By Nancy J. Banks

I might have been a scout troop meeting but it wasn’t: 30 rowdy, intensively literate post-teenagers in matching uniforms packed into a musty basement in Worth, Illinois. But plans for picnics and softball games failed to excite this crowd as they passed the pop and potato chips. They were here for the TV – 30 pairs of eyes in a darkened room, absorbed in the flickering light of an electronic camp fire that tells its own tall tales at night.

As the identical T-shirts proclaim, these are the U.N.I.T. Irregulars, and for the last hour and a half they have been in the thrill of Doctor Who, the oftbeat British science-fiction series that has become Chicago’s hottest cult hit and cultural phenomenon.

Though the show caught on here only two years ago, Chicago’s Doctor Who audience has burgeoned into the largest in the country, spawning bookstores, conventions, and more than a dozen clubs like the U.N.I.T. Irregulars for fans who can’t get enough Doctor Who. Who-mania reaches something of a climax this week, as Chicago marks the 30th anniversary of the show’s British premiere with a special episode Wednesday on Channel 11, followed by a same-night conversion this weekend of the Hyatt Regency O’Hare featuring virtually every- one ever associated with Doctor Who.

Sure, there have been sci-fi cults before—and plenty of superheros to rival the Doctor, the time- and space-traveling protagonist of Doctor Who, who regularly saves whole planets and galaxies from Ultimate Destruction while still retaining his sense of humor. But there is something other than Dr. Who’s bizarre blend of (mostly) terrific plots, tacky special effects, solid British acting, and tongue-in-cheek humor that gives the show camp to such high points in the best neo-comic-book tradition or rise to the status of a social movement of significant social issues. Imagine Star Wars as conceived and executed by the Monty Python troupe, and you get a pretty good idea of Doctor Who.

Sitting around after the show in the Irregulars’ beret-clad, uncared-for, carpeted living room, surrounded by incongruous boxes of video equipment, the Irregulars discuss the Doctor’s exploits. None, by the way, isn’t his name—that, according to early episodes, is beyond the powers of the human tongue to pronounce—with a fervor strong enough to make more mundane matters, like Central America or the Middle East, fade into insignificance.

“Something like the ‘Seeds of Death’ episode, for example,” you’ve got an alien invasion, a return to the set of Doctor Who, but there’s no comment about the evils of big business,” insists Adam Carriere, the founder of the Irregulars. “It’s not unusual for the Irregulars, a kilt-clad would-be scriptwriter who is currently studying at Columbia College. “And when I saw ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ by the constant parallels between the situation on Solos and the British writer’s conceptions of the Red Death. When the marshal says to the district president, ‘These people aren’t ready for independence,’ and the guy turns around and says, ‘Well, if they’re ready for independence or not. We’re going to give it to them anyway…’”

I mean, what other show can handle topics like that? None.”

That unique, almost Shakespearean quality that enables viewers to see what

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**MISCELLANY**

**Fans of Who**

“When I saw ‘The Mutants’ I was struck by the parallels between the situation on Solos and the British withdrawing from their own empire… I mean, what other show can handle topics like that?”

above game shows as an art form, are also drawn to Doctor Who.

“That’s the nice thing about Doctor Who. It bonds us all together,” observes U.N.I.T. Irregular脚footplayer Sargent, a shy, blond schoolteacher from the northern suburbs. “I wasn’t really into science fiction at all. When I first watched Doctor Who I just never read science fiction, so I never paid that much attention to it, but Doctor Who is different. It’s less mechanistic and the characters are really likeable. I think that’s why I stuck with the show.”

Sarge isn’t alone. A realm normally dominated by adolescent males, Doctor Who attracts substantial numbers of women, partly because it’s one science-fiction adventure women can watch without grimacing. Over the years, the Doctor has invariably been accompanied in his travels by at least one attractive young woman—a reporter, for example, an extraterrestrial jungle woman, an Australian airline stewardess who popped into a police call box after her car broke down, little realizing it was really an unhinderingly sophisticated machine that swiftly (but often inaccurately) traveled in time and space. The companion’s role was rather basic, notes the show’s current producer, John Nathan-Turner. Some of the requirements used to be that she be able to run down long corridors and say, “What do we do now, Doctor?” with some degree of conviction. In recent years, however, things have changed. “I certainly think the program has been influenced by women’s liberation,” Nathan-Turner says. “The companions have attained more of a substantial character than their predecessors, and they’re not just the traditional screamers.”

But forget women’s liberation and the show’s enlightened female characters. Who-ever, Dr. Who’s popularity among women, the female members of U.N.I.T. are unanimous in suggesting that such an appeal is centered up in two words: Tom Baker. Less good-looking than his successor, Peter Davison, and less dashing than his predecessor, Jon Pertwee, Tom Baker has won them over by his low key in the world as Jo was given a chance to become queen of the planet.

Dress leans toward 20-foot scarves and wide-brimmed hats, but endless variations on the theme are also in evidence. Re- spectable grannies in Doctor Who’s T-shirts and baseball caps swap details of their favorite episodes with eight-year-olds dressed either as various incarnations of the Doctor or as monstrous villains, while bewildered parents look on, their eyes ever-vigilant, wondering how they just spent $85 on a bunch of strange-looking books and posters anyway.

‘You know, there are an amazing number of incredibly fat people here,” one photographer points out, more or less accurately. ‘Is that fact significant? Who knows. Perhaps it’s just symptomatic of the fact that people who join cults simply feel more comfortable than in dealing with society as a whole. After all, an intimate knowledge of the history and culture of Gallifrey matters more than a vague figure to Who fans.

Like Adam Carriere, many of the fans gathered here are members of the sci-fi/ fantasy crowd in general—former Trekkie, Douglas Adams addicts, admirers of Frank Frazetta. And an awful lot of ordinary viewers, including many who consider science fiction barely one step

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Saturday Night Live and the Rocky Horror cult, and Channel 11 has been able to cash in on that trend with Doctor Who. Dedicated Who fans like the Irregulars may decry the time slot as "awful" and insist they'd watch it at any other time, but a whopping 6 percent of Chicago's TV households disagree. Since they are the ones who have turned Doctor Who into Channel 11's oddest success story, the station's attitude toward disgruntled fans like the Irregulars seems to be that those who can, watch; and as for the rest, let them watch videotapes.

Named after a paramilitary organization on the show, the U.N.I.T. Irregulars have never shrunk from conflict, and earlier this year the troop took on Channel 11 — not in a dispute over scheduling, but over the very survival of Doctor Who in Chicago itself. The root of the trouble sprouted back in England where, in late 1980, the moody Baker left/was ousted from the show and was replaced by mild-mannered Peter Davison, familiar to Channel 11 audiences for his role as the devil-May-care younger brother on the BBC veterinary sitcom All Creatures Great and Small. By January of this year, the first Davison episodes were being seen across part of this country — but not in Chicago.

Convinced that Channel 11 was cheating them of the new adventures out of sheer parsimony, U.N.I.T. members reacted with outrage. "We were the first to take a stand against Channel 11 and the first to say, 'We gotta do something about this,'" Carriere recalls. "To this day Channel 11 denigrates, ignores, and openly disdains Doctor Who fans, especially those in clubs."

Bandaging together with other fan clubs in a United Doctor Who Network organized by George Broo of the New Fantasy Shop (a popular local hangout for Who fans), the U.N.I.T. members, with Carriere as their spokesman, fought for an aggressive response. Carriere soon found himself outflanked by the moderates, however, as the network settled on the idea of a boycott and pulled out about 150 fan club members who had been scheduled to answer telephones during Channel 11's March pledge drive.

But Carriere had had a tip from a production manager at WTTW indicating that, because of the flak the show was generating from fans, Channel 11 was seriously planning to cancel Doctor Who altogether. Panicked by the information, the U.N.I.T. forces regrouped. Certain that only swift action could avert imminent termination of the Doctor's life in Chicago, the Irregulars plotted their strategy with all the intensity of Daleks planning the conquest of Skaro. (And that, in case you've never seen this peculiar species of walking, talking sociopathic peppershakers in action, is very intensely indeed.) "We wanted something substantial, something showable, something physical," Carriere says. "We wanted a picket."

On Sunday of pledge week, 50 U.N.I.T. Irregulars showed up outside Channel 11 headquarters and, together with 25 other concerned fans, picketed for several hours. In addition, club members jammed Channel 11's phone lines during the drive, repeatedly calling the station with pledges from "Peter Davison" or "Richard Bowman" or even "Ian Smith."

"With hindsight," says Carriere, "it was a rotten thing to do. It was probably the most childish of all the things we did. But you know, that's what hit 'em the hardest, because we didn't just do it on Sunday — we did it all week, all three weeks — but it was especially intense on Sunday night." (Channel 11 acknowledges that the phone jamming hurt pledges during the March drive, though by how much is impossible to estimate.)

Suddenly, two weeks after the drive ended, Channel 11 announced on the air that the station had concluded negotiations for the new episodes and that it had not only purchased rights to all the Davison episodes, but had also renewed its rights to the Baker episodes through 1991, and had secured rights to the preceding Doctor, Jon Pertwee, as well.

What happened? Had U.N.I.T.'s tactics prevailed on Channel 11 to change its corporate mind? Carriere thinks so: "It was successful. Obviously nobody knows except the people at Channel 11 how much it mattered to them and nobody cares. They're showing the new episodes now and they're treating the show more respectfully. That's all we asked."
But out at Channel 11’s northwest-side headquarters, Richard Bowman paints a different picture. According to Bowman, Channel 11 would willingly have purchased the new episodes sooner—had the syndicator (New York-based Lionheart Television International) been willing to sell them. But Lionheart first chose to offer the Davison episodes on a market-by-market basis—with Chicago well down on the list. “They knew we had rights to the Baker episodes that would keep us until January of 1984,” Bowman explains. “So when the new episodes came available, there was no rush for them to start the sales and syndication process in Chicago.”

Several insiders also speculate that Lionheart had sound financial reasons for holding out on the Chicago market. Doctor Who draws better ratings and a far bigger audience here than in any city in the country. Consequently, the price Lionheart can command from Channel 11 is higher than in other markets where the fans are neither as numerous nor as outspoken. (Channel 11 officials will not comment on how much they are paying for Doctor Who other than to say it is “a lot.”) While Lionheart couldn’t have foreseen the intensity of the Chicago reaction to the information that new episodes were available, it is more than likely that the syndicators counted on some form of mounting fan interest that would influence Channel 11 to meet whatever terms they would eventually offer for the new shows.

Caught between the fans’ pressure tactics and Lionheart’s refusal to sell them the new episodes, Channel 11 officials were going slightly crazy. “I kept writing letters saying, ‘Look, once it’s available, we’ll bid on it. Trust us. All you’re doing is serving to drive the price up, to make it harder for us to buy them,’” an exasperated Bowman explains. “But the fans insisted on dealing in rumors and the result is that one or two people almost screwed the deal for us. However, once we were finally able to get Lionheart to say, ‘OK, you can now bid on it,’ within three weeks we had it all signed, sealed, and delivered for another eight years.”

As for Carriere’s rumor that Channel 11 might have taken Doctor Who off the air altogether, however, Bowman confesses: “For a moment there, because of the public relations problems the fans were generating, we thought, ‘Maybe it’s not worth it.’ But I pointed out that you can’t let a handful of fans screw the deal for 350,000 people. I felt we had to go back and buy the stuff. It’s good stuff and it’s got an audience.”

Whether you accept Carriere’s or Bowman’s version of the events surrounding Channel 11’s purchase of the new episodes, one thing is clear. Those events have poisoned relations between the station and fan club members in Chicago, and hastened Channel 11’s decision not to include fans in future pledge activities. “It’s just easier for us at this point to use our regular volunteers, and we don’t have to worry about this feeling that developed in the past that the fans really owned the show,” says Bowman.

And even Carriere has been forced to admit that his antics and those of his fellow fans may have legitimately cost them the amity of Channel 11: “Looking at it from their point of view, I’d be pissed too, if there was a show that was really popular, but at the same time its popularity brought a lot of heartache. Channel 11 sees organized fandom as a pain in the ass, and they think Doctor Who fans are a little ‘off’ to begin with. They’ve had a lot of bad experiences with Doctor Who fandom, and I for one consider their distaste perfectly justified.”

If Carriere is willing to concede a certain amount of sympathy for the good folks at Channel 11, however, the one group he has no tolerance for is the inevitable band of professional promoters, merchandisers, and convention organizers who have sprung up in the wake of Doctor Who’s fans to exploit the commercial possibilities of the show. “Money is killing Doctor Who,” Carriere warns apocalyptically. “The bigger it gets, the glitzier it gets, and the more money that becomes involved, the more trouble there’s going to be.”

“Two years ago this was a nice, small, honest group of people, with one or two specific dealers, like Larry Charet [of Larry’s Comic Book Store] getting material to satisfy them. Then suddenly, everything exploded. Suddenly everybody’s a fan, everybody wants their piece of the pie, and the politics and the infighting that have come along with it are extraordinary. If some of these people are Doctor Who fans, I’ll kiss your ass. The bottom line is that the show is everybody’s. When it becomes somebody’s, that’s when fandom is in trouble.”

Fandom doesn’t appear to be in any terminal danger just yet however, and Doctor Who’s popularity is spreading faster than the invisible virus on Titan. The demand for fan clubs has even forced the U.N.I.T. Irregulars to open new branches at Northwestern and the University of Illinois, in addition to their Worth, Deerfield, and Columbia College divisions. Somehow the oddball escapist/pacificist/profeminist/anticapitalist science fiction/fantasy/comedy/drama has evidently struck a responsive chord here in Chicago. As Adam Carriere explains it, “There’s just never been anything quite like Doctor Who. That’s what it’s all about.”