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Why can’t Doctor Who be a woman? It’s 2017. Time Lords are gender-fluid

by Chloé Hamilton

Unfortunately, Mackie’s popularity didn’t translate into ratings. Viewing figures for the latest series were the lowest-recorded since the programme returned to the screen in 2005, attracting an average audience of 5.5 million. (When Capaldi began in 2014, the average audience was 7.8 million.) So it was a shame, but perhaps not a surprise, to learn that Mackie would be leaving the show alongside Capaldi and head writer Steven Moffat at the end of this year’s Christmas special, with new showrunner Chris Chibnall bringing in his own cast of characters to play alongside Jodie Whittaker’s 13th Doctor.

If Mackie is disappointed, she hides it well. “I’m still getting over the overwhelming nature of having been a companion in one series,” she says. “I feel so honoured to have done it that being upset to not have continued doesn’t really come into it.”

Will she watch her final episode? “Oh my God, yes. A hundred per cent, yes. And I will make all of my family shut up and listen to it, which is no mean feat. I mean, I’m quite a talkative person, but I’m pretty quiet compared with the rest of my family.”

The only clues she can give as to the plot is that it is “emotional”. And when asked whether the door has been left open for Bill to return in the future, she says: “There’s not a severe devastation by the end, which is nice.” Make of that what you will.

Mackie, who grew up in Brixton and is the granddaughter of Philip Mackie, who wrote the screenplay for The Naked Civil Servant, is endearingly honest about the realities of being part of the juggernaut that is Doctor Who. She calls me from Orlando, where she is attending Comic Con, the three-day science fiction, gaming and media convention. Days earlier she had attended Birmingham Comic Con, where she’d been handed a special gift. “A fan bought me a star,” she says, explaining that she was given co-ordinates to find her present in the sky: “I was blown away.”

She admits to feeling taken aback by the conventions still, “but in a really good way. This level of recognition is not
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something I ever really anticipated." You never quite get used to seeing a person dressed up as your character, she adds.

It is all the more poignant for Mackie, who explains that when she was growing up, there weren’t many people on screen who looked like her. "There are a lot more people of colour on screen now," she says, adding that she’s "amazed and joyous" that Bill has been a part of that change. "But we’ve still got a long way to go. It’s not by any means reflective of the diverse society that we live in," Black actors, she says, still struggle to be represented in a way that is not stereotyped and is as nuanced as their white counterparts.

For many viewers it will come as no surprise that Mackie’s character resonated with fans. Bill is witty but normal, with a big heart and a snazzy wardrobe. According to Mackie, a lot of Bill’s clothes were chosen from high-street shops, making it easier for fans to replicate. She rejections, essentially, a regular human who finds herself in an irregular world, and she frequently challenges the Doctor on topical issues, meaning that her series has been one of the most political, confronting subjects such as racism and sexuality.

Out with it

Bill is also the Doctor’s first lesbian companion. It was important to Mackie that her character wasn’t “grappling” with her sexuality over the course of the series. “It was just part of who she was, and not the most interesting part. For people to see a mixed-race woman, a woman of colour, being comfortably with being a lesbian on a global prime-time series is phenomenally important.

"People have come up to me and said that watching Bill helped them come out to their families. I didn’t anticipate that it would ever have that kind of impact."

Mackie has no time for critics who claim that Doctor Who has become too politically correct. (When Whittaker was announced this summer as the first female Doctor, the Daily Mail’s TV critic, Christopher Stevens, wrote that the decision had a “complete and utterly correct blow to a TV show that is once simply a children’s favourite.”)

"It’s 2020," she scoffs. "Time Lords are gender-fluid - that was established ages ago. Why can’t the Doctor be a woman? I think it’s important, and I think if people are frustrated by that then, I don’t know, maybe they need to update their views."

That’s not to say that Mackie thinks Doctor Who needs incessantly to reflect what’s going on in the world. "It’s not The West Wing. It has all of time and space at its fingertips. It’s not something that has to be grounded in reality and I think the fact that it isn’t part of the reason it’s so successful." Does the show ever border on preachy?

"There are fundamentals that the show is grounded on, but I think the most important one is to be kind to everyone," she says. "If it does preach anything, it’s that, which is possibly the best thing you can preach."

A quick swoop of Mackie’s Instagram and Twitter pages reveals the actress to be politically engaged, with regular posts about Donald Trump and Brexit. She’s a fan, too, of Jeremy Corbyn, whom she met for the first time at the Pink News Awards in October. There’s a photo of them side by side on her Instagram page, Mackie looking giddy with excitement. "I probably talked too much," she says. "He was wonderful, great, very charismatic." What does she like about his politics? "We have a long way to go in terms of political inclusivity in this country. I feel that he might be able to attack us a little further down that road, which I very much admire."

Talk turns to the future. Does Mackie ever look at other companions - Billie Piper and Karen Gillan, for example - and dream about what her own post-Who career will be like? "I do look at their careers and think what phenomenal careers they’re having," she admits. "It’s wonderful to be part of that alumni." Will she tread the boards like Piper or follow Gillan to Hollywood? "I just want to tell some interesting stories," she says, modestly. "If I’m lucky enough to do that on screen, in theatre or on radio for the rest of my career, then I will be very lucky."

In January, Mackie will star alongside Toby Jones, Zoë Wanamaker and Stephen Mangan in Harold Pinter’s The Birthday Party, whose opening night of which will be staged 60 years after the original performance. What was it like working with a cast of that calibre? "I will never forget to know that never goes away," Mackie lets out a throaty cackle. "Oh my god, I’m so excited."

There’s a thoughtful pause. "I think you should be scared to do things," she says, eventually. "Everything that I have done that has been intimidating has always turned into something amazing. Had I been very comfortable doing them, they might not have turned out that way."

The Doctor Who Christmas special airs on BBC1 at 5.30pm on Christmas Day.