Patrick Troughton
The Character Actor who Brought Character to

DOCTOR WHO

His Doctor was “an ineffectual genius,” creating fun and wonder as a cosmic hob in TV’s longest-running SF series.

BY BEN LANDSMAN & PATRICK DANIEL O’NEILL

The short, blue-eyed gentleman with the Beatle-cut shock of now iron-grey hair always looks rather unprepossessing—but that’s just the way Patrick Troughton wants it. In his own mind, the man who played the second incarnation of the Time Lord on Doctor Who is an actor, not a star—and actors don’t need to be showy. As a matter of fact, until recently, Troughton rarely granted interviews.

“If you’re a character actor, you need to be anonymous as a person,” he explains.

“The ideal situation is when you’ve played a part the night before, and you go out in the street, and nobody knows it was you playing it—because you’ve succeeded in the part. And if, as a character actor, you go around promoting your own personality, you’re defeating the very thing you’re trying to build up and achieve as an actor, which is to be anonymous as a person, and only emerge as somebody else on the stage, screen or wherever!

“That’s the main reason I’ve stayed away from interviews. It’s like a conjurer telling you how he does his tricks all the time. It’s as simple as that, really—I’m old-fashioned, I suppose. But now, Doctor Who has become such a big and popular thing, as long as one doesn’t do it too often, I don’t mind.”

Troughton’s preparation for a life as a character actor began with a fairly average time as a public school student in London (what Americans consider private school, the British call public school) until age 16, when he felt the acting bug bite after listening to a radio interview with actress Fay Compton. “The life she described appealed to me, and I felt I would like that kind of life for myself,” he recalls. Troughton enrolled at the Embassy School of Acting in London, run by Eileen Thorndyke, sister of actor/writer Russell Thorndyke [who wrote the Dr. Syn books] and Dame Sybil Thorndyke. Then, he earned a scholarship to the Leighton Rollins Studios at the John Drew Theatre at East Hampton on New York’s Long Island—which required a sojourn to America.

He returned to Britain and joined the Tonbridge Repertory Company, but his burgeoning career was halted when he was called up for naval service during World War II: After his time with the Royal Navy (he ended the war as a captain on a gunboat in the North Sea), he returned to acting, moving into film and TV by the early 1950s. Since then, his gallery of characterizations has included Adolph Hitler, Benjamin Disraeli, St. Paul and Charles Dickens’ Quillp in The Old Curiosity Shop. Troughton has also appeared in several science-fiction and fantasy films, among them, The Omen, and Ray Harryhausen’s Jason and the Argonauts (as Blind Phineas) and Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger (making him the second former Time Lord to appear in a Sinbad flick; Tom Baker co-starred in The Golden Voyage of Sinbad).

It was during work on The Viking Queen (1966) that Troughton was asked to take over the role of the Doctor from the ailing William Hartnell. “We were in Ireland,” Troughton remembers, “and it was while I was filming that the phone kept on ringing, saying, ‘Come and play Doctor Who.’ And I said, ‘No, no, I don’t want to play Doctor Who.’ They went on phoning up, and I went on saying, ‘No, no, I don’t want to play it. It wouldn’t last more than six weeks with me!’ By the week’s end, they kept on pushing the money up so much every day that I finally said, ‘What am I doing? Of course, I’ll do this part! Yes!’ So, I decided to do it, thinking, well, perhaps a couple of episodes and then they’ll finish with it. That’ll be the end, but it’ll be just one job, and I’ll move on to another. Little did I know—I’m still here, Doctor Who’s still here, it’s 1984, and we’re both still going strong.’”

Cosmic Hobo Who

Troughton eventually played the role of the mysterious time-and-space traveler for three years, in the guise of a “cosmic hob.”

“I had several ideas when we started. I thought, ‘Oh, I’ll be like Conrad Veidt in Thief of Bagdad’—black-up with huge earrings and turban, and play it like that. I thought when the series was all over, I could clean up my face so nobody would recognize me, and I wouldn’t be typecast! The BBC people thought that was a bad idea.’” With one image struck down, Troughton suggested another approach: “A very tough windjammer captain, with an old Victorian peaked cap, and we dressed me up as that and showed it to Sydney Newman, the
BBC’s drama head, and he said no. He said he wanted a sort of Chaplinesque character, a tramp, ‘a cosmic hobo.’

“And that’s how we did it. We went to the costumers, and sorted out a whole lot of ragged stuff—after the style of Billy Hartnell, but with Billy Hartnell as a tramp. I think ‘tramp’ is the wrong word in the States—a hobo. Because a tramp is a hobo, but a hobo isn’t a tramp, if you know what I mean,” Troughton adds, laughing.

That original “cosmic hobo” image altered over the years, although the costume didn’t. Troughton’s Doctor is frequently seen as the one with the most appeal to young children, a factor he attributes to his having a young family of his own at the time. “My daughter was about 12, and my sons maybe 10, and eight, so I obviously had them in mind when I was playing the role—and I really tailored it to that. Perhaps if I’d had a grown-up family, it might have been a different character that emerged; but with my children being young, one had that in mind—you didn’t want to make the character too frightening for the children.”

Troughton’s era on the program was often seen as the heyday of the great monsters, with the Ice Warriors and Yeti making their debuts, along with a continuing series of run-ins with mechanical villains. Troughton feels the “horror” elements of Doctor Who have never really been harmful to children. “I think it’s worse in the cinema,” he notes. “There, it’s dark and a child is not in contact with his or her family. I remember I used to hide under the seat at things like The Invisible Man when I was a kid. But at home, the lights are on, you’re with your family, there’s a convenient sofa to hide behind. I think it’s all right—it’s fantasy.

“You know, I heard the other day, having decided to be a sort of inceptor, apparently un-time-travel, genius—someone who seemed to get it all wrong until the very end when he got it right—apparently that idea scared the hell out of the children far more than being absolutely certain you’ve got to win! Because, all the time, the fears that I showed and the apparent bungling, got them worried—they had no faith in the fact that I was going to solve the mystery in the end—although, of course, we always did. That was the reaction of at least one child I’ve met—who has grown up now, of course.”

Naturally, it’s difficult for anyone to remember specific incidents nearly 15 years after the events, and with a busy career like Troughton’s, the three years as the Doctor must seem something of a blur. Still, he can recall a few funny, and perhaps slightly bawdy, episodes. “On a couple of occasions,” he explains, “standing in the TARDIS, waiting to come into the studio, waiting for a cue, Frazier [Frazier Hines, who played the companion Jamie] would be there, and Debbie [Deborah Watling] would be in the middle, and I would be here. At a given signal, Frazier and I would whip down Debbie’s pants just before we got the cue and then open the door and go out, and she would be giggling away, trying to struggle into her pants to get on the set. I don’t know whether that’s printable, but there we are!”

Troughton joined former Time Lord Jon Pertwee and then-current TARDIS resident Peter Davison (along with Richard Hurndall, who died in April 1984, then replacing William Hartnell as the first Doctor) in the 20th anniversary special “The Five Doctors,” an experience he describes as “Wonderful! I fell into it at once. The only thing I regret is not getting the hair right. My makeup lady, 15 years ago, used to lift it with curlers, so it was fairly high, and I forgot that this time. So, although the length was right, it wasn’t the same. And it was my own hair; it wasn’t a wig, though perhaps it looked like one.”

Unfortunately, Troughton holds the record for the shortest time portraying the Doctor, and now Peter Davison has nearly matched it, leaving just short of a full three seasons in the role. It’s a move with which Troughton can sympathize. “Three years is long enough,” he says. “It’s not too long, so that you’re typecast—especially for Peter. We’ve all got to make a living, you know, for the rest of our lives.

“When I finished in the role, I was, well, fairly young, and I had a long lot of acting to do, and I had to get back to the variety of roles which I had been doing,” Patrick Troughton explains. “Otherwise, if you stay too long, you get into a play and everyone says, ‘Oh, it’s Doctor Who!’ And that’s no good. You must try and get them to forget—hoobink them into forgetting. And that is possible.”