Three years after he took his turn as Dr Who, Tom Baker landed in Boston to a welcome that was out of this world. John Sandiland witnessed the adulation. Photographs, Louise Gubb

Who on Earth...

Tom Baker walked on to the stage in the auditorium of the Boston Sheraton to the kind of welcome that only pop stars and successful dictators regard as routine: an involuntary levitation by all present, a thundering of feet and hands, a simultaneous exhalation of excited breath. For an unemployed English actor in a park-bench outfit of scarf, crumpled mac and plimsolls it was an astonishing reception. But then there was much to engender amazement at the Dr Who convention.

Indeed, given that Boston, host city to Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, capital of that north-eastern seaboard where the Ivy League colleges reside, has been called The Home of Reason there was reason to believe, on that particular weekend, that the place had gone completely round the bend. By night and day the streets around the Sheraton Hotel, centre of the convention, were thronged with persons of both genders in similar macs and elongated scarves and tennis shoes. Even the statue of an early US president on a high plinth in the city's main square had somehow acquired a droopy scarf and seemed likely to step down at any moment to shake Tom Baker by the hand.

Baker could then have climbed up on the plinth himself and become a fixture, a fitting memorial to the vast enthusiasm aroused by an individual who had done no more than play a mythical character on Saturday evenings on British television several years ago and thousands of miles away: a Time Lord in a piece of pseudo-scientific fiction originally intended for children and featuring such oddities as TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimensions in Space), a police-box shaped vehicle which whisked him through the time-space continuum.

It was another acronym, NADWAS (North American Dr Who Appreciation Society), which had brought him to Boston and the time-space convolutions of international TV marketing which was responsible for his present popularity, those segments of the series in which he starred having only recently reached America and having turned his portrayal of Dr Who, posthumously as it were, into the cult which was now being celebrated.

This was Baker's third visit to America in less than a year. He had manifested previously in Palo Alto, California, and Chicago and he was fascinated by the fact that the Home of Reason seemed most prone to mass-hysteria. "I was extremely nervous before I came here," he said. "I could imagine Dr Who being treated with a great deal of scorn by clever men from MIT."

Usefully for someone finding himself in such a curious situation,
Here, for example, was a mythic figure possessed of supernatural powers and glimpsed by mortals only in that trance-like state induced by television. Now, and closely pursuing the classic legend, he was to become flesh and move among his followers. His 'descent from the heavens at Boston's airport, in that case, was uneventful but there were soon auguries that a singular experience was about to commence.

He was spirited by representatives of NADWAS to one of the city's best hotels, or so it seemed from the number of photos of the local Kennedy family shaking hands with the manager which were framed and hung like trophies in the lobby. In that case, Baker, whose mac, scarf and plimsolls actually constitute his chosen everyday garb, looked more as if he was answering to a vagrancy charge than seeking registration at the reception desk.

He was rescued from this possibility by a whispered conversation between NADWAS and the desk clerks as a result of which he was booked in under an assumed name for security purposes, which instantly conferred high status nowadays in expensive hotels. His alias - Norman Rubinstein - was suitably cryptic but it was not infallible. Through mounting exposure in his TV persona in the following days, he was most frequently addressed as "Doctor", as if he had medical qualifications.

The preliminaries to the Doctor's personal appearance at the Sheraton were a series of media confrontations at local radio and TV stations where he was announced on the air with prodigious enthusiasm but the incoherence that accompanies programmes punctured every few seconds by commercial breaks. It was his newspaper press conference which first indicated a more meaningful relationship with the American public.

The female reporters especially, several of whom looked equally capable of handling crime stories, immediately abandoned any pretense at journalistic detachment. "My name's Melissa and I'm from Concorde and I'm in love with you," one hardened interrogator announced herself in a vibrant voice and the kind of material they wanted seemed more like the type of background they might try to extract from a boyfriend with whom they were getting serious.

Was he married? What did he think about family life? Was he a person who took things seriously?

Baker's replies suggested that he was not and in fact struck hard at a number of important tenets of American life. He had been married twice and had two grown-up sons "both of whom are somewhat underwhelmed with me". The work-ethnic got short shrift. What was he doing career-wise at the moment? "Nothing," Baker said equably. He was actually, he said, heading on for Los Angeles after the convention to see if there was anything doing there.

There was a question about the role models he had pursued in his youth. "As a boy," Baker said, "I wanted to be a martyr. It would naturally follow that I became a saint, which I rather fancied." He produced his enormous grin but everybody was scribbling this down furiously. He was unnerved only by queries about Dr Who, which he seemed to have some difficulty in recalling after a lapse of nearly three years. What had been his favourite episode? He rolled his prominent eyes skywards, genuinely trying to remember. "Well," he said eventually, "there was one in which I saved the Universe..." The Armageddon Factor, grizzled a reporter without looking up from his notebook. "Ah, yes," replied Dr Who.

At the end of the conference Baker was warmly embraced by one of the lady newshounds and there seemed to be a genuine response to him as to a being from another planet, Gallifrey say, which is where Dr Who is supposed to have come from, which would allow him to say anything he chose or nothing at all, and this was even more apparent when the convention proper began on the following day.

From early morning the vast Sheraton Hotel was packed with Whovians, the description the fans had invented for themselves in order to own a little of this alien magic, and there were many who had taken this need a great deal further. Monsters from distant episodes, fully caparisoned, sat in the coffee shop or caught their intricate costumes in the escalators. A Dalek blundered about the main concourse and innumerable Dr Whos trailed lovingly constructed K9s, the electronic dog much featured in the series.

An extraordinary element, if you could bring yourself to address a Dalek or a space-suited Cyberman or a repulsively repililian Silurian, was first the age and then the intellectual level of the Whovians.

This was not a youthful...
event. There were family groups but they did not predominate and the children seemed less enthralled than the grown-ups. A female of indeterminate age, because she wore a clown's make-up under a wig constructed from a floor mop, together with a ballet skirt and tights, a total reconstruction, it turned out, of one of Dr Who's former adversaries from another planet, proved to be 39 years old and an editor of scientific works with the New York branch of the Oxford University Press.

A certain degree of worldly achievement, in fact, was vital because the convention was a fairly expensive event. There was a vending area where Whitman's of every kind was on sale and imported English jelly-babies, a humble piece of confectionery which Tom Baker's Dr Who had evidently sucked in moments of high stress in the series, were selling at the equivalent of £2.50 although their domestic price of 35 pence was clearly marked.

It cost nearly £20 a head to attend the private luncheon with Dr Who which preceded his main appearance, but a large room set aside for the function was packed and the atmosphere was that of a kiddies' party about to get out of hand. "I still can't believe that he's really going to be here," a mature male computer programmer from New Jersey burbled and Baker's arrival brought a pandemonium that would have been crushed with extreme brutality if it had taken place in a creche.

Everybody seemed to have been concealing a present for him which they wished to pass over immediately, causing a congestion which put at high risk a huge TARDIS-shaped cake which a lady from Chicago had baked and imported in sections to be assembled and iced in her hotel room, an astounding feat which she confided to Baker in great detail amidst the crush, as he strove to keep the icing off his mac.

The assemblage had to be ordered back to their seats by the head waiter and Baker then circled the room, spending some time at each table, an activity which required him to do little more than smile and nod since everybody talked to him at once in their anxiety to convey those pent-up matters which had brought them there in the first place.

The burden of what they wanted to say seemed to be a strange amalgam of regard for Dr Who as a television phenomenon of mind-expanding excellence and an extraordinary affection for Tom Baker himself. Four women who had made the trip coast-to-coast from California, after encountering him there, sat together at one table and intoned their feelings into the hubbub as if they were alone and trying to compose his epitaph, "Tom's a rainbow in a black, nasty world," one said, "Nobody ever gave so much to so many people," another said in a choked voice. "It's a joy to be here and to keep the presence of this wonderful person fresh," another announced, wide-eyed and looking straight ahead.

Baker left, waving to a forest of outstretched hands, some of them holding eating utensils and, in one case, a plate of fruit salad and was hastened through corridors by the NADWAS functionaries because he was already late for his appearance in the auditorium, which was packed to the doors and growing dangerously resitive. Once on stage he could do no more than raise his raincoated arms in a kind of benediction as the tumult washed around him and it was possible to wonder how he could provide anything that would justify such an explosion of approval.

It was easy. He got another standing ovation when he removed his mac and dropped it on to the stage. He was thunderously applauded when he merely gave his age, which was 43 years old. His address to the multitude was quite short, no more than a resumé of his period as Dr Who and a few compliments to his audience - "You are not my fans. You are my friends" - which threw the hall into a fresh frenzy.

He then asked for questions, which was a rationalisation since once again the Who fans seemed to want to hear themselves talking to him more than anything else. And once again there were the strange, solitary statements that seemed to have been saved up for Dr Who, if ever he should visit Earth in person. "I have a question! I have a question!" a large lady bawled until she had beaten every other interlocutor into submission. In the momentary silence she began to speak in the high singsong of a revivalist meeting: "I love you, Tom. I love your hair. I'm jealous. You draw people to you like a magnet. I don't want you to be up there on the stage where I have to share you." She paused for breath and to begin a new catalogue: "I love your nose. I love ..." but she was drowned in fresh acclamations from a dozen parts of the congregation.