

# 'DR. WHO' / THE BBC TIME LORD'S OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD ADVENTURES

BY PATRICIA BRENNAN

Who's Dr. Who and what in the world—or out of this world—is he doing, anyway?

Well, that's difficult to say. Like football, it's easier to follow the game if you've got a program. Look at it this way: you're dealing with a Time Lord from a planet called Gallifrey who became disgruntled with his fellow time-and-space monitors, stole a TARDIS that was stuck in the shape of a British police call box, and came to Earth.

This is not a glamorous guy, either—no skintight latex suits, no astronaut gear, no changing into a superhero while he's in that booth. The Dr. Who you can see weeknights on Channel 32 affects the rumpled look, in an old overcoat, deep-crowned broad-brimmed hat and a 12-foot-long striped scarf that drags on the floor. For a powerful guy who's returned to Earth from the far, far future, he looks very much like an habitué of park benches.

Having swallowed that, you may be surprised—perhaps even appalled—to learn that this BBC show has been on the airwaves for 20 years this November, that it is the longest-running science fiction program in the history of television and that it has millions of fans worldwide. The 250 episodes of the vaunted "M\*A\*S\*H" pale beside the nearly 660 of "Dr. Who."

Even if you watch a few episodes of this British series, airing on WHMM-TV (Channel 32) at 11 week nights, you'll probably still wonder what the fuss is about. One local viewer who admits that "you may find the program confusing, even silly," says he watches the shows anyway

because "sometimes they offer concepts that make you think, expand the mind." Even some of the fans reluctantly agree that "Dr. Who" is not everyone's cup of tea.

Confusion lies partly in the program itself: long-time fans already know a great deal about the show and keep up-to-date with newsletters, synopses and information from BBC. But because Channel 32 airs two- and four-part installments of "Dr. Who" five nights a week, casual viewers may find themselves out of synch. On the occasions when WHMM has aired the episodes out of sequence, the vocal "Dr. Who" fans shower the station with calls and letters.

Twenty years ago, when the show was first telecast by the BBC late Saturday afternoons, it was aimed at children. In those days, some English parents were wary of the strange, science-fiction series. Jill Nightingale of Bethesda, who watched the show as a child, recalls, "It was really quite a novel program then, and some people thought it was really rather dangerous [for children to watch] . . . unreal and quite fantastical."

That was before man had managed to walk on the moon and to live and work in orbiting spaceships, before the imaginations of Stephen Spielberg and George Lucas had exploded onto film and raised the science fiction consciousness of modern filmgoers. Today, the adventures of "Dr. Who" and his associates may seem a bit quaint.

That opinion isn't shared by the legions of "Dr. Who" fans worldwide, who point out that instead of using

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special effects, the show relies heavily on story line and on the personalities of the five actors who have played the Doctor. Few viewers in this area have seen Doctors other than Tom Baker, however, because Channel 32 is the only station carrying the series in the Washington market and all of its 172 episodes feature him. Local fans hope that WHMM-TV will carry the BBC's "Dr. Who" 20th anniversary special on Nov. 23, which is scheduled to feature all five actors.

WHMM-TV's station program director Avon Killion has not committed the station to the 90-minute special, saying that it is too expensive for his limited budget. He says "Dr. Who" fans appear to be "vocal, articulate and upscale," from children to doctors and lawyers, but they haven't contributed to financially-pressed WHMM during membership drives.

A couple of weeks ago Killion switched "Dr. Who" from an 8:30 p.m. prime-time slot weeknights to 11 p.m., substituting Bill Cosby reruns, mainly because "our mission is to serve minorities." The angry letters he received from "Dr. Who" fans were "well-written, articulate, grammatically correct—many of them were written on word processors." Others were from kids annoyed that the show is now too late, for them to watch. Killion says he might eventually move "Dr. Who" from its new slot, and assures fans that WHMM intends to carry it at least another year.

If you tune in to the series and find yourself intrigued by insouciant Tom Baker, you may wonder how the BBC has gotten away with casting five actors successively in the same lead role. No problem. Dr. Who's cells can regenerate themselves into a completely new being: out with the old actor, in with the new. A fresh personality makes the show that much more interesting.

A man with a mop of curly hair and a beak of a nose, the roguish and eccentric Baker had the role from 1974 to 1981. The Doctor he followed was John Pertwee, a man with long blond hair and darting movements, who developed what was nearly a cult



*Tom Baker, the BBC's fifth "Dr. Who," cavorts through time and space at 11 weeknights on 32.*

following between 1970 and 1974. During Pertwee's tenure, he and producer Barry Letts gradually changed the focus of "Dr. Who" toward an adult audience, and its audience grew by the millions.

Gene Cowan, of the local D. C. Doctor Fans, says the Pertwee episodes were aired on Channel 9 during the 1970s. WETA-TV (Channel 26) also has carried the show. Before Pertwee the role was played by Patrick Troughton (1966-1969), and by William Hartnell, the original Dr. Who (1963-1966). Since 1981, Peter Davison has played the role but he will be replaced in March by Colin Baker, whose Companion will be Nicola Bryant, reportedly the first American actress to appear in the series. (Over the years, the Doctors have traveled through time and space with human and robotic Companions, the most popular of which may have been a robotic dog, K-9.)

For 20 years, in whatever guise, Dr. Who has been darting in and out of British police boxes (similar to old telephone booths) to be transported through both time and space. The booth—called a TARDIS (Time And Relative Dimensions In Space)—is

bigger on the inside than on the outside, and, through its chameleon circuits, can blend in with its surroundings. That makes filming a lot more convenient for the BBC than, say, a space ship.

The Doctor himself is a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey, who, disgruntled with his fellow Time Lords, stole a TARDIS and came to Earth with a young girl named Susan. She appeared only in the original episodes with Hartnell and accounted for the title of the first episode, "An Unearthly Child." The TARDIS that Dr. Who stole had a malfunctioning chameleon circuit—it's stuck in the shape of a police call box and can't blend in (that way even you can spot it). In a given episode, "Dr. Who" might seem a bit like "Star Trek," with the hero encountering monsters, aliens or evil humans and using his special talents to cope.

Although the British are the long-term audience and have their favorite Doctors, an American club says it holds the membership record. The Dr. Who Fan Club of America, formed in 1982 by Ron Katz, a real estate salesman, and Chad Roark, an architect, claims that its 15,000 membership is the biggest Who club worldwide. With a paid staff of four, it offers a toll-free phone number (1-800-call-who). The \$5 membership fee gets you a quarterly newsletter, "The Who-vian Times," plus a badge that changes color. The club's address is Box 6024, Denver, Colo. 80206. Another club, The North American Doctor Who Appreciation Society (NADWAS), is based at 6642 Andasol Ave., Van Nuys, Calif. 91406.

The Washington area supports a fan club called the D.C. Doctor Fans, with a Maryland chapter called Renegade TARDIS, and a Northern Virginia club called Celestial Intervention Agency. Gene Cowan, a Jefferson High School student, produces the club newsletter, "Continuous Event Transmuter," and plans to establish a "Who Hotline" financed by \$10 annual dues. To join, write Cowan at 6742 Perry Penney Dr., Annandale, Va. 22003.