Directing the unfinished SHADA

WHEN the release of Shada, what better time to print an interview with director Pen- nant Roberts — conducted by TV Zone before the announcement was made regarding Shada’s video release — about his work on the aborted story and the myriad production problems that had to be faced.

**TV Zone:** Looking back at Shada, a decade after its untimely end, what sort of potential do you think the story had, and how do you think it would have been received?

**Penant Roberts:** I was very distressed by the whole chapter, really. I think it had a lot of potential. I haven’t read it, but from what I gather, I think that [Douglas Adams'] Dirk Gently storyline skates many elements of Shada. This is all thirdhand, but obviously Douglas didn’t let it go. I thought it had a lot going for it.

**On Location**

What happened was we were at the end of 1979, and it was a six-part story, therefore there were three fortnightly blocks to be recorded with about four or five days filming in Cambridge beforehand, which we finished. We then had a dispute about the electricians which meant that the sequence that I would have eventually shot at night had to be shot during the day, which in point of fact I wanted to do anyway. I felt that we would be able to control the crowds at Cambridge and would then be able to see some of it while shooting it as a day scene, whereas before we were considering a night chase scene with the Doctor being pursued by this invisible sphere. If we shot this scene at night, it would have meant two lighting crews leapfrogging through the whole of Cambridge, and it was beginning to look very costly in terms of effort. It meant a very long night’s work — four in the morning is not the best time to be working while keeping the pressure on, because I like to hop from one place to another.

We extended the sequence, shooting the next day in daylight, but we weren’t able to shoot the night sequence after all because of the strike. It was only a wildcard thing; our charge hand was not able to work, and he was very distraught about it. We went down to this pub at the end of the alleyway where we were filming that day, and this young lad from King’s College turned up and started talking about Doctor Who and how much he enjoyed it, and said: “Why don’t you have the King’s College Gentleman Songsters in Doctor Who?”. He was the secretary. I said, “Well, we’ll be filming in Cambridge tomorrow, and if you can provide us with the King’s College Gentleman Songsters, we’ll be glad to have them aboard!” He asked what time, and we made this arrangement that the Songsters would be at this particular corner at four o’clock.

We then had this sequence where Tom was escaping this invisible sphere, pedalling his bicycle past the Gentleman Songsters who were singing ‘Chattanooga Choo Choo’ in twenty-two part harmony. Now when I say an ‘invisible’ sphere, it would have been visible, but because we were able to edit it in afterwards, it wasn’t visible in that shot.

**TV Zone:** So you wound up with this wonderful scene of Tom Baker riding by and ringing his bell to punctuate the music.

**Penant:** Yes, and it all arose out of this conversation in a pub at half past seven the night before! That was the sort of thing you would do in those days.

Anyway, we had done this first block of recording and what I had found from my experience of doing the show was that if you had multiple blocks, what you needed to do was as much dialogue as possible during the first block because it gave the actors an opportunity to find their characters, and then you would do as many special effects as possible in the second block. Therefore, if there were going to be three blocks, we did all the dialogue sequences and all the Chronotis scene sequences first, plus the lab scenes, and probably not an awful lot else.

**Studio Strike**

We got set to rehearse the second block, but by then we had to release some of the actors, because they were only set to appear in the college room scenes. We began to rehearse the second block, but one of those stupid disputes arose; a technical managers dispute. I got into the studio early that day, because I was a bit worried about the amount of time available, and had asked for an early start at two o’clock. I had actually rehearsed in this set which was beautifully designed...

**TV Zone:** Was this the spaceship or the prison set?

**Penant:** No, we never got that far. I can’t remember which one it was right now, but I remember being particularly impressed by it, and we had worked on it from twelve o’clock that day, and that was when the dispute hit, and I lost the rest of my studio time. We went back into rehearsing this block and I think the dispute was resolved the day before we would have been in the studio for the third block, so I thought well, at least we’ll get something done, but we didn’t. They hadn’t finished building, because they thought this dispute was going to go on much longer and they cancelled the work. We now had no sets, the actors were all ready to go, and we were moving into Christmas, and they had to use the studio for the Christmas run.

**Trying for a Remount**

For a long time we thought we would be able to re-stage it in January at the end of that current run, it really involved about three actors. I think the regulars, Chris Neame, Dennis Carey...

There was certainly a lot of special effects work to be done and that would have been very time consuming. Of course the story would have been totally, well, with just the bits that we had already done. There was talk of trying to steer a clear course for home and creating a four part story out of the bits already in the can, but of course that would have been totally impractical. We had done pieces of six episodes which took place in the rooms and you certainly couldn’t have reconstructed the plot out of that. You probably would have had to chop about half of that away if we went for four episodes.

**TV Zone:** So you would have lost a lot of the footage you had already done?

**Penant:** That’s right. I think what was
IN a brave move, BBC Video have salvaged what remains of Shada and attempted to weave it into a story, with links provided by Tom Baker. Sadly, it falls rather flat.

Part of the reason for this is the script, written by Douglas Adams. While his work on The Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy is justifiably renowned, Adams’s efforts for Doctor Who were variable at best; one rather good script (The Pirate Planet) plus script editorship of the show’s disastrous Seventeenth Season. It would seem that he never got to grips with what made Doctor Who successful; he was good at creating complicated, intriguing stories, but then proceeded to ruin these with unbelievable larger-than-life characters and self-indulgent, farcical humour.

Shada is no exception to this. On first inspection the story looks fascinating: an eccentric Time Lord called Professor Chronotis, who retired from Gallifrey three hundred years ago, summons the Doctor and Romana to his rooms in Cambridge, but forgets why. As the mystery unravels we discover it concerns a book of ‘The Ancient Law of Gallifrey’, which Chronotis foolishly removed from the Panopticon Archives, and which is now sought after by the mind-robber Skagra in his search for the unknown ‘Shada’ and a super-criminal, Salyavin. All well and good, but the clever narrative is swamped with the most appallingly juvenile gags, such as the repetitive tea joke, mention of a book called ‘Alternative Betelgeuse’ (another reference to Hitch Hikers), Romana describing Gallifreyan children as ‘Time Tots’ and a scene where Chronotis beats his heart in Gallifreyan Morse. In fact the only time humour is used to good effect is in a scene not written by Adams, as the Doctor cycles past the King’s College Songsters as they sing ‘Chatinooga Choo Choo’. Production values are variable; the Cambridge location filming is a treat (Tom Baker’s Doctor fits in perfectly, and really should have been exiled there...) but the studio work is largely uninspiring. Rupert Howes-Jarvis’s costumes are dreadful, and include such travesties as the unconvincing Krargis, and the embarrassingly camp suit worn by Skagra.

In retrospect, releasing Shada was not a particularly wise move. Whereas episode one can be resurrected almost in its entirety, by the time we reach episode three only a few scenes per episode exist, and by episode six you are left feeling cheated as the story’s climax was never recorded. Considering the amount of post production work required, BBC Video’s investment in this project must have been substantial. The original material needed dubbing, editing, sound effects, some video effects work, plus specially composed incidental music and the re-hiring of David Brierley to voice K9 on the film footage. Admittedly it is rather well compiled, with all beginning and end title sequences intact, and the fades between scenes show some imagination on John Nathan-Turner’s part. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Keef McCulloch’s music; his ‘Cambridge’ theme is appealing, but the remainder is too brash and intrusive.

Add to this the cost of contracting Tom Baker to fill in the numerous gaps, and you end up with an expensive release that is one for the dedicated collector only. Shada is really nothing more than a curiosity.

Richard Houldsworth

DOCTOR WHO
Shada
BBC Video
Price £19.99

The Five Doctors...

TV Zone: As a footnote, how did you feel a few years later, getting to see some of your footage being used in The Five Doctors?

Pennant: It was a bit out of context. John said: ‘Do you mind if we use it?’ I said, ‘Feel free’. Yes, it was very much out of context for that period of the series, and especially on Douglas’ home patch of Cambridge. The whole punting sequence was very much part of Douglas’s background, and since he had been associated with the series over two or three years, it seemed appropriate that it should be done.

TV Zone: What about the talk of now using some of that footage, along with a framing device such as a Doctor?

Pennant: I certainly remember the discussion on whether we could make a four parter out of it very close to the time afterwards. Both Douglas and I looked at it and came to the conclusion that it wouldn’t have been possible. Because the number of elements that were incomplete spanned a greater number of sets and you required those to meld the story together. I think if you tried to cobble the story together, you would have to be an extremely clever writer to make any sense of it. The idea behind Shada was pretty weak anyway, and there wouldn’t have been any virtue to be gained from just using material for another purpose, especially the bits we had.

Joe Nazzaro