

Portrait of our romcom master

Richard Curtis gave Britain *Four Weddings* and *Love Actually* – now he's tackling the Doctor (and Vincent van Gogh)

Doctor Who

Saturday 6.40pm BBC1, BBC HD

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 Musée 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 superim-

posed onto a Van Gogh-style background. Curtis smiles a lot, and makes appreciative noises. “With Van Gogh, you can feel him painting the 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 only ever sold one painting, and certainly never even got a sniff of the nigh-on universal acclaim and appreciation, let alone the considerable material gain, which have been accorded to Curtis, in metaphorical van-loads. Curtis nods. “He is the most extreme example of someone who got no recognition in his life.” Hence the plot whereby the Doctor and Amy go back in time, meet Vincent and make sure – via various heavy hints (and a bit of sopiness) – that he knows his moment will, eventually, come.

SUCH TENDER SYMPATHY 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. So the Scarlet Pimpernel was a hideous show-off,” he says, laughing, “or Sir Walter Raleigh a spectacular bore. Whereas in this case, I tried to do well by Van Gogh; to be truthful rather than cruel.”

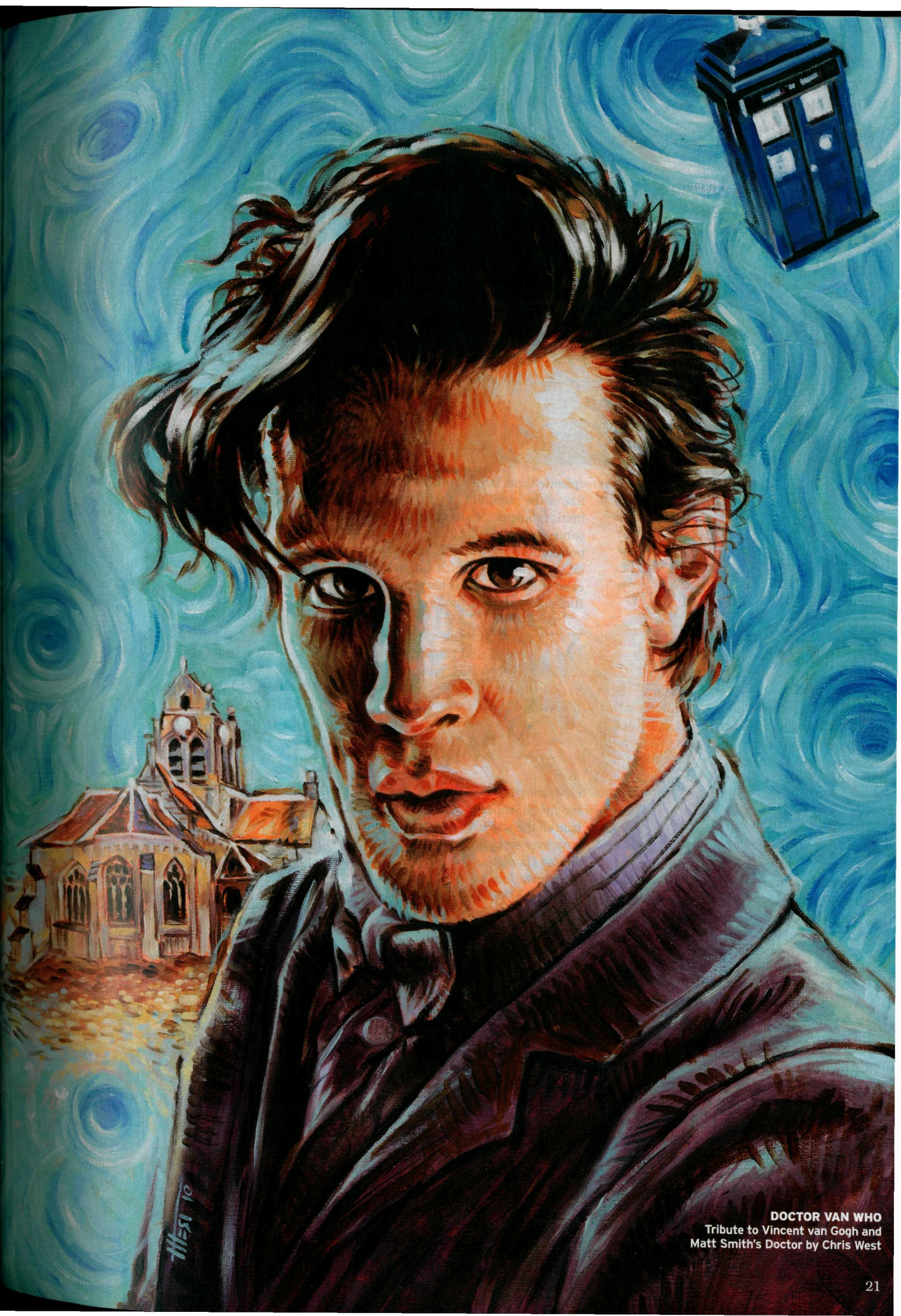
Yet the *Blackadder* experience was, in another sense, highly necessary. “With *Blackadder*, we never did any research. We just figured out that, somewhere in your bones, you knew about people in history. Well, I think Van Gogh is that kind of figure. Somewhere in your bones you will have seen the pictures. I took the gamble that people would know about him. And if not, there is of course a monster to keep 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



DOCTOR VAN WHO
Tribute to Vincent van Gogh and
Matt Smith's Doctor by Chris West



"I love films but they take a long time. I love the speed of television and its mass exposure"

◁ the plot development for *War Horse* – he's adapting Michael Morpurgo's novel for a Spielberg film. Does Curtis spend his life dreaming of cinema, and just tinkering with TV in his downtime? "Not at all. My heart lies in both places. I love films but they take a very long time. I love the speed of television and its mass exposure. The idea that five million – or however many – people will watch your programme, and you can get it done in nine months, and that your work can be in people's living rooms! Telly is still a great big, open media, and I can't foresee a time when I won't want to work in it," says Curtis nicely.

Indeed, he is fundamentally nice, as you always suspected the king of the British romcom would be. Sure, there must be steel beneath that Snowy Owl exterior, but he is remarkably deft at covering it up. He even refuses to be rude about the often hilarious special effects with which *Doctor Who* used to be synonymous. "Our monster is a very interesting one, in so far as you see as little of him as you possibly can," Curtis explains. "We did it with computer-generated imagery, which is fine. When you don't want to use CGI is when there are conversations to be had. And there aren't."

What about the scary scale, then? Is his episode going to be one of those where the primary school population of Britain cowers behind the sofa? "Mine has got some jumps in it. But it's not very scary. The fear factor is like a drug to little children. If you did it consistently, if you thought that every time there would definitely be a hideous brutal murder of a small child..." He shrugs. Surely not! "No, of course not. But *Doctor Who* is a very cunning balancing act, because in each

episode there is just something which adds the fizz of the possibility that there may be a traumatic moment... it's like going out on a date with someone and feeling the possibility, just the possibility, that you might have sex with them," he says, in a line which might well have been used to describe the character played by Alan Rickman in *Love Actually*.

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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THE HITS OF KING CURTIS



BLACKADDER, 1982

Curtis teamed up with Rowan Atkinson – who played the eponymous antihero – and later Ben Elton to write everyone's favourite historical sitcom.

Miranda Richardson (above with Atkinson) played Queenie in 1986.



COMIC RELIEF, 1985

Curtis persuaded comedian pals to act daft for a good cause and Comic Relief was born. The charity has raised £620 million for vulnerable people in the UK and the world's poorest countries.



FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL, 1994

Starring Hugh Grant as a bumbling bachelor and Andie MacDowell as his dream woman, Curtis's first film broke British box-office records. More of the same followed: *Notting Hill* in 1999 and *Love Actually* in 2003.

THE VICAR OF DIBLEY, 1994

Curtis created the role of Geraldine – a jolly cleric with a weakness for chocolate bars and Hollywood hunks – especially for Dawn French (right).

Blackadder and *The Vicar of Dibley* were voted Britain's second and third best sitcom in a 2004 poll – after *Only Fools and Horses*.

