

# The good Doctor

Shopgirl Rose (Bille Piper) is whisked away by Eccleston's Doctor after her mannequins turn on her in episode one. All cg effects were done at The Mill



Russell T Davies, executive producer of the new series of *Doctor Who*, faces a challenge bigger than Jon Pertwee did in *Day of the Daleks*. Not only do he and his writing team – which includes Steven Moffat (*Coupling*) and Mark Gatiss (*The League of Gentlemen*) – have a huge legacy to live up to for the BBC's 13x45minute series but, in the 13 years since the Doctor last travelled through time and space, the bar on audience expectation has risen.

The BBC sets of old look decidedly shaky compared to those that followed in 90s effects-laden blockbusters, while US cult shows such as *Buffy* and the *Star Trek* spin-offs have hammered home the 21st-century need for “character arcs” and “emotional truths” – concepts as alien to a 70s viewer as the Nimon and the Garm were to Tom Baker.

“I don't think the fact that we're in the post-*Star Wars* era is an issue, but matching *Buffy* is. *Doctor Who* was never a space drama anyway, it was about horror: dark shadows and creepy monsters lurking just around the corner,” says Moffat.

Davies is the first to admit that his blueprint for the new series was *Buffy*. “It can break your heart, that programme, I absolutely love it,” he says. “In the 60s we could watch programmes like *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)* because we were happy with the spectacle, but now we're more adult and we expect that emotional content.”

With this in mind, Davies and series commissioner-cum-BBC Wales head of drama Julie Gardner had a very 21st-century, US-inspired “tone meeting,” and one of the rules to come out of it was that, in every episode of *Who* (as they call it), the Tardis must come back to Earth.

Davies says: “We need to return to Earth to get an emotional focus on what's going on. If we're on Planet Zog and Zog people are being affected by a monster, we couldn't really give a toss. But if there's a human colony on Planet Zog, then that's more interesting.”

While the scale of the BBC project and its budget (understood to be in the region of £600k per episode) doesn't quite match that of the US networks (which tend to run in seasons of 21), it's gone some way towards assuring Davies' ambitions.

Besides gaining an extra 25 minutes in length per episode, the new show also boasts a notably

Bigger Daleks, action-packed effects and a Tardis with added bling are new ingredients that Russell T Davies hopes will bring the Gallifreian time-lord hurtling towards the 21st century, reports Ann-Marie Corvin

sexier, younger-looking cast. The Doctor's new incarnation is a leather-jacket-clad Christopher Eccleston – the Salford-born actor known for his intense performances in *28 Days Later*, *Shallow Grave* and the Davies-penned *Second Coming*.

"He's not like Tom Baker, but what they have in common is that they can go around being as funny and daft and as gormless as they like, but you still take them seriously but because they're fundamentally both scary, impressive men," Davies adds.

Former teen pop-star Billie Piper – who proved her acting mettle in the BBC's *Canterbury Tales* – plays the Doctor's companion Rose Tyler; as in *Buffy*, the action in the new series is largely seen from the perspective of the young woman. "I think the companion is as pivotal to these adventures as the Doctor himself. Rose can be our eyes, discovering spaceships and alien creatures with awe and wonder, and a vital sense of humour," says Davies.

At times the new series' humour verges on the surreal, with characters being devoured by wheelie bins and spontaneously combusting in restaurants. Like *Buffy*, it also contains the odd-self referential wink to its increasingly-sophisticated audience.

"If you're an alien then how come you sound like you're from the north?" Rose asks the good Doctor in a scene where she learns that the London Eye conveniently doubles as an anti-plastic transmitter. And, in episode one, her reaction on entering the Tardis for the first time is, naturally for a Cardiff shopgirl, to run straight back out again.

The Tardis itself gets an added bling factor – the impossibly huge interior of the 1950s police call-box now stands at the larger height of 6.5m tall and is 20m wide. The structure (designed by Edward Thomas and housed at BBC Wales in Cardiff) has also been elevated off the ground to get away from the studio floor feel that's plagued past outings. "Russell and I thought the most powerful Tardis was the first one, so we kept this in mind but then we went back to nature – basing designs on organic materials, the main structure being coral, with glass walls and lots of wood," says Thomas.

The new series has also taken full advantage of computer graphics which were only just coming to the fore when the series was famously taken off air in 1992 (by current BBC Chairman Michael Grade, in his former guise as programme controller).

The Mill – best known for its Oscar-winning



work on *Gladiator* – carried out all the post-production, including colour grading and the infamous title-sequence which sees the doctor's head replaced by a red spinning disc. Visual effects producer Will Cohen claims it's the largest number of effects shots ever produced for a UK TV drama. "The technology has really moved on – we're working at TV resolution on DigiBeta rather than film, which speeds things up, but we've been averaging 100 effects shots per episode. Five years ago on *Gladiator* that's how much we totalled," he says.

Monster-making work included designing and animating the Gelth (a trail of ectoplasm intent on taking over the human form in Victorian Wales) and creating Cassandra (the last human on Earth, a piece of stretched skin supported by two poles that needs constant moisturising in order to survive).

Cohen explains: "Russell wanted her to be translucent and the entire character was created in cg. We had one character animator studying and tracking actress Zoë Wanamaker's expressions while she did the voiceover, while another concentrated on the lip-syncing."

Cassandra appears in the second episode – which sees Rose witness the end of the world – and Cohen reveals that it contains one fifth of all the effects

shots in the entire series. "We refer to it as the 'space opera' episode because there are two exterior space-station shots, views from outer space, a lot of green-screen set replacements, animated spiders and loads of particle work with suns expanding."

The Mill also collaborated with prosthetics specialist Neill Gorton to create new villains: the Slitheen, flatulent green monsters who disguise themselves as MPs and who are intent on initiating World War III. Cohen says it's still difficult and time-consuming to create moving characters in human form so, for the close-up shots of the creatures, they used Gorton's prosthetics while for the wider shots they used cg.

Miniature effects supervisor Mike Tucker (who also worked on Peter Davison's *Who* in the mid-80s) was also on hand to help create a scene which involves a retro-looking UFO smashing into Big Ben. While the Mill animated the spaceship and fuel trails based on designs by concept artist Bryan Hitch, the moment of impact was best achieved using a miniature of Big Ben.

"You could sit there and hand-animate every single particle of dust but sometimes it's easier to create miniatures and then just smash them up," says Tucker – who also worked on miniatures of the

Daleks, which appear to have grown considerably in size since their last appearance.

It's clear that the BBC is intent on making its money back and maximising one of its most enduring, well-known brands. Sales to CBC in Canada and Prime TV in New Zealand have already been announced, with Australian broadcasters expected to follow shortly. Sales to the US, however, may be hampered by the decision against shooting in HD.

Brand manager Ian Grutchfield sees a large part of his job as making sure a new generation of children are left cowering behind their sofas. "The challenge is to get younger children to watch the show – adults know *Doctor Who* exists but kids won't have heard of it and they're not traditionally the most prolific consumers of drama," he says.

To this end, the BBC's webpage ([bbc.co.uk/doctorwho](http://bbc.co.uk/doctorwho)) aims to snare youngsters with a single and multi-user game in which they get to become supervillains. Site visitors can also drive a Dalek and download *Who* sounds on their PCs. A half-hour behind-the-scenes programme, *Doctor Who Confidential* is also set to act as a companion to both fans and newcomers to the show and is scheduled to run on BBC3 after each episode of the new series goes out on BBC1 earlier on Saturday evenings. ■



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