The Doctor (Tom Baker) and Sarah (Elisabeth Sladen) in the 1975 BBC episode, "Planet of Evil."
A Visit with The Doctor (Who):
TOM BAKER

By KAREN E. WILLSON

He came by way of airplane, not by TARDIS, and the long scarf and floopy hat had been replaced by a three-piece business suit. But the curly brown hair, rich British accent and charismatic wit marked him unmistakably as Tom Baker, the flamboyant BBC star best known as Dr. Who.

STARLOG spoke with Baker in Los Angeles, where he paid a surprise visit to a Dr. Who convention. (See story, page 40.)

"It was simply marvelous [being] with the supporters of the program! They were wonderful! It was heaven. It's interesting that in the United Kingdom the average age of the people who turn out for two hours to meet me, to talk to me for 30 seconds, is about six years old. Now the thousand people who turned out Saturday were certainly young adults. . . . So that's very surprising.

"I think when one looks at the success of a film and television series, after the thing has become successful people start asking rather searching questions. And the ghastly sort of reality is, that it was all an accident. In fact, the first reason why it's successful is because there isn't anything like it. So therefore, it's bound to have some kind of success; it doesn't admit a comparison. That makes it unique!" Baker exclaims, his arms waving, his eyes wide. "And secondly, I think the BBC do have a very high level of technical expertise that backs up the uniqueness of the program. I think for those two reasons we do rather well among people who are interested in the subject.

"And mostly, I've always thought that most of the science-fantasy or science-fiction things that I look at are rather devoid of any irony or humor. Let us think of something for which one cannot say one single thing—except that it employed a lot of people. Space: 1999—now, that was an exercise designed—it seems to me by accident—to put the whole viewing public into a coma. There wasn't one single redeeming feature to it. In spite of the fact that the expertise that went into it was stupifying! Marvelous designers of costumes and sets, excellent actors, lovely music, lovely special effects. And quite serious people writing the scripts. Why didn't it work?" The effervescent Baker pauses for effect, fully prepared to answer his own question.

"I think that somehow when they set out on that project, they were actually impressed by the project! Why don't they just tell a few adventure stories within the formula of Space: 1999?"

"No! There were those actors with their hearts on their sleeves being—dammit! so sincere—and it was so ponderous. There was nothing silly about it. Now, if there's nothing witty or funny or silly or something, it's utterly devoid of any resemblance to reality. My view is: I cannot conceive of any situation which is real or imaginative which isn't all of those. If you want to work with an alien or a group of aliens in outer space, you've got to look for irony and humor, and silliness, embarrassment, a sense of verve, dynamics.," Baker continues. He is seated, but animated.

"But you cannot roll it in as if it were the first time anybody's ever heard [Beethoven's] Fifth Symphony. It starts in: Ba ba-boom!, as though it were some new thing with something really important to say. Since when did television actually think it had something important to say? Time to switch it off," says Baker, "actually start talking to each other."

TV Alchemists

It is quite clear that Tom Baker has strong feelings about television and science fiction and the products of their intermingling. And he is refreshingly outspoken.

"The real trick about television is that the really gifted people are all alchemists. And they are alchemists in the sense that they have to transmute whippetshit—I can't think of anything more despicable to say about popular television scripts than to call them whippetshit," Baker explains. ("I don't even know what whippetshit looks like, but it sounds to be very thin and obscene . . . .) But they have to transform whippetshit into the gold of entertainment."

BBC's resident Time Lord holds forth on his favorite subjects, science fiction and television.
"And sometimes, if they’re very, very clever, to transform it into something quite inspiring and amusing, diverting, that fills people with optimism. That’s the real test of who’s any good at it.

“Anyone can stand up on television with a modicum of expertise and indulge, or pander to prejudice and bigotry. And say ‘the right things’ in a reasonant voice. And be charmingly dressed and whatever it is—a quiz show or some ghastly situation comedy. But it needs someone really very clever to transmute that to something very special.”

Baker chuckles when asked if, after all, there is any difference between himself and the equally incisive and charming Doctor.

“You’d have to ask someone else,” is his cautious response. “I mean, I don’t know a thing about Dr. Who from an actor’s point of view. Of course, Dr. Who is not the only unique thing about it [the series]. I play an alien. Of course it’s not really an acting part...it doesn’t admit any development. You have a character who is actually utterly, utterly predictable. That’s a burning formula for boredom.” Baker states.

“I don’t really know how it went at the beginning; that was 17 years ago. But imagine. Someone says, ‘Well, look—here’s this character, he’s an alien, comes from Gallifrey, and he flies around in a police box, and he’s got this girl with him sometimes.’ And the producer must have said to the director, ‘Well, what does he do?’ He gets involved in all sorts of scrapes and finally he triumphs and he’s a sort of hero, a melodramatic hero. And they said, ‘Does he knock off the girls or is he a drunk, is he tired, does he have a hump on his back?’ No, he’s absolutely straightforward! He doesn’t smoke or drink, he doesn’t eat, he doesn’t even drink tea! Let alone take sugar in it! He doesn’t get involved in an emotional relationship with anybody, and he is never, but never, gratuitously violent.

“Someone must have said, ‘Well Christ! That sounds like a very convoluted formula for anesthetics!’ But that is the character. The character is incapable of development for the person who is playing him. Fine fellow, but utterly predictable,” Baker says.

“The real trick, and fun for the actor playing him, is: How can you be utterly predictable and still come in with enough vitality and generate enough static and surprise to gloss over the commonplace and turn it into something else? It’s very difficult.”

**Defining the Future**

“One of the problems in science fiction is that in the future it gets very difficult to describe the ordinary artifacts of existence,” Baker continues. “What are cars going to look like in the 23rd century? Or men’s haircuts? Or women’s figures? Nobody knows. It becomes difficult for writers of the future to define these artifacts.

“But in fantasy, you can actually blow up the time factor and go anywhere you want; but not irresponsibly, because the characters have to be defined. And yet, in our fantasy, while we have to define the characters and their responsibilities, we’re not channeled by the tedious business of what is scientifically viable—because fantasy actually gives one the freewheeling area of what might be desirable, if we could break all the laws of science and morality or whatever. You break all the laws! And we can go into a world which is marvelous! And it’s funny, and sometimes frightening. All the time there is the underlying heartbeat of being optimistic, diverting! But the most important thing is that television should be diverting! Take people out of themselves, literally out of life.

“So fantasy has a marvelous service to offer people. I don’t want to patronize any kind of audience that watches what I do. I adore them! I love them! They make my whole existence possible! I truly do love them.”

But Baker would still like a chance to realize more of the Doctor’s potential and perhaps share it with a new audience. Toward that end, he wrote a screenplay for a Dr. Who film, but hasn’t been able to sell it.

“Nothing has come of it, as you would expect,” Baker says with a sardonic chuckle. “Moviemakers are very cautious, aren’t they? Dr. Who sells in every country in South America except two. It sells all over the Middle East and the Far East, in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and 65 places in America.

“It’s a formula which is underpinned by hundreds of hours of television all over the world. They run it again, and again and again! And yet somehow, no one will enter into actually making a movie of it!

“You see, most of the science-fiction or fantasy movies are contingent upon special effects for their success. I’m not interested in special effects, and I think I have a kind of popular taste. I trust the audience. And I don’t think that people are interested in just special effects.”

**Sharing is Everything**

“The only thing that is interesting, that makes life bearable, is sharing something with other people. All the rest is just whippish! It’s only people in dilemmas that are interesting to anybody. What is especially interesting is people cracking the dilemma and pushing on, surviving...I’m interested in ingenuity. I’m interested in characters who actually amuse me.

“I’ll laugh, but especially at people who will inspire me with their fundamental sense of optimism—what they do isn’t solved by the annihilation of the opposition. It isn’t solved by some absolute decision, which means something is killed or destroyed...Bores me to death!

“I mean, I think of a few successful shows like Kojak. I can’t picture anything more despicably sentimental and appalling than the character of Kojak. So charmless! And when he tries to be charming he ends up shockingly sentimental.

“There’s such a terrible simplifying of everything. What happens is such a waste of material and resources and a waste of technical possibilities, because they could all be so much more fun and interesting. I’m opposed
to ‘bang bang comma, boom boom boom' exclamation mark! On popular television there are too many exclamation marks. Really, the punctuation's pretty awful. Too many dashes and exclamation marks!”

Baker breaks up laughing at this, and then looks around. Everyone in the coffee shop has stopped to listen to him, and he smiles, enjoying his audience.

“You know, there's a big difference between television and film. The fundamental difference is the context in which it takes place. When you're going to the movies it's a formal affair. You get on a bus or you go in a car and you buy a ticket and, although the movie is a communal experience, it actually becomes instantly private when the screen lights up because the movie happens in the dark. It happens in the dark! That's what's so marvelously exciting about them! Television, as opposed to 'happens in the dark,' takes place practically by definition in a domestic context where the degree of concentration and the instance of distraction is stupendously higher! People are making tea, or telephones are ringing or babies are crying. People are having fights—albeit with the television on. You can't do that in a movie, not without being thrown out!

So television is always domestic, isn't it? And that sense catches people also. Although their degree of concentration might be slightly and more intermittent, it gets people when they are terrifyingly vulnerable. And because of that amazing intimacy, there's a difference between television actors and film actors, because when I meet the audience that watches me in their living rooms, they feel much more proprietorial about me than they do about—well, I don't know...say Jack Nicholson.

Owned by the Audience

"Someone spots me in a restaurant and their kids come over and say, 'You're Doctor Who!' And I say, 'Yes, I am. Hello there.' I'm the only man in England for whom 'don't talk to a strange man' doesn't apply."

And Baker obviously loves it.

"I'm owned by my audience," he states. "I'm talking about the character as well as me, because I inhabit the character physically—and yet it devours me, it impinges on Tom Baker's privacy. But I understand that; the people who recognize me know me from their living rooms, so there is a difference. They are daunted by someone they see up on a 70-millimeter screen. But me? Everyone has a license to talk to me or touch me or kiss me because I am in their living rooms. So you see, television is infinitely more powerful than the cinema."

Does that explain why Baker stays with the show, despite TV's built-in limitations? "The reason I keep on with the character is that, first of all, it's my living, and secondly, when I consider the alternatives of what I could be doing... You know, I'm really quite aggressive and self-destructive in some ways. I'm not frightened of unemployment, I'm not frightened of scrubbing floors or being a bartender or whatever. I'm too occupied with saving what little I have. But when I look around and see the alternatives... I know something about my limitations. No one's going to give me a big part in the movies, mostly because I think the big movies are made in America and by definition are rooted in American subjects. So there's nothing for me in American movies."

"Then, when I look at the BBC and popular television and movies, when I think of how marketable I am...I look at things on the air: Well, I might get in that or that... Do I want to be in that? I don't want to be prancing around in a costume in some bloody terrible Jane Austen series or terrible adaptation of Nicholas Nicholsky. It's a lot better that I go to work and laugh my head off at Dr. Who, help promote it by coming crazily here for 48 hours. I may have a wit of a time. It's much more fun to do that, be involved in the books and the magazines. Oh, that's much more fun than to actually pretend to be real."

"I mean, I could never play parts like that bloody genius David Jansen who plays those paralyzing bores. How does it I don't know. He's another fellow who could actually make anesthetic redundant. How could he play those parts? I mean, I watch him, he's an incredible man, obviously a genius. He's a superior person. How he can actually walk through a door on television and say that stuff without cracking up, or walking through saying it without embarrassment. I know I can't compete with those kind of people.

Into TV History

"So I settle for jolly Dr. Who, which is terrific fun. I'm not into anything that isn't fun."

"You know, when I got the character I was desperately out of work and glad to have the contract. Fortunately, I signed the contract before anybody else did. I remember the wonderful feeling I had when I signed this beautiful contract, which was going to put me into television history because of the formula. Even if I had been a disastrous failure I would have gone into history as the first failure, because no one has failed Dr. Who."

"That means I never mistake myself for the character, and I never, ever underestimate the formula. There are certain actors who feel nothing could go on without them and sometimes they're right. What is constantly vital about Dr. Who is the delicious formula."

"It doesn't matter what takes it on, given professional expertise. Some hunchback or...well, it doesn't matter. It's what the character stands for, what the formula allows, which is a success. So I never actually think my contribution is bigger than the formula."

Tom Baker may play down his contribution to the Dr. Who series, but he is the catalyst that makes the formula work. Intense and opinionated, he performs every word with style, drawing on a dictionary of gestures and expressions that would make a mime jealous. Weaving warmth, humor and verve into an entertainment medium that all too often settles for the commonplace, Tom Baker is a renegade in his field. And like the good Doctor, he thoroughly enjoys it.