Sylvester McCoy,
The New Doctor Who
By JEAN AIREY

The latest Time Lord is just a normal gent. He wanted to be a monk. He sold insurance. And sometimes, on stage, he stuffed ferrets in his trousers.

A bit too tall to actually "be a Scottish Leprechaun," Sylvester McCoy, the latest actor to be cast as the Doctor in Doctor Who, possesses enough impish humor to be related to a wee green one. Standing a bit over 5'6" tall, and wearing his own wire-frame glasses, it is easy to see a resemblance to such comedians as Wally Cox and Woody Allen. But when he removes those glasses, his face is transformed by large, expressive, brilliantly blue eyes. In an interview, he uses them to effect, much like Tom Baker, a predecessor in the role.

Curiously, also like Baker, at age 16, McCoy had other plans for his life. He wanted to become a priest, but after spending four years in a Scottish Seminary, he decided that priesthood was not enough. "My intention was to become a monk," he says in his lilting Scots accent. "I was really holy. I was so holy I got housemaid's knee from praying." He illustrates a knee about 10 times normal size. "My knee just blew up. So, I thought I would become a monk. I left the seminary and got a letter that said I was a year too young—so just hang on a year—and luckily for me, I went to a school that had girls." He grins wickedly.

There were some indications even in those early years that the future would lie in the theater. "When I was studying to be a priest, they used to tell my family, 'He should be an actor.' And my grandmother, who was Irish, had this Celtic thing of seeing into the future. We once sat in a bay window in the Highlands of Scotland, looking down on the glorious Clyde River and she suddenly went rather strange and said to me, 'You should be an actor,'" he whispers mysteriously. "Then, when I became an actor, she kept asking me, 'Why did you give up that nice job in insurance to become an actor?" And I said, 'You told me!'

But it would be seven years from the time he left seminary before McCoy would get his chance on stage. "I worked in London as an insurance executive. Lucky for me, my firm went bust. I ended up working in a

What will his Doctor be like? "He'll be a little smaller," McCoy predicts.
box office in a London theater. I was selling tickets and there was another actor there [Brian Murphy] who presumed I was an actor. I didn’t un-presume him. I didn’t say I was, I just smiled.” With the serendipity that seems to follow McCoy’s life, touring company organizer Ken Campbell happened to remark to Murphy, “‘I’ve got this mad show I’m setting up in the north of England and I need someone really mad.’ ‘You ought to get the guy in the box office, he’s out of his head,’ Murphy said. So, Campbell asked me, ‘Do you want to join our show?’ I said, ‘I’m not an actor.’ He said, ‘Well, do you want to become an actor?’ I said, ‘YES!’ and here I am,” he laughs.

His early experience in the theater was a bit bizarre. “Years ago, I did a show called An Evening With Sylvester McCoy, the Human Bomb. That’s how I got this name.” His real name is Patrick Kent-Smith.

“It was a show about a stuntman, a comic show—as if the Marx Brothers had decided to go into the stunt world,” he explains. “I played the one who did all the stunts. I was the smallest, weakest looking one in the bunch, so I did everything. I got people from the audience to try to strangle me with ropes. I put nuckles up my nose. I mustered a combustible cotton wool. I blew fire. I had a brick broken on my chest. I learned all sorts of stunts to play the role.

We thought we would invent our own stunt as well—and that was sticking ferrets down your trousers. Now, ferrets are vicious little creatures and they bite! The British press came along and they thought it was rather bizarre and the headline was: ‘It might be Fun, but is it Art?’ Why were we getting Arts Council money to entertain people? Overnight, people started sticking ferrets down their trousers! Overnight, it became a tradition. We only did it for a laugh, for silliness.”

In his 17 years as an actor, McCoy has had some experience with the science-fiction/fantasy genre. “I’ve done Dracula in many ways. I’ve actually played Count Dracula on stage. I was one of the smallest Draculas there has ever been. I had to have a ladder g. a. brick up on my chest. ‘I can’t imagine why they cast me.”

“I did the film Dracula [1979] with Frank Langella, in which I played Walter. I was up for Renfield, but they cast a different type of actor. The producer and the director liked me so much—they found me amusing—that they created this role. I just stood around looking worried—wondering what I was doing in the film. Catching Langella’s cape, standing behind Laurence Olivier—he was very ill at the time—hoping he wouldn’t keel over—he didn’t, amazing man.”

In the upcoming film Three Kinds of Heat, “I play a villain, kind of a Peter Lorre type. The character was a courier for a Chinese secret society which was coming into the West, taking over from the Mafia. The Mafia was trying to bump me off. The Hong Kong Chinese Police, in the apparatus of a six feet two lady, were trying to arrest me. The FBI was trying to keep me alive. The British Police were totally bewildered—and so was I,” he chortles.

“They chased me around the world—supposedly, but I was all done in the studio.”

McCoy is clearly excited about playing the Doctor. “When I was 20, I started watching Doctor Who—from the second Doctor [Patrick Troughton] onwards. I was a fan, that’s why it’s great to get the job,” he says bluntly.

When McCoy heard in December 1986 that the part was being recast, he asked his agent to suggest his name. The actor was called in for an interview, “if went along and saw [Doctor Who producer] John Nathan-Turner and we had a very long interview. Usually, interviews are very short, but this went on for hours and hours and I thought I was in with a chance. Or John just liked long interviews.”

There was a question, however, before the final casting decision could be made—with his well-entrenched reputation for bizarre, off-the-wall comedy, could McCoy handle Who’s serious moments? He was asked to make two screen tests. “They were both with an old companion, Janet [Fielding]. One scene was with the companion, the companion was leaving and it was a sad scene. In the other, Janet played an enemy, The Iron Lady. That one was to find out whether or not I was strong enough to take on the badies and the beasts.”

The tests were successful and McCoy got the part, becoming the Seventh Doctor. As a fan of the program, he has a sense of its unique history. “My favorite Doctor Who episodes were the ones that went back in time,” he says. “I think that’s because it would be wonderful to meet historical people like Napoleon Bonaparte, Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell.”

He finds the role of the heroic Time Lord intriguing. “It’s because he can go anywhere and do anything. His enthusiasm for life and the world, I like all that. I suppose what I hope to get out of it is that he shows many different aspects of personality from anger, fear, comedy, enthusiasm, silliness, horror. He goes through all of them. There are many areas where you can stretch yourself.”

What will his Doctor be like? “He’ll be a little smaller,” McCoy says whimsically, “a bit more comedic. I think there might be a little bits of the other Doctors, just hints, because he is really all the same person.”

In the wake of Colin Baker’s abrupt departure from the series, did McCoy have any hesitation about assuming the role? He thinks for a minute. “No, these kinds of things happen in this profession in all kinds of ways. I hope it doesn’t happen to me, but who knows?” he smiles. “I’m not green behind the ears.”

Considering who he would like to be if not himself, he pauses. “Anyone who has a really good life. But I would rather be me.” Finally choosing the sculptor Rodin, he adds, “He had a good life, but I get the chance to play many marvelous lives all the time. I guess I have the best of both worlds!”

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