Ian Marter
Harry Sullivan’s Travels

A departed companion to “Doctor Who” is remembered as his hopes, dreams & tales of the TARDIS are recalled in his own words.

By Jean Arey & Laurie Haldeeman

If, when Ian Marter was a child, a gypsy had foretold he would become an actor, he would have been incredulous. “As a kid, I was terribly shy and was always the one who didn’t want to be asked to do something,” he recalled while attending the August 1984 Tardiscon. “The idea of having to put on a performance really horrified me. I hated the idea of failure. And still do, as everybody does. But if you’re not prepared to hazard—to take a gamble—you never do anything!”

“I suppose I went through all the usual repertoire of ambitions, but I never par-
ticularly wanted to be an actor until I went to university where I began to act a great deal.” Marter confirmed his choice of career was to become a writer until, as he explained, “My girl friend—who I later married—had to go to an interview at the Old Vic Company. She said, ‘Why don’t you come along, something might turn up at the auditions.’ In the end, somebody didn’t turn up, I went on and got a job! I wasn’t the sort of person who said, ‘I want to go to drama school,’ because I didn’t go to drama school and I didn’t originally want to be an actor. Sometimes I feel that I’m totally half-hearted about it.”

Before Ian Marter died last year, he was an active and popular member of the Doctor Who community. As Surgeon-Lieutenant Harry Sullivan, a bumbling military officer, Marter accompanied Tom Baker through several Doctor Who adventures. After his character left the series, Marter pursued his earlier writing ambitions and turned his attentions to producing several Doctor Who novelizations and an original Who Companion novel, Harry Sullivan’s War.

As an actor with ambitions to be a writer, Marter often found himself frustrated by the words other people wrote for his character. Encouraged by Tom Baker, he finally decided to combine the two careers. “All actors get frustrated by scripts, I think,” he observed. “I used to—would want to write things differently; many actors feel that. The script wasn’t particularly special to me. That’s not to say scriptwriters don’t have problems, too. Of course they do. But we used to find quite often on Doctor Who that people didn’t write the sort of style we felt we should have had and we tended to contribute many dialogue changes. We would throw out things that didn’t seem to work and substitute something else, maybe substitute a bit of action rather than dialogue. Tom Baker [STARLOG #115], Lis Sladen and I had a great principle: If you can do it, don’t say it.

“Obviously, we weren’t in charge, the directors and so on were, but writers can write awkwardly. Sometimes, stuff that
doesn’t appear to be awkward in print doesn’t quite gel when you try to say it or do it. I find it quite difficult to judge what’s good script writing and what’s bad. It’s very difficult to judge until you start to rehearse and then you discover a part that originally reads well doesn’t always work.”

Marter found just the opposite happening to him as he worked to turn a televised script into a novel. “There might be some dialogue with something visually happening underneath it which you can’t actually recapture on the page, because if you describe it, it becomes something else,” he noted. “You can elaborate on the descriptions, that’s totally permissible, because when somebody’s reading a book, they have to visualize it and you’ve got to help them. So, you must give them as much as you can and that’s what I try to do within the limits allowed by the publication format.”

**Trouble with Harry**

During his tenure as a Doctor Who companion, before he embarked on his writing career, Marter occasionally felt disappointed with the character of Harry Sullivan. “The producers thought they might need somebody [when Jon Pertwee left and before Tom Baker became the Doctor] to rush about and throw things—jump out of windows and go through burning buildings and rescue damsels,” Marter explained. “So, for some reason, they asked me to play this character they were planning to invent. But then, of course, Tom was cast and it was obvious he didn’t need someone else to do all those things. So, they had to change the character’s conception and make Harry a bit of a bumbler and an idiot—although good-hearted with the best intentions!”

“It became more interesting in one way,” he mused, “and, in another way, less interesting because they had to change the format. They didn’t make the character as well as it could have been. The Doctor should have people around him who are resisting him as well as helping him. It seems to me if you have a hero character or heroine character, you need to be surrounded by friends. If the friends are too low-key or too incompetent, it diminishes the hero or the heroine. The opposite of what you think. The stronger you make their companions, then—provided the actor playing the hero or heroine is up to it—then the stronger that person becomes from the strength of the people around him. To me, it seems a great mistake to believe you make a character bigger by surrounding him with idiots. You actually do the opposite. Harry may have been a bit of a bumbler, but he was also a trained doctor … and they never let him be one.

“In Harry’s first story, ‘Robot,’ he was quite funny in the early stages when he had to deal with the Doctor’s recovery and the Doctor didn’t appear to be quite right—having two hearts and all that. But you had to tread a very careful line not to make him an idiot! Even there, they trembled on the brink, leaving the audience to wonder how anybody as daft as that could be a doctor in any kind of military organization. It just wouldn’t happen. Quite honestly, I think part of the problem [the production team had] was perceiving Doctor Who as for kids and assuming they could get away with that. That’s absolutely untrue. You must be more careful because kids aren’t fools. They pick up things and notice things like crazy.”

**Human Achievement**

Even if the supporting characters were made stronger, Marter could justify how the Doctor would remain the hero. “It seems to me the audience is prepared to accept that the Doctor will allow things to get out of hand just to see how well the other humans cope with it,” he commented. “He knows in the end that he can probably deal with it but—for whatever reason—he allows things to develop and allows the humans to make their attempt and then he comes in at the right moment and does the clever thing. Or, not always the clever thing, but sometimes the accidental thing. I remember Tom saying that the Doctor mustn’t be too much of a magician. It mustn’t be possible for him to just take gadgets out of his pocket and give them a name and say, ‘Ah, well, now I’ll cut through this 28-foot lead shield with this pencil because it’s a special lead-shield cutting pencil.’ If he can do that, then there’s no story because he can do anything. He’s never going to be in danger.”

It was easy at one time for Marter to make the hypothetical choice between a writing career or an acting career. “If I could only do the sort of writing or acting I’ve done so far, I would find it very difficult to answer. But if I could do the writing or acting I would really have to do, I would prefer to write,” he said. “To me, there’s a side of acting I’m not really interested in—the ego side. I find it terribly tiresome. I dislike it a great deal, but it is necessary if you want to ‘get on.’”

Despite his strong dual careers, Marter would not have characterized himself as a “Renaissance man.” “That term could only be used for someone like Isaac Asimov,” Marter insisted. “To be a scientist and a writer and a popularizer—an amazing set of achievements!” Marter maintained that he would have preferred to be thought of as a multitalented person rather than just the person who portrayed Harry Sullivan. “Oh God, yes! If I’m going to be remembered as just that, I would rather be forgotten completely!”

“I don’t want to be remembered, afterwards. That’s no kind of hassle to me, to think of just disappearing without a trace—I don’t see the problem. I don’t particularly want to leave a mark, while people are alive who knew me, I hope they’ll remember me in some kind of goodish way.

“As for being a kind of post mortem figure, I don’t care at all about that. I don’t have any kind of religious beliefs. I believe that when I die, I’ll become a pile of dust and just blow away. Like everybody else. ‘Not too bad a person,’ I suppose is OK [as an epitaph]. It sounds like fake modesty to say that, but I just think that when you go out on a clear night and there are so many stars out . . . What impact do we have on it all?”

Ian Marter died on October 29, 1986, in his London apartment at age 42. The cause of death was a heart attack. Marter, a diabetic for many years, was always taking very good care of himself, but diabetes is well-known for triggering early heart attacks. No doubt a great many fans—both those who were fortunate enough to meet him and those who only admired from a distance—will go out on a clear night, look up at the stars and remember Ian Marter as “not too bad a person.”

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