DOCTOR WHO

New Season's Preview

***Starburst* feature by Richard Houldsworth**

It isn't that long ago since it seemed that a new season of *Doctor Who* was guaranteed each year. Now, sadly, the series seems to cling to production in much the same way as the fourth Doctor clung to the cable from the Radio Telescope in *Logopolis*. It seems that actors who play the Doctor can now be hired and fired at will, and a Script Editor can be seen to walk out on the show in mid-production amid a blaze of adverse publicity. Indeed, the behind-the-scenes battles on *Doctor Who* seem to have been the most publicised aspect of the series in recent years to the extent that one begins to wonder if it is really worth the BBC bothering to make the programme at all.

IT is with such behind-the-scenes traumas fading into the past that we herald a new season – the twenty-fourth in the programme's history – and welcome a new Doctor in the form of Scots-born Sylvester McCoy.

It seems rather premature to try and anticipate what lies in store for the series, with the low ratings of the twenty-third season (ironically lower than the low viewing figures which got the show postponed in the first place!) still very much in one's memory. John Nathan-Turner will be notching up his seventh season as Producer; in many people's minds far too long for any one person to stay in a job, let alone the helmsman of a creative British institution. One hopes that the new Script Editor, Andrew Cartmel, will inject some originality – indeed it seems that this may yet be the case, with some of the stories of the season echoing the freshness and innovation of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. As for Sylvester McCoy himself, he appears to have been an inspired choice for the role – a true eccentric (perhaps the most important qualification for an actor who is to play the Doctor?), and an actor with a whole range of wonderful facial expressions. Sylvester can be happy and sad, frivolous and reverent – I sincerely hope he is the success that he deserves.

Strange Matter

On to the actual adventures themselves. The first story goes under the working title of *Strange Matter*, although it appears that the novelisation may be called *Time and the Rani*. It is scripted by Pip and Jane Baker, whose two previous efforts (*Mark of the Rani* and *Trial of a Time Lord* 9-12 and 14) have been rather disappointing hotch-potch, jumble sale affairs. As you have guessed, Kate O'Mara is taking a rest from *Dynasty* to make her return appearance as the evil Time Lord – and she appears to have brought her *Dynasty* shoulder pads and sexy hair-do with her, judging from the photographs from the press call. The story is set upon the planet Lakertya, where the Doctor is suffering from post-regeneration amnesia and is being manipulated by the Rani into helping her with a destructive scheme that threatens the Universe. She is aided and abetted by some new monsters called the Tetraps, which are rumoured to be very impressive creations. The Visual Effects department of the BBC seem to have been kept very busy on these episodes, mainly trying to keep up with the Rani's unusual and inventive ways of killing people! The Production Team went on location to a quarry in Frome during the spring of this year, and their efforts were featured in a 'Breakfast Time' special report some weeks later. Guest stars include Mark (*Brat Farrar*) Greenstreet, and Wanda (*The Faceless Ones/Image of the Fendahl/UFO*) Ventham, and both play residents of the planet Lakertya hidden under layers of scales and hair.

Paradise Towers

The second story is called *Paradise Towers*, and is written by the first of three newcomers to *Doctor Who*, Stephen Wyatt. He has worked for the BBC recently on the script of a filmed play called *Claws*, due for an airing soon. This tale will be the first to display what could be termed The Cartmel Factor – a fresh and innovative script filled with interesting characters and witty and very clever dialogue. The story takes place in a giant tower block, where civilisation has broken down and rival gangs roam the streets, painting graffiti on the walls. There are some excellent sets from BBC designer Martin Collins, including a two-level town-

New Doctor, Old Mel! (Photo Stephen Payne)

The Doctor, with distaste, examines a gun in 'Strange Matter'

9/87

square area, from which Sylvester McCoy was required to perform a stunt fall during a chase sequence. His landing was eased, however, by well-disguised mattresses hidden under a pile of rubbish! The monsters for this story are some very strange robot creations, which have been made by the Visual Effects department. There is some location footage, which is believed to have been shot at a London swimming pool, and provides the Doctor and Melanie with the reason for wanting to arrive at Paradise Towers in the first place. Guest stars include Julie Brennon, wife of Mark (Turlough) Strickson, playing a character called Fire Escape (yup, Fire Escape!), and distinguished actresses Brenda Bruce (seen recently in the repeats of *Connie*), Judy Cornwall and Elizabeth Spriggs playing some dear old ladies . . .

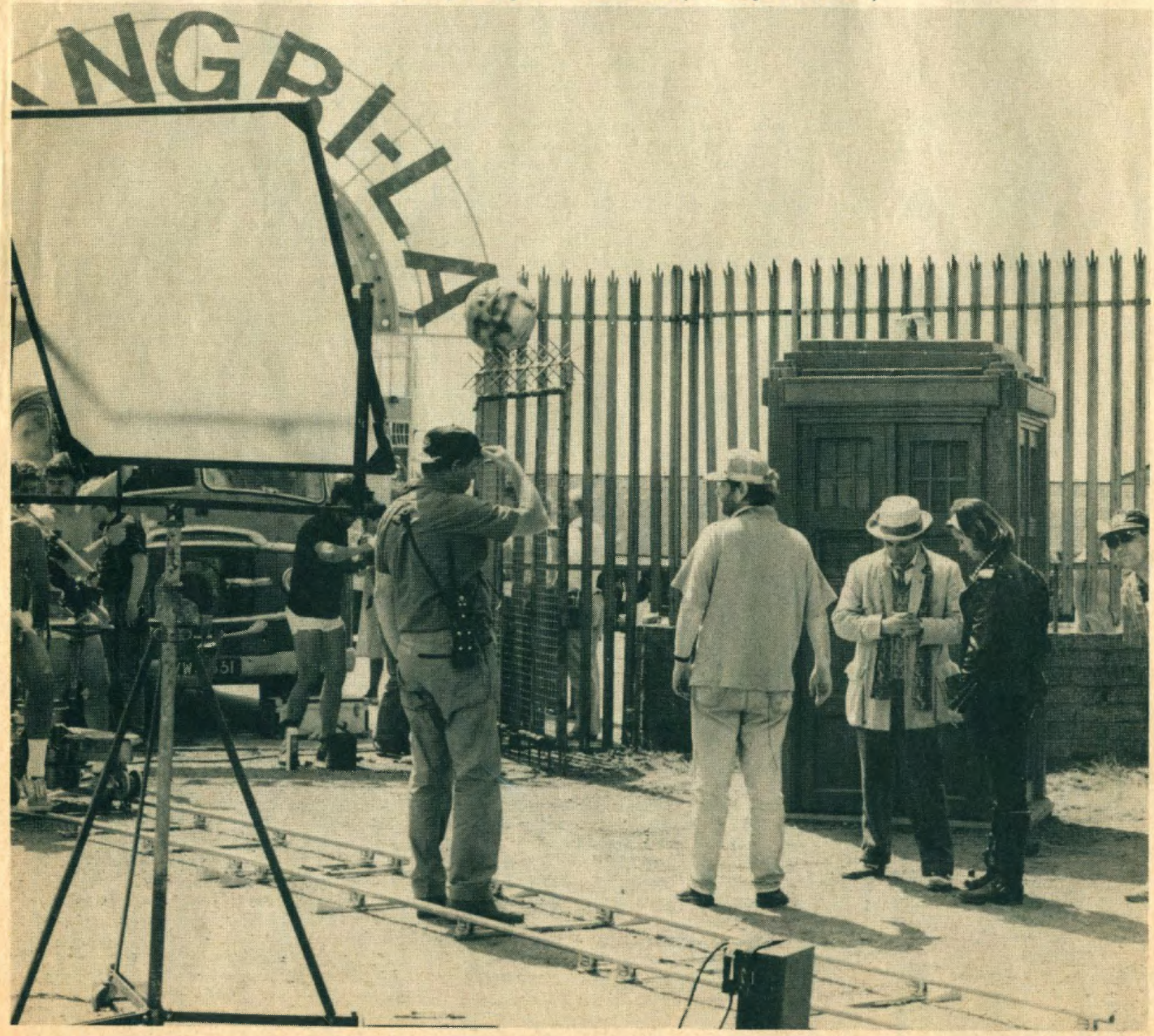
Flight of the Chimeron

Story number three is called *Flight of the Chimeron*, which was made under the decidedly odd working title of *Delta and the Bannerman*. This tale was recorded entirely on location using Outside Broadcast cameras – the first *Doctor Who* story to do this since *The Sontaran Experiment* in 1975. The plot concerns the final stages of an epic chase through time and space, with the Doctor and Melanie becoming involved in a space battle set in a charming holiday camp during the 1950s. During this adventure the Doctor will win a very strange prize in a competition, and the BBC's Visual Effects department have provided some rather interesting shots of a rather different space craft flying amongst the stars.

Guest stars for this colourful adventure include Ken Dodd in a walk-on role as the Tollmaster, Don Henderson as the chief villain Gavrok, Hugh Lloyd as a Welsh local, and Stubby Kaye as an American detective. With the use of exciting period music and costume, this story promises to be one of the all-time *Doctor Who* greats.

Dragonfire

The final story of the season is called *Dragonfire*, and is set in the ice caverns of an alien planet. It concerns the quest for a strange treasure, and introduces a new villain with a very odd social problem! Tony Selby will be recreating his role as the popular Glitz, last seen stuck in a limbo atrophier in the final instalment of *The Trial of a Time Lord*. This story was recorded entirely in the studio.

The twenty-fourth season could be make-or-break for *Doctor Who*. Certainly there are some promising stories, a cast of distinguished names, and Cartmel would appear to have influenced a radical change in direction that can only be good news. In recent years *Doctor Who* has been too hollow – a surface layer of gloss backed up by silly plot devices. Hopefully we will once again be seeing good stories well told – *Doctor Who* seems to work at its best when it keeps things simple. However, no matter how good the production is itself, the Controller of BBC1 will have his eyes firmly fixed on the viewing figures. These will probably be a very important issue for the series if it is to continue, and one can but hope that it is not scheduled opposite some mammoth ITV ratings grabber. ■

The location filming for *Flight of the Chimeron* (Photo by Peter Wilson)