Sarah Sutton and Janet Fielding (left) were labeled "the Doctor's harem" when their sedate wardrobe became more revealing.

The good times came to an end when the writers could no longer comfortably accommodate three companions. Sutton (in mask) followed Matthew Waterhouse's demise, leaving Peter Davison and Janet Fielding behind.
More than her character was left behind on the last planet Sarah Sutton visited with the Time Lord.

Assttants during Doctor Who’s Peter Davison era came and went with great regularity, and Sarah Sutton was no exception. She left the series after two brief years and now, five years later, she has gone from the part of a time-traveler to being a part-time travel agent.

“I had done an awful lot of television by the time I came to do Doctor Who, and since I left, I haven’t done any television at all,” says Sutton, adding that it is not only television. “Everything really! I did do a pantomime when I left Doctor Who, and I did do a murder play which toured England, Wales and Northern Ireland. So, the theater seemed to do all right because they were obviously using the Doctor Who name thing, but I would have liked to have done some more telly.

“I’ve done more television and I do enjoy it. I actually started work in the business professionally when I was nine years old and did my first television when I was 11. In the meantime, I have a part-time job as a travel agent. It’s obviously not what I had intended to do with my career, but it’s quite interesting and I enjoy traveling.”

Despite the possible drawbacks to having been in a commercially successful series like Doctor Who, Sutton resists the temptation to point an accusing finger. “I don’t know. It’s very easy, I think, quite convenient sometimes to blame the lack of work on something. I mean, certainly since leaving it, I haven’t done much work but whether that has to do with Doctor Who—who knows? And, who can say? But it is true that my career hasn’t done as much as I would like since leaving Doctor Who.”

Sutton demonstrates a keen sense of humor that rarely abates—even when she recalls some rather bleak post-Who times. With a hint of frustration in her voice, she explains, “I don’t know what it is! People say to me, ‘Is it because you’re typecast?’ and I don’t think it’s typecasting as such. I don’t know whether people tend to think you’re still doing it, and so, in some rather strange way, think you’re not available.

“When I left the show, I missed it terribly,” Sutton confides, “not so much actually doing the show, but the people. Working with other actors for two years is quite a thing in this profession. You really do get to know people very well and I was very close to Janet Fielding and Peter and Mark Strickson and everyone. It was quite a loss. I didn’t know what to do with myself, I slept less.” With a somewhat sardonic laugh, she concludes, “It’s quite sad.”

One can’t help but wonder if Nyssa’s departure was absolutely necessary, but according to John Nathan-Turner, it was. “John had decided that it was time for Nyssa’s character to go and for new faces to be seen in the TARDIS.” Sutton reluctantly agreed. “I had come to the decision that if I was offered a new contract, I probably would not sign it. As much as I loved doing the show, there comes a time when you must move on or not move on. So, it was a little bit of a joint decision in a way.

“I think one of the problems my character had, it was the same problem for Janet’s character, for Matthew Waterhouse and indeed for Mark as well, is that we were, at some point, all there together,” observes Sutton.

“Writing scripts for more than one companion, let alone three, is actually very complicated. And that’s why in some stories, like ‘Kinda,’ I wasn’t around very much at all, simply so poor Janet could have a decent story. Splitting the action up in half-hour episodes, dividing the action between four people—the Doctor and his three companions—there just isn’t the time to do that and to develop subplots in any great depth.

“So in order that Janet could have one good story, I was told to ‘just lie down with a headache,’ from the top of the episode!” she says with a chuckle. “The dissipation of action, storyline, characterization, words and everything between more than one assistant was a big problem.”

Nevertheless, Sutton recalls her role fondly. “Nyssa worked very well with Peter’s Doctor. I was quite lucky that Nyssa was given a technical side to her character. She was quite bright and in time of crisis, instead of being told to just stand and scream, she could actually do something practical—make something or mend something—which was quite nice for me. I enjoyed that side of it.”

She also enjoyed the off-camera side to being a companion to the Doctor—the conventions. “It’s wonderful doing conventions, in the States especially, American fans are super. Also, through conventions, I’ve met assistants from 12-15 years back, and I would never have met them before. And yet, when you meet for the first time, you all have something in common.

“It’s like being part of a big family. You can’t erase it even when you’ve left and have gone off to do other things, you are part of it, you’re with it. It’s quite nice going to conventions and meeting up with people. Although you may not have seen them for a few years, it’s like you’ve never been apart.”

Sutton admits to having very little input into the characterization of Nyssa, although she feels that certain events in her personal life during that time inadvertently altered the character. “Two years is quite a long time and—I Sarah Sutton—changed quite a lot,” she explains. “I grew up in the two years and I think it shows with Nyssa.

“In the beginning, she was quite snooty and didn’t seem to have a great deal of a sense of humor. As the show went on, and as Nyssa got older, she relaxed an awful lot and had a little more sense of humor in the end. I liked Nyssa.”

Sexy new costumes prompted the British press to label Nyssa and Tegan as “the Doctor’s Harem.” Following an outburst of laughter, the amiable actress contends, “I thought it was rather good! I can remember that phrase being used and we all thought it was rather funny. With costumes and things, we don’t have much say. In my very first story, I had that very fairy-like outfit, and then for practical reasons, I went into trousers. I believe there were quite a few letters saying, ‘What happened to Sarah’s legs?’ Hence the skirt again. So, you see that’s why skirts go up and down and trousers disappear.

“You’re very torn between having something on that’s practical in Doctor Who because often when you’re filming in the middle of January or February, it’s freezing cold and skimpy little skirts, climbing up rock faces, are not the most practical of gear—and yet, you want to, as John Nathan-Turner says, keep the dads happy. So, I quite enjoyed it, and I loved my last costume in ‘Terminus.’ I never had a part before that was in a remotely pretty costume. Slightly sexy. I really enjoyed wearing that costume because it was completely new.” Jokingly, she adds, “They were beautifully made, lovely, lovely skivvies!”

Regarding “Terminus,” her departing story, Sutton recollects that “it wasn’t the jolliest of subjects.

“It was pretty grim and colorless and dull—we’re in a script sense but in the whole atmosphere of this spaceship.” Smiling at the thought, she adds, “I actually quite liked it. I felt sorry for Janet and Mark because they seemed to spend the whole time crawling through vents or something, and getting sore knees. But I had quite a good story, (continued on page 95)
and I was quite pleased.”

The dramatic impact of Adri’s departure was a tough act to follow and Sutton confesses being concerned about whether her method of departure would be memorable as well.

“Initially, I wanted to be killed off. Adri’s exit from the show was very dramatic [he was killed off], and I thought, ‘Ah, now that’s a good way to go—you’re remembered when you’re killed off.’ But then I thought, ‘Well no, I don’t think I do.’ Then, I thought, ‘Oh, I bet they get me falling in love with some chap from some planet and I have to walk off hand-in-hand with this person! No, no, no, I don’t want that to happen because I can’t see Nyssa doing that.’ So, in the end, I was quite pleased with the way she was given to leave the show. It fit her character very well. I particularly liked the final scene where she actually tells Tegan and the Doctor that she won’t be coming with them back to the TARDIS. That was a lovely scene to do...’”

"...and quite the bear jerks!"

“‘I still get my fan mail, unbelievably,’ she says happily. ‘Obviously not as much as when I was doing the show, but I do still get fan mail. There’s a lot now from Australia, although that has trailed off a bit, and trickles from the United States, and letters from Canada. Sadly, I’m a bit lazy about it. I feel so bad about my fans. I tend to leave it for a few months and then do the ‘Big Fan Mail Answer,’ a couple of sackfuls at a time and then leave it again for a few months.’

Sutton isn’t easy to please when it comes to her own career and the parts she is offered. “I’m actually quite fussy. I always have in my mind the thing I would love to do next and the job that comes up is often completely different, and I think, ‘Oh well, that could be interesting.’ I tend to have things set in my mind—I would love to play that part or a character like this and life just doesn’t work out that way. You get offered things you wouldn’t have dreamt of, and that’s how it goes.”

The former child actress admits that she would like to be remembered for one of her early performances. “Yes, Alice Through the Looking Glass, which I did when I was 12. It was a production that the BBC did—it was one of the first productions that used color separation overlays totally as a trick photography system. Very few productions have used it throughout the whole program; usually, it’s used in snippets to get an effect. It was quite cleverly done.”

“...so I never wanted again—looking on the pessimistic side—I would like to be remembered for that. But who knows? In the future, I hope to do something more memorable still.” Forming a devilish smile, Sarah Sutton quips, “It sounds as if they’re quite serious about the Doctor Who movie this time. Perhaps there’s a part in it for me!”

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