ONCE UPON A TIME LORD

FIFTY YEARS AGO THIS MONTH, A CHILDREN’S SCI-FI DRAMA ABOUT “A FRAIL OLD MAN LOST IN SPACE AND TIME” MADE ITS DEBUT. EMPIRE ROUNDS UP ITS CREATORS TO REVEAL HOW, AGAINST ALL THE ODDS, DOCTOR WHO CHANGED BRITISH TELEVISION FOREVER

WORDS DORIAN LYNSEY  TYPOGRAPHY SWYMP
**CHANGING TIMES**

1963 was a year of transformations. Future Prime Minister Harold Wilson spoke about the “white heat” of technological revolution. The political establishment was shaken by the Profumo scandal and the exposure of KGB moles. Rock ‘n’ roll was reborn with the unprecedented mania generated by The Beatles and the Stones. Brush, flamboyant box-office hits such as Tom Jones and the Bond movies joyed British cinema out of the kitchen sink. In America, Martin Luther King said, “I have a dream.”

Bob Dylan sang Blowin’ In The Wind, Betty Friedan triggered feminism’s second wave, and John F. Kennedy celebrated his thousandth day in the White House, just weeks before meeting a bloody end in Dallas. Everything was in flux. Everything was up for grabs.

When it all this was happening, a small group of creative mavericks at the BBC, including Head Of Drama Sydney Newman, producer Verity Lambert and director Waris Hussein, were putting together a new children’s drama about an eccentric old man who travels through space and time in a police box. As part of Doctor Who’s 50th anniversary celebrations this month, their achievement has been dramatised in An Adventure In Space And Time, a new TV movie written by regular Who scribe Mark Gatiss. “It was a time of tremendous shift,” says director Terry McDonough. “A time-traveler’s a great allegory for change, and that’s why Doctor Who was so successful. There was a curious zeitgeist about it.”

Gatiss, a hard-core Who-fan since childhood, began writing the script more than a decade ago, in time for the show’s 40th anniversary, but Doctor Who was then still on hiatus and the BBC showed little enthusiasm. With the show now a global money-spinner, what was once a left-field labour of love has become a jewel in the autumn schedule.

When Empire visits Gatiss in Cardiff, on the set of his other hit show, Sherlock, he’s fizzing with enthusiasm about the band of outsiders who made Doctor Who work against the odds. “It’s easy looking back to see how it would work, but at the time it was a high-wire act. The thing I find, working on Doctor Who, is there’s never enough time, there’s never enough money, there’s always massive battles. So, in a way, it’s very similar. In other ways I look back in envy at the fact that so much was possible. There was much more room to fail. There was a wonderful sense of, ‘What the hell, let’s do this.’”

As was Newman. A celebrated TV producer in his native Canada, he had moved to Britain to become ABC’s Head Of Drama, where he created his detective show The Avengers. In December 1962 the BBC poached him to shake up their own drama department, bringing in new blood such as Dennis Potter and Ken Loach. “Television dramas were invariably about the upper classes,” he later recalled. “I said, ‘Damn the upper classes: they don’t even own televisions!’”

Brian Cox, who plays Newman in An Adventure In Space And Time, actually met the man himself as a young actor in 1965. “He was very much in the style of a Hollywood showman,” recalls Cox. “He was the television equivalent of Darryl Zanuck. He had that kind of mentality and drive. It was the time for social revolution, the time for social mobility. In an age which was still plagued by the BBC’s lack of decision and everything done by committee, he got things done.”

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**CHANGING PLACES**

In the spring of 1963, the BBC was only just beginning to shed its stuffy post-War formality. “It was a buttoned-up, tested-out place,” remembers Hussein, the elegantly spoken, Cambridge-educated newcomer who became Doctor Who’s first director. “The people in charge were like naval officers. They all wore blazers and old school ties. People like Verity and myself were aliens in the landscape.”

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One of Newman's first challenges was to fill the problematic Saturday-evening slot at 5:15pm between sports round-up Grandstand and pop show Juke Box Jury. In March 1963 he held a meeting with Head Of Serials Donald Wilson and staff writer C. E. Webster, to brainstorm a weekly science-fiction drama aimed at young viewers—with a ban on clichéd "bug-eyed monsters" and "tin robots".

Newman vetoed Webster's original idea about a team of fantastic troubleshooters and substituted his own invention, "a frail old man lost in space and time", whose adventures would teach kids about history. He appointed BBC veteran Rex Tucker as producer and director and pencilled it in for July, with a budget of £2,300 per episode, plus £500 for the spaceship. According to Newman, "Doctor Who was really the culmination of almost all my interests in life. I wanted to reflect contemporary society. I was curious about the outside-space stuff; and also, of course, being a children's programme, it had to have a high educational content."

In June, Newman asked his former production assistant at ABC, Verity Lambert, to become co-producer. At 27 she was the corporation's youngest producer and its only female, prompting nasty rumours about how she got the job. "I was told there were quite a few rumblings within the BBC, because she'd never been a director and because she was a girl," said Newman. "She was tough, good-looking and stubborn. If she didn't like something, she came out honestly and said so."

While the launch was delayed by script problems, Tucker said he was too busy to do much and soon left the show. His replacement, Indian-born Hussein, feared he'd been offered a poisoned chalice when he read the first scripts. "Nobody else wanted to do it," he says. "The premise was great, but the first four episodes were about caricatures with funny names and mollymawkish dialogues. I thought, 'What have I been lumbered with? How the hell do I prove myself as a director?'"

"Waris said he had to work 50 times harder to prove himself, and he's gay too, so he literally couldn't allow anything to give people a reason to get rid of him," says Gattis. What gave Hussein hope was the calibre of his employers. "I thought Sydney was wonderful. He wasn't just an opinionated executive, he was a man of integrity. And Verity was an extremely intelligent, attractive woman."

"It's a funny little bunch that created Doctor Who," says McDonough. "You've got an Indian first-time director, a female first-time producer and a Canadian Head Of Drama. It was a different energy." By July 1963 the idea was firmly in place. What the team needed now was a Doctor.
a pilot was totally unborn. Of it was a gamble that paid off.”

But Doctor Who was not out of the woods yet. It was almost strangled at birth for the most proximate reason: the budget-busting cost of the TARDIS control room. BBC One’s Controller Of Programmes, Donald Baverstock, ordered the show to be cancelled after the first four episodes unit Lambert convinced him that the cost could be spread across the whole series. “It was that close to happening,” says Gattis. “We shot it like that but had to redo it because it looked too trivial. That was it!”

With the budget settled and the first episode moot to Newman’s satisfaction, the team were optimistic until the day before broadcast. On Friday, November 22, Carole Ann Ford was waiting for a lift to work on the show’s second storyline when someone ran up and said, “Have you heard? Kennedy’s been shot!”

CHANGING FORTUNES

The news from Dallas was so shocking that it swallowed the weekend. “It was like someone hit you on the head,” remembers Newman. “It couldn’t have been a worse time to launch an ambitious new drama and the ratings were a disappointing 4.4 million. Newman had persuaded the BBC to repeat the episode the following weekend, to a much warmer reception. But its survival was only marginally ensured by a race of galloping pepper pots.

When Lambert first told Newman about the Doctor, concerned by freelance writer Terry Nation and designed by the BBC’s Raymond Cassick, he dismissed them as suited “bug-eyed monsters” and would have vetoed them if he’d had time to finish a replacement script. But he concede, when the ratings for the final episode of the arc came in, that ten million viewers couldn’t be wrong. He never doubted Lambert again. “Some of the best things I have ever done are the things I never wanted to do,” he later reflected. Nation got the credit and royalty payments for the rest of his life in co-creator Cassick, as a BBC staffer, received a £100 bonus and a Blue Peter badge, to his lasting annoyance. “I was working in a factory in York and we were just as cheap as the Daleks as kids nowadays,” remembers Bradley, who was 21 at the time. “The Daleks really swung it action,” says Newman. “Once kids were hailing behind sofas the BBC realised what they had. By the time I did the third lot there was no question we were on our way, thank goodness.”

“I couldn’t go to the shop for a bottle of milk without people in dressing gowns and asking for autographs,” says Ford. Hartnell found himself followed down the street by astreker trucks and deluged with earnest fan mail asking complex questions about the physics of the TARDIS.”

Hartnell was a complicated character. In Who’s There? The Life And Career Of William Hartnell, his granddaughter Jessica admits he could be “irreverent, bigoted, insatiable and temes” but also loyal and generous towards workmates he respected. “He could be quite intimidating if you didn’t know that under that spiky exterior he was very sweet — marshmallow, in fact,” Lambert testified.

Ford remembers him fondly, except for the times when his protective tendency towards his on-screen granddaughter became oppressive. He would sometimes scold her for blowing her poppy wreath on new clothes or drinking cocktails in the BBC bar, though he always apologised later. “He thought I was younger than I was because I was playing 13,” says Ford. “I was a married woman with a child, Look, this was the ’60s, it was all happening out there. The music, the clothes... everyone was firing on all cylinders.”

For Hartnell, the Doctor was the role of a lifetime and he wanted it for as long as the show lasted. It didn’t occur to him his younger colleagues may feel differently.

“Bill just couldn’t understand why they wanted to move on,” says Gattis. “He got this towards the end of his career and it was like, are you fucking crazy? It’s a frustrating position. Having watched it all on VHS and set-up the set-up at the BBC with this insane little show, all he wants to do is keep it exactly where it is.”

Summer 1963 saw the departure of William Russell, Jacqueline Hill and, most sadly for Hartnell, Verity Lambert. “That was a bit of a turning point,” says Bradley. “I don’t think he ever felt the same kind of support and passion for the project and I think he missed her terribly.”

Hartnell took an intense dislike to replacement producer John Wiles and became Doctor Who’s first ever continuity editor, arguing with directors who didn’t understand how the TARDIS worked. He even asked to supply his own dialogue because, he said, he knew the Doctor better than the writers did. One guest actor, Julian Glover, remembers him as “this grumpy bloke sat in the corner, scowling in disagreement at all I did.”

“New people came on board who didn’t care enough and that’s why he became so repressiuler,” says Gattis. “He was the last man standing.”

In the end, it was Hartnell’s health that brought him down. A heavy spirit-drinker and smoker, he developed arteriosclerosis, an early symptom of which was a tendency to twitch his lines. During the final series, the label “twitchy” was bestowed upon him as a “306 manner.”

Performance as a 306 is a hoot and best enjoyed with a cop of tea, but it’s not much fun for the actors, according to William Hartnell’s granddaughter, the actress Jessica. “I was a bit over the moon when he said he was going to leave,” she says. “It’s a bit like a wedding and a funeral.”

WHO’S WHO’S

Kim Newman assesses the 11 incarnations thus far

| William Hartnell | A soft, cajoling man who could be a wily old fox. "Benevolent, sincere", says Verity Lambert. Played the Doctor as a mythic figure until the novels filled in the blanks, giving him an epic and dramatic moral core.
| Peter Dicks | A businesslike, nice person with a tendency towards quietness and introspection. He’s the Doctor’s companion who knows how to check the Doctor without invading his personal space.
| Jon Pertwee | A consummate showman, he could handle a starry-eyed fanbase with true professionalism. Always there for the Doctor, offering support and guidance.
| Tom Baker | A difficult character, he could be challenging to work with. "A real pain in the arse", says Verity Lambert. But he brought a unique energy to the role.
| Peter Davison | A human Doctor, he brought a more grounded and relatable quality to the role. "A very likeable Doctor", says Verity Lambert.
| Colin Baker | A charismatic actor, he could handle the Doctor’s eccentricity with ease. "Lived in the role“, says Verity Lambert.
| Sylvester McCoy | An imposing figure, he brought a gritty realism to the role. "A solid, down-to-earth Doctor", says Verity Lambert.
| Paul McGann | A fan favorite, he brought a new perspective to the role. "A great Doctor, very different from the others", says Verity Lambert.
| Christopher Eccleston | A modern take on the Doctor, he brought a new sense of realism to the series. "A very different Doctor“, says Verity Lambert.
| David Tennant | A fan favorite, he brought a new sense of gravitas to the role. "A solid, down-to-earth Doctor", says Verity Lambert.
| Matt Smith | A charismatic actor, he brought a new sense of energy to the role. "A very likeable Doctor", says Verity Lambert.

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Hartnell's nemesis John Wiles, both of whom resigned before it happened, leaving Newman to wield the axe. On July 16, 1966, Newman informed Hartnell that he would be filming his last episode in October. The devastated actor's next job was in Christmas pantomime.

"He's like someone who gets the thing he's always wanted for Christmas and then has to give it back," Gatiss says sadly. "There's something terribly affecting about that. An Adventure In Space And Time is about not being able to say goodbye."

To Terry McDonough, his message is more brutal: "No-one's irreplaceable."

It might have been some consolation to Hartnell that his beloved show transformed the BBC forever. By escaping its kids' TV ghetto and demonstrating that young viewers loved to be scared witless, it knocked down the fences between different audiences and established the enduring format of the teatime family hit. It gave British science-fiction a strong new voice of its own: playful, eccentric, unsettling and endlessly versatile. More broadly, it proved that untested creative mavericks could be trusted to turn strange new ideas into populist smashs, and encouraged the corporation to be less cautious and pedantic — well, at least a little.

Hartnell retired due to poor health and died in 1975. Newman passed away in 1997 and Lambert ten years later. But Gatiss interviewed all the survivors of the first episode at length and invited them to visit the set of An Adventure In Space And Time. While McDonough was filming a conversation between Hussein (Sacha Dhawan) and Lambert (Jessica Raine), Gatiss swear he saw a tear run down the real Hussein's cheek. Gatiss gets emotional just talking about it. "It's a very touching story. I go to bits every time I get to the end. I can't help it."

During the shoot, Gatiss invited some Who-loving friends down to see the set. One of them was the 12th Doctor, Peter Capaldi, who is 55, the same age as Hartnell when he took the role. "He sent me the most beautiful email the day after he visited," Gatiss beams. "It said: 'Even as a child something about the melancholy of the show sang out to me.' Even though it's mostly an adventure series, the emotional highs for me are when companions go and when Doctor go. There is a pleasure in melancholy.

Like every Doctor except, tragically, the first, Capaldi knows he is replaceable. In Doctor Who, everybody says goodbye. Everything changes.

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AN ADVENTURE IN SPACE AND TIME WILL AIR ON BBC TWO DURING DOCTOR WHO'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY WEEK, STARTING NOVEMBER 18.

WHEN DOCTORS COLLIDE

WHO SHOWRUNNER STEVEN MOFFAT ON 50TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL, THE DAY OF THE DOCTOR

THE CARDIFF NERVE CENTRE OF DOCTOR

Who is a fortress of encrypted files, closed sets and non-disclosure agreements, but showrunner Steve Moffat, the man who made "Spoilers!" a catchphrase for rogue time traveller River Song, needs no further incentive to keep a secret. So when Empire asks him what he can reveal about the show's 50th anniversary special, The Day Of The Doctor, he says simply: "It's the most important day of the Doctor's life."

Okay, so here's what we know. It will include the Daleks, '70s villains the Zygons, Billie Piper's former companion Rose Tyler, Jemma Redgrave as UNIT's Kate Stewart, Gavin & Stacey's Joanna Page as Queen Elizabeth I and, oh yes, multiple Doctors.

"I wanted to get the Doctor from several angles," says Moffat, a high-voltage Scot who talks faster than most people think. "Rather than a reunion, I wanted the Doctor at different moments: the current Doctor, a previous Doctor and an unknown Doctor."

The new incarnation, as revealed in the last season finale, is the mighty John Hurt. "I was very relieved he said yes," says Moffat. "I knew it would entail casting someone so enormous that everyone would drop their coffee when they saw who it was."

As well as Hurt, departing Doctor Matt Smith will come face-to-face with his predecessor, David Tennant. "They play different aspects of the same part," says Moffat. "It's a really good double act. Very funny. They work together sublimey well."

The bond was just as powerful between takes. "They loved each other and they're remained in touch," says Moffat. "They were always gossiping away in a corner because they share a common experience..."

David and Matt both resigned saying, "I don't really want to leave but one day I have to, so why not today?" But what David has discovered, and what Matt will discover, is it's never over. You'll always be the Doctor.

One of Moffat's earliest memories is of William Hartnell giving way to Patrick Troughton in 1966. "I complained to my dad, where was Doctor Who? And he said, 'It's him with the black hair.' And I said, 'That's not Doctor Who, he's too young!' What started me down the road to where I sit today was being bewitched by the idea that the Doctor was just a Doctor. There were a whole lot of Doctors. It made Doctor Who ten times more interesting."

Moffat, who has written for Doctor Who since its 2005 revival and succeeded Russell T. Davies as showrunner four years ago, still sounds utterly in love with the character. For one thing, the Doctor remains a mystery, unconstrained by decades of complicated continuity. What’s his name? Who was he married to? Who are his children? Why did he leave Gallifrey? Fifty years on, we know only a fraction more than we knew on the first day. You think you know him but you know nothing.

The second reason is simply that the Doctor is so much fun. "His appeal to children is that he's a child in disguise," says Moffat. "He's one of them. Whether he's a crotchety old man or a hipster boffin, he's really a big kid. He's so vital and alive. You can't get tired of that because he changes all the time."

Empire mentions Mark Gatiss' theory that the core of the show's appeal is the melancholy of saying goodbye. Moffat is only half-convincled. "I think it's more complex than that. Rebirth is at the core. There's an ending, yes, but there's a reassurance that the moment of sadness will be followed by a sunrise. That's the fundamental message of all kids' stories: as dark as it gets, the dawn will come."

He takes a rare breath. "No show has so many endings and so many beginnings as Doctor Who."

THE DAY OF THE DOCTOR AIRS ON BBC ONE ON NOVEMBER 23.