TALKING 'BOUT MY REGENERATION

Matt Smith reflects on his final days as the Time Lord and reveals his Hollywood hipster ambitions

Matt Smith is sitting in a rather glori­ous BMW on his way to the ExCeL Centre in London's Docklands. He's sporting a neatly cut crop, wearing jeans and a jumper from ACNE, a leather jacket from D&G, a scarf from Marc Jacobs and some slightly alarming socks.

As the car gets closer to the gleaming glass and grey steel hall playing host to thousands of fans - marking their hero's 50th birthday at the three-day Doctor Who Celebration - the current incarnation of the last living Time Lord looks more like his next big role: Patrick Bateman in American Psycho. Which way is he going to play it when meeting the fans? He laughs. "You just have to be yourself. Whatever that is nowadays..." He can be forgiven for his confusion. This Christmas, when he hands over the sonic screwdriver to Peter Capaldi, he'll be leaving the Doctor in the best of health - a pain-racked regeneration notwithstanding. On air in over 50 countries and counting - it's on three channels in the USA - the show has a global audience of some 77 million. When he was cast, as the youngest actor ever to play the part, newspaper headlines were mocking - "Doctor Who?" In the UK, at least, he's answered that question.

Since he announced he was hanging up his Tardis keys earlier this year, however, he's gone for roles so different from the good-hearted saviour of the universe that you assume he's making a Daniel Radcliffe-style statement: "Don't think I'm just the Doctor." He's already filmed Ryan Gosling's directorial debut, How to Catch a Monster, and tabloid shots from the set showed him lifting weights like a marine, his much-loved floppy fringe razored off.

This month he's on stage at the Almeida Theatre in American Psycho, a London stage-musical version of Bret Easton Ellis's bestseller about a powerful Wall Street banker who moonlights as a serial killer. "It's a bizarre challenge, especially as I've never sung before," Smith explains. "I thought, why not give it a stab... foolishly. I mean, it's not like other musicals - which is why I took it. It's difficult and challenging."

We're conducting this exit interview the day before his barnstorming performance in the 50th birthday episode. He only has what remains of the year as the official Doctor. While we're talking, you can almost feel him moving on.

What's it like playing the Doctor? "Everything changed. It's all consuming - and that affects the rhythm of your life. Now, however, it's settling down a little." What can we expect from the Christmas episode? "I can't tell you. It was a great shoot - a sad one for me, but I think it'll be a fitting send-off and a fitting introduction for Peter."

Any regrets? "None. I think if I was going to..."
THE DAY I MET PETER CAPALDI

Years ago I went on location for the second series of Armando Iannucci’s blood-drawing satire, The Thick of It. A bland corporate training centre in the middle of nowhere was doubling for Westminster’s corridors of power, but it was alive with an effervescent cast and crew who were, incidentally, the most delightful, welcoming bunch of people.

Hanging around waiting for breaks in filming, I was giddy with excitement... I was about to meet my filthy-mouthed hero, Malcolm Tucker! I eventually spent ages talking to the man who crafted this most brilliant, vicious comedy creation, Peter Capaldi. He was great — clever, charming, not at all filthy-mouthed — and I later watched some filming. I get a bit embarrassed and self-conscious seeing actors doing actor-y things, but observing Capaldi mutter and pace as he morphed into Tucker before going into a nuclear rant in front of the cameras was a proper pleasure. Ah, I thought, so friaf’s how it’s done.

Capaldi has a vivid, multilayered back-catalogue and not just as an actor. As a writer he won an Oscar for a short film, he directed the mordant BBC4 comedy Getting On, and he co-wrote and starred in the same channel’s lovely little docu-spoof gem The Cricklewood Greats. I can watch him in anything. He was the only character who kept me involved in BBC2’s lifeless and now defunct news saga The Hour and I am unfeasibly excited that he’s the new Doctor. I never really bought into Matt Smith; he was too puppyish for me, but that’s a generational thing. He’s young, I’m not, fair enough. But, like William Hartnell and Patrick Troughton, both of whom I loved as a kid, Capaldi will be my Doctor, someone with depth and gravitas, who actually looks as if he’s lived broody, unhappy, tired or sulky.

Moffat thinks Smith is the most successful actor yet when it comes to capturing the enormous age of the Doctor. “Matt is a youthful envelope but he has an old soul,” he muses. “In real life Matt is very cool. The Doctor would like to think he’s cool, but he isn’t. The Doctor probably thinks he can hang out with Matt and go to the same clubs, but I don’t think Matt would have him along on a night out.”

Certainly, Smith is looking to make some cool choices. He’d love to do a movie with 12 Years a Slave director Steve McQueen or Morvern Callar director Lynne Ramsay — who shoot cutting-edge, offbeat, disturbing films. He’d also like to direct, having tried his hand for Sky Arts’ Playhouse Presents. In January, however, it’s “back to the drawing board — the auditions, the casting”.

He tells us this as the car waits at traffic lights near the convention centre. While he’s talking, a man walks past wearing an impressive Tom Baker scarf. Smith checks it out then winds down the window: “Hey mate... over here... nice scarf!”

The man smiles sheepishly at his friend in a Captain Jack jacket then realises who it is. He dashes over, stunned and gabbling, but can’t seem to make up his mind whether to ask for a photo or an autograph. “Hey man, quick,” Smith urges, hanging out of the window as the driver puts the car in gear. “He’s going to leave, mate,” but the man is almost frozen in shock. It’s not often, after all, that the actual Doctor admires the Doctor Who fan. “Oh dear...” Smith is stricken as the car starts to move. “We gotta go, dude... bye... see you later.” He flops back on his seat. “That was weird.”

The moment shows the fans’ devotion to Smith. Will that help with his cool young movie star ambitions? Some people aren’t sure. “In
quirky, supersmart men in TV shows penned by
both made a stab at Hollywood after playing
you exposed. That first 30 seconds in the room at
Radio Times 7-13 December 2013
David Tennant and Benedict Cumberbatch -
an audition - no actor is beyond that."
The truth is it's me you're criticising. It leaves
he shrugs. "If you criticise my performance, in the
been promised. He was devastated."
It's the character you don't like or the interpreta-
papers or an audition, I can try to convince myself
appeared online, the phone calls stopped.
he recalls, refusing to name the actor in question.
"But the film was badly reviewed - not a turkey
but not a hit. As soon as the first Variety review
appeared online, the phone calls stopped. Literally went dead. He had a week to go before
the American Open and he couldn't get anyone
to even answer his emails about the tickets he'd
been promised. He was devastated."

Does Smith fear such a rejection? "Of course,"
he shrugs. "If you criticise my performance, in the
papers or an audition, I can try to convince myself
it's the character you don't like or the interpreta-
ton. The truth is it's me you're criticising. It leaves
you exposed. That first 30 seconds in the room at
an audition - no actor is beyond that."
Looking for precedence, it's tempting to compare Smith's chances with the careers of
david Tennant and Benedict Cumberbatch -
both made a stab at Hollywood after playing
quirky, supersmart men in TV shows penned by
Moffat (to a US casting director the Doctor and
Sherlock could almost be the same role). Tennant
returned to Blighty and Broadchurch, while
Cumberbatch has two big films lined up for 2014.

Steven Moffat is sure of Smith's success. "Benedict and Matt are both fascinating actors -
they're never going to play James Bond, they're
not leading men, they're not Brad Pitt," he
explains. "They'll always choose the interesting
script over the glamorous part. But that's good.
Stars tend to have very short careers, while Ian
McKellen will be working until he's 80, and they
have that quality."

Smith thinks his footballing experience will
help - he played for Nottingham Forest and
Leicester City youth teams until injury
steered him into acting. "I'm a firm believer
in the parallels between sport and acting," he
explains. "Practice is important. Frank Lampard
practises sprints his entire career. An actor might
work on his voice. But then it's about expression
practises on the moment - preparation and dedication are
appropriate to ask if he's had any profound exis-
tual thoughts as a result. Does an on-screen
depth teach you what's important in life? Is there
a point to our existence? He thinks for a moment.
"That question starts off on the wrong foot...
I think the point is the endeavours we make
towards the discovery of our existence through
art or love or family. They're at least the things
that make us realise we exist."

He's declared himself an atheist, but if there
was a God and they met - what would he like to
say? He laughs. "If there was a God, what would
I ask? I'd ask - can I have my money back?" And
he bids a warm farewell as the ExCel
swallows him up, moving on into his unwritten future -
with no Tardis and no option of ever coming
back. Stephen Armstrong