Dr. Who? Sylvester McCoy, that's who!

By Steve Biodrowski

Sylvester McCoy was the last actor to portray Dr. WHO on the long-running British TV series. Although his adventures may be less familiar to American viewers than those of Jon Pertwee and Tom Baker (whose episodes were extensively shown on PBS), he gained higher visibility with his cameo appearance as a character on the sci-fi series "Buffy" where the Fox Network's made-for-television Dr WHO movie, and now some of his classic episodes have reached these shores on video tape. Today, McCoy is happy to be part of the history of a show that existed long before he became a part of it. "I knew a fellow named Ted Wilson," he recollected. "I started watching when the second Doctor, Patrick Troughton, was in it. I enjoyed it a lot, but then when I started working as an actor, I couldn't really follow it, so I lost the habit of watching. But then I was able to see some of it at a national institution in this country. I mean even today, out in Trafalgar square, I was launching the time thing [countdown] for the millennium, because of Dr. WHO, ten years after I started doing it." McCoy landed the role after seeing a performance by the previous actor, Colin Baker, who was, "I phoned up my agent and said, 'There's an acting job. Get in touch with the BBC.' And he did. As luck would have it, the next phone call the producer got was from another producer at the BBC, who said, 'Listen, I think Sylvester McCoy would make a very good Doctor.' And the producer of Dr. WHO said, 'What, are you working for the same agent?' Just by this coincidence, this made the producer interested. I was at that time at the Royal Nation Theatre, playing the Pied Piper, a musical that had been written for me; he came to see that, and it was a very good audition piece for Dr. Who." As with the other actors in the role, McCoy's interpretation of the Doctor relied somewhat on his own personality. "Well, you have both a little say, and you have the writers trying to write for you," he explained. "The writers, in a way, spend most of their imagination writing for the other characters, because the Doctor is there—he's been created. I suppose it gets the individuality from the fact that they try to employ actors who have got a lot of personality themselves. I mean, other actors haven't got a lot of personality, but that doesn't mean they're not good actors; some of them are stunning actors—chameleons—but in their own life continued on page 61
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played the Doctor Who tended to be larger than life charac-

ters—I don't know if I was one, but that's how I tended to view the

others, anyway. So they filled the roll of the Doctor, because it was

kind of an empty space in the script, apart from the words they

didn't have to say, and the actor came along with his personality and

filled that space.

This necessitated a certain

flamboyance in the performance.

"That was one of the ingredients

in the Doctor, and in a way that's

why the kept changing characters—it gave it an interest, because a new

eccentricity would come along."

Still, while bringing something new, McCoy was conscious of the

character's history. "I also want-

—because there were six other

Doctors before me—to be a mul-

tia-facted Doctor myself. If there

were any moments that I thought

were a Patrick Troughton moment or a John Pertwee moment or a

Tom Baker moment or whatever, I

would think of that and, in think-

ing of that, hopefully bring a little

of them into that moment. That's

why my Doctor was a bit comical, I

think, and I was a bit like Patrick

Troughton. If he was a bit crabbit and bad-tempered sometimes, that

was like William Hartnell. Some-

times he was aloof and mysteri-

ous; sometimes he was a bit dan-

gerous, like Colin Baker."

Besides a changing personality,

each new Doctor also had a dif-

ferent look. Did the actor have any

influence over the costume? "Yes,

I did," said McCoy. "I actually

wore my own hat. I went to see

the producer, and my hat was like

that. I said, "Give me that hat!" he

said. Well, if you're going to put

the hat in DOCTOR WHO, you've
got to have me with it." So that's

how I got the roll: they cast the

hat, but I went with the hat!

"That was the beginning of the

costume," he continued. "I wanted

a Chekovian professor type, and

also I wanted big pockets, because I

wanted somewhere to keep the

script—that's how it came to be.

The walking stick was my idea,

because I liked the idea of work-

ing with a walking stick. The

question mark pullover wasn't my

idea; that was the producer's. He

did have his say."

By the time McCoy came to the

role, the character was a famil-

iar icon, not the object of mystery

he had originally been. "So much

had been written about The Doc-

tor that a lot of the mystery had

disappeared, unlike the original

first Doctor, and the second Doc-

tor as well—they were more mys-

terious characters. So what I want-
ed to do was bring back that mys-

tery. Luckily, the script editor was

of the same mind. The other thing

was the first Doctor was slightly

more dangerous, in a way, partly

because of the mystery, so I want-

ted to try and bring that back to

it—and a slight darkness as well. When you bring mystery, then that

can happen—darkness and dan-

ger. That's what we were working

towards."

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Lovecraftian Crawling Chaos was

living life as we know it, until there

is nowhere left for the characters to

run, except into the bowels of Hell itself.

This finale, though obviously

achieved on a low-budget, is nicely

realized. With but a single set and a

baza effect above the skyline to

imply an endless horizon, Fulci

conveys an apparently infinite

monotony of deserted nothingness;

plus, the imagery comes full cir-

cle, dissolving back to a painting

seen in the prologue, at last clari-

fying what the artist Schweik (An-

toine Saint-John) was attempting to

portray. Perhaps the most disturbing

is the fact that the characters who

suffer this fate have done nothing

deserve it. (It's not quite clear

whether this Hell is personal expe-

rience only for the two leads or

whether the entire world will soon

follow.) This is a film in which no

power of Good presents itself, and

there seems to be no way to stop

the advent of Hell once the Gate

has been opened. In an intriguing,

climactic image, MacColl and

Warbeck sport contact lenses simi-

lar to those worn by Antonella

Innocenti in the character's brief

career. The apparent conclusion is

that they have been struck blind; however, they are not acting as if

blinded, but are continuing to stare at the Hellen landscape sur-

rounding them. What is really happening?

Earlier, Emily had made the cryp-

tic statement that the blind "see

things more clearly." Perhaps her

pupil-less eyes do not really signi-

fy blindness; perhaps this is what

happens when one's sight is blast-

ed by a glimpse into The Beyond.

One small note of praise for the

cast: In a film like this, not much is

required of the actors in terms of

characterization, so it helps to have

some kind of inherent appeal or

likability. Both Warbeck and

MacColl fill the bill. Though hard-

dly allowed to deliver tour-de-force

performances, they nevertheless

face the proceedings as seriously

as possible, never descending into

camp or winking at the audience.

Wretchedly mangled in its

original U.S. release, THE BEY-

YOND has long deserved a resur-


