

# THE WHYS AND WHATS OF WHO

Doctor Who? Nigel Kendall reveals all you need to know about the Timelord

**▶** If you haven't heard by now that *Doctor Who* is returning to British TV screens today (Saturday), in the first serialisation since 1989, then I assume that you're as familiar with space travel as the Doctor himself. For weeks now, the nation's newspapers, magazines, TV news programmes and illegal download sites have been so full of it that if I read the words "Behind the Sofa" one more time, I'll hide behind the sofa.

All of this excitement has been generated by people of a certain age, nostalgic for the Saturday tea-times of their youth. For those of you who don't view the past through rose-tinted spectacles, though, or are young enough to wonder what the fuss is about, *THE EYE* presents all you need to know about the new *Who*.

## WHY WHO NOW?

Keen to revive the old tradition of the family watching TV together, Lorraine Heggessey, the outgoing BBC One controller, decided to bring back the 900-year-old Timelord, whose last series was axed in 1989. Ironically, *Doctor Who* owes its very existence to similar thinking back in 1963, when the BBC head of drama, Sydney Newman, was looking to fill the slot between the end of sport at 5.15pm on a Saturday and the beginning of *Juke Box Jury* at 5.45pm. The first episode, starring William Hartnell, was broadcast 12 hours after President Kennedy was assassinated, a fact obviously referred to in the first episode of the new series.

## WHO DO YOU DO?

Christopher Eccleston is the ninth TV incarnation of the Doctor. An actor associated with brooding, intense roles, Eccleston surprised the new *Who* writer Russell T. Davies by sending him an e-mail begging to be considered for the part. "I think Chris wanted to break out of the way he felt he was being typecast," says Davies, who previously worked with Eccleston on the acclaimed drama *The Second Coming*. Eccle-

ston's Doctor is a pleasing hybrid of those who have gone before, a quick-witted, sharp-tongued cosmic prankster prone to endearing bouts of utter dimwittedness. "It's the closest I've been to playing myself, in a way," says Eccleston of his interpretation of the role. "It's a version of myself as a child. And I based it a lot on Russell. I borrowed some of his speed of thought, and pace."

Surprisingly, the 41-year-old Eccleston was not a fan of the original series. "I felt the Doctor was a bit too authoritarian," he says. "I finally got round to watching Tom Baker recently, after I had had two bottles of wine. Now I know what the role entails — the ability to deliver jargon with charisma and wit — I thought he was fantastic."

## WHO'S THAT GIRL?

"When I was asked by the BBC to bring it back, I froze for three days," says Davies. "I thought: 'Do you really want to work on something that you love so much?' It's a rolling stone that's gathered a lot of moss. A history surrounded by frock coats and anoraks. I knew we had to keep certain things: the music, the Tardis, the Daleks, and the assistant."

The Doctor needs his assistant like Holmes needs his Watson. Without someone to share his travels and explain all the science to, he'd be a mad old interplanetary windbag. The former pop star Billie Piper is the Doctor's fifteenth humanoid assistant, Rose, a smart-mouthed girl from a London council estate whose mother obviously never warned her about travelling through time and space with strange men. Not for our Billie the leather bikini of Tom Baker's Leela or

WHO'S WHO  
Eccleston and  
Piper (below left)  
with a weird and  
wonderful  
collection of  
intergalactic  
ambassadors,  
including Moxx of  
Balhoon (centre)



the baseball bat of Sylvester McCoy's Ace; she can handle herself in a scrap without any help from Eccleston, whose Doctor is himself surprisingly useful with his fists.

#### WHODUNNIT?

What would *Doctor Who* be without its baddies? The new series features a mix of old favourites and newcomers, and episode two will introduce a whole gallery of exotic extraterrestrials. The villains of the first show are the Autons, an army of shop-window mannequins brought to life. Old-timers will have to wait for episode six to be reintroduced to the Daleks, whose 16-year absence from TV screens seems to have made them more bitter than ever.

"*Doctor Who*'s universe is surrounded by death," says the writer Steven Moffat (*Coupling*), whose spectacular contribution to the new series involves a flying saucer crash-landing in the Thames. "It's child-friendly horror. But you have to make it enjoyable. The Doctor must look as if he's enjoying himself, otherwise it's like Timothy Dalton as James Bond."

#### HOW MUCH WHO?

There are 13 45-minute episodes in the new series, comprising two two-part stories and nine self-contained adventures. Work is already under way on a second series, for transmission next year. If your abiding memory of *Doctor Who* is of men in rubber suits, giant slugs made of bubble wrap and cardboard walls that wobbled whenever a door was closed, prepare to be pleasantly surprised. This is the most expensive drama commission yet undertaken by BBC Wales. The new-look interior of the Tardis cost £100,000 to build and the special digital effects have been created by The Mill, the company that won an Oscar for its work on *Gladiator*. "That film had 100 effects," says The Mill's Will Cohen. "The new *Doctor Who* has 100 effects per episode." Traditionalists, despair not. There are still a lot of men in rubber suits. ■

*Doctor Who*, Saturday, BBC One, 7pm

## DR. WHO v THE CYBERKIDS

WILL EPISODE ONE GET TODAY'S TECH-MINDED PRE-TEENS BEHIND THE SOFA? DOMINIC WELLS TESTS IT ON SOME CYNICAL SOUTH LONDONERS



4.19 mins Rose is locked in a deserted department store. "Is that someone mucking about?" A mannequin turns its head! Beth, 8, shrinks into the sofa.

6.59 "Nice to meet you, Rose," smiles the Doctor. "Run for your life." Tom, 11, laughs.

11.20 "There's a strange man in my bedroom," says Rose's Mum, coily. "So there is," replies the Doctor. "I'm in my dressing gown..." she continues. "Yes you are," says the Doctor. "Anything could happen," she breathes. "Er — no," says the Doctor firmly. Everyone laughs, the biggest laugh of the night.

12.14 A severed dummy's arm springs out from behind the sofa! Who's that yelping like a girl? It's Dad, 42. Ahem.

21.44 A plastic rubbish bin comes to life. It attacks Rose's boyfriend. Phoebe, 7, looks round, making sure there's a grown-up in the room. The bin swallows him whole! And burps. Saul, 11, guffaws, but Elliott, 9, is too

shocked: "Ooooh! He got eaten!" Ben, 9, moves from the floor to sit on the arm of the sofa; not quite behind it, but close.

27.07 Rose enters the new-look Tardis. No reaction. No reaction! Don't they realise that this one set cost 1,000 licence fees?

31.14 "Everything plastic in the world is waiting to come alive," cautions the Doctor. "The shop dummies, the phones, the cables..." "Breast implants," adds Rose. Theo, 11, laughs.

37.04 The killer mannequins writhe like drunken mime artists and expire. Sam, 9, cheers. The world is saved. Until the next episode...

**THE VERDICT** Only the youngest. Phoebe, admits she was scared, but the others did a good impression at times. There are some top lines, some real laughs, and even the very blasé Theo volunteered that the special effects were "wicked, nearly as good as in a movie". He'd give it four and a half stars. A hit!

