doctor, who possesses two hearts and a cool 60-degree body temperature, must battle an array of cheesy monsters and dastardly villains. In the event of serious injury, he can regenerate his body, adopting an altered appearance. That premise not only makes recasting easy (McGann is the eighth actor to take a turn in the role), but is part of the tale's droll charm.

"He's a magical character who appeals to the child in all of us," says the movie's executive producer Philip Segal. "He's charming, a little dangerous, full of fun and humor, and willing to take risks—a classic hero." Adds Sylvester McCoy, who played the character for the final three years of the series' astonishingly long run, and who returns in the movie to pass the baton to McGann, "He's a very human alien. He gives off a sense of hope. He's

*Assuming the role of the mercurial Doctor, Paul McGann emerges from his time machine.*

# The New Who

*A venerable sci-fi cult favorite, Doctor Who is vividly reborn on network TV*

BY MARK NOLLINGER

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL RICHARD FOR TV GUIDE; GROUNDED: LISA KUCHANOW/FOX





McGann gets temporal with Yee Jee Tso and Daphne Ashbrook.

got a big heart—two hearts, actually."

For legions of loyal Whovians, as fans are known, the revival was long overdue. They had gotten rather used to having the guy from Gallifrey in their lives. The original show, after all, ran on the BBC from 1963 to 1989, making it easily the longest-running sci-fi series in history. (The program had its U.S. debut in the '70s, and has since been seen on PBS and cable channels.) All told, the Doctor's adventures have been broadcast in more than 80 countries, attracting an estimated worldwide audience of more than 110 million viewers during the show's peak in the late 1970s and early '80s. Die-hard fans attend *Doctor Who* conventions (see next page), hang out on-line at *Doctor Who* Internet sites, and religiously scoop up *Doctor Who* merchandise ranging from comic books to videos to wallpaper to pinball machines. "It has more fans than *Star Trek*," Segal claims. "It's a complete underground cult."

Segal knows a thing or two about this sci-fi phenomenon—he's seen every one of the almost 700 episodes filmed during *Doctor Who*'s 26-year run. "I was a little boy whose grandfather sat him on his knee one night in 1963 to watch the pilot episode of *Doctor Who*," recalls the British-born producer. "I've been a fan ever since."

So how do you go about updating a story that is such a cherished part of so many people's lives? Very carefully, Segal says. "If you try to change it, then you

damage the fabric of what it is," he explains. "We've really held on to the mythology of the character, but we've given him a bigger world to play in." An example: the elegant new interior of the TARDIS. Determined to be as true to the old show as possible, Segal and his colleagues constructed original blueprints obtained from the BBC, then spent a big piece of the film's budget creating an interior that resembles a lavish Victorian gentleman's club.

One crucial decision the producers faced was choosing which of the show's distinctively goofy evil-doers to include in the new movie. Despite their amateurish construction—the original *Doctor Who* was a stupendously low-budget affair—the Daleks, Yetis, Cybermen, and other garish fiends are huge fan favorites. In the end, the filmmakers elected to revive the Master, a rival Time Lord who has long given the Doctor fits. "What made the most sense to me was to pit him against as human an adversary as we possibly could," Segal explains, "so that an American audience who has never heard of *Doctor Who* could at least have something to grab onto."

Roberts, who remembers watching *Doctor Who* on the telly when he was attending the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London in the '70s, is cryptic when asked to describe his character. "He's got magic eyes—let's put it that way," says the actor.

The movie introduces a new element into the *Doctor Who* myth: an air of romance. While the seasoned time-traveler often enjoyed the companionship of attractive females in the old series, the relationships were always decidedly chaste. Not this time. "It's very '90s," says Ashbrook of her character's chemistry with

the Doctor. "We get romantic. We don't, like, do it or anything. But we kiss."

Of course, the biggest challenge in updating the series was finding the right actor for the lead. McCoy, the outgoing Doctor, endorses his successor whole-

heartedly. "I think he's going to bring a lot of mystery to the role," says McCoy. "He has a wonderful sense of angst about him, which will be quite good for it."

McGann himself didn't think he was flamboyant enough for the part when he was first approached. "There was a style to the Doctor that, quite honestly, I didn't think I could live up to," the actor says, taking a break on the set. "Some of the skills were almost vaudevillian. It was sort of that indoor scarf-wearing, eccentric kind of thing. It wasn't me."

Eventually McGann was won over. But he wasn't prepared for the public response his signing would generate, especially in Britain, where *Doctor Who* is much more than a TV program—it's a bona fide cultural institution. "It was on the evening news and in all the lead columns of the newspapers," he says with amazement. "It felt like I just got the U.S. ambassadorship or something. It's only been the last few days that I've been thinking, 'Whoa, I'm going to have to live up to this.'"

He may have time to get used to the attention. The movie also serves as a pilot, and McGann has already signed a long-term contract to star in a prospective *Doctor Who* series that would air both here and in Britain. "It's a classic franchise," Segal says. "If we get a strong [rating], the future bodes very well for the good Doctor." ■

Mark Nollinger is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.

## The Doctor Is In

Doctor Who has spawned an alternate universe of theme events and collectibles



GREG LAVY FOR TV GUIDE

Serious Whovians pore over memorabilia in Los Angeles.

hobby, not something we spend our lives doing."

Still, some fans can go a little overboard with their enthusiasm. McCoy says that on a *Who*-themed Caribbean cruise last year—yes, there really are such things—one woman got so enthused that she threatened to throw herself off the boat. "She didn't think life would be worth living after the cruise," McCoy recalls. "Strange. Dangerous. But she's alive and well and living a happy life now."

—M.N.