‘Dr. Who’ series draws fanatic followers

by Diane Mermigas

Ask yourself: What could be appealing about a whimsical 780-year-old chap in a multi-colored scarf who works out of an English police box that is really a time machine that takes him throughout the universe?

Enough to turn several million American adults into fanatic followers of the British sci-fi hero “Dr. Who,” a pacifist renegade Time Lord who sets out in his Tardis to save the universe from destruction by Daleks, Cybermen robots, man-eating Krynnid vegetables, his arch foe The Master and other odious creatures at 11 p.m. Sunday on Channel 11.

“Dr. Who” has been an outer-space cult hero in Great Britain for nearly two decades and now airs in 39 countries to an estimated weekly television audience of 90 million viewers.

The high-gang series, which aired sporadically on American public television since the mid-1970s, only now is catching on with Yankee sci-fi enthusiasts who have been searching for a new fixation since “Star Trek” was canceled by NBC in 1969.

LIKE THE futuristic adventures of the starship U.S.S. Enterprise, “Dr. Who” is a cerebral space opera that puts more stock in action and story-line than in the flashy special effects that have become a staple of America’s new wave cinematic science fiction. The props and settings of “Dr. Who” are often downright risqué.

Much of the appeal of “Dr. Who” lies in the personality of British actor Tom Baker, who for the past seven years has given his moral hero a wayward sophistication and pleasing sense of not taking himself or his extraterrestrial jaunts too seriously.

Baker’s “Dr. Who,” a slobbish Edwardian coat and fedora pushed down over his mop-like curls, unfailingly triumphs over evil. The doctor successfully has conquered even the Doomsday Machine, a powerful weapon owned by alien Friends capable of blasting apart entire planets.

He travels through time, battling a broad spectrum of “bad guys.” One week, the Daleks, led by their ruthless emperor, are centered to remove Earth’s core and replace it with a drive mechanism in order to pilot the planet through the universe.

THE NEXT WEEK, leaders of Operation Golden Age are plucking dinosaurs from Earth’s past and transporting them to present-day London to get rid of the city’s undesirable elements.

No task is too formidable for Dr. Who’sCharge-a-bus or swashbuckler, even if it is wrestling with the temperamental breakdown of his Tardis spacecraft, which frequently takes the time track or home its “fast return switch.”

Because “Dr. Who” is more a celebration of the human spirit and swashbuckling enterprise than Hollywood hardware, many of the show’s most ardent fans are college-educated professionals in their 20s and 30s.

These die-hardy, secretively delight in the scientific mumbo jumbo exchanged by the good doctor, his trusted K9 (a computerized dog with an IQ of more than 360) and a revolving door of unimpressed female companions ranging from helpless screamers to fiercely independent Time Ladies.

Sarah Jane Smith was a journalist from Earth who saw the doctor through his fourth incarnation. Leela was a glamorous fighting Amazon whose uncivilized manner caused her to perversely kill monsters and giant rats first and ask questions later. Romana, the fourth Doctor’s companion, is a strong-willed Time Lady who has been Baker’s most recent companion.

“DR. WHO!” aficionados can rattle off endless trivia about each new alien race and villain the doctor and friends tangle with during their 90-minute escapades.

Who-ites are a small but faithful lot. Chicago’s underground cult of “Dr. Who” watchers has grown mostly by word of mouth during the past two years. A group of from 200 to 300 people, who call themselves “Dr. Who” fans, get together monthly to screen episodes, discuss them and answer trivia questions on “Who-ites” in exchange for $10 in annual dues.

Fans can send their inquiries to NADWAS, 4643 Andesol Ave., Van Nuys, Calif. 91406.

The people interested in “Dr. Who” appreciate mature TV science fiction. We’re so tired of junk like “Battlestar Galactica,” which is beamed at too low a level for adults. “Dr. Who” assumes that the people watching the show are mature and intelligent,” Baker said.

ASIDE FROM the fun club and an annual Dr. Who convention, which will take place in Chicago July 16-18, there is no grand nationwide “Who-ites” network. Fans are left to their own devices.

Consequently, bank executives (Continued on Page 7)
'Dr Who': British sci-fi minus usual razzmatazz

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Davis and the Doctor both talked about the audience's reaction to the character and how it has evolved over time. They also discussed the importance of the Doctor's role as a hero and his impact on popular culture.

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THE DR. WHO known to Chica- goans is played by Tom Baker. One of his companions during his time travels is played by Laila Ward, who also had a featured role in PBS' "Duchess of Duke Street." At left, Peter Davidson stars in the newest form of "Dr. Who" adventures, which have yet to be aired.

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