

The 'Doctor' is in

New version of cult science-fiction show serves up sly, hip entertainment

By Allan Johnson
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Coming up with new incarnations of successful cult shows can be a risky business: They must project an overall feel of the original show so fans won't revolt, but they also must entice new fans without making them feel they're not as hip to the subject matter as those who were there from the start.

"Doctor Who" definitely rates the "cult" label. As the longest-running science-fiction series in history, it was an institution for 26 years on the BBC and still has a loyal following even though the BBC ceased production in 1989. In the United States, the show gained its cult status through exposure on several PBS outlets, including WTTW-Ch. 11, which aired it for almost 16 years starting in 1975.

Now the "Doctor" is making a house call in a new made-for-television movie airing at 7 p.m. Tuesday on WFLD Ch. 32. And fortunately for those who aren't as versed in Who-lore as are diehard fans, this "Doctor Who" serves up a decent couple of hours of sly entertainment while retaining enough charm and spirit of the old series to keep inveterate "Who" watchers happy.

(Trivia alert: When Channel 32 first went on the air in the 1960s, it showed the 1965 British feature film "Dr. Who and the Daleks," starring Peter Cushing, every night for a week.)

For those who need a "Who" primer, the Doctor is a renegade from an alien race known as Time Lords, beings who travel freely through time and space. The Doctor (he's rarely called Doctor Who) flits about the cosmos in his TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimensions in Space), which looks like a British police callbox but

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is a front for a vast craft.

Time Lords have two hearts and 13 lives. When they lose a life, they transform their bodies with a new life, complete with a different personality (really handy for when an actor's ego gets too big for the role).

It's the body thing that poses a problem for the Master (Eric Roberts, saving his patented scene-chewing for the end), the villainous Time Lord of the TV movie.

Sylvester McCoy played the last Doctor Who in the BBC series and has a cameo in this movie until he morphs, through a set of urban terror-tinged circumstances, into Paul McGann. Doctor Who No. 8 (McGann looks like Tom Baker, the actor who played the Doctor for much of the BBC series.)

McGann does a nice enough job of making us root for the Doctor as he battles the Master, who has used all his bodies and has a plan to steal the Doctor's and extinguish life on our planet in the process, as the two land in San Francisco on Dec. 30, 1999.

"Doctor Who" has a fun, involving story when it gets going, and a good give and take between McGann and Daphne Ashbrook as a medical doctor who gets mixed up in the Doctor's plight.

You could do worse than spending some time with this Doctor.

■ **"Saturday Night" satisfaction:** As NBC's "Saturday Night Live" winds down to its potentially blockbuster season finale this weekend with guest host Jim Carrey (10:30 p.m. Saturday, WMAQ Ch. 5), there has to be some sense of satisfaction.

The show is getting some critical praise for its new cast after a few



Daphne Ashbrook portrays a physician who joins forces with a time-traveling space alien (Paul McGann, right) in "Doctor Who."

years of creative bankruptcy. And when Fox first threw "MadTV" at it, then Roseanne's "Saturday Night Special," "SNL" handed those shows solid, if not overwhelming, defeats in the ratings.

But executive producer Lorne Michaels isn't about to celebrate. "When you've seen clouds for as long as I have these last few seasons," he says, "you're not really sure you can trust sunshine. But it seems like there's some blue sky."

Sunny days seem to be here again for the late night sketch comedy show. And even Michaels admits he's pleased with the overall success of his new staff this season.

"I think the cast is clearly more confident. I think the writers and the cast are working together, and I think it's working. I'm fearful of overpraising it, but I'm pleased."

Nancy Walls, who came to "SNL" from Second City this season, agrees with Michaels' assessment. "We were all new and there were a lot of new writers, and I just feel that everybody started clicking. And I think the show just improved."

Walls, 29, says that "actually

working together, just getting to know each other" is what made the cast and writers start to get their comedy hookup going halfway through the season.

Michaels thinks the show started to click toward the end of February and reached its peak with two recent episodes—one hosted by former presidential hopeful Steve Forbes, the other by Teri Hatcher of "Lois & Clark."

Michaels, 51, knows that there were times when the writing was "frayed" and "thin." He also says that when a particular character scored, it might have been rushed back too quickly to try to capitalize on that initial success.

But Michaels cites Norm MacDonald's evil Bob Dole impersonation, Molly Shannon's hyperactive teenager Mary Katherine Gallagher, Will Ferrell and Cheri Oteri's cheerleaders, and the impersonating talents of Darrell Hammond as some of the high points of the season. When it comes to characters, he adds that Hammond is "as good as anyone we've ever had on the show."