



All Dr. Who Photos: Copyright 1987, 1988 BBC-TV

## Companion in Punk Leather

Portraying a cross between Mrs. Peel and a Hell's Angel, Sophie Aldred promises not to be a screamer.

By JUANITA ELEFANTE-GORDON

**D**octor Who has been on the air now for 25 years, a long time for a TV series to sustain freshness and zing—to cast and audience. But one only has to check the ratings, count the fan clubs and talk to Sophie Aldred to learn that the British SF series has so far succeeded.

Just one year older than the long-running series itself, Sophie Aldred's elation with landing the much-coveted part of the Doctor's companion is matched only by her enthusiasm in playing it.

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Nearly a year later, Aldred still looks back on the audition with wide-eyed wonder. "From my point-of-view, I was still a struggling fringe and children's theater actress when my agent got me an interview. I really haven't been involved in that kind of high profile type audition before either, so it's all completely new to me. I understand now that many people did go up for the part of Ace. For me, it was slightly different in that I didn't actually go up for that part, but for the character of Ray in another story, 'Delta and the Bannerman,' because I could ride a motorbike and they wanted someone who could ride a motorbike. Getting the part of the assistant was a shock in itself!

"It's quite strange for me having gone

through such... you know, very small-time stuff—traveling around schools in a van, putting my set up and doing two shows a day and really working very, very hard. To do something where I will get recognition for all the work I do will be quite strange. At the moment over here, I'm known more for the children's series *Corners* whereas now I suppose *Doctor Who* will take over, and I'll be known for *Who*."

Now that the young actress has the role, she intends to follow her own checklist of "companion do's and don'ts." "Well, I don't want to scream although you might hear me screech from time to time—so that's the 'don't'! Because Ace is one of those kids who wants everybody to believe that she's so tough, tougher than she really might be. She's quite bright and aggressive and doesn't take no for an answer. The main 'do' is to support the Doctor," Aldred explains.

"A friend of mine told her grandparents, [who are in their 80s] that I had gotten the part of the Doctor's assistant and they said, 'Ah yes, that's rather like being Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, isn't it?' It's really quite interesting, that kind of supporting role that the assistant has; and I fully intend to carry on the tradition and support the Doctor. She's great and terrific fun to play. I find it very interesting being 26 and playing a character nearly 10 years younger than me. If I can do that convincingly, I hope I'll have achieved something."

It is her *lack* of television experience that seems to allow Aldred to bring before the *Doctor Who* cameras a style which is fresh, natural and unaffected. "Well, 'Dragonfire,' which I did last season was literally my very first time in a television studio—and I even had to ask where Television Centre was in front of Bonnie Langford," Aldred admits sheepishly. "It's really good news that I was cast in *Doctor Who* because it shows some real courage on behalf of [producer] John Nathan-Turner and director Chris Clough. They didn't know how I was going to perform in front of the cameras, yet they trust me enough to give me this responsibility. That's good for all my friends, who are all actors and actresses. They're pleased that I got this part because it means that there's still hope for them!"

Wowed by her first television job, Aldred declares, "I certainly found it, as an actress, quite rewarding. It was pretty nery but everyone was really friendly. I'm a much more technical actress than say a method actress. I don't go out and research. What I really like about television is the fact that you must draw everything together for one short take and try to get it as right as possible and then it's gone, finished. Whereas with theater, I tend to find the repetition starts to get me down. After the 100th time, I ask myself, 'Why am I doing this!' I suspect I have a very low boredom threshold or something like that! But I certainly thoroughly enjoy doing television. I enjoy learning and happen to learn very quickly so I find it fascinating. Also, it's interesting to



Although awed by her instant popularity, Aldred manages to keep her feet firmly on the ground, considering herself just an ordinary person.

see what other people are doing, like the cameraman and director. I like going up to the gallery to see what's going on and try to work out how the scene's being put together.

"Although television pays better, theater still holds that prestige—West End theater in particular. My agent watches me in *Doctor Who* and says: 'Oh, never mind dear, something will come up soon. Next, what you should do is nice Rep Theater and get some experience.' There's a lot of snobbery about theater favored over jobs in TV."

Watching herself on television is a "very weird" experience. "I don't really look at it as me," she says. "It sounds very odd but I see 'this person' and I don't relate to it as myself, though I do tend to criticize myself as 'another' actress like—'Good Lord, she could have done that better!'"

"I had seen myself on *Corners* quite a few times before 'Dragonfire' came on the air. When I actually saw this episode of *Doctor Who*, I was so nervous. In a way, there's much more to lose and really, I had forgotten what I had done because it was months between filming and actually seeing it on TV. I was squirming with embarrassment. I wasn't even able to look at myself! But now, I don't find it so much the problem."

Unequivocally, Sophie Aldred will be known for having played Ace in *Doctor Who*. However, she has some definite ideas of how she would like to be remembered in *Who* history. "I would like it to be said that I was a strong character. I'm quite a feminist in my own way—not with a capital 'F'—and I think it's marvelous to play a character who can run around and help the Doctor by being his protector and smash up a Dalek rather than scream and run away. When I told my friends that I got this part, they thought it was funny and almost a cliché. They said, 'Oh, you're going to scream, run around corridors and run away from Daleks!' See what I mean? Also, I hope that my relationship with the Doctor will come across well. Sylvester McCoy and I get along very well in real life—I hope some of that translates to the screen."

The idea of Ace working in concert with the Doctor as more of an "equal" sounds a bit like "*The Avengers* in space." Laughing, Aldred remarks, "We joked about this because I have to do what [director] Andrew Morgan calls my 'butch acting' and we did talk about *The Avengers*—I suppose slightly rather less the sex symbol but certainly that kind of relationship. I would like to be as strong as the Doctor in strength, but not quite so intelligent and all-knowing."

Very often, being a "too strong" companion can have its drawbacks, resulting in the character's premature departure. But Aldred explains why Ace might just work. "It's the character's fallibility," Aldred observes, "she's young which is good. If you had an older assistant who was running



around and jumping over land mines, it would be a bit too overpowering but because Ace is about 16 or 17, it's acceptable. And the writers seem keen on this."

While on the topic of departure, Aldred confides, "Of course, something else worries me a bit. I met [previous companion] Nicola Bryant and she told me the problems that she has had in getting work. I'll just have to cross my fingers—but yes, it is a worry! It's a very, very good thing that I have the children's series in between *Doctor Who* seasons. I hope to carry on with that next year. Doing other things I think is very important. It's very difficult with any high profile show. Really, my agent will let me know when I've had enough."

The instant fame, international press and touring engagements which accompany being a companion are an unexpected bonus. "At the first convention that I went to [in London], when I was introduced, a rush of photographers came down and people wanted to speak to me. It made me feel as though I was Madonna, and I just thought, 'But this isn't me!'"

With an almost childlike fascination, the young actress says, "It was bewildering why these people wanted to have my name on a piece of paper and speak to me and ask me questions about my life. I'm lucky that my friends keep my feet firmly on the ground—they think it's hilarious that I got this part and they would give me hell if I start taking myself too seriously."



Photos: Courtesy Juvenile Elefante-Gordon

Unlike previous companions, Ace is a strong character "who can run around and help the Doctor by being his protector and smash up a Dalek rather than scream and run away," asserts Sophie Aldred.

"There's a strange gap between what *Doctor Who* fans think of me—which is like a star—and what I actually think of myself—as just an ordinary person who managed to land this incredible job," Sophie Aldred says, "and I just try to do my job the best I can, like we all try." ☆