

Life after the Doctor

He's spent years caring for his ill partner, now writer **Russell T Davies** is back – and has a lot to say about modern gay life

RUSSELL T DAVIES has created one of the great monsters in TV history. Henry Best, the “hero” of his new series *Cucumber*, is an amoral, pant-sniffing sexual predator with a terrible secret. He is also rather irresistible. Davies, Britain's greatest contemporary TV writer, has dreamt up a character to rival John Updike's Rabbit for flawed complexity.

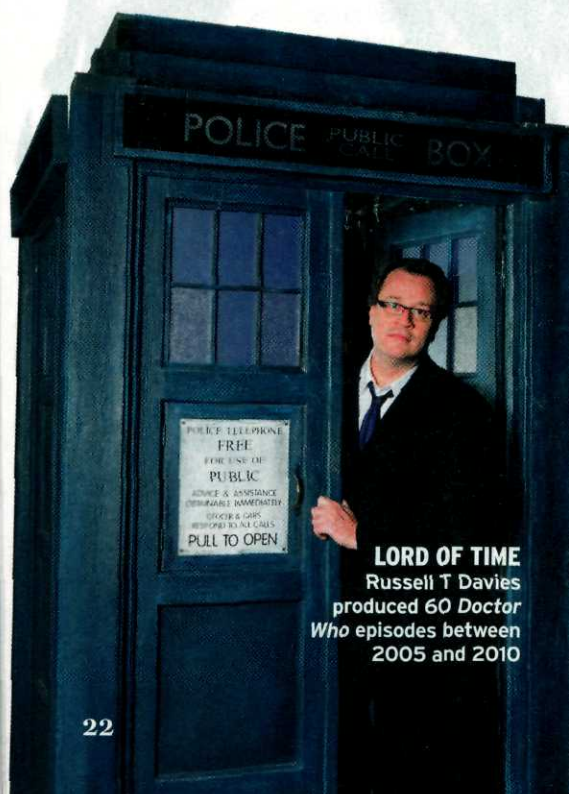
Cucumber is a brilliantly imagined return to Manchester's gay scene portrayed so memorably in *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, 1999). But this time his characters aren't young and horny, they're middle-aged and horny – overweight, balding, dissatisfied, jealous, invisible, loudly salivating over the young meat surrounding them, or quietly disappointed. And always (as with everything Davies does) they're very human.

As for Davies himself, he couldn't be more different. This giant of a Welshman (6ft 6, “technically one inch short of a giant”) rocks with enthusiasm, shakes with laughter and takes life's setbacks with equanimity.

Still best known for reviving *Doctor Who*, he's been away from our screens for some time as he turned into a full-time carer for his partner who has grade-four brain cancer, and is miraculously still alive. But what a return Davies has made. *Cucumber* is only part of his unholy trilogy, alongside *Banana* and *Tofu* (their names come from a medical study to categorise male impotence). *Cucumber* is on C4 and *Banana* follows on E4 right afterwards and focuses on the peripheral younger characters from the main drama. Meanwhile, in *Tofu*, online on 4oD, real people (including some of the actors) discuss modern sexual mores.

FOR THE BEST part of a decade, Davies has been talking about *Cucumber* and *Banana*, even if they didn't go by those names back then. It was the project that meant most to him. Yet time and again, life and *Doctor Who* got in the way. “I thought *Doctor Who* would last a year and I was going to write the gay men drama after that. But it just became this huge roller coaster that made me determined never to do a second series again.” Davies ended up executive-producing 60 episodes of *Who*, as well as creating *Torchwood* and *The Sarah Jane Adventures*.

After six years on *Doctor Who*, Davies packed his bags and headed off for LA with his boyfriend Andrew Smith. This, he decided, was where he'd write the new gay drama. But Andrew was diagnosed with cancer and given a three per cent chance of surviving. The couple moved back to Britain – initially to Manchester, where Andrew (like Davies 51 years old) was treated – and then back to Swansea, where Davies could be close ▷



LORD OF TIME
Russell T Davies
produced 60 *Doctor Who*
episodes between
2005 and 2010



GAY ISN'T THE WORD
Henry Best (Vincent
Franklin) is a right old
grouch in *Cucumber*



THE RT INTERVIEW BY
SIMON HATTENSTONE

**'I'm
fascinated by
the tension
between
middle-aged
and young
gay men'**

RUSSELL T DAVIES

◁ to family. Davies has been caring by day and writing by night. "He's had seven operations on his head. He's like a stroke victim now. He needs a lot of care."

It's made Davies reassess his career. "My boyfriend being ill became a little lesson in mortality. There are 56 things in my head I want to write and it's about time I got on with them because I haven't got 56 years left. So it's been an eye-opener in terms of saying, 'Get on with it, do the things you want to do.'"

Cucumber and *Banana* remained his priority because his life, and gay life in general, had changed so much since *Queer as Folk*. This, he says, is his subject. "It's the heart of my mind. As a gay man I think about gayness every day of my life. And I don't mean that tritely. I mean about who we are, how we live, what our culture is, how much fun we are, how mad we are. I've got things to say. It's as simple and as arrogant as that." He roars with laughter. "You're so arrogant as a writer in many ways. You've got to be arrogant to walk into a television station and say give me £8m."

WHEN HE WAS growing up in Swansea, the world was so different. There was no gay marriage or civil partnership, and it was almost unheard of for teenagers to come out at school. "The seismic difference is when I wrote *Queer as Folk*, Nathan Maloney was an extraordinary figure in being 15 and out. Now, 16 years later, the gay schoolboy is not an impossible thing." And for older men, he says, this has caused envy and resentment: the young have the beauty and power, and now they even have legislation on their side. "I was fascinated by the tension between middle-aged and young gay men. The jealousy, on a very simple level. You see them being out and proud and walking down the street and being happy at 21 – you very naturally wish you'd had that. That's what every old person thinks of every young person anyway."

But, he says, in some ways, the gay world – the



WHO'S A WINNER
In 2006, Russell T Davies celebrates his Bafta for *Doctor Who* with David Tennant and Billie Piper

sexual world in general – has become even more of a cattle market. In both *Cucumber* and *Banana* he shows young men never being more than a text message away from the next sexual encounter. Great in some ways, terrifying in others. "If you're 19 and gay, you've got the law on your side, you can be visible, you've got apps, you can be out and proud, but that doesn't make you happy. There's a great mistake that middle-aged gay men assume young gay men are happy. You're never happy in your teens."

Davies was never backwards at coming forwards when it came to sex, but even he

'It has to be arrogant to say to a TV station: give me £8m'

sounds appalled when he talks about the "pornification" of everyday life. Sending photographs over a phone of your genitalia "is now the most normal thing in the world. That's the grammar! That's flirting! That's extraordinary, isn't it? That's got to create body pressures, hasn't it?"

One of the bravest aspects of *Cucumber* is that its main character is so repellent. At one point, Henry dubs a colleague in to the authorities with tragic consequences, at another he dubs his partner in to the police after a threesome goes wrong. (As well as the serious stuff of life, both *Cucumber* and *Banana* are very funny.)

Davies was desperate to create the antithesis of the bumbling, apologetic type that Richard Curtis created and Hugh Grant brought to life. He insists he loves Grant in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* but enough is enough. "It's infected the whole of fiction, so that men in every drama you turn on are mostly playing variations of Hugh Grant in *Four Weddings*. They've been doing this for 20 years. I absolutely wanted to stop that.

Everything is written in that tone of voice now. The ironic tone of voice. The not-quite-being-honest voice. In Henry, I wanted to write a man who doesn't resort to those speech patterns. I could do that reflexive voice for Henry easily, but I just want to make him tougher and harder."

Davies loves the fact that Henry's so objectionable. "I wish I was like him; I wish I was that honest. People say he's monstrous and I'm like, 'No he isn't, he's marvellous.'" He rolls his tongue round the word with relish.

Was he ever a swine like Henry? Well yes, he says, he's had his moments. Years before Andrew was ill, he said he was so self-absorbed that if he found his boyfriend having a heart attack when he was writing, he'd probably just step over him to meet his deadline. I remind him, and he belly laughs. "But then I stayed! You know what shocked me? Friends of mine said, 'We're amazed you stayed with him when he was ill,' and I think what did I look like to you? And they're my friends! The people who don't like me must be thinking it ten times as much." Anyway, he says, it's so much easier when you love somebody, and yes he probably has changed.

Neither he nor Andrew are counting their chickens; they know anything could happen, but even so they tell each other how lucky they have been – they don't struggle for money; they've been given this extra time; they have each other.

You sound so different from Henry, I say – so optimistic. "The optimism I'm writing is really deliberate because in real life the story ends sadly. Thump! You die. I think the whole point of fiction is to give it a bit of shape and to say something about that."

BUT THERE ARE positives to be taken from the tough times. Andrew's illness has given Davies new subjects – and a sense of urgency to complete them rather than return to old haunts. So he really will never go back to *Doctor Who*? "No. You have to move on." Now he plans to make a drama about professional carers. "There's the great untold story. That will be my next drama – that lifestyle is unbelievably exhausting."

Before that, there's a C4 drama about Aids, the subject he says he has spent his adult life "turning away from". There were so many friends he lost, so many funerals he didn't go to, so much guilt he hasn't been able to address till now because of the "sheer terror".

But for now it's time to get on the train back to Swansea to look after Andrew. This is his first day in London in three years and he feels like a country mouse. Davies puts on a large coat that dwarfs even him and, as he heads towards the station, he tells me it's not just adult stories he'd like to tell. "D'you know, last week I won a Bafta for pre-school drama for Bernard Cribbins's *Old Jack's Boat*. So I go from pre-school drama to *Cucumber*." He throws back his head and laughs with pure glee. "I think that's the biggest leap in history. Nobody's ever gone from that to that. I'm proud of that."



GROUNDBREAKING
The cast of Davies's 1999 Channel 4 hit, *Queer as Folk*