IT IS, ACCORDING to Richard Curtis, the Hamlet of the television world. A pivotal, career-making role, to be reprised over the years with different actors, always the same, and yet metamorphosing radically with each new incarnation.

We are, of course, talking Doctor Who - and how Curtis, that nice chap who made Hugh Grant into a superstar and Bill Nighy into a pin-up, who made us hoot at Four Weddings and a Funeral in the cinema and Blackadder on the telly, has at last been corralled into Camp DW.

Not that Curtis, 53, was a childhood addict. "No, I wasn't very dedicated. I seem to remember I liked the Master more than the Doctor, strangely enough." He says his decision to write an episode was more thanks to the nagging from his four children, now aged from 14 to six. "My kids absolutely love it. We all watched the Christmas special two years ago and my children said I had to do one. Scarlett, our eldest, pointed out that while I'd always promised I would write a children's movie, by the time I do, she won't be a child any more. And the great thing about telly is how swift it is by comparison with films."

While the "Curtis Episode" stars the new Time Lord, Matt Smith, it uses a storyline about Vincent van Gogh that had been in Curtis's head for a long time. So, the Tardis journeys into The Starry Night. That's a bit high-end, isn't it? It's certainly a long way from the common-as-yuk territory of blood-curdling vampires or nasty underground aliens (to cite just two of the Doctor's recent experiences). Not at all, says Curtis. In his view, Van Gogh is easily as familiar as an alien or a vampire.

"Look," he says, pointing out of his office window on London's Portobello Road. Down on the pavement opposite, a woman is selling some rather blotchy-looking oil canvasses. "She does copies of famous paintings for £20 each." Indeed, they are all there - the sunflowers, the stars, the cornfields. If anyone deserves the title of people's painter, it's surely Van Gogh, suggests Curtis. "He is utterly democratic."

When he was writing the episode, Curtis and his partner Emma Freud took their family to the Musee d'Orsay in Paris, where they looked at the originals, bought posters and cards, and transformed their London home into a Van Gogh project, with artwork stuck up in every room. The children helped him choose which pictures (and there is one in particular) should be in the story. The experience became a means by which Curtis achieved "real appreciation of, and a passion for, his work".

I show him a rough drawing for RT's illustration (right) of the Doctor and Tardis superimposed onto a Van Gogh-style background. CvJ smiles a lot, and makes appreciative noises. "With Van Gogh, you can feel him painting pictures, in the way that you can't with any other painter. You can feel him dragging his brush across the canvas - it's so passionate and energetic. And human."

Rather like Curtis's films. Except that poor old Vincent died impoverished and famously never sold one painting, and certainly never got a sniff of the nigh-on universal acclaim and appreciation, let alone the considerable monetary gain, which have been accorded to Curtis, metaphorical van-loads. Curtis nods. "He is the most extreme example of someone who got recognition in his life. Hence the plot where the Doctor and Amy go back in time, see Vincent and make sure - via various heavy (and a bit of soppiness) - that he knew his moment will, eventually, come."

Such tender sentiment perhaps explains why there are no ear gags at Van Gogh's expense in the ribald manner of Blackadder. "When we did Blackadder," says Curtis, "our duty was to undermine the reputation of these historical characters; the Scarlet Pimpernel was a hideous show-off, he was laughing, "or Sir Walter Raleigh, a spectacular bore. Wherever I tried to do Van Gogh, to be truthful rather than cruel." Yet the Blackadder episode was, in another sense, not necessary. "With Blackadder, I never did any research, we figured out that, sooner or later, you have to have a spectacular bone. Whereas in this case, I tried to do Van Gogh, to be truthful rather than cruel."

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And if not, there is of course a monster waiting for them going."

Dominating one wall of Curtis's office is an assemblage of large white postcards showing "My kids absolutely love Doctor Who. They said I had to do one".

RICHARD CURTIS
“I love films but they take a long time. I love the speed of television and its mass exposure”

Yet for all the special effects, jumpy moments and time travel that engage his playful skill, Curtis says the profound nature about the programme and its central character is one of Doctor Who’s great strengths...

"when it suddenly goes to the heart of the matter, emotionally, about who the Doctor is. In the Venetian episode there was a great moment where Amy’s boyfriend Rory criticises the Doctor for putting people who love him into danger, into too much jeopardy. And you realise that that is true all the way back, with all the Doctor Whos I have ever seen. Such a big observation." Indeed, almost Hamlet-esque.

So how does he feel about the new Prince of Denmark? "Well, one of the things that my kids have noticed is that he’s not saccharine. He’s quite harsh to Amy. And I think he’s very aware of the historical contradiction of the role, that he has been here before, that he is hundreds of years old."

Will the Junior Curtises be satisfied with the episode? “They’ll be sensitive to my feelings, and it’s on at half-term, so we’ll have a great time watching it in a big group. But it’s always precarious. I’ve watched some of my things before with groups of people. I remember when we did the first Blackadder, we had a little pilot, which we thought was pretty good. And I watched it with 12 friends. There was this horrible silence at the end.” Is he really nervous? You must be kidding. "If my children think it’s bad, it’s their fault. For not having worked hard enough on it.” Yes, Richard Curtis is a sweetie on the outside, but would you want him as your dad?

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