BY PAUL MOUNT

WHEN BBC Controller Michael Grade 'suspended' Doctor Who for eighteen months back in February 1985, the series' many fans reacted in a number of different ways. They screamed, they shouted, they wrote petitions, they threw tantrums, they made useless disco records, they threw more tantrums and they boiled away in their own fat, consumed by their fury. They were all united in their common determination to see Doctor Who back on the air long before its eighteen month ban was up.

Eighteen months later Doctor Who returned to BBC 1 – on Saturdays in twenty-five-minute episodes – scheduled opposite the strangely popular A-Team. It was doomed immediately. However, the four-teen episodes which constituted the delayed twenty-third season weren't great Doctor Who but they were a marked and significant improvement on the tired and derivative fare which the series had been peddling for the previous few years. Those who dismissed the new series out of hand before it even went into production were blinkered by the prejudice typical of any fan(atic): it's also especially gratifying to see that disgraced script editor Eric Saward's clumsy and venomous hatchet job in Starburst 97 has been at least in part vitiated by a series which was, despite its many shortcomings, colourful, well-produced and above all entertaining.

The fourteen episodes – transmitted under the umbrella title 'The Trial of a Time Lord' – took as their framework the idea of the Doctor being 'taken out of time' and put on trial for his crimes, initially those of breaking the Time Lord's cardinal rules expressly forbidding interference in the affairs of others. It's a charge the Doctor has answered to before, of course, back in 1969 at the end of Patrick Troughton's tenure as the Doctor. On that occasion the trial (about half an episode) led to a period of great popularity for Jon Pertwee as the Doctor, so producer John Nathan-Turner can be forgiven for hoping that perhaps another trial might pull the trick for his latest Doctor, actor Colin Baker.

It's ironic that the Doctor himself should be put on trial (both by the Time Lords and his more dangerous superiors at the BBC) at a time when you couldn't move for trials on television; The A-Team went on trial for three weeks, the trial of Bockin Adams was dramatised on BBC 1, Channel Four reconstructed the trial of Lee Harvey Oswald and even television itself went on trial at the beginning of December. The very fact that it's been done before on Doctor Who robs the idea of any originality, but it was a handy and convenient device to utilise to bring the series back into line.

Having set up the motif, with the Doctor's Tardis dragged aboard a giant spaceship (an impressive but over-rated effects sequence) and placed in the courtroom to face his prosecutor the Valeyard (Michael Jayston) and his 'judge' the Inquisitor (Lynda Bellingham) it fell to the first twelve episodes to present the evidence, the first eight intended to hang the Doctor by dint of his meddlesome activities, and the next four allocated to the Doctor for his vindicating defence. The final two episodes would prove the Doctor innocent or guilty ... or possibly neither.

Accessing information from the Matrix (the source of all Time Lord knowledge, so we've been told) the Valeyard is able to present for us (and the jury) on a viewscreen a couple of the Doctor's past adventures – "episodic interfaces" as the Valeyard might call them – fully equipped with special effects and incidental music. For the purposes of grabbing the audience, it's un-fortunate that the weakest of the three 'stories' was selected to lead off the trial.

Ignoring Dominic Glynn's dreadful realisation of Ron Grainer's legendary Doctor Who theme, it seemed for a brief couple of episodes that the series had learnt something from the hoinous errors of the year before. Apparently suitably chastened, the first episodes replaced the base and gratuitous violence of the twenty-second season with a fine line in lacoic wit courtesy of the late Robert Holmes, a writer familiar with the art of writing humorous Doctor Who. Colin Baker and the comedy Nicola Bryant stepped back effortlessly into their roles as the Doctor and his assistant Peri, to an extent that it finally looked as if the characters were actually enjoying each other's company for a change. This particular segment of the story – heavy with location filming – promised much but delivered little – mainly due to the fact that so many loose ends were left untied, hopefully to be resolved at the end of the season. The accent certainly seemed to have shifted, as predicted, more towards comedy – if not overly much so – but what was missing was a plot. Virtually the four episodes were a cross between Blake's Seven and Robin of Sherwood (yuk), crammed with toothless bearded tribesmen led by Joan Sims and human characters dressed either in one-piece overalls or studded leathers. The highest honours must go to Tony Selby and Glenn Murphy as Glitz and Dibber (he of "the vacuous expression and single-track mind"), the two intergalactic rogues, and the lowest honours to the two robots, particularly Drathro, an imposing presence who spent most of the time standing in a corner swivelling his wrists and not doing much else at all really. The story itself – such as it was – had run out of steam long before its fourth episode and it was mainly its arch sense of humour which kept it going.

It was during these early episodes that it became obvious that not only was the Doctor on trial but also that the programme's audience was going to be reminded of Brian Blessed as Yrcanos
the fact at every available opportunity, courtesy of constant unnecessary cuts back to the court-room for the making of some totally spurious point of Gallifreyan law. These scenes, all written by Eric Saward in his best (i.e. worst) sub-Holmes style, not only disrupted what pace the story had managed to work up, but also defiled Holmesianism, gone with the wind. Sp Sheridan-Dalke's portrayal of the Doctor was quite good too.

It was only when the action shifted to the planet Thoros Beta (realised by some clever trickery) that the new line in humour came rushing to the fore. Episodes five to eight saw the reappearance of Sili, the grim, maggots-long monstrosity from the previous season's drab and heavy-handed 'Vengeance of Varos', a leader warning about the perils of a society hooked on video-based violence. Episode five kicked the story off in a disturbingly grim fashion, with a number of tank-like hideous genetic experiments (man into-wolf, man into-plastic-crab thing, etc) and it all seemed not too far removed from the dismembered remains of... well, the 'Scary' Daleks that had characterised the previous couple of seasons. But over the next few weeks it all built up into a fairly uproarious slice of fun. Most of the comic performances from Chris Ryan (from The Young Ones) as Kiv and the brilliant Nabil Shahban as Sili balanced a typically over-the-top performance from the lowest of Sili's enemies, Brian Blessed. Episode eight's denouement was chilling - Peri the victim of a brain experiment which had left her and with Kiv's brain inside her head. It was an episode which broke most of Doctor Who's traditions; there was no miraculous last-minute rescue for the Doctor was lifted out of the action by the Time Lords and Peri was apparently killed. A brave move in a series which was under orders to

Christopher Ryan as 'Kiv'

be less openly violent and it was a move which turned out to be totally debased by later turns of the plot.

Like many I'd been dreading the appearance of Bonnie 'Legs-in-the-Air' Langford as Melanie Bush (known as Meif as she'd announce to anyone who'd listen) the Doctor's new assistant - but her first appearance in episode nine to twelve was a surprising revelation. Contrary to popular belief, she can act - and she can act well - but her grounding is on the stage in front of a live audience, not before the camera. BM the TV camera and in Doctor Who it showed. That said, the character holds promise and if she can fight back the urge to over- dramatise everything she could form a worthwhile partnership with the garrison Doctor. It's certainly a jolt from the thrusting sexuality of Nicola Bryant's Peri to the totally sexless Bonnie Langford.

The story which didn't introduce her tried hard to evoke an Agatha Christie murder-mystery atmosphere but it failed because it, like much of the season, was desperately unambitious. Farcical monsters pitted themselves against fictional human stereotypes in a less-than-interesting who-dunnit set aboard an inter-galactic cruise ship called Earth. But the whole thing was so brightly lit there was little sense of threat, and the human cast was too small and two colourless for the audience to care a great deal what happened to any of them. The story's logic hardly helped; the idea that sentient plants could replace robots as a workforce and eventually take over the world is far too silly to take seriously, especially when the plants are very obviously six men in leafy wet suits and rubber masks. But at least it had some basis of reality, a vague point of believable reference which the fantastical excesses of the first two segments did not.

With the evidence now out of the way, the season stood or fell by its resolution in the last two episodes - and if it didn't exactly fail it certainly teetered a lot. Episode twelve turned the trial on its head, with the Doctor now charged with genocide - and in episode thirteen we were subjected to an uneasy and confused hock-potch of ideas. It crammed in too much too quickly, it tried to tie up the loose ends from the previous years - but it did at least come up with a flash of the imagination for which Doctor Who has always been noted. With the Valeyard revealed as a future evil incarnation of the Doctor who has fiddled the evidence to the Doctor's detriment, the action shifted rapidly to the fantasy-world of the Matrix. It all happened so quickly and it was all handled so clumsily - with the inclusion of Anthony Ainley's bo-hiss portrayal of the Master and the announce ment that Peri did not die but decided to settle down and have noisy children with Brian Blessed's character - that it was just too much to take in.

Luckily episode fourteen saved the day. Both episodes were basically fantasies, unreal representations of reality where we were never quite sure if what we were seeing was happening or merely part of the Valeyard/Doctor-controlled Matrix dream. The last episode tore along at a breakneck pace, the last building of a future dramatic pitch leading up to a climactic conclusion. With the Valeyard defeated, the charges against the Doctor dropped and the Matrix scheme (so far away they were) thwarted, the Doctor and Melanie set off happily to resume their wanderings. But not quite.

It's difficult to imagine a better ending to the season, a sting in the tale which left Sward's planned climax - the Doctor and the Valeyard left to fight forever in the Matrix - in the shade. But now, with the Valeyard still alive, it suggests that the end of the trial was itself a complete fantasy, that the Valeyard was never defeated and that Doctor and Melanie are travelling on in the Matrix fantasy. Even more sinister is the possibility that the Valeyard's survival seals the Doctor's ultimate destiny; slowly but surely he will become the Valeyard whether he likes it or not.

'The Trial of a Time Lord' was an inconsistent series, but it was a series which required its audience to look behind and beyond what was presented on the screen. The main problem lies in the fact that the whole plot contained a lot of

Bonnie Langford as Melanie subtly but none of it was handled with the necessary sympathy and delicacy. Every fact, every movement, was spelt out with agonising deliberation - we'd - hammer - you - over - the - head - with - this - one - in - case - you - missed - it'. There was too much of Eric Saward's influence - characters continually restating their characters and then acting totally out of them (a failing of almost all the stories he's script-edited for the series) and much of the more deadening-humour can only have been Sward's. It was a complex series - unfortunate in a year when it was important for Doctor Who to grab the public's imagination again. But the ratings remained unimpressive, a high of around 5/6 million - but despite this the go-ahead has been given for a shorter season for later this year, with John Nathan-Turner again Producer. My main hope after the future for the series; there should now be signs of development beyond mere improvement. Where are the signs leading to a new direction? 'The Trial of a Time Lord' was something of a stop-gap season, Doctor Who for the sake of it. Despite its multi-layered plot and fascinating concept, something solid comes out of it for the next series, if no real lessons have been learnt, then the series really did, as the Valeyard would say 'elevate futilities to an art form'.

'The Trial of a Time Lord' was possibly the finest of the six (count em) seasons of Doctor Who which John Nathan-Turner has produced. Many critics were ready to congratulate Eric Saward if it was any kind of success and to blame John Nathan-Turner if it was a diabolical failure. Hopefully these same critics, in the light of Sward's recent actions, will be prepared to give John Nathan-Turner much of the credit for what has been an entertaining and thought-provoking fourteen weeks of Doctor Who.

Perhaps next season, with a script editor who can edit scripts and leave his ego at home, he can do even better. Surely the fact that the series has been given another season is testament to the fact that someone, somewhere must have done something right!