Who Altered British TV? 'Who' Indeed

By SARAH LYALL

CARDIFF, Wales

RUSSELL T DAVIES, perhaps the most admired writer and producer working in British television drama, was once confronted at a wedding by a fellow guest bristling with indignation about a scene in Mr. Davies's hugely successful, family-friendly science fiction series, "Doctor Who." In the scene Capt. Jack Harkness, a swaggering intergalactic hero who exuberantly lusts after both men and women, plants quick kisses on the mouths of both the title character and the title character's female sidekick as they face imminent death. (Everyone survives.)

Mr. Davies's first instinct — as a reasonable person, as a happily gay man — was to be relaxed and placatory, he said. But something snapped.

"I was standing there saying, 'You're a bad mother, and your children will either grow up to be lesbians, or they will be taken into care because they've been badly raised,'" he recalled in a recent interview near the "Doctor Who" set. He began to chuckle. "'You are ignorant, and you're bringing up your children in ignorance, and that will backfire on you.'"

Luckily, the woman's husband escorted her away before a fistfight broke out. But the incident was jolting, in part because it was such an anomaly. Mr. Davies, 44, had already won these arguments, at least with most people, years before. So successfully has he pushed the boundaries of British

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television that he sometimes forgets how far it, and he, have come.

"He has basically changed the face of television in the U.K.," said John Barrowman, who plays Captain Jack in both "Doctor Who" and a spinoff series, "Torchwood," which is aimed at adults. "He has taken subject matter that nobody else will touch, and he has put in characters that nobody else will bother doing."

And he has done it with mainstream programs that are immensely popular. In the last three and a half years Mr. Davies has built "Doctor Who," "Torchwood" and another spinoff, "The Sarah Jane Adventures," into Britain's most successful homegrown drama franchise. At a time when young audiences are fleeing television for the Internet and other hipper media, "Davies has made family television cool again," in the words of The Guardian. It is hard to overstate "Doctor Who's" significance for Britons of a certain age. First broadcast in 1963, when many households here were just getting used to that novel new device, the television set, it was a triumph of family viewing, a science fiction show that (unlike, say, "Star Trek," with its particular audience) parents and children stayed home to watch together.

The show followed the adventures of a time-traveling character whose spaceship was cunningly disguised as an old-fashioned telephone booth and who saved the universe by means of immortality, brilliance, a mordant sense of humor and an array of useful enemy-thwarting devices. It remained on the air in one form or another until 1989, the potential awkwardness of having a succession of different actors in the title role explained airily away by the Doctor's ability to morph into a different body every few years.

The new "Doctor Who" is broadcast during Britain's family friendliest hour — just after dinner on Saturday nights — and it too has morphed into something else altogether, science fiction that is playful, sophisticated, emotionally resonant and peppered with lightning-quick allusions to literary works, to classic "Doctor Who" episodes from long ago, and to historical events and people. But Mr. Davies presses his grown-up themes with a whisper and a laugh, not a shout. No one actually has sex on screen in "Doctor Who." And when Captain Jack makes an appearance (only rarely, since he now has his own show), his sexuality is an issue only in that his constant, equal-opportunity flirting tends to annoy his colleagues, busy as they are fighting intergalactic evil.

"He takes 'Doctor Who' and pushes the envelope the whole time, not in terms of taste and decency but in terms of ideas and emotional intelligence, the size of feeling and epic stroke of narrative breadth," said Jane Tranter, the BBC's head of fiction. She said that no one at the BBC had ever had a problem with Captain Jack or with any of Mr. Davies's plotlines. "How ridiculous would it be that you would travel through time and space and only ever find heterosexual men?" Ms. Tranter said.

Hiring Mr. Davies to remake the beloved but, finally, creaky old series was a daring, even counterintuitive move by the BBC. First there was the worry that "Doctor Who" had already had its day, that it belonged to another era altogether. But more than that, Mr. Davies was a risk taker with no obvious science-fiction credentials other than a fanatical lifelong devotion to "Doctor Who" and a headful of ideas about where to take it next. At the time, in 2003, he was best known for "Queer as Folk," a 1999 series that chronicled the lives of a group of hedonistic gay men in Manchester with a frankness never shown before on mainstream television. (It was later remade in the United States.)

"Queer as Folk" was revolutionary not only because of its racy subject matter but also because of the matter-of-fact way it presented its characters: ordinary people, if unusually attractive and sexually frisky, who happened to be gay. Criticism of its content tended to be overshadowed by admiration for its wit and verve and for the mature fun of its story lines. Mr. Davies used the same philosophy when Captain Jack came on the scene in "Doctor Who" — make it entertaining, not didactic.

"I thought, 'It's time you introduce bisexuals properly into mainstream television,'" he said, laughing.

He tends to see the joke in most things and talks about television with a words-spilling-over-each-other enthusiasm. What better way to introduce a charming bisexual character, he asked, than to make him "an outer space buccaneer?"

"The most boring drama would be" — here he put on a whiny, fractious voice — "'Oh, I'm bisexual, oh my bleeding heart' nighttime drama. Tedious, dull. But if you say it's a bisexual space pirate swaggering in with guns and attitude and cheek and humor into prime-time family viewing: that was enormously attractive to me."

HAZEL THOMPSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Russell T Davies, left, who has brought "Doctor Who" back to life. Above left, John Barrowman and James Marsters in one of those spinoffs, "Torchwood"; above right, David Tennant as the Doctor in "Doctor Who."

"Doctor Who," "Torchwood" and "The Sarah Jane Adventures," which is aimed at children and stars one of the original characters from early "Doctor Who," have helped win numerous awards and accolades for Mr. Davies, who was named Industry Player of the Year in 2006 at the Edinburgh Television Festival. This season's opening episode of "Doctor Who" drew 9.14 million viewers — more than one-seventh of the population of Britain. (In the United States "Doctor Who" appears on the Sci Fi Channel. "Torchwood" appears on BBC America and this season was its highest-rated program ever.)

Mr. Davies, who was born in Swansea, Wales, is tall and solid, his broad face dominated by a pair of black-rimmed glasses similar to those worn by Doctor Who himself. His middle initial doesn't stand for anything; he added it early in his career to distinguish himself from a radio host who shared his name. He lives partly here and partly in Manchester and has a longtime companion who works as a customs inspector for the British government.

After a childhood in which his twin obsessions were television and comic books, he found work as a writer and producer in children's television. He wrote for soap operas, contributed to long-running dramas and, before "Queer as Folk," wrote "The Grand," a multipart drama set in a hotel in the 1920s. Some of his programs have been more successful than others, but most get talked about. In 2003 he tackled religion, to controversial effect, with "The Second Coming," a two-part drama in which a video-shop owner from Manchester realizes he is the son of God.

But it is the transformation of "Doctor Who" that has cemented Mr. Davies's reputation. In the old days the program could be one-dimensional, almost cheesy, with cheap special effects that sometimes verged on the Ed Woodian. But serious money is being lavished on the new production. And under the care of Mr. Davies, who writes or supervises the writing of every episode, it has been imbued with newfound sensitivity, pathos and humor.

The hope is that that will be true even after Mr. Davies leaves. He recently announced that he would step down from "Doctor Who" after the 2009 season, which is to consist of four specials rather than regular weekly episodes. He says he wants to pursue other projects (but won't say what they are). His successor, Steven Moffat, the writer behind the successful series "Coupling," has written some of the most memorable "Doctor Who" episodes in the past few years.

Over these recent seasons the Doctor has traveled to far-off planets where unspeakable creatures do unspeakable things. He has traveled to Pompeii while Vesuvius erupted. He has rescued Queen Victoria from a giant werewolf, embarked on a heartbreaking love affair with Madame de Pompadour — it ended tragically, on account of her mortality — and saved Earth from annihilation by numerous bad-tempered aliens.

How to get a bisexual character into prime time? Try making him a space pirate.

Mr. Davies's "Doctor Who" has examined the bonds that tie us to even annoying family members. It has plumbed the mysteries and possibilities of chaste love. It has made the case against slavery and violence, played with existential questions about past, present and future and explored what happens when everyone is about to be annihilated by poison gas spewing from automotive exhaust pipes.

Alert viewers will notice the frequent juxtaposition of peril and comedy — the Doctor and his sidekick, Donna, start bickering about how to pronounce the name of some extraterrestrial villains who are within an inch of murdering her, for instance — as well as other signature Davies touches. When the Doctor meets Shakespeare in an episode set during the writing of "Love's Labour's Lost," Shakespeare throws him a lustful glance.

"Davies dresses these things up in such a friendly plotline that we all have a warm glow, and he gets away with murder," said Peter Bazalgette, the former chief creative officer of Endemol, the production company that has been responsible for some very popular British programs, including "Big Brother" and "Deal or No Deal." "It genuinely represents the liberalization of society, which he is leading and reflecting. I think he's a genius."

Then there is "Torchwood," which Mr. Davies describes as "science fiction for adults." Broadcast later in the evening, it follows the adventures of a group of operatives who thwart the aliens that have a habit of finding their way to Cardiff. It is darker, sharper and less chaste than "Doctor Who." Mr. Barrowman looks like a bigger and better Tom Cruise and has the charismatic bravado the role requires. Captain Jack makes no apologies; no one asks him to.

In one episode Captain Jack has a full-on fighting-and-making-out session with a former lover turned enemy. Whatever he does, Captain Jack has great fun doing it, which is the point, Mr. Davies said.

"I often get asked to write dramas or films about a man coming out of the closet to his wife, or a man coming out of the closet to his children, or a man who's beaten up because he's secretly gay," Mr. Davies said. "I always refuse if it's a negative take on homosexuality — if the only aspect being portrayed is the trouble, the tears and the angst."

He continued: "There's enough of that out there. Why bother? Drama is easy when it's tragedy. Anyone could write a scene of a man crying in the rain saying, 'I'm sorry.' But actually it's much more fun to see a man in a bar trying to pick up another man. That's tense. There's a whole minefield of emotions there."