Doctor Who? Tampa Whovians turn out to see

John Nathan-Turner, producer of "Doctor Who," and Peter Davison, one of six actors to play Doctor Who, talked to Tampa fans about the popularity of the series.

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In England, "Doctor Who" fans sit quietly and smile with appreciation at the campy science fiction series.

In America, fans call themselves Whovians, dress up like their favorite alien, wear T-shirts and buttons and turn out in droves for festivals such as the one at Tampa Theatre Friday night.

"I'd say we're more reserved in our appreciation, but we enjoy it just as much," said John Nathan-Turner, producer of the long-running series.

Nathan-Turner and a former Doctor Who, Peter Davison, talked about the famed series while sitting by a hotel pool, wearing their pale skin to a rosy pink in the Florida sun.

Later that day, Nathan-Turner and Davison addressed some 1,400 Whovian followers of the BBC series.

Reruns of the series air in this country on many PBS outlets, including WEDU, Channel 3.

Fifteen percent of the proceeds from the one-night Whovian festival was donated to Channel 3 by the Doctor Who Fan Club of America.

Doctor Who is an alien who travels through time and space battling strange creatures (usually in low-budget costumes).

He frequently travels with a lovely female companion and uses his superior wits instead of a laser gun.

Built into the plot is a device for allowing new actors to play the role.

Time lords may live hundreds of years, but they also have the power to regenerate themselves in new forms.

Davison, 33, was the fifth actor to play the lead. He left the role 15 months ago, after a three-year stint. He has since been replaced by Colin Baker.

"I do seem to only do projects for three years at a time. So far, that's worked out fine for me," he told the Tribune.

The blond actor, who has worked only in British television, also is known to viewers of PBS as Tristan from the popular BBC series, "All Creatures Great and Small," the story of small-town veterinarian James Herriot (Christopher Timothy).

"That was my second role. I started working in 1974 in a children's science fiction series called 'The Tomorrow People.' I wore a curly wig and played a space cowboy with my American accent," he said.

He said he went from that into "All Creatures."

"That was a wonderful experience," he said. "It was one of those quality productions that was actually more popular in America than in Britain."

That role lasted three years and he has since returned for a 90-minute sequel.

"I'm going back for another 90-minute sequel soon. The last sequel was set at the end of the War, this sequel will be set two years later," he said.

Davison also starred in two British sitcoms, "Sink or Swim" (for three years) and "Holding the Fort" (three years).

He said "Sink or Swim" dealt with two brothers. One was a rogue and the other (Davison) was trying to better himself.

In "Holding the Fort," Davison played a house husband who stays home to bring up baby. "It was rather run-of-the-mill, but "Sink or Swim" was good," he said.

He said he took the role of "Doctor Who" because he needed work, and the idea of playing one of Britain's most famous heroes appealed to him.

But he had to follow Tom Baker, the most famous and most popular of the actors to play the doctor.

"It wasn't as bad as it may seem over here," Davison said. "Americans saw Baker first and then the other doctors; in Britain I was another in a long line of doctors."

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He said that the first three of his "Doctor Who" scripts were written for Baker, so he had some adjusting to do.

Each actor has brought a different interpretation to the role. Baker, a more mature man, had a flair for comedy. Davison is more the young hero.

He said that he left the role because he didn’t want to be stuck doing the same thing too long. Baker played the role so long that it’s been difficult for the public to accept him in any other role.

While in America, he plans to visit Hollywood to meet some American producers, but he doubts that he’ll work in this country until he gets “discovered” in some successful British film.

After visiting several Whoian festivals throughout the country, he plans to return to his home in London and his wife, American-born actress Sandra Dickinson, and their 10-week-old girl.

His wife also has been on PBS. She played Trillion on the science-fiction comedy "Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy."

Davison said he was amazed at the reaction of Americans to the "Doctor Who" series.

Although "Doctor Who" has been on the BBC for 22 years, only in recent years has it developed a large cult following in America.

Two weeks ago, Whoians were shocked when the BBC announced it was cancelling the 1985-86 season of "Doctor Who" because of budget cuts.

"That created such an uproar in the press and with the public that the BBC promised last week that it would return in September of 1986, after an 18-month hiatus," Nathan-Turner said.

In the meantime, a London record promoter has produced an album, "Who Cares," featuring numerous British rock groups.

The proceeds from sales of the album were planned to help the BBC fund the series, but the BBC can’t accept donations, so the money is going to help fight cancer, Nathan-Turner said.