



Elisabeth Sladen & Ian Marter: Dr. Who's Companions Come to Hollywood

By ALAN BRENDER

In March of 1980 an unprecedented event took place in southern California. Two of Dr. Who's time-traveling companions arrived at the Hyatt Regency for a week-end of no-holds-barred fun and reveling in "a special tribute to British fantasy." We are pleased to warp you back to that weekend for a delightful discussion with two charming time trippers.

People keep thanking us for coming—like we are doing them a big favor," she says, sitting in the 19th-floor luxury suite of a Los Angeles Hotel with all of Hollywood at her feet. "I am not being humble," she continues, "but they have done us the favor, to be asked to come to Hollywood—to be allowed to be applauded and looked after—I'm not joking. I have had only a couple of hours sleep in the last couple of days, and I'm not the least bit tired."

"She's as high as a kite," says the gentleman next to her.

"I am," she admits.

Just a few minutes earlier an audience of several hundred people were flying equally high as she, Elisabeth Sladen, and he, Ian Marter, recounted their adventures as characters on the British science-fiction television tradition—*Dr. Who*. Sladen portrayed Sarah Jane Smith, the Doctor's female companion, and Marter played Harry Sullivan, the Doctor's aide.

Both performers had nothing but praise for their American fans at the *Doctor Who* convention in early March in Los Angeles, sponsored by Sirius Productions.

Pleased with Response

"They knew us by name," Sladen says somewhat incredulously. "They didn't say 'Hello Sarah, hello Harry'—you know, the characters. They wanted to know about us, which is even more flattering. They thanked us for staying overtime to sign autographs, but how can you walk away when people have been queuing up for so long? I shall cry before I leave, I'm getting so emotional."

Marter is more low-keyed, but he too is genuinely appreciative of the response of American fans to *Dr. Who*. "They think a lot about the program. The enthusiasm is genuine. And the questions have been very intelligent; not just: 'Can I have your autograph,' and 'How do you learn your lines?'"

"Yes, and there's attention to detail," adds Sladen. "We had a fancy-dress contest last night. It wasn't just the Doctor they were dressing up as, but all sorts of characters they had seen in the program—even small part characters."

It was this attention to detail that caused the two performers to suffer considerable consternation enroute to the convention. For though they do both appear in many of the episodes currently being shown on American television, both of them have been out of the series for several years. Sladen left in '76 and Marter a year earlier.

"I was apprehensive," Sladen admits, "because I felt 'am I going to remember?' I was nervous, too, because I didn't want to let down all the people who worked so hard on this convention. The night we arrived, after an eleven hour flight, we were immediately taken out to a meal. We were a bit zonked. They were talking about the show and actually quoting lines we had said! It was really quite worrying. But, in fact, it helped because it tickled our memories."

Tickle seems to be an apt word in Sladen's case. This petite, beautiful actress, whose

flair for words is disarming, frequently dissolves into convulsions of giggles as she searches her memory for anecdotes of her years as Sarah Jane Smith. Yet, she is also extremely introspective and analytical when it comes to discussing her character, the program, her relationship with the other performers and her profession.

Joining the Show

In discussing the show with Ian Marter, the words pour out from the two of them. There's obvious respect and friendliness between them as they interrupt each other occasionally to add bits of information, give a compliment or to jostle the other's memory.

Sladen had been playing Sarah Jane Smith for about a year when Marter joined the show as a regular. But Marter had actually been the first of the two to appear on *Dr. Who*.

"I was asked to play a character in just one story when Jon Pertwee was playing Dr. Who," Marter elaborates. "The character I played was in a story called 'Carnival of Monsters.' I played a naval officer on a merchant ship that got abducted in the Indian Ocean, miniaturized and put into a sort of machine. I was an upright English naval officer type."

"Then two to three years later when Tom Baker was going to come into the show as the Doctor (Liz was already in the show) they decided they would like a similar character based on the one I played in 'Carnival of Monsters' and use him as a sort of regular with the Doctor and Sarah Jane."

"And Ian coming into it," Sladen interjects, "gave me more scope because normally they had to find something for Sarah to do—either be tied up, gagged or knocked on the head. Now I had someone to argue with when the Doctor was out of the way, which was wonderful. It was special."

"My first episode," Marter continues, "was Tom Baker's first episode. I was brought in as part of the army unit—the unit

crowd—supposedly to look after the Doctor and make sure he was in good health. Of course, you can't do that with the Doctor. He takes off on a tangent straight away... you are just left to trail behind."

"There is a lovely scene that Ian did," adds Sladen. "The Doctor has two hearts—and it was lovely when he took his stethoscope out and found both of them. He was totally out of his depth."

Working As A Team

According to Marter, there was a very good relationship among him, Baker and Sladen. "We got on very well," he says.

"It was a lovely team," Sladen interposes. "We sometimes almost didn't have to finish a sentence. We knew what we were about. And we were allowed to alter things."

"Tom had this maxim," Marter adds, "and we sorta adopted it as a threesome, that if there is an alternative between utter dialogue and some action—let's have the action and cut the dialogue. We used to actually cut a lot of our lines voluntarily."

"And," says Sladen, "we also could cut ourselves from a scene. If all I'm doing is standing around in the background not adding anything important, I might just as well be out of the way, really."

"We used to rewrite a lot of it, actually, in conjunction with the director and sometimes the writer, but more often than not the writer wasn't there," Marter chimes in. "We would change things if they were awkward or couldn't work or we thought there was a better way of doing it."

"We were allowed to lose our tempers as characters," Sladen elaborates. "And that was good. We developed that ourselves. The day we stopped caring was the day we stopped criticizing each other."

"I really feel I gave it all I had," Sladen says. "We had fun and laughs, but I also cared desperately that it be right because



Left: Sarah and Harry watch as the Doctor attempts to stop the "Genesis of the Daleks." Above: The U.N.I.T. team: Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, Doctor Harry Sullivan and sometimes scientific advisor, the Doctor in "Robot."



Harry and Sarah at the Doctor's private parking spot, await the TARDIS.



On the "Planet of Evil."

you're on show to so many people.

"It was difficult to be in because you don't really have the ammunition as an actor to cover yourself as you might in a different kind of play. You had to draw very much on your own character because you were so close to otherwise having *no character*. I was allowed, therefore, to put a lot of me into it."

"I think her character," says Marter, "was a very real character—a very strong base that you felt sympathy for. You believed she was trying to do her best for the Doctor, and yet she was still critical of the Doctor."

"I'm sure Liz won't mind my saying this," Marter continues. "When Liz first came into the show, she had a very forthright script."

"They wanted someone to stand up for herself," Sladen interjects.

"Then," continues Marter, "there was a little time when it seemed as if the script people and the production department were losing sight of it. And I didn't think they were making use of Liz's personality and talents. There was a time when I could sense there was a 'marking time' period. And Tom was very aware of that too. And he was very generous in the way we would work scenes out, wasn't he?"

"Indeed he was," Sladen answers. "He was never out for Number One. It went back to the old format of the girl being a bit silly. I said: 'I don't mind being made to look the fool as long as you let me try with best intentions. If the Doctor's in trouble, let me try to help him.'"

"Sometimes the scripts made our characters too daft," Marter continues.

"Yes," agrees Sladen, "and that made the Doctor look daft."

"Right," adds Marter. "That only serves to bring the Doctor down, contrary to what

the writers were trying to do—make the Doctor go up. I think that in those situations where you have minor characters in threesomes or twosomes, as in *Streets of San Francisco*, the only way to make that main character better is to make the other characters better. It doesn't work the other way around."

"Tom would have been the first to say that," Sladen continues. "He wouldn't go around with these fools. Tom was incredibly careful with our parts."

Sladen was also very careful not to infringe upon Baker's role when he first took over from Jon Pertwee as the Doctor.

"I was given more to do in Tom's first episodes," she explains. "And I was very aware that Tom should know that I wasn't trying to elbow anyone away. I couldn't have carried the show. I knew that the stronger Tom would be as the Doctor, the better it would be for my character."

Highlights, Lowlights

Among the shows Sladen performed in during her three years as Sarah Jane, she is most fond of *Planet of Evil*. As she explains, "It was all so imaginative. Normally, we land on incredible rubbish dumps and in dungeons that are always very bare, grey and sparse. But all of a sudden we were in this lush jungle with steam and heat rising up and these weird plants. It was a terrific change!"

"We did this one show," chimes in Marter, "called *The Sontaran Experiment*, which was only a two-part episode. We were doing it in Dartmore, which is a very barren area—just sheep and lots of rain. And Tom broke his collar bone. He was having a fight with Styre, a potato-headed monster and he slipped and broke his collar bone."

"I was being rescued at the time," Sladen adds. "I had to sit in a bog wearing a plastic nappy (diaper) around me for about five hours. I had my eyes closed when they did that scene. I thought, 'My goodness, that shout sounded realistic. This scene is going well!' Then I discovered Tom was actually in dire pain."

"That is not the reason, I should add," says Marter, "that it was a two-part story. We've had this myth going around that the story was cut because of Tom's broken collar bone. But it was always intended to be a two-part story. Fortunately, Tom recovered very quickly. And by using his double very cleverly, they were able to cut the story together very well."

At this point Sladen is reminded of a funny incident that happened during the shooting of one of the shows. "I'm not sure I should repeat this, but it was funny. There was a certain actor who was used as an extra..."

"He was a shoe salesman really, not actually an actor," interjects Marter.

"Yes, that's right," continues Sladen. "But he was enjoying it so much that they started to give him dialogue to say. There was one point in one story where the Doctor had to be shot by mistake by this particular actor. The director said to him: 'John, I need an ad lib here when you shoot the Doctor.' 'Oh,' he said to me, 'Liz, can you think of something to say?' We were thinking of things, and then he said: 'Oh, I've got it. I've got it.' So we came to do the scene. He shot Tom and said, 'Oh, shit, I've shot the Doctor.' Cut! That was a beauty!"

Villains & Heroes

Important to all the *Doctor Who* shows are the villains, who test the courage of the Doctor and his faithful companions. The Robot and the Cybermen were among Sladen's favorites.

"I got very fond of the big Robots in Tom's first episode," she explains, "because there had been nothing quite like it that I could remember. It was so beautifully made. But

(continued on page 63)

Dr. Who

(continued from page 46)

when he would walk out of the dressing room, he would fall over. The man inside was a radio actor because they wanted his voice. But he wasn't a physical sort of person."

"It was funny," Marter adds, "because every once in a while you would hear this crash. And somebody would say: 'Christ, the robot has fallen over again.' It was about eight feet tall."

"I also liked Styre, played by Kevin Lindsay," Sladen adds. "He was in my very first episode, *The Time Warrior*. I was so nervous because, though I had done TV before, I had never done a series. So he told me: 'We're going to have a wonderful time, dear. You just do what I do, and we'll have a smashing time with no hassles.' The first shot I was in, he was dressed in his uniform. He had to come out of this big silver golf ball. He came out, put his hand on his hip and said: 'I am a Sanitarian.' The director went up and said, 'Kevin, actually it's Sontaran.' He said, 'Listen, I come from the blankety-blank place, I should know.'"

Sladen describes *Dr. Who* as a show about heroes. "People need heroes," she explains. "It's good to know that no matter what scrapes you get into—good will triumph over evil. I think there's a safety factor in it that you can have a little giggle and always know that the blood is tomato sauce."

From the Top

But to make the tomato sauce believable takes talent, especially the talents of the performers.

Elisabeth Sladen started her career as a dancer. "I danced with the Royal Ballet," she says with mock pride. "But," she adds more humbly, "instead of being in a lovely tutu, I was always a mouse. So I went to drama school."

She studied at Liverpool Playhouse, the oldest repertory company in Britain, and performed in many classics there. Then she moved to London where she found her way into television. "I did two *Z Cars*," she says. "In one episode I played a real sweet naive girl and in another I played a real scrubby tart."

The *Z Car* roles helped her to land the part of Sarah Jane Smith, a role she played for three years. Since leaving *Dr. Who*, she has done numerous plays, a comedy series for Granada Television, called *Take My Wife*, and for the past two and a half years she has been doing a children's program for Independent Television, entitled *Stepping Stones*.

Marter, too, has a strong acting background. After leaving University, he trained at the Bristol Old Vic. He has appeared in such notable plays in London's West End (equivalent to Broadway) as *Conduct Unbecoming* and *Abelard and Heloise*. He continues to do legitimate theatre, some television roles and commercials. In addition, he has taken to writing—including three novelizations of *Dr. Who* (*Ark in Space*, *Sontaran Experiment* and *Ribos Operation*).

"When you do novelizations," he explains, "you have to add a lot more narrative than what is just a script on a page. But I always tried to make Sarah Jane's character fulfill all the qualities that Liz has. In *The Sontaran Experiment*, I actually changed the plot here and there to make Sarah Jane work more in the story than she did originally."

"I don't know if I'll do more *Dr. Who* novels," Marter continues. "I have been asked to write a *Dr. Who* story in four parts. Also I have been trying to write a science-fiction fantasy."

Just Good Friends

"He's very clever, actually," Sladen adds with a smile. "I would be standing at rehearsals a bit bored, and Ian would be doing either the Times crossword or something like measuring how many times he would have to put one foot in front of the other to get to Hong Kong. I'm actually very jealous of Ian's abilities as a writer."

Marter: "Oh, come on."

Sladen: "No, I feel things. But words... I can think of lovely ideas, but I need to write them down grammatically."

Marter: "Didn't you tell me the other day that you wrote a story?"

Sladen: "I wrote a little thriller thing. In it I'm to find out who committed the murder. The plot has to do with a dance, and all the clues are in the way the movements were going."

Marter: "That's wonderful. That's not silly."

Sladen: "Maybe Ian will rewrite it, and we'll all star in the film."

Marter: "I think you mustn't hide your light under a bushel."

Sladen: "I glow very darkly."

This type of repartee and respect for each other caused more than one fan to ask if there was anything more to Harry's and Sarah's relationship than appeared on the screen.

But actually Sladen and Marter are both happily married to other people and have rarely seen each other since they left *Dr. Who*.

Of more concern to fans of the show was the relationship of Sarah with the good Doctor. "Most people," Sladen says, "thought they should have had a normal healthy reaction together. But they were just good friends. It *can* happen, you know."

Now that both Sladen and Marter have been away from the show for several years, they were asked whether there were any plans for either of them to go back to the series.

"No one has asked me," answers Sladen. "But I think I would say, 'How lovely, but no thanks.'"

"I would say: 'Thank you, but no,' also," adds Marter. "Even with this convention—if it had been England, I wouldn't have gone. But here the stories are current, so I don't feel we are clinging to an old show."

"I agree," says Sladen. "They wanted me here because I was immediate even though I left the show in '76. I turned down two jobs to come here, but I don't regret it at all. ★

Conrad

(continued from page 38)

everything with some degree of authenticity.

"You never make a laugh for a laugh, because if you do there's something wrong. When Ross and I play the roles we don't say, 'Hey, this is a laugh-line.' It's not done that way at all."

"While I won't watch the old ones, I do enjoy seeing the new movies. They're different... lighter... richer... much more honest in their approach."

"This next one (*More Wild West*) really works," the actor launches into a mock used-car pitchman's voice: "If you want to see good entertainment, you *must* see this next one!"

Conrad has little need to depend on yearly *West* films to keep him going. The versatile performer pops up in series after series with little pause for breath. His last such adventure into weekly television was the SF-flavored *A Man Called Sloane*; it was one of last season's earliest casualties.

"It was a terrible show," snaps Conrad. End of subject.

The actor has formed his own production company and is currently at work on several projects. *The Coach* is a feature film and Conrad's first independent offering. He has also recently finalized plans to portray G. Gordon Liddy in a new film.

During the interview Conrad pauses to leaf through a stack of photos from *The Wild Wild West* and his other series. He comes across a still from *Black Sheep*, a World War II program in which his daughter Nancy co-starred. How did it feel to act with his own flesh and blood?

"She was an actress. It didn't bother me!" he barks. But coming across another photo of her he says tenderly; "There she is. That's my baby!" After spending an hour with Conrad it seems obvious that his gruff, "macho" exterior shields a soft inside.

The actor admits that his outspokenness and individuality has made him *persona non grata* in Hollywood. While he accounts that feuding with an NBC executive resulted in the cancellation of *Black Sheep*, he will still push to turn out quality entertainment.

"TV today is good and bad—just like it's always been. You take shows like *All In The Family*, which is a quality show... *Star Trek*... but there is always that part of the audience that wants pure crap. Yet that part of our community is entitled to their own diversions," Conrad snores, derisively. "Whatever the product, there's an audience out there for it, and it is not our place to judge that audience."

"I'm glad in many ways that *TWW* ended when it did. Towards the end I was hurt all the time, I mean really physically hurt. I was glad when it was all over. It's become a 'cult' show like *Star Trek*, so there's still a big public out there for it. We may do the William Shatner episode as a TV movie, because *TWW* is going to be on for a loooooooong time." ★