

TELEVISION REVIEW

Universe in Trouble? Just Call Doctor Who

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

Riddled with bullets, the middle-aged doctor dies on the operating table. After some mysterious electrical charges buzz the hospital morgue, the corpse emerges as a much younger man while an unsuspecting orderly watches "Frankenstein" on television. The regenerated creature, temporarily discombobulated, cries, "Who am I?" Doctor Who, that's who, in his eighth transformation since the childlike adventurer in time and space made his debut on the BBC in 1963.

Shown on PBS in this country, the series has become something of a

cult for those who don't mind taking their serious science fiction with a dash of humor. Now Universal Productions Canada has transposed the elfin doctor to a full-length television film devised as a pilot for a possible new series. Being broadcast on Fox tonight, "Doctor Who" the movie leaves that prospect up in the air, so to speak.

With somewhat chintzy sets that seem inspired by the old "Flash Gordon" serials ("This looks pretty low-tech," one character admits) and wink-wink dialogue that wouldn't be out of place in "Third Rock From the Sun," "Doctor Who" offers as its hero a renegade time traveler whose stolen time machine, called Tardis (Time and Relative Dimension in Space), is a battered London police box for making public calls. The Doctor belongs to a race of aliens called Time Lords, passive observers from a place called Gallifrey. The Doctor's arch enemy is the Master.

When the first Doctor Who, a grandfatherly type played by William Hartnell, decided to retire, the producers came up with the idea of giving Time Lords the ability to regenerate themselves. They are allowed 13 lives, each with different physical appearances and personalities. Of such ingenuity is a long-running series cobbled.

So tonight, when the doctor unexpectedly lands in San Francisco on Dec. 30, 1999, the reins of the leading role are handed over from Sylvester McCoy, the seventh doctor, to Paul McGann, who does a kind of Peck's-bad-boy battle against a vicious Master portrayed by Eric Roberts. For romantic interest there is the beautiful heart surgeon, Grace Holloway (Daphne Ashbrook), who gets the inevitable line: "I finally meet the right guy and he's from another planet." And for the younger set, there is Chang Lee (Yee Jee Tso), a cocky Chinatown youth dangerously drawn to the Master's cynical promises of money and power.

As the clock counts down to midnight and the year 2000 (let's not get into when the millennium actually begins), Doctor Who and Grace maneuver speeding cars and swing by

DOCTOR WHO

FOX, tonight at 8
(Channel 5 in New York)

Phillip Segal and Alex Beaton, executive producers; Peter Ware, producer; screenplay by Matthew Jacobs, co-producer; Geoffrey Sax, director; music by John Debney. Jo Wright, executive producer for the BBC. A production of Universal Productions Canada for distribution by BBC Worldwide and MCA Television.

WITH: Paul McGann (the Doctor), Daphne Ashbrook (Dr. Grace Holloway) and Eric Roberts (the Master).

ropes from rooftops in a race with the Master to control the Tardis's "Eye of Harmony," which must be closed or "this planet will be sucked through it." As usual, those helping Doctor Who will do a lot of terrified screaming.

Can't Doctor Who, with his dossier of unusual powers, do something a bit less hackneyed to save the situation? No. The Time Lords do not interfere. As the doctor explains, "The universe hangs by such a delicate thread of coincidences, it's useless to meddle with it." A little script meddling, though, might have helped in this case. Mr. Roberts is left with little to do other than impersonating Bela Lugosi. Actually, the character of the Master has now used up his 13 lives and, presumably, would be unavailable for a possible series. But never underestimate the wiles of determined producers.



Joe Lederer/Fox Broadcasting

Paul McGann is the time-traveling Doctor Who in a television film.

Metropolitan Forecast

Despite the near record chill this morning, considerable sunshine and a freshening breeze from the southwest will produce a noticeably warmer afternoon. High pressure moving off the Middle Atlantic Coast will draw warmer and more humid air toward the region later tonight and tomorrow. However, clouds will rapidly increase by morning and a shower or thunderstorm is likely tomorrow midday or afternoon. Temperatures will be seasonable.

Today Sunshine with scattered clouds, milder winds this afternoon. High in the 60's. Tonight, becoming cloudy late. Low in the 50's. **Tomorrow** Mostly cloudy, breezy, perhaps a thunder shower. High in the 60's.