

Dr Who design team sues BBC over film rights

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THREE award-winning special effects designers are suing the BBC for millions of pounds. They claim the corporation reneged on a deal for the film rights to *Dr Who* weeks before they were due to start shooting.

John Humphreys, George Dugdale and Peter Litten all worked on the *Dr Who* television series, which came to an end in 1989 after eight actors had taken the title role. They said their £15 million film would have starred Alan Rickman as the Time Lord under the direction of Leonard Nimoy — Mr Spock in *Star Trek* — and would have been packed with special effects.

Recognising the enormous cinema potential of the series, they had negotiated the rights for a film, established a consortium of about 20 individuals, including the pop star Bryan Ferry, and found a major investor in Lumière Pictures. Mr Humphreys said they had even put up their houses. They had secured backing from Lumière, a French-owned company with substantial interests in Britain, which had been inspired enough to be considering three films: As the option expiry dates had come and gone, they had extended them.

"They had been devastated by the BBC's actions. "This has taken its toll on us," he said. Each member of the consortium had lost money — "some a few thousand, others everything". He added: "When you're dealing with the BBC, you expect absolute honour. You wouldn't think you'd have a situation like this."

Mr Humphreys said: "Just before we started filming, the BBC wrote us a letter pulling the rights, saying we'd broken the agreement." In a case that goes to court in October, the designers are seeking damages of £8 million a picture.

Stuart Lockyear, of the law firm Stephens Innocent, which is acting on a "no win, no fee" basis because the



Rickman: was to have played the Doctor

designers' company has gone into liquidation, said that the BBC executives who originally drew up the contract had left. He suggested that the BBC had belatedly realised the commercial potential, particularly — if the rumours were to be believed after a Hollywood director had expressed interest in the project.

He said that the BBC had told them that the consortium should not have assigned its rights to a finance company. "That's what the consortium had done, but it had done it a year earlier and had told the BBC, which raised no objection. It was perfectly straightforward. They leapt upon this at the eleventh hour in order to justify their claim."

A spokeswoman for the BBC said: "The BBC owns the feature film rights to *Dr Who*. The BBC will be vigorously contesting the case. They licensed rights from us for a certain length of time. Within that time, they had to get this movie off the ground. They didn't, so the rights return to the BBC." She dismissed the suggestion that a Hollywood director had expressed interest in such a film.

Mr Humphreys, 43, a graduate of the Royal Academy Schools, has just won an art prize from the RA's Reynolds Club for former students. The winning work was one of his striking and disarmingly life-

like portraits in glass fibre that tease the eye and play with illusion by distorting and stretching facial features. He has also won Bafta awards for *Max Headroom*, the futuristic Channel 4 series, and various BBC programmes, including *The Young Ones*, creating a head decapitated from one of the characters.

His designs for *Dr Who* featured a creature called Sil, which he describes as "part-maggot and part-fish and still one of the top ten *Dr Who* creatures". It is among works that have been exhibited at the Museum of the Moving Image.

Between them, the three designers worked with Tom Baker, Peter Davidson and Colin Baker, among other actors who played the Doctor. They collaborated on a creature called the Magma Beast, a giant armadillo-like monster that killed off Peter Davidson allowing Colin Baker to take over the role.