Tom Baker
The Curious Heart of Doctor Who

That most recognizable of Time Lords has changed his style, but his trademark grin remains as he praises his fans, performs on stage and explains his "Five Doctors" absence.

By Jean Airey & Laurie Haldeman

Silver-haired, but still silver-tongued, Baker insists that "I would go anywhere for a job that interests me."

After a record-breaking seven years as Doctor Who, Tom Baker left the series in 1981, remarking to the British press that he really didn't care if he "faded into oblivion."

"I suppose what I meant at that time was that Doctor Who had been so gratifying to do—and so splendid—that I felt that nearly anything I did afterwards wouldn't admit a comparison with that job," Baker comments today. "Maybe I was anticipating, as we all do, the rejection in television, which turned out to be a well-grounded fear. Because, effectively, I am now unemployable on television."

Touring with the Excalibur Corporation's Whovent '86, Baker has just completed a talk to an audience of some 900 enthusiastic people and recalls their reaction gleefully. "There are fans here who feel I could play James Bond! Isn't that wonderful? Have you ever thought about playing James Bond?" he repeats one of the audience's questions and grins. "If I had said, 'No, I'm thinking about playing Romeo,' that fan would have burst into ecstatic applause—so blind is love, isn't it?" He thinks I can play Romeo. He thinks I could probably play anything. That's what people do when they love you.

"Of course, in TV and films, the casting directors aren't that sympathetic. In Los Angeles, they are so parochial they don't even know I exist! They actually don't know. It irritates me in principle because I'm not the only Doctor Who!" Baker chuckles and smiles self-deprecatingly, but presses home his point. "There are four other fellows still alive—give one of them a job! But the center of the TV industry doesn't know what several million people are watching. Now that completely baffles me in a commercial society!"

The actor hasn't been totally ignored by American TV, appearing on an episode of Remington Steele as an obsessed Interpol agent, but he credits his employment to an unusual source. "A fan had written a very literate letter, so the director actually looked at me," Baker recalls. "Normally, they don't look at actors. They don't look at you at all. They just hear a famous name."

There have also been parts on British television, playing Sherlock Holmes in the BBC special Hound of the Baskervilles, a legless pirate in Black Adder and a villain in the Jemima Shore mystery Dr. Ziegler's Casebook. "I've got one coming up, Faye Weldon's Life and Loves of the She-Devil. I play Father Ferguson in that special, and I'm in the last hour," he explains. "And that might nudge them along a little bit. But, when I say that I'm not employable on television, I'm not merely complaining. I'm just slightly bemused because there are things I could do. But the reservation is the association with Doctor Who. When in fact, of course, my appearance has changed."

Gone are the Doctor's flamboyantly wild brown curls, replaced by a more conservative cut. Even Baker's hair color has changed, now more silver than anything else, but the puckish sense of humor the actor brought to the role remains. "I'm not really recognized on the street anymore," he notes. "I might be recognized in a restaurant when someone has time to look at me for a few minutes, but in the ordinary way, I'm not recognized. Well, I mean, I'm years older, I've gone grey, my hair is shorter. You would think there would be some work there on TV, and maybe there will be."

In spite of the difficulties Baker has faced since Doctor Who, he would not hesitate to do another series. "I would go anywhere for a job that interests me. Like a shot!" he insists. "You see, it's very important for ac-

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tors—if there’s such a thing as a strategy about a career—to be able to return to the theater when you feel like it. Now, the ace in your hand is this springboard of television. If one is doing reasonable TV work to a receptive audience, then—this is the sad truth—you go out hard-working as the battle seems so you start, because the audience knows you and are predisposed to be very interested in what you do."

**Stage Roles**

Baker speaks from some experience, having performed in numerous plays over the last five years: portraying Oscar Wilde (a role he had long said fascinated him) in *Feasting With Panthers*, Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*, the professor in *Educating Rita*, Brack in *Hedda Gabler*, Mr. Hardcastle in a tour of *She Stoops To Conquer* for the National Theatre, and, most recently, both Holmes and Moriarty in *The Mask of Moriarty*. Fans who have seen him first as the Doctor persistently follow his career.

"When I have occasion to tour, what was most gratifying and astonishing was the reception everywhere I went! The American fans found out because they’re brilliant at organization, and they bunched me [wined and dined and waited at the stage door] on a big scale at every date," he says delightedly.

"This is a silly business, isn’t it? And I love that, this complicity of the fans being in on my silliness. I remember one time I had a wonderful experience in some city or other. There was a real hardened journalist, about my age, really crumpled, had a great paunch, tired and smoking five cigars. And I’m sitting with a few ladies talking. This fellow obviously doesn’t watch anything on television, he was too busy making a living. But he had this wonderful style, like he was trying desperately to stay awake. He said, ‘Tell me, I don’t watch television—what are all these people here for? What do you like about this fellow?’ And this young woman said—as only the Americans can, being so extravagant, ‘Well, to me, it’s just naked sex, it’s just naked sex appeal.’ This man, the look on his face, it gave a new meaning to incredulity. He said, ‘What?’ thinking something had gone wrong with his ears. With a great big effort, I could hear his brain saying, ‘Go on, check him out.’ ” Baker suddenly rolls his eyes, mimicking the pungent journalist, checking out his target. “He said, ‘That’s naked sex appeal?’ He was dumbfounded. Wrote a very sarcastic notice.” A wide grin splits Baker’s face. “It’s quite nice to see people thinking, ‘What’s everybody laughing at?’ That amuses me to no end.”

Baker talks candidly about his reasons for being absent from the 20th anniversary *Doctor Who* special, "The Five Doctors." “Because I couldn’t bear to share it. When it came to sharing the script with four other people and me taking only 20% of the script—I couldn’t bear the thought,” he laughs. “However, should there be another special, and I find I can just walk through one sequence, I would like to stop near the camera and quizzically say to the audience, ‘Yes, I’ve been here before.’ If they asked me to do an anniversary special again, I wouldn’t be churlish about it. I wouldn’t be mad about it really, because I’m more interested in talking about *Doctor Who* and thinking about *Doctor Who* than in trying to recapitulate it in the actuality of digging out my old costume and putting it on. But I would—yes.” He stops and thinks for a moment and continues insistently, tapping his fingers on the table. “It would have to be well written, though. It would have to be funny. In fact, I would want a hand in that scene. Yes, I would.

“I don’t have a favorite *Doctor Who* episode.” Baker sighs in response to a question he is asked in nearly every city. “People won’t believe me, but working on four or six scripts at a time—and all shot out of sequence—I hadn’t the remotest idea what was happening. And after a few weeks, I didn’t really care. It had occurred to me—why am I getting terribly upset about understanding *Doctor Who* when I don’t understand life? I can’t do a *Times* crossword puzzle yet! I used to confess sometimes in the pub to Ian Marter, who was really a close buddy of mine. I would say, ‘Ian, I don’t know what this story is about,’ and he would say, ‘Shh, nobody knows what it’s about!’ So, I was comforted."

Baker also explains why he can’t give his opinions of previous or subsequent Doctors. Gesturing wildly, he notes, “I don’t watch it!
I didn’t watch Doctor Who when I was in it—so I’m not about to start now! I didn’t watch it, because in those days, I had quite severe reservations which I wasn’t about to discuss—I was in it and you can’t go around criticizing your own show. But now it’s all past. I didn’t think Doctor Who was nearly violent enough, or funny enough, or crazy enough.

"Someone once said to me, ‘I quite like the way you come through the door—kind of fragile and delicate. What were you thinking about?’ Well, I had to come through the door like that otherwise the whole set would shake. The sets used to shake! And the crew would say, ‘We’ve got to go again, Tom,’ as I got terribly agitated, saying, ‘Why are we going again please?’ Never mind, just get on with it. I would ask, ‘No, why are we going again? Just tell me.’ Well, the production assistant would say, ‘The set was shaking. The director doesn’t like the set shaking.’ I would say, ‘Where are we in this rather silly story?’ So, they would say, ‘Gallifrey.’ ‘Oh yes,’ I would answer, ‘I wonder what conditions are like up there when people walk through doors.’ And they could not understand that the children would be on it in a flash. It doesn’t matter. You’re on a planet 10 light years away where amazing things happen. Rocks crawl toward the light, there are monsters all around, and they worry about a shaking door! So, we used to have these constant rows about where to stop. And they would say, ‘You’ve got to draw the line somewhere.’ That’s what people always say. They think they’re terribly saying things like that. They could have done anything they wanted. And they didn’t.

"They chose to do it as if it were on Earth. They really didn’t explore the possibilities. I could have had a patio as big as Colorado—and they wouldn’t do it because it was silly.” He grimaces in disgust. “Of course, it was silly. The whole bloody thing is silly. That’s why you like it.

"I wanted this old lady to be the companion. She would have a stick, because she would have a very bad hip. You could have had great fun with the Doctor saying, ‘Come on, please, you know, we’ve got to go fast,’ and she obviously can’t go fast. Now, it strikes me as being in a wonderful surreal area—how fast are the monsters who are following us? They can only move very slowly, and that strikes me as being full of comic possibilities. Just because they’re moving slowly doesn’t mean they can’t catch us, because we’re only moving slowly. Because I’m not going to leave my beloved companion who has an arthritic hip, am I? And so there would be tension and great humor there. But they didn’t think like that. See, all television is predictable, isn’t it?"

**Television Parts**

Is Baker still pursuing a career in American TV? "You must understand that however many fans there are in all the cities, they just represent that minute portion of people in the United States who have exquisite taste," he suggests. "The point is that if you have exquisite taste and high, demanding standards, what on Earth is there for me in American television? What is there for me in British television? It's very rare. There are only a few things I would consider. What I would really like to do is to get a meaty part in The Golden Girls.

"I have howled with laughter at those raunchy women in The Golden Girls. Especially the one with the voice like a man [Bea Arthur]. Oh, the voice! The Golden Girls is quite subversive. And anything that’s subversive in America will become fashionable, and then the subversiveness, the fangs will be drawn. Everyone says, ‘Darling, isn’t it funny?’ And they all laugh together, missing the actual danger, because what The Golden Girls is about is sex—and death. That’s what it’s about. Two preoccupations that fill most Americans, as they fill most civilizations, with utter terror. The terror of their incompetence at sex, and the terror of their misunderstanding of the inevitability of death. In that sense, the program is very, very radical. But they’ll win Emmys, you see, then everyone will watch them and then it will be diluted."

There is currently some talk of bringing The Mask of Moriarty to London, and Baker might have another opportunity to tackle the role of Holmes. He comments ruefully on that particularly part. "You see Sherlock Holmes is so odd—he’s tall, he’s middle aged, he’s fantastically clever, he smokes two pounds of black shag a day, he plays the violin, he’s rude to his friends, and he has a very suspect attitude towards women. He also has a very low threshold toward boredom. That’s why some people think I would be perfect casting for Sherlock Holmes," he says. "But actually, why I like playing Holmes is because he’s ridiculous. He’s one of the funniest characters of the late 19th century. However, some of the producers I work for don’t agree with me about that. They very rarely do agree—I don’t understand how I work at all."

Another offer he is considering is a new production of Peter Pan. "I had a call from a director who said, ‘We’re doing Peter Pan on a big-scale production and we’ve got some new insights,’” Baker nods enthusiastically. "I always had insights—the fellow who plays

The Doctor and his companion, the Time Lady Romana, take a tour through "The City of Death." Off-camera, Tom Baker and Lalla Ward decided to make their companionship matrimonial. They were wed.
Despite thinking that Sherlock Holmes is "one of the funniest characters of the late 19th century," Baker appears grim and determined as the Great Detective and Watson (Terence Rigby) hunt down The Hound of the Baskervilles.

Peter isn't nearly old enough. He should be about 50 and 6'6"—and I thought the director had discovered it as well. I rang him up, but it's not Peter Pan at 52 and 6'3"; they want me to play Captain Hook. Now the drawback there is those children. I really like children, but I can't bear them. They bring out the Jack the Ripper in me. I want to strangle them. So, if the director will let me throw them over the side and let the crocodile get the children, so I could run away with Wendy, then I'll agree to do the play."

While Baker may wax a bit whimsical on his future projects, the experience of playing the Doctor has left him with memories no other role could possibly duplicate. He recalls one visit to a hospital that obviously affected him deeply. "I remember I was filled with terror. I went into a ward where there were children who were severely disturbed and catatonic. Some of the children were about 12 or 13. The place was bristling with static," he says. "I went in feeling very foolish because a doctor had asked me to go in. We went through this big thick door and some children were just sitting and others were watching television. All of them were looking absolutely distraught. One boy with gimlet eyes looked at me and walked away thinking about what he had seen. Then, it came into his mind and he said, 'Doctor Who.'"

"I was very, very frightened indeed and the boy just came up to me, having said that, just glided up to me. He didn't stop until he was actually leaning against me and then he just slipped his hands inside my coat and just embraced me. I was, of course, turned to stone and embraced him in return, not knowing what to say. He said it again—'Doctor Who,' and he gave me a little squeeze and went away. I stayed a few more minutes and then went. When I left, the doctor was sweating. He said, 'That boy hasn't spoken for about 14 months!'"

For a few seconds, Baker is quiet. "Now, I tell you that to illustrate my gratitude for the part. It would have happened to whomever had been playing Doctor Who, but it didn't happen to them, it happened to me—and I am eternally grateful.

"This is a silly business, isn't it?" Baker remarks. "And I love this complicity of the fans being in on my silliness."

"So, if sometimes my career seems to be an anti-climax, it doesn't really distress me. Whatever I do will be an anti-climax after that curious part that sent me pell-mell into people's hearts. It can never happen again. It doesn't admit to comparison with anything else." Tom Baker settles back into his chair, the quicksilver restlessness stilled for a moment. "It's amazing the way it penetrates into people's hearts," he say softly, smiling. "And for a while, I was at the top of it."