American fans quickly dubbed Colin Baker, the sixth actor to portray the BBC's regenerative Time Lord, "The Electric Doctor." It was as much a recognition of the actor's personal charisma, charm and verve as for the eye-blinding eclectic Doctor Who costume he wore. Baker obviously enjoyed playing the part and frequently mentioned at conventions and in interviews that he liked to "break records" and wanted to become the longest-running actor in the part. But, in November 1986, the BBC unplugged the Electric Doctor—a decision that has left the actor, more than a year later, still puzzled and dismayed.

"That will teach me to shoot my mouth off," Baker admits ruefully, settling in to answer questions. He smiles briefly. "Doing it now with the hindsight of a year..." There is a pause. "I'm astonished by my own bubbling passion about it these days. It's still a festering sore which I can't get rid of. I mean, I don't think about it from one day to the next until I sit down with someone and they ask questions. I still feel desperately aggravated."

Certainly when Baker was hired for the part, he was given every reason to believe he would be with the program for some time. "My contract stipulated they had four years of consecutive options, which meant that if they picked it up, I was committed to do it for the next four years. That was at the insistence of the head of serials and John Nathan-Turner, the program's producer."

Because they were disappointed when Peter Davison left so quickly. Inexplicably, the program was short-circuited immediately after the first Colin Baker session aired in 1984. "In a matter of weeks, John said, 'I've got bad news—they've picked up your option but they won't be doing the show.' 'Why?' 'I don't know,' he said. 'All I have is a message from above: The series has been cancelled this year.'"

It didn't take the public, press and television professionals long to label the source of that decision: the newly-arrived controller of the BBC, Michael Grade. "It made all the headlines," Baker recalls. "Doctor Who Axed,' "Michael Grade the Axe Man.' In fact, Grade axed a great many other programs as well. He came in, looked at the product and got rid of what he thought was dead wood. Then he went on holiday—skiing in Switzerland—and was suddenly besieged by people asking why he had cancelled Doctor Who. I don't think he had given it much thought, [probably thinking,] 'That's boring old rubbish.' I remember seeing him saying exactly that years before when he was being interviewed on London Weekend Television. He was talking about the BBC and cited the fact that the BBC was so old fashioned and fuddy-duddy, showing old rubbish like Doctor Who. So, even years before, he showed a disinclination to like the program."

"Suddenly, he's being asked why he cancelled it, so whether he had thought it out or not, he said, 'It's the viewers who are disappointed. It's too violent and it lacks humor. The whole thing needs a shakeup!'" John was told February that Grade would see him in April, the first appointment he could get. As I understand it, Nathan-Turner spent about three minutes with him and was told—"Baker's voice becomes a very bored, drawn-out British upper class drawl, "'Ye-es...more humor, less violence.' That was the extent of instructions given to get the show back on the 'right track.'" Baker shakes his head and smiles with very little amusement. "This was the big reshake. And every time Grade was interviewed, he would say, 'Yes, there are many things wrong backstage. We've got to"

"You stop doing Doctor Who," explains Colin Baker, "and you go grey and get your hair cut off."

Jean Airey & Laurie Haldeman, veteran STARLOG correspondents, are the authors of Travel without the TARDIS (Target, $3.25). They profiled Sally Knyvette in STARLOG #130.

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Like his suit? Baker never did. If he’d had his way, the Doctor would have kept his ensemble a basic black.

get Doctor Who back on the right track.' He did nothing at all.’

When Doctor Who finally returned to the air, it did so in a format that enabled the BBC to claim there were more episodes but, as Baker points out, there were 14 half-hour segments as opposed to the 13 45-minute episodes scheduled the previous year. In effect, the viewing time was cut in half.

After the current began flowing in fall 1986, the new season—Baker’s second—was aired under an umbrella theme, entitled “Trial of a Time Lord.” The show was moved back to Saturday night in an earlier time slot following a new “children’s” program. Baker was not overjoyed.

“It was scheduled after Roland Rat—one of Michael Grade’s ‘pet’ projects—which only got two million viewers, and that’s being repeated!”

For those unfamiliar with the more esoteric aspects of British television, Roland Rat is a puppet with a personality that falls somewhere between Howard Cosell and Don Rickles. Judging from the numbers, British viewers didn’t share Grade’s fondness for the rodent. The show provided very little lead-in ratings for the returning Doctor Who, which still managed to get more than double the rat’s ratings.

A Glitch in Time

Although not happy with the shortened season, Baker found the series itself more than satisfactory. “I was quite happy with it. I was very proud of it. I thought it was good.” He received no indication there were contrary opinions. “The team—John N-T, the writers, all the directors—enjoyed working with me and vice versa.” Confident that Doctor Who would be renewed and his option picked up, Baker invested heavily in a new home for his growing family which, at that time, consisted of his wife Marion, his daughter Lucy, two dogs and five cats. Then came the astonishing news.

“In November 1986, I got a call from JNT, saying, ‘I’ve got some good news and some bad news.’ I said, ‘Let’s have the good news first.’ He said, ‘Well, the series is going ahead next year,’ and I said, ‘Oh, fantastic!’” Baker’s face changes. “The bad news [John went on] is that I’ve got to replace you.” Stunned, Baker asked why.

“I don’t know,” he said, “I couldn’t get a reason out of them. All they would say is that three years is quite enough. I pointed out to them that you hadn’t done three years either by time or seasons, the most is two-and-a-half, but they’re adamant. They do want you to do the first four episodes of the new season, a change-over story.

“This is November, the new season starts in April,” Baker explains. “My instinct was to say, ‘Stuff it,’ but I said I would think about it. John and I were about to start work on Cinderella [a children’s Christmas play], so I thought about it. I asked Marion if she would mind if I would say ‘no’ to it and she didn’t mind a bit. I said,” he quotes himself with a defiant, impish grin, “‘Sorry, I’m not interested!’”

Baker wanted to find out the BBC’s reasons for his dismissal. “I was so cross, I asked to see Jonathan Powell [the head of series], whom I had never met. I went to his office and he was very brisk and pleasant. He said, ‘Hello, Colin, how nice to see you. Do come in. What can I do for you?’—as if he was very surprised I had any desire to see him. So, I said, ‘I’ve asked for this meeting to get an explanation of what the hell is going on. Why am I being treated like this?’

What followed sounds like Catch-22. Baker shakes his head as if he still can’t believe what he heard.

“Oh, no,” [Baker quotes Powell,] “we were very happy with everything you did. Michael and I just feel that things move on and this series has to move on. Three years is about the right length of time for a Doctor and we think changing every three years is good for the program.” I said, ‘But, I haven’t done three years.’ Well, in our terms, it’s three years. We would like you to do the story to change-over. It’s in the tradition of Doctor Who.’ And I said, ‘That’s a bit like a husband saying to a wife, “I’m leaving you, but you can come back and spend a month with me next year.” It’s either a clean break or not at all. But what I will do, even though I find it quite painful, is to do the season and then I feel I’ve left with some sort of dignity.’

Powell never answered directly. As Baker recalls, “He hemmed and hawed and said, ‘Well, you go away and I’ll talk with Michael Grade again and we’ll think about your suggestion. You think about doing the first episode and we’ll meet again in a week’s time. I’ll be in touch with you.’ And that’s
This might not have been what BBC controller Michael Grade had in mind for Doctor Who (Colin Baker) and friend, but the result was the same.

the last I’ve ever heard from him.”

There is a pause before he continues. “I was doing Cinderella and I said to John, ‘Have you heard anything?’ And he said, ‘Yes, they’ve decided it’s four shows or nothing.’” Baker shrugs. “They couldn’t even say it to me face to face.”

Rumors of a personal vendetta against him by Michael Grade are scoffed at. “I know,” Baker says emphatically, “as certainly as I can without sitting down with the man and getting the truth out of him that the only reason I’m not doing the program is because he personally didn’t like Doctor Who. After having shot his mouth off so much, he had to be seen to do something and the only really public thing you can do is get rid of the actor. If you change the writers or the producer or the directors, you’re not going to get any public acknowledgement.”

To Doctor Who fans, Baker’s firing seemed particularly strange since he had been so very vocal about staying while producer John Nathan-Turner had said he felt it was time he himself should leave. Were Grade’s actions—firing Baker and keeping the producer—a subtle form of sabotage?

“Even though it would seem a bizarre thing to do—fire the actor who cares and keep the producer who wants to do something else—I don’t think he even considered that. To be quite honest, I think they [the BBC] regard Doctor Who as an embarrassing necessity. In the Radio Times [the week of January 2-8, 1988], the new head of BBC Enterprises, James Arnold-Baker, is asked about a success story in merchandising and says, ‘There are some strange answers. Doctor Who is probably our biggest single seller.’ It’s the first time someone has actually admitted it—the most successful program on the air and to treat it in the way it has been treated in the last two years! That shows you how bizarrely organized the BBC is. If it’s your most successful line, in any other business, you lavish love and attention on it; you don’t criticize your own product, even in bad times.

“What producer would want to take over the job of producing Doctor Who given the situation it was in? They couldn’t persuade anyone else to do it. They knew John actually cares and he’s so stubborn that he wants to see the show through. ‘He’s so stubborn that he wants to see the show through,’ as he put it. He cares about his characters, and it’s hard to believe.”

His Doctor may have been intentionally unlikable, but Baker himself doesn’t mind just hanging out with his fans.

Time Warps

One of the charges frequently brought against the Colin Baker Doctor Who was low ratings. The actor is quick to point out that such charges, especially considering the nearly 25 years the show has spanned, are like comparing apples to oranges.

“During the William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton, Jon Pertwee years, even into Tom Baker, it was on almost every Saturday and built up a strong following. Then, they began reducing the number of episodes and it was on only three months a year and then the viewing figures started to slip. There is nothing like repetition to build viewing figures.

“[The] first season averaged five, six, and seven—“which is respectable, I think. You can’t compare it with the previous seasons—Peter was on at 7:30 p.m. when there are more viewers and he was midweek. As I understand it, the figures were roughly comparable with Tom’s last season which went out at that [same] time. Then, Michael Grade appeared and said the viewing figures were disappointing and the fact that somebody says something makes it true. So, the newspapers took it up, and they don’t compare scheduling, they just show pictures. If you compare it to the last time it was in that time slot, it was doing about the same. Given the fact there’s much more competition about than when the program started 25 years ago, those figures weren’t that bad.”

Not only has Baker had to put up with such misleading charges, he has also had to deal with the notion he has made a fortune out of the show. “Everyone assumes that because you’ve had a successful series,
"My Doctor and Peri [Nicola Bryant] were in grave danger of implying something absolutely taboo," says Baker, "hanky-panky in the TARDIS."

you’ve made a packet. When you’re negotiating your contract, they’ll say to you, ‘Now, this may look small, but when you consider the sales of our merchandising and the repeats…’ Of course, it’s just my luck that my shows have never been repeated in England. No episode of mine has ever been shown twice. I made half the product of my predecessor, therefore, there’s half the product to sell.”

Bitter he could be, especially if he hadn’t known beforehand what to expect. ‘‘I was warned by one of my predecessors: ‘Don’t pay much attention to the talk of the vast sums of money you’ll make,’ Yes, it is nice to get the odd check for 120 pounds every three months, but that’s about all it is. Oddly enough, whenever I did a personal appearance as the Doctor—in costume—I had to pay 20% of whatever fee I got to the BBC, that was part of the deal. I’ve given them more money than they’ve given me!”

Since his time with the program was so short, does he feel that he’s left a lasting impression on the show? The answer comes with his typical directness and honesty. “No. I shouldn’t think so. Actually,” he says, revealing something he has not previously discussed in public, “I wanted to be brave and make the Doctor not instantly accessible, like the ploy in the first story of having the Doctor deeply unlikeable.” He also fought to project an amount of growth into the part, in contrast to accepting it as what Tom Baker called a “non-acting part.” “For instance, the relationship with Peri [Nicola Bryant] was dictated quite considerably by the fact that my Doctor and that nubile young girl were in grave danger—if I was too openly friendly—of implying something absolutely taboo: hanky-panky in the TARDIS. It was only by my being inaccessible and cold that we could make it quite clear we were the Doctor and companion. When Mel [Bonnie Langford] took over, suddenly the sixth Doctor was able to be protective because Mel was not as overly ‘woman’ as Nicola was. The Mel character was ingenuous, a child, spunky, boyish, and therefore I could show a little bit of concern. Those things can only be seen in context, as part of the plan. If the plan is chopped half-way through, then you don’t have any chance to show it.”

Fan criticisms still grate, especially in view of the defused plan. “I am quite different from my Doctor. It was an acting role. When I’m just dismissed as arrogant and bumptious by some of the fans—‘That awful costume, that arrogant Colin Baker giving his pantomime performance’—I find that very depressing.”

His new outspokenness extends to his eypopping outfit. “I didn’t like the costume anyway. My instinct for the character was something in black velvet, like Hamlet or the Master, but you can’t because it’s too similar. Of all the costumes, I liked Jon Pertwee’s best—a kind of elegance. It [Baker’s multi-colored patchwork costume] dictated some of the things the Doctor became. I was inside it looking out, so I wasn’t as affected by it as other people were, but it certainly affected the attitude of people watching,” he admits. “They saw the costume first and me inside it. I would have liked a change at the first season’s end, but given the budgets of Doctor Who, that’s a rather large item. I didn’t like the costume, but there are other people’s creative inputs and I don’t believe in being autocratic. I was never in a position to be autocratic.”

Has this changed with the new Doctor? Baker nods. “I gather Sylvester [McCoy] has been given much more freedom than I
The Doctor needed the help of Doctor Spock when Colin Baker became the proud father of Lucy (shown here) and her four-month-old sister Belinda (born February 21). Congratulations may be sent to the Bakers at Box 216, High Wycombe, Bucks, HP14 3PA, England.

Peri (Nicola Bryant) and the Doctor (Colin Baker) may have rushed to the aid of hundreds of others, but against the BBC’s might, no one could help them.

got. He, in fact, seems to be able to do what Tom [Baker] was able to do in his later years: to dramatically rewrite scenes. I was never allowed that. When I tried, the producer, script editor and director said, ‘Nope, do as you’re told.’ That’s fair enough. I tried to put in the odd joke, that quotation—a great number of the quotations were mine. I gather that’s very different now. I think it’s because they realize the Doctor’s input is a large element. There was a little bit of worry when I came in, because I’m a fairly ebullient kind of person, that I would turn into Tom Baker II. They thought if they could squash me early, they could allow me latitude later, but later never came.”

Baker wasn’t the only upset that “later never came.” The actor received thousands of letters from fans who were angry with the BBC decision and wanted to let him know of their support. “Fan reaction was marvelous. The American fans even took out an ad in the Stage [a magazine with a circulation equivalent to America’s TV Guide].”

He also doesn’t hesitate to compare the American fans to the British. Whom does he prefer? “The Americans over the British,” he states flatly. “Fandoms are different. As a generalization, it strikes me that American fans start off from enthusiasm and love whereas the British fans start off with possession.” We [the British] possess this program because it has been on our screen for 25 years and we reserve the right not to like a producer, a director or an actor and we’ll take a damn long while to convince.”

There are exceptions to that. I get sent much of the fan press and I can’t help reading it. I’m a fool. I open the American fan press with a degree of anticipation which is eager rather than doomed. Basically, they have an affection for the show which overrides everything. The British accuse John of bringing in star names. Well, if star names want to do the show, then that must say something about the show. They’re coming to Doctor Who, and you can’t blame John for getting the best, if they’re willing to do it and do it for what Doctor Who can pay.”

He grimaces. “It is hurtful to read a letter—Thank God, Colin Baker’s gone with that dreadful costume and ham overacting”—missing on the point that it wasn’t Colin Baker overacting, it was the Doctor being a larger-than-life character deliberately. You can’t write back and say, ‘Oh, no, don’t be horrid,’ you have to live with it. That’s the nature of the business. Some British fans have a different attitude. They harp back to whatever their halcyon day was, usually either Jon Pertwee or Tom Baker. I think that’s because they start watching the show and then 10 years later, they’re still watching it and they write to the fan magazines and make comparisons with the past.”

He stops and thinks for a moment, honesty wavering with feelings. “Maybe I’m being a bit naïve in expecting any kind of devotion. I feel because I cared about it and did my best and wasn’t ashamed of the result, I would just like it if those who watched felt the same way. But,” he says with a chuckle, “I shouldn’t be in this business if I’m not prepared to take the knocks!”

Time at Last

Has he watched any of the recent Sylvester McCoy as the Doctor? Once again, Baker offers a direct answer. “I have not seen one frame of Sylvester. It’s partly deliberate and partly the result of circumstance. It’s my damned honesty again,” he admits. “I know when Tom’s [Baker] asked if he has seen the show, he says, ‘No, I haven’t the time.’ There must be an element of choice involved because we all have videos these days and I could have recorded it and watched, but A) I didn’t want to think it was wonderful—because it might be wonderful and I would feel terribly depressed if it was—and B) I didn’t want it to be bad either, because I’m fond of the show, and C) I didn’t want to be asked what I thought of it. So, given those three things, it’s just safer.”

Because Baker didn’t accept the “generous” offer to film a four-part regeneration story, from March to November 1987, he was able to do the play Corpse on tour and then on London’s West End for four months. The show was extremely well received both critically and popularly. He co-starred at the Wimbledon Theatre in Robinson Crusoe, playing Blackbeard the Pirate and, following the birth of his daughter Belinda, went on tour in the play, Deathtrap.

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Baker
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Along with acquiring a new child, Baker has also acquired a new look. A weight loss of some 50 pounds was not caused by worry over losing his Doctor Who role but was characteristically Colin Baker—the result of a challenge. “The Sun, a spectacular daily newspaper, had on the front page of its Sunday magazine a list of ‘Famous Fatties.’” He winces and adds, “I was in the very best company. Someone showed me the article and I thought, ‘I could make some money here for charity.’ So, I rang up and said, ‘Will you sponsor me to lose weight?’ They agreed to pay 100 pounds a pound. Two hundred and twenty-two pounds I was—and I lost 50 in three months!” he recounts gleefully. “I got 5,000 pounds [about $7,500] for Crib Death and the Wildlife Foundation. When the newspaper coughed up with good grace though they didn’t expect me to do it. Weight loss is quite expensive. I lost eight inches around my waist, and now, I shall have to get rid of all the fat clothes and get a whole new wardrobe.”

“The reporter confided to me they were going to have a field day at my expense because they never thought I would do it. I vowed I’ll never go above [180 pounds] again.” He runs a hand over the remains of his wild curls. “I’ve also had all my hair cut off, like Tom’s. Isn’t it odd?” he muses around a lurking grin. “You stop doing Doctor Who and you go grey and get your hair cut off. It’s a whole new career.”

“Would that new career include a multi-Doctor special?” Baker answers slowly. “I would be less likely to do that. I don’t know, whatever dignity means, I think I would lose it. I’m equivocating on this because it’s a question people have often asked me. I would take the offer on merits. I would want to know what the story was about and, of course, they don’t write it until they know what Doctors they’re going to get. I find myself with a great deal of sympathy for Tom’s hitherto unexplainable actions with regard to Doctor Who as a result of what has happened to me. Not that we think we’re the Doctor or anything silly like that, but it twanged a chord inside us. I can understand after seven years and after two-and-a-half years and a sudden dismissal why one would feel a kind of ambivalence toward the show.”

One last question about Doctor Who: What if—with Michael Grade gone and an obvious continuity gap in the aired series—what if he were asked to come back? Colin Baker is totally floored by the suggestion and hesitates. “Come back and do several years of it and meet Melanie at the end?” His face suddenly changes. “Oh, God, I would be tempted, horribly tempted. I also think it’s about as likely as Mikhail Gorbachev marrying Nancy Reagan!” There follows a short pause. “I wouldn’t reject it out of hand. I would certainly think about it, because I did enjoy doing it—too much, methinks.”

Williamson
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work out the whole thing in advance and simply follow your plot to the end. I used to do that in the days of the pulps, when most copy went out in first draft. No longer. Though my editor wanted an outline before he bought the novel, I don’t look back at it. I simply try to keep the story alive in my mind. The basic idea, the central characters, and the main conflicts are still the same, but getting them on paper has been a matter of trial and error.

“‘If the story stays alive,’ says Jack Williamson, ‘a time always comes when writing a new scene feels more like discovery than invention.’

In the beginning, I wasn’t certain of anything. Many of the early pages were fumbling searches for the color and drama I hoped for. As I kept on trying, places and people and events began to emerge into reality. New insights keep on coming, as I sit at the keyboard, as I walk in the afternoon, as I lie half asleep. Most of them are better than anything I could have planned for that first outline. If the story stays alive, a time always comes when writing a new scene feels more like discovery than invention.

I do regret that missed deadline. I keep apologizing to my agent and my editor, and I’m grateful that my publisher doesn’t want his money back. And I feel pretty certain now that I have finally blundered toward another finished book.

I’m even thinking of yet another novel set in the Oort halo a little farther in the future, when human beings are being re-engineered to live in the vacuum of space with no need of special suits and pressurized habitats. The title might be Starcraft. Writing it will surely begin with more pages that don’t quite work, but they should lead me into one more future world, as new and exciting to me as I hope readers will find it.

Jones
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Dramatic Arts. The results were fascinating. “I didn’t do much learn how to act at the London Academy as I did about speech, movement and how to relax,” explains Jones. “Their attitude was that the acting was basically up to you.”

Jones returns to the States and puts his training to good use in such Broadway and regional theater productions as The Elephant Man, Trelawney of the Wells, Boy Meets Girl and Cloud 9.

But it was the role of Emperor Joseph II in the film Amadeus that shot Jones into the public eye.

“The role required that I simulate playing the piano in one scene,” offers Jones. “It wasn’t really necessary to actually learn to play the piano, but I really wanted to play the part. The real-life success so I spent the year before the film went into production learning to really play the piano.”

A true test of Jones’ comedic talents followed in the person of Ed Rooney, the bumbling school principal in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off.

“If nothing else, that role showed people I had a sense of slapstick timing,” he notes. “There was also an interesting play-off between the two characters. Ferris Bueller is the type of character who always seems to succeed while people like Ed will always do anything to get in the way of that success.”

The question of success is very much on Jones’ mind as the topic of conversation turns to his other films, the flop Vietnam film, Hanoi Hilton, and the upcoming mystery comedy Sherlock and Me (in which he portrays Inspector Lestrade). Then, there’s the box office success of Beetlejuice, a topic he attacks in acting terms.

“My intentions as an actor are always to make whatever I’m doing work. I look for the piece to be good as a whole and then, hopefully, to have something good for myself as an actor. I’ve always been intent on giving to both the project and myself. My feeling about Beetlejuice is that it works all the way down the line.”

“Still, I do know this is going to be a hard sell. I’ve got my fingers crossed.”

But Jones is fully aware of what the result of a Beetlejuice success story could have on his career.

“Any successful film just adds another notch to your gun. It helps you get something else and if you’ve been good at something that has been successful, the chances are good that you’re going to get offered that something again.”

Then, you’re faced with the tough decision that I’m beginning to have to deal with. You go with what has been working for you and run the risk of becoming a product or you go against the typecasting as much as possible. But reality dictates that you’ve got to make a living.

“Which is why, suddenly,” Jeffrey Jones pauses, “there seems to be a Jeffrey Jones kind of role.”

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