DOCTOR WHO
An interview with the current producer John Nathan-Turner

Producer John Nathan-Turner is now the longest serving producer on the show. He has also had to endure more problems than most producers.

SB: Since last season the show seems to have suffered a series of behind-the-scenes set-backs. Has it been a traumatic year?
JNT: No, not really.

SB: Eric Seward quit in a flurry of publicity. Do you have any comment to make on that?
JNT: No, none at all.

SB: What was your reaction to the interview which he gave in a previous issue of this magazine?
JNT: There’s really nothing that I want to add to the statement made the BBC at that time . . . it speaks for itself.

SB: Presumably it was a blow when Colin Baker’s contract was not renewed?
JNT: Oh-huh, I felt sad in many ways.

SB: What do you feel about losing Bonnie Langford as well?
JNT: When Bonnie was engaged to play Melanie it was on the understanding that she would do so for twenty episodes, spread over two seasons. Although I’m disappointed that she won’t be along for some of the episodes of next season, which we had asked her to consider, it’s not a blow in any way, as the original plan was...
only for those twenty episodes, which she has now completed. I’m sorry, of course, that she’s moving on, but she did give us ample notice that this was her intention and there were no options signed on either side that she would continue beyond the end of the present season.

SB: So how did you set about finding a new script editor? ... JNT: Well, there are lots of literary agencies that suggest writers to us. I spoke to them and, obviously, to other people within the industry and also with script editors who were leaving other projects; the final choice being Andrew (Carmell), who was suggested by an agent. He’s done quite a bit of writing, most of which has never been formally published; I’ve read much of it and it’s really terrific quality. This is the first time that he’s script-edited.

SB: ... and a new Doctor? ... JNT: Much the same procedure was followed as with Andrew. Agents suggested hundreds of actors, which is understandable as the title role in Doctor Who is still the most sought-after job in television. Several producers-friends rang me up with ideas and suggestions. Probably over a thousand names poured into the office, which we whittled down to dozens that we interviewed and finally to the three whom we screen tested.

SB: ... and finally, a new companion? JNT: By much the same process but, naturally, on a far smaller scale. When you are looking for a slightly older actress who can play young, it does limit the field. I needed someone who was free of the licence restrictions which apply to all children under 16. Sophie (Aldred) was cast initially for one story, ‘Dragonfire’, with options on the BBC’s part to develop her character (of Ace) further, but she was also cast with a view to joining up and being the new companion.

SB: A year ago you were ready to move on. What caused you to change your mind; was it the prospect of working with a new team?

JNT: Absolutely ... and the enormous attraction of the approaching twenty-fifth anniversary season, plus persuasion from my peers.

SB: So having assembled your team, the cycle for a new Doctor was set in motion with the necessity of a fresh title sequence ... JNT: Yes, we went through Oliver Elms, a BBC graphic designer, to a company named Calvados, which specialises in computer animation and which had executed the Nia O’Connor sequence. It took a long time because each one of the hundreds of frames in the sequence had to be hand-processed. It’s the longest opening titles the programme’s ever had, which is about fifteen seconds longer than the former average of thirty-five seconds, but it doesn’t impinge drastically on any of the actual programme time.

SB: ... and another variation on the theme music? JNT: I felt that with a change of Doctor we might as well have a complete revamp. Many people expressed their dislike of

Dominic’s [Glyn] version, but I didn’t dislike it. Obviously, I didn’t, otherwise I wouldn’t have employed it on the fourteen episodes of the ‘Trial’ last season, but with a new era in the show’s history being embarked upon, I thought a fresh setting to go with the new titles was in order.

SB: Several new writers and one new director were brought in for Season 24; was this Andrew Carmell’s influence?

JNT: Well, not the new director, certainly, but the writers, of course. Andrew is very keen, as indeed I have always been very keen, to cultivate new writing talent for the show and he’s found some interesting new people, or at least brought them to my attention, as I had actually met Stephen Wyant and we’d talked generally about the possibility of his writing for Who before Andrew was appointed as script editor. Andrew did, however, work very closely with Stephen and also brought him in Malcolm and Ian.

SB: Who devised the character of the Seventh Doctor? ... JNT: It was a team effort; Andrew, Sylvester and I had several discussions as to the way in which he should be played but that sort of thing doesn’t evolve every last aspect, so, of course, it also evolves as production proceeds and indeed this happened throughout the season. In fact I think we’re still evolving it now.

SB: ... and his costume? JNT: Ken Trew, the costume designer, and I met initially and then we roped in Sylvester, and the end result is what is now on the screen.

SB: What has been the public reaction to Sylvester McCoy; has there been any reluctance to accept a new actor in the role?

JNT: No more than usual; there’s a change of Doctor, there’s an initial hesitancy, which is mainly found in the younger viewers, who may have only ever seen Colin or maybe Peter in the role. On the whole he’s been received very well. Patricia Quinn as Peri and Edward Peal as Kane in the fourth story – ‘Dragonfire’.

He’s had to face some press criticism, most of which is unfounded. I think Sylvester said it all when he reacted to being voted ‘Wally of the Week’ by Nina Mikhic by saying that clearly he had therefore arrived in the industry.

SB: How do the viewers rate Bonnie Langford? Was there any feedback when her departure was announced in the press and that Sophie Aldred would be taking over?

JNT: Apart from the occasional letter that may say “on the one hand I’m sorry Bonnie’s going but welcome to Sophie” – no reaction at all has been received here [in the Production Office].

SB: Did you formulate a deliberate policy not to use returning monsters in Sylvester’s first season? JNT: I always like to think in terms of returning elements rather than just monsters and I felt that Kate O’Mara and Tony Selby, as the Rani and Glitz were quite enough past ingredients for fourteen episodes. That is two items from the Doctor’s past was quite sufficient and this season they both happened to be

humanoid; but they could just as easily have been Cybermen or even Zygons or maybe both.

SB: ... and the Master? It’s the first season in your tenure as producer that he hasn’t been involved somewhere.

JNT: With the seasons reduced to fourteen episodes and therefore three or four stories at the most, I feel that he should appear in only one or say seven rather than one in four. That’s not to say that he won’t be back next season or indeed that he will. I haven’t yet been able to give very much thought to next season as there’s still several episodes of this one to complete.

SB: This season there seems to be a proliferation of well-known actors/actresses in cameo roles. Is this a deliberate policy change in that it’s a complete contrast from when you became producer in 1979 when approximately one guest-star appeared per story?

JNT: Well, I wouldn’t call the Chief Caretaker and Gavrok exactly small parts, but if you mean that more well-known actors and actresses are appearing, it’s

New ex companion, Sophie Aldred as Ace and Bonnie Langford as Mel
true. I have said in the past that Doctor Who has become like the Morecombe and Wise Show, which has become misquoted as "Doctor Who is like the Morecombe and Wise Show". What I actually meant was that, as with the Morecombe and Wise Show many known people in the profession want to appear in Doctor Who; they actually ask if they can be cast in it. So if a suitable personality part comes along, as with the one Ken Dodd played, then I'm delighted to have them come aboard.

SB: At this year's 'Doctor Who Appreciation Society Convention' Tony Selby was grilled by fans who thought that Doctor Who these days has become a second-rate pantomime and turned into a children's show. Would you refute that view?
JNT: I'm afraid that it's so ridiculous to liken Doctor Who with a second-rate pantomime. As many readers of Starburst and many DWAS members will know, I do have a certain penchant for pantomime as a release from the pressures of 50 weeks a year with the BBC and I often become involved with a panto at Christmas for a change of pace. I do consider myself a purist in pantomime terms and something of an expert in the field. Having said that, I can honestly say that I see no similarities between pantomime and Doctor Who whatsoever.

SB: That Convention was notable for the absence of the current 'big three', Sylvester, Bonnie and yourself: can you say why none of you were present?
JNT: I can't say why Bonnie was not present as I don't actually know that myself. Sylvester, as attendees of the event will know from the video-taped interview which he did for it, was on a promotion for the BBC in America that weekend. The reason for my own absence was caused by illness within the circle of my immediate relatives and I had warned the organisers that I might not be able to be present because of hospital visiting in the Midlands that weekend, which indeed was the case.

SB: Where did the idea of the on-air synopsis of the story so far originate for the last two seasons?
JNT: The idea of the recaps originated from the Presentation Department. They rang and offered the facility for the programme and I took them up on it. The recap is illustrated by slides, which I choose and is written by Andrew, as script editor.

SB: What are your views on the latest time-slot for the programme?
JNT: Well now that we're getting a healthy five million per episode on average, I think it's quite a good one. I always said before transmission of this season began that in some ways I thought it was a good idea to put it opposite Coronation Street and that in some ways I'm all for what Michael Grade has termed, alternative scheduling; that is offering viewers a choice. On the other hand, it was in some ways very daunting to be placed opposite a show which goes out 52 weeks a year and has been running even longer than Doctor Who itself. We're seasonal, whereas the Street is ever there whether it be Christmas, Easter, Whit or whatever. It's only not there if there should be a strike. So I had looked at it from two different points of view and I must say that the viewing figures appear to have pleased the Sixth Floor, though, of course, we would love to reach six million by the end of the run.

SB: Has there been any reaction from Jonathan Powell . . . ?
JNT: Jonathan's very happy with the show.

SB: . . . and Michael Grade?
JNT: He's equally happy: apparently he's delighted with the stand it's made against the Street.

SB: Next season will include the twenty-fifth anniversary of the series. Are there any plans for a celebration story? If so will it be a Special, as it was for 20 years, or part of the season, as for 10 years?
JNT: There isn't going to be a Special. The anniversary will be part of the twenty-fifth season, which will be more or less the same shape as this year: two four-parters and two three-parters. One of the stories will be made entirely on location again, as with this season, which I hope will be the one to be transmitted to coincide with the anniversary.

SB: Can you give any hints yet?
JNT: Negotiations have started, but nothing is finalised yet, so no, I can't. At this moment in time we're still fighting transmission; next Monday's episode is still not yet finally treated and some post-production work is still needed on the remaining four episodes, so we're still very busy with this season. There hasn't been time to reach any firm conclusions for next year's anniversary yet.

DARREN SCOTT
The Interview was conducted in the Doctor Who Production Office between the transmission of episodes 1 and 2 of 'Delta and the Bannerman'.

Hugh Lloyd and Stubby Kaye guest starred in the third story - "Delta and the Bannerman"