

Television

Call the Dr., please.

by Lloyd Rose

The change of cast was announced on the BBC evening news. On Easter Sunday 1983, 40,000 people gathered to celebrate its 20th year on television. No doubt about it: *Doctor Who* has been a resounding popular success and is now a cult phenomenon. Why? Because this "children's adventure series" taps the same ageless concerns as the *Oz* and the Alice books, *The Wind in the Willows*, the fairy stories of George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis. Affirmative in spirit, humane and unsentimental, it rises above its sci-fi serial clichés to become an off-beat interstellar fairy tale.

Doctor Who has been shown in this country since the mid-Seventies; it now airs on over 80 stations. We are not seeing all of it, only the seven seasons during which Tom Baker played the Doctor and, in some areas, a couple of seasons of the actors who preceded and followed him: John Pertwee and Peter Davison. It began to catch on around 1979, the year Barbara Elder founded the North American Doctor Who Appreciation Society (NADWAS) here. Marvel Comics attempted to launch a comic book based on it in 1981, but it's only recently that the program has begun to reach cult status. *Time* and *TV Guide* have paid attention to it. Lyle Stuart published *Doctor Who: A Celebration* last year and is planning to reprint the English novelizations of the show. The NADWAS convention last summer drew 6,000 people, and just recently a serious exegesis, *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text*, was published in Britain.

The show has always had its American champions. Harlan Ellison, the science fiction writer, who is not known for his generous critical opinion, has called it "the greatest science-fiction series of all time" and considers it superior to both *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. On the other hand, James Wolcott, certainly the best mind in TV criticism today, dismissed the program with one sentence: "I never have



Tom Baker as Dr. Who, with K-9.

gotten the hang of *Dr. Who*, in which a Jonathan Miller look-alike in a floppy hat and anaconda scarf confronts extra-terrestrial creatures that look like crawling lasagna carpeted with fuzzy green felt." For the casual viewer, Wolcott has pretty much summed the show up. It takes a while to get the hang of it, and to begin to appreciate its odd, compelling spirit.

Certainly, as far as general format goes, the program could hardly be more insouciantly lowbrow. It is, as a friend of mine who cares about such distinctions remarked, "sci-fi, *not* science fiction." Its hero is a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey with a body temperature of 60 degrees, two hearts, and a lifespan of roughly a thousand years. In cases of critical injury, he can regenerate into a new body—primarily because, in 21 years, the role has gone through five actors. Although he is listed as Doctor Who in the end credits, he is called simply (and inexplicably) The Doctor.

The show is in serial form—two to six episodes of 24 minutes each—and its plotting rarely gets much above cliff-hanger level. The Doctor battles monsters and evil aliens; he helps oppressed peoples free themselves; he periodically saves Earth from destruction. Before the inevitable triumph over evil, he and his companions are regularly hit on the head, threatened, tied up, mildly tortured (usually by rays of colored light that conveniently cause no physical damage) and finally manage a hair-raising escape.

The Doctor travels through time and space in a machine called a TARDIS (an acronym for Time And Relative Dimensions In Space), which is larger on the inside than it is on the outside. Its inventors sensibly realized that one of the great disadvantages of a time machine is that, particularly on visits to nontechnological cultures, it tends to sit around the landscape looking alien and conspicuous. So they equipped it with a "cha-

meleon circuit," which enables it to shift shape to blend with its environment. Unfortunately for the Doctor, the chameleon circuit of his TARDIS is jammed, and he is forced to span the eons and the cosmos in a contraption resembling an English police call box.

The show is obviously whimsical, though in a nicely daffy way. It's what Americans think of as "very English"—charming, homey, and slightly off-the-wall. But unlike the irksomely precious *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (whose author, Douglas Adams, was once script editor for *Doctor Who* and wrote a couple of strenuously zany episodes), it isn't campy. It doesn't wink at its audience.

At the show's inception, its creators didn't have any ideas about Time Lords or body regeneration or half the things that are now conceptual pillars of *Doctor Who*. Not surprisingly, it has a patched-together quality. No one's bothered to hide the joins either. It's as if there were a general agreement among everyone involved that, in a program revolving around a 750-year-old alien battling rubber-suited monsters, a scrupulous concern with minor discrepancies is, if not exactly dishonest, beside the point. The oddities are simply added in and left exposed. The result is something like an architectural folly—awful in any classical sense, but amusing and sometimes wonderful if you're willing to ignore received ideas about style and taste.

One gets the impression that the program was made by men too sophisticated to be fooled about the trashy nature of their material, but not too sophisticated to love it. This combination of knowingness and affection gives the show an appealing innocence. It sometimes overdoes the drollery, but it's not cute and it doesn't condescend to its viewers. Its silly plots are rendered with ingenuity and humor.

The humor is diffuse and a little dreamy. Although occasionally a writer like Robert Banks Stewart will come up with a straight-faced line such as "I underestimated his intelligence, but he underestimated the power of organic crystallography," *Doctor Who* isn't high on wit. The tone is one of playful humor, which sidles up to you from odd corners. It takes a while to realize, for example, that Time Lord society is largely a collection of doddering, near-senile old men—a parodic combination of the House of Lords, the Senior Common Room of an Oxbridge college, and the Bellona Club. And there's an unemphasized modern joke in the way the

Doctor, who routinely saves the universe, can never quite get the TARDIS to run properly.

Everyday details pop up in unexpected places. There's an old-fashioned wooden hatrack in the TARDIS' ultra-modern control room, and the Doctor occasionally wears two-tone wingtips. This quirky hominess is reassuring; it makes the future seem a pleasant and familiar place. And it puts the show squarely in a certain English tradition: the call-box TARDIS is first cousin to Alice's looking glass and the old wooden wardrobe that led to C. S. Lewis's Narnia.

Yet for all its charm, the universe of *Doctor Who* is harsh. People die frequently, and the innocent often suffer. The program takes for granted that there is no God. This is never stated in so many words, but every god that the Doctor runs into turns out to be a fake, and he himself frankly thinks of religion as superstitious rubbish. This antireligious bias leaves *Doctor Who* with a mechanistic and rational universe. This is just one of several Victorian accents that give the show a slightly archaic tone. Faith in technology is another. So is the idea that a lone individual can make a difference. This last, so simplistic when presented

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by Robert Milton Miller

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as the "Great Man" theory of history in *Gandhi*, seems wholly appropriate to this sweetly heroic fantasy.

The individual who makes a difference, the show's unsentimental hero with one foot in eternity, is the Doctor. He is genuinely heroic—brave, unselfish, determined to thwart wrongdoing. But he's not wet about it. Whereas *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk could go all weepy and soft, squaring his jaw and writhing in moral agony, the Doctor is brisk and matter-of-fact, even when facing something really important—like the earth's blowing up. Nor does he react to villainy with horror or moral indignation. He's impatient with and dismissive of evil, which, although he takes its effects seriously enough, he clearly considers idiotic. He's good, all right, but he's nobody's fool.

In a sense, the Doctor is a direct descendant of Sherlock Holmes. He is a brilliant, eccentric English bachelor who has chosen to exercise his extraordinary powers in the cause of good. And like Holmes, he has no active sexual nature.

The show's originators made him an alien, and the games have never been played with him that were played with Mr. Spock—he is uninterested in romance. Nor is he interested in power, money, or violence. His primary impulses appear to be curiosity and an aversion to cruelty and suffering. This absence of most recognizable human motivation, which could have made the character go flat and dull (and must make it a nightmare to act), becomes a source of strength in Tom Baker's surprisingly complex characterization. His Doctor is not so much lacking in fear and desire as beyond them, with the magi and the saints. He's like an oddball Zen master turned loose among the galaxies.

Tall, curly-haired, and slightly pop-eyed, with a charming smile and a fine, resonant voice, Baker seems to have been born to play either villains or eccentrics. (In the film *Nicholas and Alexandra*, playing Rasputin, he combined the two.) There's something slightly skewed about him; his inner gyroscope is set at an odd tilt. Loping through alien landscapes, trailing a ridiculously long scarf, greeting the new and unexplored with pleased wonder, he makes curiosity seem like one of the virtues. This welcoming generosity is balanced by an impatience with lesser minds and a strong disinclination to suffer fools gladly. His Doctor is mercurially unpredictable—at once caring and acerbic,

brilliant and totally out-to-lunch. Much delights him, little surprises him, and nothing fazes him. Like Lewis Carroll's White Queen, he seems fully capable of thinking of at least six impossible things before breakfast.

Faced with the difficulties of playing what he characterizes as "that rather zany character who was from elsewhere," Baker has said he "just sort of cultivated this air of surprise. I was very much interested in the innocence of the character. I used to try to think from the point of view of a child and not make any assumptions." The Doctor is likely to panic over misplacing his sonic screwdriver but will greet the intrusion into his cell of two monsters who hold him prisoner with a pleasant smile and the query, "Social call?" When threatened with being thrown as food to a malignant virus, he will demur very politely that he'd just as soon not; and when tied to a stake as a sacrifice to a flame cult, he will irritably keep trying to persuade the sacrificers, whom he clearly regards as dolts, to accept his scientific help. This lack of appropriate affect combined with Baker's own slightly off-kilter personality gives the Doctor a weirdly convincing "otherness." He *seems* alien.

Baker has been primarily a stage actor, and in *Doctor Who* he plays with a theatrical panache perfect for his vehicle. He's near-brilliant at investing shallow, melodramatic situations with style, wit, and, occasionally, the troubled rumblings of something dangerous and real. At the center of his manic portrayal is a grim kernel of melancholy; it grounds the comic-book conceit of the Doctor's celestial loneliness. On its own pulp terms, Baker's is a great romantic characterization.

Baker played the Doctor from 1974 until 1981. During this period, the show came under pressure to cut back its violent and frightening elements; and simultaneously, though not for this reason, lost Phillip Hinchcliffe, the producer who had shaped and guided the early Baker years. Then Robert Holmes, who served first as writer then as script editor also, left after eleven years. All these factors contributed to the program's degeneration into sloppy goofiness and the metamorphosis of Baker's performance into something most accurately described as alien cornball.

Then in 1980, a young aggressive producer, John Nathan-Turner, previously the program's unit production manager,

took over the show. After producing Baker's final year (and restoring some of the character's dignity), Nathan-Turner replaced him with Peter Davison (best known here as Tristan on *All Creatures Great and Small*). Blond and pleasant-faced, Davison is likely to strike an American as looking like a beachboy with a secret anarchist's soul. Though not as ferociously pixillated as Baker, he has a gentle, out-of-it quality. He dresses as a cricketer and sports a sprig of celery in his lapel. At thirty, he was the youngest actor ever chosen to play the Doctor, and he brings vulnerability to the role; he is as likely to muck things up as to set them right.

Nathan-Turner also took steps to give the show some respectability, to make it science fiction rather than sci-fi. To a large degree, he's succeeded. *Doctor Who's* scripts are sounder, its sets more impressive, and its acting is of a slightly higher quality. If the pleasures it affords are now more ordinary, this is not Nathan-Turner's fault. He came into a deteriorating situation and he moved to repair it. By the criteria of sophistication, design, and story, *Doctor Who* is probably better now than it's ever been. What it's lost is its larkiness and its pop-mythic quality.

Sanford Schwarz, in a review of David Hockney's photographs, referred to "a distinctly English kind of scrappy, helter-skelter lyricism." This is the quality of overgrown English gardens, with roses high as your head blooming among hedgerow flowers and everything spilling greenly over its borders. The early Beatles films had it, and so does the recent *Local Hero*. In a shrill, debased form, the Pythons have it. Ralph Richardson had it. So, in the best of the shows with Tom Baker, does *Doctor Who*.

Not that the series has ever been lyrical; it's a little too workmanlike for that. But something poetic is generated from its straightforward acceptance of and commitment to its pulp motifs. Within its ellipsis of humor, the show is basically what it sets out to be: the adventures of a powerful, time-traveling alien who got tired of sitting around observing the misery and evil in the universe and decided to do something about it. And because it doesn't clutter itself up with self-consciousness, there's room for the humanism implicit in the concept to expand until it pervades the program and gives the pulpy conventions life. *Doctor Who* may not have any formal artistic validity, but it's got a soul. ☸