DAVID TENNANT DEPARTS AFTER 4 YEARS AS 'DOCTOR WHO'

THIS DOCTOR IS OUT

DOCTOR WHO: THE WATERS OF MARS. 9 p.m. Saturday, BBC America.

DOCTOR WHO: THE END OF TIME, PART ONE. 9 p.m. Dec. 26, BBC America.

DOCTOR WHO: THE END OF TIME, PART TWO. 8 p.m., Jan. 2, BBC America.

ELLEN GRAY

PASADENA, Calif. — The Doctor is on his way out.

Oh, there'll be another one along soon, because that's the tradition of "Doctor Who." The world's longest-running science fiction TV series, it's featured 10 actors in the title role since 1963.

But for David Tennant, whose long goodbye continues Saturday as BBC America airs the second of his final four "Doctor Who" specials, "The Waters of Mars," his four-year tenure as a wisecracking 900-year-old "Time Lord" who travels time and space in a 1950s London police call box known as the TARDIS is drawing to a close.

"It's hard, because I've genuinely loved doing it," Tennant said in an interview last summer. "I'm really proud of what we've done. It's difficult to step away from that. But at the same time, well, better to whilst I'm still loving it, better to leave them wanting more," he said, "and the show's in very rude [good] health, so it's nice to be able to hand that on, to know that we've acquitted ourselves well."

For Americans who may have missed both the original "Doctor Who," which aired in Britain from 1963-1989, or the somewhat slicker revival writer Russell T Davies has overseen since 2005, it

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Tennant (left) with Lindsay Duncan (right) on the BBC series.

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can be difficult to grasp just how important the series has been to generations of Britons, or how popular it's made Tennant, a 38-year-old Scotsman probably best known in the U.S. for playing Barty Crouch Jr. in "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" and for a recent turn as the host of PBS' "Masterpiece Contemporary."

"You all are much easier than the British press," he said to me after we'd wrapped up our interview, one of a series he was doing that day.

The remark briefly stung — reporters never like to hear they're easy — until I remembered how closely his personal life gets tracked in Britain, where on vacation a few weeks later, I saw photographs and caricatures of him in the windows of half the souvenir shops I passed.

"Back home . . . it's kind of the No. 1 drama," Tennant said.

"It's nice to feel that we've done our job, and we haven't messed it up."

It's also a luxury for an actor looking to move on — Tennant's reportedly starring in an NBC pilot for a comedy about a Chicago attorney with panic attacks called, "Rex Is Not Your Lawyer" — to know he can go on to new projects without destroying the show he leaves behind.

"There's precedent to suggest that it won't crumble without me," Tennant said wryly.

"Of course, it's slightly galling, but, no, I'm glad. Because I'm a fan of the show, I grew up watching it, so I don't want to be the man who kills it."

So other than himself, who's Tennant's favorite Doctor? "It's a bit like a chick hatching from an egg, isn't it?" he said. "I think the one you first experience, if you fall in love with the show, you fall in love with that Doctor. So that would've been Tom Baker [1974-81] for me, as it would be for many. I mean, he did it for seven years, so he has a certain place in the history of the show. And then Peter Davison [1981-84], I suppose — the two of them were the two" he watched.

Tennant: "It's nice to feel that we've done our job, that we haven't messed it up."

Davison also made a brief appearance in Tennant's "Doctor Who."

"Peter came and did a little sequence with us, which was fantastic. And that was very odd, for someone who'd grown up watching him, to then be in my TARDIS with him, visiting, in the costume. That was a very peculiar, very exciting moment for me."

The 11th Doctor, played by 27-year-old Matt Smith, will debut in "Doctor Who: The End of Time, Part Two," which premieres on BBC America Jan. 2.

He may find Tennant a tough act to follow.

Tennant demurred when asked about a 2006 readers poll in *Doctor Who* magazine that named him the "best Doctor," but after four years in the role, the actor, who succeeded Christopher Eccleston in 2005, has clearly left his mark on the character, whose stay in Tennant's body has been marked by humor, manic energy and a certain sadness.

"I think what Russell [Davies] has done — and it's partly because of the time he's writing it and the culture he's writing in, and also because he's a fantastic writer, who can do all the fancy action-adventure stuff but also has to get the characters a background and a full life — with the Doctor, he's examined what it would mean to be 900-odd years old and what it would mean to be the last of your people. You really feel the genuine effect of that," Tennant said.

"And you get this character who can bounce from being the sort of mercurial, effervescent fizzing thing" to someone more thoughtful, he added.

But how much of that is Davies and how much Tennant? Because Tennant fizzes a lot.

"Well, maybe I do," he said. "That just seems to me that that's how he is. He's hungry for the next experience. You know, he has wanderlust, an uncontrollable wanderlust. He has to keep going. Maybe he's running away from something as well. He's clearly got guilt, and regret."

The final specials offer "a wonderful opportunity" to tell stories that don't "reset to zero" at the end of the episode, he said.

"We've explored different aspects of the Doctor and his personality and his loneliness and whatever else, he still carries on. And now you're faced with the possibility where he's not going to carry on. His life is coming to an end. And he knows it, as well. He's been told: 'Your song will end soon.' So he's aware that the sands of time are running."

Judging from Saturday's "The Waters of Mars," in which the time-traveling Doctor finds himself on the red planet at a crucial moment in human history, this incarnation of the character isn't going quietly.

"I think he's raging against the dying of the light," Tennant said. "He doesn't know what's coming next. But that's a gamble, isn't it? You never know what you're going to get."

It's a transition that can be difficult for viewers as well.

I told him I remembered mourning Eccleston — *my* first Doctor — and being initially suspicious of Tennant, though I'd loved his work in BBC America's "Viva Blackpool."

"I think that absolutely is part of it," he said. "And of course you're teasing the audience with the very expectation that you're going, and they know it, and in the story we're telling, the Doctor knows that his days are numbered."

Not that it's all long faces: "It's also a cracking big adventure, of course, and there's some very funny bits and there's some huge set pieces and some action sequences. But there's a new flavor as well. The stakes are higher." ★

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WATCH THIS

'Jennifer Hudson: I'll Be Home for Christmas'

8 tonight
CHANNEL 6

The Academy Award-winning singer and actress (right) relives childhood Christmases by performing at her neighborhood church and other Chicago locations.

'The Sing-Off'

8 tonight
CHANNEL 10

Looks as if the Peacock has a bad case of "Glee" fever. In this new competitive reality series hosted by Nick Lachey (right), a cappella groups vie for a recording contract with Sony.

'Two and a Half Men'

9 tonight
CHANNEL 3

Charlie (Charlie Sheen) coaches Jake (Angus T. Jones, right) in the fine art of infidelity while his girlfriend's away for Christmas. "Warning, It's Dirty." That's not us talking; that's the episode title.