

DR WHO IS ON THE MOVE AGAIN

By Daniel Farson

When Tom Baker stepped into the time machine he quickly became one of Britain's best-loved actors. Why has he decided to move on?

When Tom Baker was chosen for Dr Who it was a triumph of casting. Though his predecessors in the role had been distinguished: William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton and Jon Pertwee, Baker's flamboyant personality enhanced the Doctor's eccentricity so perfectly it is hard to think of one without the other. Consequently, the news that they are about to part company has shocked the viewers, estimated at 100 million in 37 countries, but it makes sense. Baker is now in his seventh year as Dr Who and is too versatile an actor to be restricted to one character, even though it has proved the part of a lifetime. Appropriately, his first major role following the intrepid space investigator, promises to be the greatest detective of them all - Sherlock Holmes in a stage version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Talking to Tom Baker is an extraordinary experience. The eyes mesmerise and the voice enchants. Not only is he interesting, but he sounds so interested that he makes an exceptional listener too.

Sometimes his talk is so honest it has the shock of a confessional: "I had a very religious mother, and I went to Mass 21 times a week when I was a boy". Attending constant funerals as an altar boy, he discovered a "capacity to grieve. Of course, one never had breakfast, because one wasn't allowed to eat before communion, and I was standing by the graveside and it was so cold I began to weep as the old lady was lowered. We used to get a three-penny bit afterwards, but a man came over, squeezed my arm, and gave me a two shilling piece, which confounded me. And it suddenly clanged in my little head - already rapacity was rearing at the age of eight - that he thought I was crying for his mother".

In war-time Liverpool he was desolate because his house was left intact: "All the children whose houses had been bombed were getting games from America with 'Greetings'! from the President. I prayed that my mother would be murdered on her way back from the pub where she worked. They'd have noticed me then. Odd, really, considering how much I loved her".

Returning home many years later he found his parents dying in separate rooms, not having spoken for seven years. Knowing how page 38▶

In his bag Tom Baker always carries a speech by Solzhenitsyn. Often there is sliced salami and Parma ham too



Photographs by Martyn Goddard



◀page 35 hard his mother worked as a char to send him a few pounds when he was a drama student, he leaned over her guiltily to ask if there was anything she wanted:

"Yes", she whispered, "to outlive that old goat in the next room". But she did not. "When my brother told him the news, my father wept for all those wasted years, all that silence; wept and wept... I felt sorry for him".

In spite of such candour, Tom Baker remains elusive, almost an enigma. He arrives alone and leaves alone, vanishing like Dr Who in his space-machine box. People hear a cry of "taxi"!, but seldom the address. Only recently has he possessed a home at all, a place in Chelsea - though home is hardly the word for it, as he tries to make it "non-specific" as if he were scared the walls might develop a personality of their own. What does he go back to?

"Nothing. Just books in boxes on the floor and, oh yes, a line of shoes all on trees, otherwise there is no evidence of the person who lives there - apart from the book titles". No dog or cat, even?

"I like cats but I don't want to be tied down".

Shortly after this declaration, with typical unpredictability he announced his intention to marry Lalla Ward, the 29-year-old actress who played Dr Who's assistant for two years. So now he is ready to replace possessions he gave away on impulse during "bad mood-swings", like the time he played Macbeth, terribly in his view, at London's Shaw Theatre.

His disaster with Macbeth was relieved by a moment of magic. As so often with Baker, it was accidental.

Tom Baker has already been made into wax by Mme Tussaud's. Here he watches his fiancée Lalla Ward take her turn to be modelled, as Romana in *Dr Who*

Waiting in the wings, someone offered him a peanut which he took without thinking. As he rushed on a particle of peanut stuck on his vocal chords and, terrified that he was about to choke, he advanced to the front of the stage and hissed and whispered his soliloquy to the audience. Afterwards, the actors crowded round to congratulate him on this master-stroke. "How did you think of it?" asked the director.

"It wasn't easy", he replied.

Did he do it again? "Oh yes, every night after that".

He is a walking contradiction: a man who adores company, but needs to have solitude. He will iron his shirts immaculately and his shoes are hand-made, but he spoils the effect by wearing a dreadful old mackintosh which a seedy flasher in Muswell Hill would be ashamed of. Why? "I think it's because it amuses everybody, it has become a sort of prop". When asked why he does not wear a watch, he looks up with "Because it's much more *fun* asking people the time"!

Fun is the vital ingredient, the quality he brings to Dr Who which makes him so popular with children.

"I am in a unique position", he realises; "the exception to the rule of 'never take sweets from a stranger or talk to strange men'". Anxious aunts and nannies have been known to hover as they see their charges

in such intense conversation with a man in a mac on a park bench, and Baker has heard the children whisper fiercely: "Go away! He's Dr Who".

His rapport with children is fantastic in every

sense: "There is a marvellous feeling of intimacy, even though they are responding to a fiction. The small ones are not interested in Tom Baker's anxieties, only in the Doctor. They're utterly reliable and rather amusing". How does he put them at their ease? "I get in first. I say 'Haven't I met you before? I know! I've seen you watching television'. Or, when they're very young: 'I've seen you hiding behind the sofa'. And that slays them, and they gurgle".

He detests the interruption of parents who tell their children what to say - "Tell him your name, George".

When meeting a child his punch-line is unexpected: "George, how nice to see you. Can I have your autograph"? And the boy produces a piece of paper and writes **GEORGE** laboriously, thrilled. In return he gives the child one of the postcards of Dr Who he always carries with him, for there is no point in mock modesty or trying to avoid recognition.

"I'm rather a *timid* sort of person really, so I like small children before they've been spoiled or disappointed. I find it an ecstatic sensation to be with another human being like that".

Consequently his recent reunion with his elder son sounds poignant; it was so long since they had known each other that he failed to recognise him. He married Anne Wheatcroft in 1960 and has two sons, Daniel, 19, and Piers, 14. Though he now sees more of his ex-wife, the marriage was page 42▶

◀page 38 over long ago, and the misery which can mar the relationship between parents and children concerns him. He recites a savage poem by Philip Larkin which ends:

*They gave you all the faults
they had*

It deepens like an ocean shelf.

Get out as quickly as you can.

And don't have any kids yourself.

Reading is a passion of his, which he has been able to share with children in his programme *The Book Tower*, which has proved so popular that there have been 28,000 enquiries so far from children, schools and libraries.

He produces a copy of Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Prize acceptance speech from his case: "I always carry it with me. To me there's something Messianic in his bravery and mind-dissolving love of truth and honour. When he quotes Dostoyevsky as saying that the world will be saved by beauty, I agree wholeheartedly".

The copy of the speech is joined in the case on Saturday afternoons by slices of Parma ham and salami, bought in Soho, which he distributes in his favourite club, The Colony Room in Dean Street, where he drinks gin and Perrier water. One reason he goes there, apart from the talk and laughter, is a particular admiration for painter Francis Bacon, another member. "He astounds me. He has that golden charismatic quality of making life more interesting when you're with him. I cannot comment

"Sometimes I'm happy, sometimes irrationally filled with dread: but an awful lot of people have the same anxieties"

sensibly on his paintings, but his conviction amazes me and I want to be amazed. He elevates".

Bacon has a comparable feeling for Baker, but has never seen him on television. A nice irony considering that Tom Baker must have one of the best-known faces in Britain. In Brook's Club a distinguished-looking man called out "Dear Doctor, how terribly nice to see you in Brook's"! Baker's host said later, "Do you know who that is? He's a *High Court Judge*"!

It is all too easy to portray him as a character from Dostoyevsky, without the redeeming humour. "I think I'm a bit hyper-tense. Sometimes I'm happy, sometimes irrationally filled with dread: but an awful lot of people have the same anxieties. Perhaps I'm easily cast-down because of my compulsive reading of sad things in newspapers – cataclysmic reports from all over the world. I grieve for the misunderstanding of people everywhere".

He may savour melancholy, as Slavs enjoy sad violins, but it goes deeper. At night he dislikes the door being closed and finds it difficult to sleep in the dark. He is frightened of

not sleeping at all, yet terrified of a recurring nightmare where he finds himself enclosed in a room with eight or nine people: "they're bandaged, like war casualties, and they turn their faceless faces towards me as if they are reproaching me for their wounds".

Is this the guilt of a doubtful Catholic? It could be argued that he is a man in search of his religion, for he entered a Catholic Order at the age of 15. When he decided at 21 that he was unable to continue he was told "We can reject you, but you are not supposed to reject us". After this he joined the Merchant Navy and was astounded on his first night at sea to find himself in the crew's bar next to a burly stoker dressed in a sequined evening gown. The outside world, he began to suspect, was stranger than he realised. He has worn such a stare of astonishment ever since.

It is possible to theorise too turgidly, to interpret the "non-specific" room as a wistful return to that monastic cell – the monk who plays Rasputin. Gently he puts it all in perspective: "You can't entirely erase all that, can you? Sometimes in the early morning today I go into St Patrick's in Soho, or the Brompton Oratory, or occasionally to Mount Street, and pray to the same saints that I did as a child".

His stamina is one of his most exceptional gifts. He plays hard and works even harder. He is noted for his discipline. Don Norman, his record producer, testifies to his professional-

ism. "He spent a lot of time with me on the editing of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and bothers to find out what you intend to do with music and sound effects. Whenever we work together he is generous with his time".

When he was asked to play Dr Who, Tom Baker had no hesitation – "I was working on a building site at the time. Reservations vanish with poverty". Yet, in spite of that momentary doldrum, his theatrical background had been distinguished.

After the Merchant Navy he joined a drama school, leaving for the York Repertory Theatre where he was noticed by a director from the National and placed under contract. His most important role in the next two and a half years was the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* and it was Laurence Olivier who suggested him for the part of Rasputin in Spiegel's film of *Nicholas and Alexandra*. Further film parts, a season at the Bristol Old Vic, and a BBC television production of *The Millionairess* led to *Dr Who*. Seven years later he has become one of the best loved actors in Britain, but he is eager to move on: "It becomes a diminishing return".

What are his plans, now that he is separating from such a formidable identity? The range is wide: after Holmes, he could play Falstaff or Uriah Heep. Because of *Dr Who*, shown by 130 stations in the U.S. alone, he is known all over the world.

"I should like to do lovely, amusing, funny, starring things", he says. "I like fantastical characters, like Captain Hook or Long John Silver. Or Chekhov – Uncle Vanya's not a hundred miles from Dr Who, though some would take issue with that. But I know I could not stop being an actor. That's all I am".

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