

Who's the daddy?



Writer/executive producer **Russell T Davies** introduces his fun-but-frightening new baby

When I was asked to create the new *Doctor Who*, I knew this was going to be something much bigger than just making a TV series. As a young boy growing up in Swansea (I was born in 1963, the first year the show was broadcast), watching *Doctor Who* was what first inspired me to become a writer – it left me permanently imagining I was about to be picked up by the Tardis and taken off on a journey to faraway planets.

So how have we made the new show different? Well, our version is much faster: we pack anything from 80 to 120 scenes' worth of action into each 45-minute episode. Also, it's a lot more emotionally literate. Back in the 1960s, sheer spectacle was enough: you'd have shows like *Danger Man* in which there was plenty of action, but you never had any idea what the characters were feeling. That's not the case with our show.

One area in which we've definitely remained true to the original is in how scary the show is. In the 1970s, I used to have terrible nightmares about Cybermen being downstairs murdering my family. So will we be sparing children those hide-behind-the-sofa bits? Absolutely not. Bring on those nightmares! Nightmares show the drama's working.

I make no apology, then, for the size of the body count over the 13 episodes! If I've got five pages of script without a fatality, I start to get worried. Besides, kids have an instinctive understanding

of fiction. It's not five-year-olds who get confused about whether something is drama or reality – it's their nans. There's not a child on the planet who watches *Finding Nemo* and thinks that's a real fish.

Plus there's the reassuring presence of the Doctor, this extraordinary man who strides through all sorts of horrendous disasters with a smile on his face. If you were in danger, he's exactly the sort of person you'd want alongside you. (I say "person", though he's not human – he's got two hearts and is 900 years old.) At his physical and psychological core lies a strength that marks him out as a leader.

I don't mean leadership just in the fighting-off-monsters sense. What I love about the Doctor is that he doesn't travel space and time because it's his job; he does it out of an inexhaustible sense of adventure.

That's what the Doctor can teach every person watching, of whatever age: if they're being undervalued or getting pushed around, they can say no; they can put their foot down; they can dare to stand out and be different. Take the Doctor's new companion, Rose. She's got a dead-end job and a boring boyfriend, she lives with her mum on a run-down estate – but when she meets the Doctor she gets the chance to show she's better than the life she's been leading. That's what lies at the heart of this show: just as the Doctor came for me all those years ago, so he can come for you.

As told to Christopher Middleton

RUSSELL T DAVIES ON... CHRISTOPHER ECCLESTON



"Chris has a reputation as a bit of a miserable northerner, which is more to do with the parts he's played than the person himself. In real life, he's funny and quick, and this role lets him re-invent himself on screen. He brings humour and strength to it – plus the sexiness that's given off by intelligent acting. His being in the show gave out the signal that this was going to be proper drama. "As for his costume, I swear I'd written down "jeans and leather jacket" before we cast him and he said that he wanted to play it – in jeans and a leather jacket!"



Lord's test

"Pragmatic, witty, brave..." Christopher Eccleston gives us the lowdown on his Doctor, and why he wants eight-year-olds to watch

THE DOCTOR

Did you watch *Doctor Who* as a child? I only ever tuned in for the regeneration episodes, because I was fascinated by the idea of someone being the same person on the inside, but suddenly looking different on the outside. With *Doctor Who*, though, I have to say that the low production values prevented me from believing it was real – unlike, say, *Star Trek*. I also felt the Doctors came across as these authority figures, lecturing me in their upper-middle-class accents. It seemed like everyone in outer space came from Surrey, rather than Salford, where I grew up.

Why did you take the role?

I've always seen myself as a niche actor, who's been in dramas that have been critically acclaimed but have never got really big audiences. A journalist once told me the roles I played were "comfort food for liberals", and I guess there was some truth in that – I let him out of the room alive, anyway! People are always telling me I'm too gloomy and can't do comedy – so taking a part in *Doctor Who* is a gamble, and I find that exciting. It could sink my career, or take it to another level.

Describe your Doctor.

Pragmatic, witty, brave, intelligent, anarchic, heroic and caring – he cares about life in all its forms, and has a permanent sense of wonder at the world and everything in it. He's also childlike, contradictory, brutal to his enemies, and constantly restless and inquisitive. In any scene, it's always the Doctor who's the primary source of energy.

What's his relationship with his new companion Rose?

He loves her, simple as that. And she loves him. They both deny it, but her mother can see it. They're very similar, Rose and the Doctor: both carry a sense of loneliness. He allows her freedom – he's always encouraging her to experience things – but he expects a great deal of her, too. He's constantly telling her, "If you want to travel with me, then don't become a burden." >

"I hope Doctor Who will be watched by children and adults together"

◀ How did you feel about doing so many blue-screen scenes, where you had to react to monsters and effects that you couldn't see?

I loved it. The great thing about acting is that you're allowed to behave like a child in terms of playing imaginary games. You can see blue-screen scenes as murder to play, or else you can view them as a challenge. And don't forget: you're talking to someone who in *Jude* [the film of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*] had to do 11 different takes of realising his son had hanged himself. The trick is to find fresh ways of exploring the moment, and offer up a variety of takes. I mean, that's the job, isn't it?

Do you feel cheated that your Doctor hasn't got a trademark scarf or hat? Totally not. Right from the start, I wanted to take on the challenge of playing an alien character



A GOOD HIDING
Eccleston's leather-jacketed Doctor is "brutal to his enemies"

without the benefit of any frills or extravagant costume; I felt I didn't need Billy Connolly's banana shoes and a feather boa to make the point. I liked the idea of him having a beaten-up leather jacket. I spotted a line in one of the early scripts that described the jacket as the kind of thing Terence Stamp would wear after a day's work on a market stall. Well, they didn't get Terence Stamp, they got me – Plug from the Bash Street Kids.

Have you found the role tiring?

I've worked harder on this series than I've ever worked. We've been doing 11-day fortnights for the past eight months; I've been working 14 hours a day and using my lunch hour to make a start on the evening line-learning. It's been

mentally and physically punishing, but I've loved the responsibility of having to lead a series, of having to be there on time, of having to learn my lines properly, of having to set an example. It's been great.

What's your attitude to all the media attention?

Bring it on! Having seen, day in, day out, the total dedication the entire film crew has put in, I'm happy to do anything that will boost the audience for this show. The idea of it sinking from view and being watched by two men and a dog is just too heartbreaking to contemplate. And if the media ask annoying questions – I'll just

give annoying answers!

Do you feel this show has lower status than your previous work because it's aimed at children?

Not at all. The eight-year-olds are the ones I want to

reach! An adult probably won't have their life changed by watching a TV programme, whereas a child will. What I really hope, though, is that *Doctor Who* will be watched by children and adults together. I remember when I was little, there was something uniquely revealing about watching TV with my mum, dad and two brothers. I was astonished at the way two working-class lads like my brothers just loved the surrealism in *Monty Python*.

And with *Boys from the Blackstuff*, I saw out of the corner of my eye that my dad could hardly watch it because it was so painful for him. If we can get that sort of thing going on, that would be the ideal result for me.

Christopher Middleton

PIPER calls the tune

Billie Piper tells E Jane Dickson how she brought feisty new companion Rose to life

Wrestling with 20ft aliens was always going to be part of playing Rose, the Doctor's new companion. Shaking off die-hard fans desperate for news of the Time Lord's latest incarnation is another matter. Fortunately, Billie Piper was too busy with the gruelling eight-month shoot to appreciate the responsibility of her new role. "I remember the show from childhood," says the 22-year-old, "but I'd never watched a show in its entirety and I deliberately didn't watch the DVDs of old episodes. So I didn't really feel the pressure of the fact that it's such an iconic show."

The real challenge, for Piper, was living up to her co-star. "For the amount of time I've loved acting, I've loved Chris Eccleston. I was scared of working with him and I really wanted him to enjoy what I brought to the table. But we worked really well together. We have a great relationship and there is chemistry there."

A pop star since the age of 15, Piper has confounded snuffy critics with the freshness of her performance in dramas such as

Canterbury Tales and *Bella and the Boys*. And freshness is what she brings to the table in *Who*. "Rose wants to try new things and wants answers. She's always asking 'How?' and 'Why?' and I relate to her in that sense."

Rose is, Piper emphasises, nobody's sidekick. "She's on a par with the Doctor. They teach each other. She's quite closed off from the world, but she could, potentially, be someone brilliant. He shows her how to do that. And equally, she shows him how to be sympathetic, how to have morals and express his emotions. It's an interesting dynamic."

But Piper's not the classic high-kicking heroine: "I've had a bit of a nightmare with the stunts," she confesses. "I'm clumsy, but I want things to go well. So I overcompensate and it ends in tears. Luckily, Rose isn't really an action heroine. She can throw a punch if she has to, but she tries to talk her way out of situations, which is better – certainly much easier for me – than violence."

Piper could hardly be further from her character – a shop girl

ICKY MICKEY

Noel Clarke plays Rose's boyfriend Mickey, who's no knight in shining armour: "Mickey's a coward," says Clarke, "a sort of Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo*. He provides comic relief – he becomes the damsel in distress."



MUM'S THE WORST

"I love Jackie," says Camille Coduri (right) of her character, Rose's mother. "She's very passionate and dramatic. She's so annoying! She's a lazy woman and she likes to live through her daughter. Rose is her world – but then Rose lost her father when she was a baby, so their relationship is a big thing."



RUSSELL T DAVIES ON... BILLIE PIPER



"I saw Billie three times for the job, and she's been a revelation. She brings this terrific sexiness to the part. She'd be sexy even if she shaved all her hair off. But there's never any question of romance between her and the Doctor. If they were to kiss, the programme would die on the spot. "It's no accident that Rose has an ordinary background, but at the same time an extraordinary inner resilience. Traditionally, women aren't the primary watchers of science fiction, so I've addressed that imbalance by filling this series with strong female characters."

who lives on an estate with her widowed mum – yet she identifies with Rose's hunger for the wide horizon. "She's bored, waiting for something to happen. I remember that. At home in Swindon I felt trapped – not because anyone told me that I was never going to do anything great; just because I knew there was something else out there and I wanted to act."

Escape to a new dimension doesn't mean leaving the real world behind. The new *Who*, Piper points out, returns to science fiction's philosophical roots: Russell T Davies plots tell us as much about our own world as the worlds beyond. "Russell will take a story that's happening now and shift it around: he might turn the people into aliens, but you get the message. He's done an episode on reality TV, how much damage it's doing. It's like, 'What if it got so out of control that...'"

Piper leaves the sentence unfinished, aware of the secrecy surrounding the plots. "Let's just say that the new Doctor Who has a lot of time for humans. He wants them to be better, to challenge their own ideas and not let fear hold them back. The monsters are great," she promises, "but ultimately the show is a celebration of being human."