Black Friday? ‘Who’ cares?

Many will skip crowds at malls for crowd at ‘Dr. Who’ convention & other gatherings, PAGES 8-9

“Actress Valerie Kessler of Elgin is heading to the Westin Lombard Yorktown Center this weekend for Chicago TARDIS 2011, the Midwest’s biggest ‘Doctor Who’ convention.” - MICHAEK SMART-SUN TIMES MEDIA

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They won’t be shopping: ‘Doctor Who’ diehards have other plans on Friday

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According to America’s Research Group, more than half of all consumers will shop on Black Friday before 6 a.m.

A good number of area residents won’t be among them, having found other worldly things to do the day after Thanksgiving besides heading to a mall to battle crowds for bargains.

Valerie Kessler of Elgin will be at the Westin Lombard Yorktown Center this weekend for Chicago TARDIS 2011, the Midwest’s biggest “Doctor Who” convention.

Kessler has been following the show since 1977, when her dad was in the Air Force and they had been living at RAF Lakenheath (in England) for two months. When she was 7, it was just that it was so unlike anything else she’d seen. Or actually, like a combination of a few different things she loved.

“My dad always been my sci-fi and fantasy buddy. He got me watching ‘Star Trek’ before I can even remember. And I’ve always loved old-fashioned Gothic horror, which Doctor Who mixes in there a lot. Puzzles, nifty costumes, and just good old-fashioned adventure. It’s all there. They can do anything and they will.”

For the uninitiated, “Doctor Who” involves the exploits of the titular character, a time lord from another world who takes human companions on adventures through history.

The convention will feature appearances from actors who have been in the series, including Peter Davison, who was the fifth to play Doctor Who, a character who periodically morphs into a new body. Longtime fan Jennifer Adams Kelley of Skokie, who oversees and creates convention programming, said this will be Davison’s second appearance at Chicago TARDIS and his first since the latest version of the series has brought new legions of fans to the show and event.

There will be shopping at the TARDIS, too — a Black Friday sale starting at 10 a.m. in its vendor room, with bargains and hard-to-find collectibles available.

And a TARDIS on display once again comes from Acme Design of Elgin.

Smith said the convention will screen in high-definition footage that has not aired or has not been available in the United States to this point.

There will be seminars of all sorts, including some for people who like to dress up like characters from the show and role-play, and a costume contest.

Daleks, cybermen

So, yes, there will be plenty of Doctor Who wannabes milling about the show, along with daleks, cybermen (the evil robots who have battled the doctor for decades) and other creatures and characters — including Elgin’s Kessler, who has served as a masquerade judge at the event.

“I’m probably best known for my clockwork droid,” Kessler said. “I can’t see very well because of the mask, and it’s very heavy and bulky with all the historical underpinnings.

Popular draw

The Chicago convention has been held since 2000, and last year it drew about 1,000 fans, event organizer Gene Smith said.

Smith, of Wheaton, owns Allen Entertainment in Lombard, which specializes in collectibles from the sci-fi realm. Smith enjoyed watching “Doctor Who” as a kid, and on a trip to visit his grandparents one summer, he picked up a book on the show. He knew he was onto something when in 1979, “somebody offered me a crazy amount of money” for that book, he said.

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But it's all worth it to hear a whole ballroom full of people gasp when I go out on stage. Just recently, I entered a picture of it in the BBC America Halloween costume contest, and won the best monster category."

While the stereotype has it that sci-fi is a fanboy’s world, the convention's crowd has become more evenly divided between men and women over the years, Smith said. He speculated that women may have come to the show in part because of younger actors playing the lead role in recent incarnations, particularly David Tennant and the current 11th doctor, Matt Smith, but women attending offered other views. "Who doesn't want to watch a show about a hero who is a little bit more unique than all of us?" said Taylor Deatherage of Naperville, who has been going to the Chicago TARDIS since 2008. "I think many, many fans of the show aspire to be heroes in their own lives, and it appeals to this mentality."

Mary Jo Chrabasz, a cataloging associate at the Naperville Public Library and time travel story aficionado, noted that the show now has extra special meaning for her, "as it's the reason I found my finance, and he proposed while we were in our Fourth Doctor and Romana costumes a few weeks ago."

**Female producer**

As such, the convention will feature a panel discussion on "Chicks Dig Time Lords: A Celebration of Doctor Who by the Women Who Love It," a book co-edited by Lynne Thomas, who is the head of Rare Books and Special Collections and an assistant professor at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. "Verity Lambert was the producer of 'Doctor Who' when it began back in 1963, and who was one of the pioneering producers at the BBC starting in the 1950s," Kessler said. "After all these years, people think of sci-fi as a guy thing, even though it's never really been true. So the editors of this book about female fans' love of Doctor Who gave their cartoon cover girl the name of this fantastic woman who made the show what it was from the very beginning."

If you're interested in attending, passes range from $350 for access to all events to $60 for a one-day general admission, and $10 for admission to the Dr. Who marketplace. For more information, see www.chicagotardis.com.