Mark Strickson
The Black Sheep of "Doctor Who"

He was Turlough, the companion with a mission to kill a time lord—but who ultimately suffered his own destruction.

By JUANITA ELEFANTE-GORDON

Reminiscent of the treacherous Dr. Smith of Lost in Space, Turlough was the only companion to Doctor Who who could never really be trusted. Actor Mark Strickson broke the mold with his enigmatic Turlough, the companion with a secret assignment to assassinate the Doctor. When he left the show, the role of the companion would no longer be so predictable.

Without having to say a word, Strickson presents a striking countenance: chiseled features and intense, almost hypnotic eyes. Speaking with a vividness nearly as bright as his orange-red hair, Strickson discusses his short-lived role.

"I got a phone call from my agent suggesting I should audition for this regular part in Doctor Who," Strickson says, recalling how he landed the much-coveted gig. "I duly went along to [producer] John Nathan-Turner's office for an interview and read-through, not thinking for a moment that I would actually get it. It's really not something you bank on because so many people in the acting profession are chasing so very few jobs. You go along to loads of interviews largely knowing that you're unlikely to get the job.

"I was offered a part in another series at about the same time that I learned I had been selected for Doctor Who. The reason I didn't want the other job was that I didn't particularly like working on that program," Strickson admits. "I accepted Turlough basically because it paid the mortgage for a year. Well, I didn't even have a mortgage—it was thanks to Doctor Who that I got a mortgage for my house. I think my bank manager is a fan of the show! Actors in Britain don't earn much money for the most part. I rang my wife and said, 'Well, at least we'll eat for a year!'"

Strickson insists that the instant fame and notoriety, which seems to be part of the "companion package," had nothing to do

Turlough (Mark Strickson) was a companion of a different sort. He wanted the Doctor (Peter Davison) dead.
with his decision to join Doctor Who. "The fame thing never enters into it. It's most peculiar," he observes. "There's no fame attached to Doctor Who in Britain because we don't have a star system like this extraordi-

nary thing in America. It didn't affect my choice to do Doctor Who—as an actor, you just do what you can and you get paid for it... if you're lucky."

According to Strickton, Turlough's complex character was especially difficult to write for—a major drawback with playing the unorthodox companion. "I know they had very great problems writing for Turlough," he reveals. "In fact, two of the writers apologized to me because it was im-

possible to write for my character once he wasn't a lead in the episode—Turlough was such a strong character. It's a shame."

"I don't think Turlough was a particular-

ly good idea," Strickton confesses. "But you've got to try everything and it's very dif-

ficult. Turlough would have worked in the context of the way they're making Doctor Who now, which is 20-episode stories, because you would have time for Turlough. But when we were making it—on a very

cheap budget and four episodes at a time, there wasn't time. It wasn't that Turlough was a bad idea, he was at the wrong place, wrong time."

Doctor Who's frenetic taping schedule of the '80s wasn't conducive to spawning an-

dotes. Strickton left the series without a one. "People who worked in the old days have

anecdotes, but when I was working on the program, we were doing almost everything on one take, no chance to go back," he explains. "We had very, very limited studio time and if something went wrong, it was merely irritating, it wasn't funny."

With frustration in his voice, Strickton adds, "If anything went wrong, it was seri-

ous. I remember having 27 seconds to do a 45-second scene because we were running out of time—they were going to turn the lights out."

"And they would have," he says in amazement. "They do turn the lights out! Ten o'clock at night is it. It was very hard work; you mess around in rehearsal a bit, but it's why they don't have Doctor Who bloopers—the bloopers are kept in! No, not really," he laughs.

After one year with the series, Strickton was history. "I had the option on the con-

tract and Turlough's character wasn't get-

ing anywhere," he says. "You couldn't have the Doctor and the aliens, the compa-
nions and Turlough. I ended up being cap-
tured in episode two and three and released in episode four, which is a fairly tedious way of earning a living. So, by a mutual decision, John Nathan-Turner and I had a chat and we decided that the best thing I could do is to shuffle off. That's why I left.

"It's very difficult to talk about Doctor Who. I thought it was all right, but in hind-
sight, I would do it all very differently if I did it now. I'm much older and wiser—not that much wiser—but life goes on. Life is not about monsters chasing you down cor-
rridors, Doctor Who is a dramatized comic

strip and if you took it too seriously, you

would go around the bend, I think.

"The last thing I want to do is to come across as if I'm slacking off [i.e. putting
down] Doctor Who, because I'm not," he declares. "It's a jolly good, decent, fun pro-

gram all the family can watch. And there aren't many of them around.

"I'll always retain a happy link with the

series," Strickton says brightly. "It's a fun-

ny show because you do get very close to
everybody else who's involved, and that's by

no means typical of all TV series. Peter

Daveison [STARLOG #102] got along with
everybody, he's that sort of person, a very

nice man. We're a very similar sort of actor.
We approach work the same way: we don't

take it too seriously. We're not saving lives!

"I thoroughly enjoyed my time on Doc-

tor Who. John Nathan-Turner is one of my
greatest friends. We live quite close to each

other. So, the thing I value from Doctor Who more than anything are the friends

that I've made in both England and

America."

Having been in a series like Doctor Who in Britain can often be more of a curse than a blessing for an actor. Strickton agrees. "Yes, it's very difficult to work afterwards," he says flatly. "It is difficult because people know you as that character. It didn't help me for a year, let's put it that way. Doctor Who is not a very popular pro-

gram in England; it's not like working on a soap opera. But nevertheless, it is a cult pro-

gram and everybody knows who's on it. Do-

ing Doctor Who has done me no favors, apart from having money for 18 months. It hasn't led to anything else. I, perhaps more than most, have done quite a bit of work beforehand, so I was able to fall back on people that I already knew anyway.

"Immediately after I left," Strickton recalls, "I did a [TV movie] of A Christmas

Carol, with George C. Scott, in which I

played the young Scrooge. I've done a great deal of other television since—mostly for the BBC, but a few for the independents as well. The last one I did was an episode of a drama

series for Yorkshire Television called Flying

Lady. I've also worked in the theater, done four or five plays. For the moment, I'm do-

ing absolutely nothing.

"I don't think television is terribly impor-
tant. I can't get terribly worked up about it." In fact, Strickton and his wife don't own a TV set. "I watch myself on video to learn or whatever. And I occasionally go to a friend who has a television to watch something that I want to watch. But I don't have a TV at the moment and I don't miss it at all."

Strickton, therefore, tends to look for work which may be more intriguing in the doing than in the viewing. "I like anything that I find challenging and interesting." He openly admits, "I'm quite prepared to do something that isn't challenging and inter-

esting if the money is good enough. I did a McDonald's commercial, God love me! If I had to say I had a favorite medium, I would say film, but we hardly have a film in-

dustry in Britain—so that's a bit out. Anything on television or the theater; I don't see any difference between doing something good on television, or the theater. If you're a good actor, you can ad-

just to any medium.

"I'm not a workaholic and acting is cer-

tainly not the be-all and end-all in my life," he says with conviction. "I'm quite happy restoring old houses. I act when I want to. It's not a drug for me.

"Being an actor is no more difficult than

being a builder, a decorator, a mechanic, or

working in a car factory—it's just a dif-

ferent job. There's no mystery about acting

as far as I'm concerned. You just have to

work harder at it; I mean, you have to do
different things. I work out in a gym regu-

larly. You keep your body looking nice

because that's the way you earn a living; but

you must take time to do that. It's fairly
tedous working out in a gym, but it's part

of the job."

While work in Britain is incredibly limited for actors, Mark Strickton keeps things in perspective and remains optimistic. "My im-

mediate plans: Let's do up the house I'm liv-

ing in at the moment, sell it and get a smaller

mortgage. I might work again," he quips, "it depends on what people offer me, if

anything."