

A WORD WITH: STEVEN MOFFAT

Christmases Past, Present and Sci-Fi

Just a handful of television narratives have become synonymous with the holiday season: a misfit reindeer with the support of an outcast elf provides crucial help to Santa Claus on a foggy Christmas Eve night; a sensitive boy takes pity on an underdeveloped would-be Christmas tree; a humanoid alien traverses time and space in a high-tech ship camouflaged as a vintage British police call

box.

O.K., so it may be a relatively recent tradition, but since 2005, the fantasy series "Doctor Who" has celebrated Christmas Day with a new chapter in its long-running story, often one with a holiday theme that introduces (or bids farewell) to a central character.

This year's special, "A Christmas Carol," pays a science-fiction tribute to that

Charles Dickens story in an episode that pits the Doctor (played by Matt Smith) against a cold-hearted industrialist (Michael Gambon) who needs some face-to-face reminders of his Christmases past. It's the first "Doctor Who" Christmas episode to be produced by Steven Moffat, who recently wrapped his first season running the series since taking the reins from the executive producer Rus-

sell T Davies. When it makes its debut on Saturday, it will also be the first "Doctor Who" episode to have its premiere in the United States (on BBC America) and Britain (on BBC1) on the same day.

Mr. Moffat, also a producer of the modern-day Sherlock Holmes series "Sherlock," recently spoke to Dave Itzkoff about the latest "Doctor Who" holiday special and the challenges of running two shows simultaneously. These are excerpts from that conversation.

Q. In the United States the networks get lazy around the holidays and show mostly repeats, while you've been producing "Doctor Who" Christmas specials going

on five years now. How did this tradition begin?

A. I think it's mostly because of the BBC. I think the BBC goes hell for leather on Christmas, because [rival broadcaster] ITV doesn't bother as much, to be honest. There's a real impetus to do some fun stuff for Christmas Day; 2005 was the first one ["The Christmas Invasion"], which introduced David Tennant, of course, and that's become a very big deal here. I wasn't involved in making that special; that was Russell. The second year we had "The Runaway Bride."

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and all the papers were saying, "the traditional 'Doctor Who' Christmas special." And Russell said, "Well, actually, there have only been two."

Q. Were Christmas-themed television specials important to you when you were growing up?

A. Yeah. You're going to get specific on me and ask me which ones, and I can't really remember. You've never heard of them, but there's a show called "Morecambe and Wise," which was a very funny show, and that was the big Christmas special back in the day — the one every child in Britain talked about, the one everyone was keen to see.

Q. Does "A Charlie Brown Christmas" get shown in Britain?

A. No. I didn't know about the Charlie Brown one, though, of course, we know about Charlie Brown. I think we tend to see your Christmas episodes two or three months later, in the wrong season of the year, which is very odd. What's bizarre is Thanksgiving. I could never work out what the hell that was.

Q. What was the genesis of this year's Christmas special?

A. There had been a feeling that we needed a really, really Christmasy one, because the previous one had been David Tennant's exit from the role. It had been quite dark and not as Christmasy as normal. We had wanted to reset it and make it a hugely jolly, merry one. Well, jolly, merry and a little bit sad.

Q. Is your story meant to be a loose nod to Dickens's "Christmas Carol"?

A. Well, it's called "A Christmas Carol." It is "A Christmas Carol."

Q. Why is that the story everyone turns to as source material at this time of the year?

A. I love "A Christmas Carol," it's a fantastic story. Even "It's a Wonderful Life" is really sort of "A Christmas Carol." Time travel at Christmas says "A Christmas Carol" and it says "Doctor Who." The moment you think of it, if you have the Doctor as the Ghost of Christmas Past, it sort of makes sense.

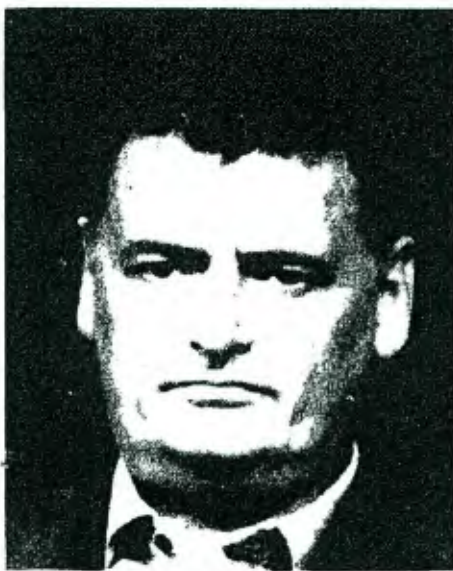
Q. When did you film this episode?

A. When did we actually do it? Back in July. It was a long time ago.

Q. Was it strange trying to get



Steven Moffat, below, the new executive producer of "Doctor Who," oversaw this year's Christmas special. It features, above from left, Katherine Jenkins, Michael Gambon and Matt Smith.



FREDERICK M. BROWN, GETTY IMAGES

into a holiday spirit in the middle of the summer?

A. Yeah, especially because I was writing it in April. I'd flown to Los Angeles while we were going on interviews [for the United States season premiere of "Doctor Who"] and got stuck there by the volcano. L.A. is just the least Christmasy place on earth. So I turned up the air-conditioning and played Christmas music to try to get in the frame of mind. But I'm used to thinking on different planets. Thinking about a different time of year wasn't so bad. It was the smallest amount of time travel "Doctor Who" ever had to do.

Q. Your "Doctor Who" episodes often end with teasers to the next story line, and this one ends in an especially tantalizing way — or is it meant to be a joke?

A. That's just a gag. We're not going to investigate the mysterious marriage of the Doctor and Marilyn Monroe. It just happened in the background.

Q. Are you permitted to say what's in store for the next season of the show?

A. Well, I'm permitted to say anything I like. I just don't. [laughs] We're going to America, which we just shot out in Utah, for our opening two-parter. We've never done this before — we're opening with a two-parter that starts in America during the '60s.

Q. On top of all this, when do you have to start thinking about the next series of "Sherlock"?

A. We're gearing up. We're doing another three films, so the other two writers have started. I won't be able to start for a while, so I'll come skidding in at the last minute and do my bit. The two of them run into each other quite a bit. There's a pretty nightmarish portion of the year where I'm doing both. What can you do?

Q. When you run two very prominent and successful television franchises, do you start to get offers to cross over to other media?

A. Well, yes. All the time. But I'm a bit busy. They're always offering me some movie or another, and I'm always very grumpily saying no. But my heart, genuinely, is in television. I absolutely love television, and I don't mean to be vulgar, but as I keep having

to explain to people from the movie industry, I get more power and more money doing television, so why on earth would I do a film?

Q. Are you being asked all the time when the Doctor and your Sherlock Holmes will meet up?

A. I think everyone who's passing me in the streets is suggesting that at the moment. I think there are problems of doing that, because then you would say that Sherlock Holmes lives in the same world as the Doctor, and there are Daleks and all sorts of things. If a Sherlock Holmes story depends on time travel being impossible, it's quite hard if he's a personal friend of the Doctor's, isn't it?

Q. Are there American television shows that you take inspiration from or consider kindred spirits to your work?

A. I don't know about kindred spirits — I wouldn't be so presumptuous — but I like "House," which oddly enough is also a kind of an updated Sherlock Holmes. It's a very good show with a fine American actor, Hugh Laurie [laughs]. It's amazing how many Brits you have over there. Don't they have actors at all in the States?

Q. We're mostly looking for show runners now.

A. Oh, God. Well, you got Russell. One's enough. I'm staying put.