The Return of Doctor Three

A Starburst feature by David Richardson and Lee Matthews

Jon Pertwee is amused. A journalist has telephoned and asked if he is enjoying playing the Doctor for the first time. Jon thinks they’ve missed the point somewhat. Almost twenty years after he made his Doctor Who debut he is back in the role. This time he is on stage, touring the country with Doctor Who: The Ultimate Adventure.

The man behind the play is Mark Furness, who brought ‘Allo ‘Allo to the West End, and plans to do the same with the hit television series Bread. The original idea was to start with an Australian tour, for which Mark Furness approached Jon Pertwee. It was with deep regret that Jon had to turn the tour down. “I love Australia, but I just wasn’t available to do it.” Sometime later the offer came up again but to do the show in Britain, and fitted into my schedule rather neatly.”

There was a slight hesitation on Mr Pertwee’s part before agreeing to the show. He left Doctor Who in 1974, and only returned once for the twentieth anniversary story The Five Doctors. In that time he had moved on to Worzel Gummidge, among other work. “I’d feel it was a retrograde step,” then I thought that the fact it hadn’t been done much on stage made it something new. I have agreed to do the first three months of the tour, but to do more would be too exhausting. I gather they are keen to go for six months, and take it to the West End, and possibly Australia and Canada. I’ll take a rest after the three months, but if it goes well I would love to go with it.”

The play was written for Jon by Terrance Dicks, who was script editor during his era of the programme. Terry also wrote a Doctor Who play for me during the 1970’s called The Seven Keys To Didoesday. At the time I wasn’t able to do it because of my commitment to the television series. They found someone called Trevor Martin to play the Doctor, Who got very good reviews. The show was a success, but the stage crew were inexperienced and the props and scenery were far too big. They couldn’t get the stuff out of the London theatre, and they wouldn’t fit into the theatre in Manchester where they were holding. In the end, the tour collapsed. There has been talk of an American production being staged, and I shared the stage at a convention with the man they had cast as the Doctor. He didn’t go down at all well, even with his own countrymen. The Americans are used to the Doctor being British.

The Ultimate Adventure will capture the flavour of the television series, but Jon hopes that it will be more ‘high tech’. “We are using lasers, which you cannot see on television. We have excellent lighting effects. It will be a straight adventure, not particularly a Science Fiction story as such. I’ll be playing it as I did on television, keeping the recognisability and the Venice base. Initially the performance will have to be larger because stage technique and television technique are totally different. The costume will be the same style, although a new one is being made for the show.”

Terrance Dicks has been able to include two of the most popular monsters from the television series in his script. Jon has appeared with the Cybermen once before, but is none too keen on the Daleks with which he has worked three times. The Daleks for the play have been specially made, and are much taller than their television counterparts to give them a greater presence on stage. “I’ve never been fond of the Daleks. I couldn’t see how these things could be so brilliant with a variety pump and an egg whisk sticking out of them. In this show they are attempting to pull my TARDIS console to pieces.”

One of the most intriguing elements of the play is its musical content. It comes as a surprise to learn that there were serious negotiations to secure Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan for the roles of the companions, but their vast popularity meant they were too busy. The songs written for them remain, but Jon is adamant that they
The Ultimate Production?

Doctor Who - The Ultimate Adventure is the most gloriously awful piece of nonsense you're ever likely to see performed on stage. If any member of the first night audience was expecting a serious, dramatic, their hopes must’ve been dashed the moment Jon Pertwee strode impressively from the TARDIS, inspiring a show-stopping round of applause. It was to be fun and frolics all the way, with the Doctor playing Tarrant Dicks using his vast knowledge of the series to drag in every cliché the good Doctor had ever encountered. This time, the Daleks and Cybermen team was dramatically assisted by David Banks (recently escaped from his Cyberman costume) and the leather-clad space mercenary.

Plot?

An American peace envoy has been captured, and that means only one thing - the Doctor has to go time-space hopping around the galaxy, encountering planets populated by strange machines, flying insects in leotards and a variously positioned piece of plastic rock - all because of Mr. Thatcher.

"I know the TARDIS is a time machine," says the Doctor, "a French assassin's assistant; in action, but the time is still running out back on Earth!"

The Daleks have been watching the human situation developments, and have managed to get their hands on a copy of the book, "Doctor Who: A History in Pictures." The Daleks, for their part, expertly avoid bumping into each other (although there are a few close calls) whilst both they and their Evil of the Daleks styled emperor have dialogue with the other dramatic quality of a British Rail ferry. Tarrant Dicks, in particular, gets excited about Kevin Davies’ animated asteroids on their large video screen.

Jon Pertwee is excellent, skillfully picking the more jargonic of his lines from the cunningly scribbled notes on a rather squashed looking Tardis console. His Doctor is as charming and watchable as ever, holding the show together with a beautiful balance of total conviction and comic skill.

Problems solved?

My second outing to the show confirmed my thoughts that it had undergone some rewriting and more rehearsal. Thankfully, this process has removed the somewhat clumsy qualities of the first night. It was obvious from the start that Tarrant Dicks’ had written far too many scene changes, almost as if he was writing for television. This had caused problems for an un-rehearsed stage crew, and made the whole experience even more hilarious for the audience than did the tactical plot. As scenario crashed and crashed in the darkness, the lonely keyboard couple in the orchestra pit vamped desperately through long passages of their TV test card incident.

The Ultimate Adventure is now, however, as polished a production as its designers have allowed it to be. The scene shifts are swiftly bridged, with the drama moving seamlessly onto each new location materializes. The Daleks are still oddly outtuned paragons of their television counterparts, looking as if they’ve been designed from a 5 year old’s crayon drawing and built by Blue Peter - but they glide about wonderfully!

There’s never a dull moment, there are plenty of laughs and it even gets exciting at times. Terrific kids love it, parents look bewildered and the Doctor, Jon Pertwee, and fans laugh their heads off as Pertwee brings the house down with his revelation that the Daleks have 'reversed the polarity of the neutron flux.'

Catch up with it on its current national tour!

Nicholas Briggs

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fell out with the producer, Barry Letts, was when I was unhappy with a scene and felt that it should be done again.

Jon’s future is looking very busy indeed. Aside from the play, there is the possibility of an ‘alternative’ Science Fiction series called Starwatch. Christopher Leech is the maestro behind the project, a man who has worked with Barry Letts and in films, "Chris called me three days ago and was very optimistic. We have already made a promotional pilot, consisting of a fascinating scene which sets up the series. We have sent out promotional cards and brochures, and even distributed scripts to interested parties. We did have a slight set-back when we discovered that HTV were doing an Anglo-American project starring Pamela Stephenson which stopped our toes a bit."

Jon refers to Starwatch as "ecological Science Fiction." The new premise of the series is one of a mad professor discovering a crystal beneath Stonehenge which is controlling the climate of Earth. This crystal is linked to others throughout the galaxy, but it is breaking down. As a result, the planet is being devastated by natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes. The professor decides upon repairing the crystal, but he lacks the knowledge to do so. He must travel across the galaxy to find another crystal and make his breakthrough. The story is written by a team of science fiction writers, and Jon Pertwee is cast as Jason (a character modeled on Jon Pertwee) in charge of organizing the rescue operation. Jon also has a leading role in the series' debut episode, and there is one very famous actor in it, Ian McKellen of "The Lord of the Rings" fame.

Jon has a chance to promote the new series while making many personal appearances across the country. He even took the organizers at the National Film Theatre’s Doctor Who weekend by surprise and turned up on the day asking to be interviewed. He still attends a large number of Doctor Who conventions in England and America. He enjoys meeting people, and loves signing autographs. His fans are very polite, if a walking down Oxford Street avoiding eye contact people would not dream of stopping me. In America they are very demanding - the fans see fanatics in the true sense of the word.

Nevertheless, he is surprised that his time on Doctor Who remains so popular. The video releases are selling tremendously well, with a promise from the BBC of more to come. "I did an appearance at the Virgin Megastore on Oxford Street to promote Death To The Daleks and couldn’t believe it - there were people coming out of the woodwork! The manager told me that we were beating Madonnas in the charts by two hundred tapes. It was the biggest sale of videos they’d had up to that time."

As The Ultimate Adventure kicks off on its British tour, an audience seems almost guaranteed. There couldn’t be a better time for the third Doctor to be back.