Peter Davison

"It Never Occurred to Me I Could Be The Doctor"

A young actor reflects on his travels through fandom and fantasy as the fifth man to herald the adventures of "Doctor Who."

By BEN LANDMAN
H is a young man, with an open, appealing face and his fair hair cut short. And there is still a note of honest wonder in Peter Davison’s voice when he recalls being asked, four years ago, to play the lead on television’s longest-running science-fiction series, Doctor Who. Thirty years old when he was offered the part (he left in spring 1984, replaced by Colin Baker), Davison was not only the youngest actor to have assumed the mantle of the time-traveling Doctor, he was also the first to have seen the show as a child. And so producer John Nathan-Turner’s call amounted to an opportunity for Davison to become his own childhood hero.

“I had watched Doctor Who since 1963,” the actor explains, “really fairly avidly through the first two Doctors. It had never occurred to me before John phoned me—never in a million years: I mean it had occurred to me that I might one day be in the show, but never as the Doctor!”

He had some hesitation at first. “It is a most appallingly daunting part to take on, if only because Tom [Baker] had done it for seven years—and also because you can’t approach Doctor Who like any other part,” Davison says. “In any other part that you’re playing in fiction, you can usually say, ‘Well, this character had this sort of background. He had parents like this, he went to this school.’ But with the Doctor, he comes from Gallifrey. The man is 750 years old and has two hearts! You can’t draw many conclusions from that.”

Davison’s own background is much more earthbound, of course. Born in Streatham, a suburb of London, and educated at a school in Woking, he remembers being only vaguely interested in drama. But then, he says, at age 16 or 17, “It suddenly struck me that I was probably useless at everything else. And, indeed, I failed most of my exams. Fortunately,” he continues wryly, “to get into a drama school, you don’t need any academic qualifications.”

He entered the Central School of Speech and Drama at age 18, and trained there for three years. Next, Davison spent a year at the Nottingham Playhouse, followed by a season with the Edinburgh Young Lyceum Company. After another year of repertory work, he landed his first TV role—in a science-fiction series called The Tomorrow People. “It was a fairly silly program,” he comments, “very definitely a children’s series. I played a space cowboy in a blond wig. Sandra [Davison’s wife, Sandra Dickinson, best known to American viewers as Trillian in The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy] was in it, too.”

Davison was soon cast as Tristan Farnon in the BBC’s popular series, All Creatures Great and Small, later seen on PBS in the United States. The production unit manager (“The one in charge of the purse strings,” Davison explains) of Creatures was John Nathan-Turner, who later moved into the producer’s seat for Doctor Who (STARLOG #82, 101). When Tom Baker announced that he was departing Who, Nathan-Turner decided that the new Doctor should be a complete contrast to Baker’s larger-than-life characterization. And he thought of Peter Davison.

In his first season as the Doctor, Davison faced the challenge of bringing freshness and contrast to a role nearly two decades old. He prepared for it by watching videotapes of his predecessors, and “tried to pick out ideas from those—just to bring in, subtly, the early ones to help me on my way.” This preparation was perhaps most noticeable in his first story, “Castrovalva,” in which Davison slipped into brief characterizations of his earlier “selves” in a burst of post-regenerative confusion.

“I don’t think John had much in his mind about what he wanted the part to be except by casting me in it,” Davison observes. “I mean he didn’t say, ‘I’m offering you the part, and I want you to play it like this.’ The trick of a good producer is to cast someone who is right for the part in the way they see it, and then let them do it. Which is really what he did. I was very much thrown in and told ‘You’re the Doctor—now do it!’”

As time went on, though, it was Davison’s own attitudes toward the Doctor which guided him. “You have to make him reckless,” he says, “so that he’s not always acting in the best interests of the situation. If he was really wise, he would probably leave during the first scene of most of the stories. As far as I was concerned, he was obviously intending to do the right thing, but somehow, by being interested, he would do the wrong thing for quite a while. Maybe he would put people’s lives at risk inadvertently, simply because he was fascinated by the situation into which he had gotten.”

The actor is not so sure where the line between himself and his portrayal should be drawn. “I don’t think you ever think too consciously—especially if you’re playing someone from Gallifrey, someone 750 years old—exactly what parts of yourself you’re putting into it.” But he cautiously concludes that there was some blending, simply because of his strongly held ideas about the series. “I wanted to

(continued on page 64)

BEN LANDMAN, Michigan-based writer, reports regularly for the Doctor Who Fan Club of America. He interviewed Patrick Troughton for STARLOG #89.

The Doctor, Nyssa, Tegan and Adric (left to right: Davison, Sarah Sutton, Janet Fielding and Matthew Waterhouse) took a trip back to 1925 for “Black Orchid.”
change the direction of Doctor Who a bit, make it more believable. The fact of the matter is that it was me playing the part. Therefore, bits that are me came over."

Although Davison was playing roles in two other series—Holding the Fort and Sink or Swim—concurrent with Doctor Who, concern about typcasting was one reason for his departure from the program.

"Obviously," he says, "that was a factor when I said I wasn't going to do a fourth year—the fact that I felt that period was about as long as I could do it without becoming too fixed as the Doctor in people's minds. The only thing I really did to avoid typcasting was to stop playing the Doctor fairly soon." But he laughingly concludes that being permanently cast as a Time Lord is not likely to be the problem. "As it is, Tristan is the part I'll never quite get away from in anyone's mind. I think it's the first part in which you come to the public's attention that stays with you. So, I was 'Tristan Playing the Doctor!'"

It was during Davison's tenure that U.S. Doctor Who conventions snowballed both in number and size. While these assemblages were first fueled by Tom Baker fandom, the showing of more current episodes quickly made Davison a popular convention guest. But such appearances have their drawbacks.

"I know people like autographs," he remarks. "But there's something about someone approaching you and saying, 'Oh, will you sign this please,' that somehow brings down a barrier between you. And, suddenly, you are 'The Celebrity' and they are 'The Fan.'" He would rather simply talk with people, because "it's a whole different thing. You can talk to them like you might talk to anybody, like a friend; and you don't have this barrier of them and us. I can't tell you how much I like just talking."

Davison has been busy since leaving the Tardis behind. He appeared in Anna of the Five Towers, a BBC classic series which aired in Britain in January, and worked on another series based on Agatha Christie's Miss Marple stories. In the future, he says, he would love to do some film work, and feels that he ought to do stage as well. "Maybe I could direct—produce—Doctor Who..." Davison chuckles.

Mostly he says, he would like to play some tougher characters—which he thinks will aid in continuing to break the Tristan mold.

And of course, he'll continue to squeeze in the conventions. But the range of options confronting a popular, available actor means that those appearances were much easier to do when I was doing Doctor Who—because then I knew that I would be doing the program next March and next July, and I could say to John Nathan-Turner, 'Look, can I have two days off to go and do this?'"

And Peter Davison concludes, with that familiar, innocent—and slightly reckless—smile, "Now, I don't know what on Earth I'm doing..."

---

**Hamilton**

(continued from page 50)

"because they haven't had the training. In British theater, they are magnificent listeners. And Fred has that. In take after take, Joel is never quite the same. Fred reacts to that. And then, occasionally, Fred throws Joel a loop. And I think that has worked well."

Their love-hate relationship is the film's core. "In scene one," Hamilton explains, "Remo absolutely hates Chiu. Chiu kicks him around, and now Remo has to have lessons with this guy. And Chiu is really awful to him. They live together, and the relationship grows. Remo learns he can really take the piss out of Chiu, and Chiu begins, reluctantly, to become fond of Remo. And they become the Odd Couple."

"When they fall out, it's very touching."

**Heroic Melodies**

Although he's best known for directing James Bond, Guy Hamilton remains sensitive about the subject, preferring that his other projects be judged on their own merits. With Remo, he's taking special plans to avoid any resemblance to his 007 epics. "When it gets to Bondania," he observes, "I automatically shear off."

Hamilton makes no secret of his unhappiness with the later Bond films, and the reason he declined to direct subsequent entries in the series.

"I wanted to switch Bond into certain new areas," Hamilton explains. "And very right- ly, Cubby Broccoli [series producer, see STARLOG #99]—with whom I got on splendidly—'But Guy, suppose you're wrong. You kill the goose that lays the golden egg.' I never liked that answer. I was stuck to a formula and was getting no kicks out of it."

The new areas Hamilton intended to explore involved the unflappable James Bond personality—which some claim owes a debt to Hamilton's own cool persona. "I talked with Sean Connery," he says. "Bond was getting pretty boring for an actor. You know, where Sean would be chasing some young villain who could run 100 yards in 10 seconds. And Bond, after all, is coming on 56 and huh—huh—" Hamilton pantomimes an out-of-breath runner—and he stops in the middle of a chase, and says, 'Oh, the hell with it. Now, I must use my brain.' But he said, 'Bond must run.' I think the other way would be charming. You would be drawing attention to his age, and Bond would be lovable!"

Another legendary hero who intrigued Guy Hamilton was The Man of Steel. Forgotten amid the success of Superman was the fact that Hamilton was the first director approached for the project.

"I prepared it all," he reveals. "We were going to do it in Rome. I had to work on two scripts—which was great fun. It was a [Alexander & Ilya] Salkind technique at that time. They had been very successful with the Three and Four Musketeers by just shooting a little bit longer and making enough for two movies. And they were trying that again. Bob Benton was on the script in those days. Tom Mankiewicz [STARLOG #69] came in later and did a few things. And then time ran out and I just passed. It was a very happy ending, a friendly situation and nothing unusual."

But Hamilton admits to some unhappiness over casting questions. "I didn't approve of Marlon Brando because I needed the money for the special effects. I said, 'You know, for what you're paying him—it's five days and he's not very good—you can get Charlton Heston who was born to play Superman's dad.' And I got very angry because at that moment they were hustling and really preselling the movie. They hadn't got the money, but in the pre-sale, they said, 'Brando's in it,' And I said, 'Yes, but it's a spit and a cough at the start.' That's naughty."

Despite his reservations, Hamilton liked Superman. "I thought it had a lot going for it," he admits.

In adapting The Destroyer, a series that has run more than 60 novels to date, into Remo, Hamilton has been forced to omit certain background elements—such as Chiu's belief that Remo is the reincarnation of Shiva, the Destroyer. But he recognizes these elements will be needed in later films.

"The quick answer is that in a couple of hours, you certainly cannot deal with all the things the books deal in," he says. "I see Sinanju, Chiu's village, very very clearly. I think it's the absolute asshole of Korea. For Chiu, it is more beautiful than Paris and Rome put together! But one day, Remo obviously has to go there. That will come. And whether Remo is the son that Chiu never had. All those things are ongoing. They'll happen later."

But Guy Hamilton isn't concerned with those promised screen sequels. He's not certain that, if they do happen, he'll be involved. "I personally don't give it a thought. I made this picture—which I've enjoyed doing with certain reservations—and I hope it's successful and I hope it does what everybody wishes. And life goes on."