

PIERS WENGER

## The next regeneration

The new executive producer of the BBC's biggest drama franchise launches the show's fifth season this Easter with a new Doctor, a new head writer, a new set of directors and a very new direction. No pressure then. Jon Creamer reports

Unless you've lately been living in a different dimension, you'll be aware that *Doctor Who* regenerates this Easter as new boy Matt Smith appears in the title role after David Tennant's five year run.

But, of course, series five is not just about a new Doctor. Both the show's exec producer and lead writer have regenerated too, with Julie Gardner and Russell T Davies now replaced by Piers Wenger and Steven Moffat.

Although both have been part of the show for a while with Wenger shadowing Gardner for a year and Moffat contributing some of the show's best episodes, this fifth season will be the first under their (along with fellow exec Beth Willis's) direct control.

"It would be mad to pretend there weren't moments of anxiety," says Wenger of his new job. "That's what gets us all out of bed in the morning but the trip of making it does take over from that fear."

The anxiety is heightened because the goal for series five has not been to simply keep the show on an even keel. "It felt like it should move forward and have a new look," says Wenger. "For the audience it should feel like an evolution, an exciting revved up version of the thing they're familiar with."

For a start, the production team's references have moved on. "When *Doctor Who* came back in 2005, *Smallville* was a show they took inspiration from," says Wenger. "But we've looked at the way the *Harry Potter* films become more cinematic, darker and more complex and we've allowed some of that evolution on *Doctor Who*." There's also an influence from films like *Twilight* and "Tim Burton films. We've tried to allow a little bit of that atmosphere and look to creep in" while "still making it feel like a full-blooded, humorous, action adventure story - ie what *Doctor Who* is in its DNA."

Of course, much of the change this season comes from the fact of a new lead actor and writer. "With Matt and Steven, things had to change. As producers we had to make sure everything else was in sync with that. Steven is a very different writer to Russell. His writing has a different character. *Blink* is a good example of how he likes to use childhood fears to inject jeopardy into his stories. We took that as a lead to bring in a sense of wonderment and fairytale and a little more darkness - that feeling of a classic children's story."

Matt Smith is a very different Doctor too, says Wenger. "If there was one guiding principle [to the

casting of the new Doctor] it was it would be hard to cast someone who was a bit like David. How would they ever make the part their own?"

Despite feverish speculation at the time about who would get the part, Wenger says he and Moffat "entered into [the casting] in a rather pedestrian way in that we just met lots of actors. Matt was the second person we met and it was instantly clear that he was the one."

He says that while Tennant's doctor was a "superb everyman doctor, Matt's is more chaotic, charming in a more bumbling way, less obviously responsible, more unpredictable. He's quite clumsy as a person, there is a Stan laurel-ish quality to him. He is very creative and thinks a lot about how to surprise and entertain people and how not to do the obvious things. He's made it fun and loveable but he does also have resources as an actor that allow him to turn on a sixpence and become powerful and shouty and scary sometimes."

While much of the production team remains constant, achieving the change in tone that Wenger, Willis and Moffat desired also called for a change in the show's direction. "We worked with a completely new set of directors," says Wenger. A decision that's been "hugely beneficial in allowing the show to evolve. We tried to find directors who know how to tell a story and were full of visual flare and ambition" including Adam Smith (*Little Dorrit* and *Skins*) Jonny Campbell (*Ashes to Ashes*, *Shameless*) Toby Haynes (*Five Days*, *Being Human*).

And, probably more significantly, "We've allowed them a slightly freer rein than directors have had on the show previously. Giving those people their head a bit is probably the boldest choice we've made because on a show like *Doctor Who*, you have to carefully police the making of the show. With 13 episodes it has to happen to quite a strict schedule. If everyone isn't working to a brief, costs can spiral."

Especially when aspirations are now so high: "You have to be careful for your ambition not to outstrip your resources." But then, he says the new tone of fairytale and darkness will help with that too. "Steven's writing is less likely to feature a thousand Daleks flying over Canary Wharf and more likely to be about a statue that moves when your eyes are closed." And more likely to have another generation watching from behind the sofa. ■

### CV

#### EDUCATION

Newcastle Under Lyme School, Exeter University (BA English Literature)

#### CAREER

Left university in 1993 and spent seven years as a journalist before becoming a script editor and eventually head of development at Granada's London drama department. In 2006 produced the Bafta and RTS winning *Housewife, 49* starring Victoria Wood and then produced *Ballet Shoes* in 2007. In 2008, became head of drama at BBC Wales overseeing *Doctor Who*, *Upstairs Downstairs*, *Sherlock* and *Ashes to Ashes* among others.



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