

Tempo

Meet Tom Baker, the Doctor Who is in with the fans

By Maria R. Traska

A TALL, SPARE figure, clad in blue shirt, gray plaid pants, Dunlop tennis shoes and pale tan lightweight raincoat and crowned with a curling mane of light chestnut hair, ambles into a room crowded with friends—people he has never met, but friends all the same.

They shout and applaud his appearance. He stretches out his arms, as if to embrace them all. His eyes dance, and his mobile face flows into a magnetic smile.

"You are mine," he gloats in a soft voice that is a hybrid of mesmerizing magician and engaging elf, "all mine."—he is interrupted by more shouts and applause—"and I am yours, all yours." The response drowns him out; they are beguiled by this affable man.

Here among hundreds of fans, Tom Baker, the fourth incarnation of television's "Doctor Who" [11 p.m. Sundays on WTTW-Ch. 11] is clearly in his element.

Five actors have played the Doctor since the series' inception. Baker is the one U.S. fans know best, though this "Doctor Who" convention, in Chicago, is only the second he has ever attended. Some 20,000 people are seeing him here.

They're but a fraction of his audience. Since Nov. 23, 1963, when BBC first began broadcasting the science fiction-fantasy series, "Doctor Who's" audience has grown to an estimated 98 million viewers in 38 countries.

"THEIR LOYALTY is irresistible," Baker says. "I mean, they're wonderful, wonderful people, and I can never get over my amazement—and my gratitude that they're the people who make me marketable."

His convention schedule at the Sheraton-O'Hare over the weekend is grueling, the worse for the 90-degree heat. After each 90-minute question-and-answer session in the ballroom, the audience forms a line that snakes way around the outdoor pool, where Baker sees and talks with as many people as time and logistics allow.

In the ballroom, he encourages them to ask any questions at all, and they take him at his word. There are requests for his phone number, offers of dinners and a place to stay if he's ever in Washington, D.C., solicitations of kisses, questions about his sleeping habits [Buff or pajamas? It's the former] and his married life.

The last must be uncomfortable for him, but he never shows it. He has been separated from his wife and costar, Lalla Ward, for 18 months. Not once does he tell the fans that; he skirts the matter jokingly:

"Well, actually, I've been married twice now. I was deliriously happy each time for days."

Dr. Who, with whom Baker hopes desperately not to be confused, is a "time lord," a sort of lovable, Bohemian-looking scholar and scientist who travels through time and space, a brilliant, maverick representative of an advanced humanoid race who plays the modest fool while he defends the universe from an assortment of oddball alien villains.

THE DOCTOR usually travels with companions, who leave the series every so often only to be replaced by new ones. Most important, the 750-year-old time lord has 13 lives—one original and 12 regenerations, giving him plenty of time to get in and out of new troubles and allowing the producers a way to replace a star when one leaves; Peter Davison has replaced Baker in current



Tom Baker has been replaced as the time-traveling Doctor Who, but he's still first place with his fans.

episodes, although Channel 11 is rerunning a previous incarnation starring Jon Pertwee.

Someone asks Baker what he thought of the Doctor's sonic screwdriver, a gadget the time lord keeps in his pocket and occasionally uses to unlock doors and defuse or set off bombs. "It's an amazingly handy thing to have in a tight spot," he says, "something I could find very handy next week in Los Angeles."

Most of the audience misses the point, not knowing that Baker is trying to get work in the U.S., thus far with little success. One would think seven seasons of

"Dr. Who" would have preceded him to Hollywood. But no.

"It hasn't opened up the possibility of working in America," he says, "because, of course, 'Doctor Who' is not shown in Los Angeles. [It will be this fall.] It does amaze me that they're so casually locked off in Los Angeles. They think, actually, that because they don't know about something that nothing is happening."

Why not simply stay in Europe where he can always

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get work?

Baker says he would like to work here, doing films and television as well.

"To be successful on television is much more important than being successful on stage, simply because you get to a bigger audience. I think it's unarguable, the influence of television. I want to get to big audiences—big, big audiences, scores of millions." He smiles. "I'm really so much more ambitious and anxious and impatient than the Doctor."

WHY BE an actor?

"It's fun, it assuages one's anxieties, it's good for one's vanity," he says and smiles mischievously.

The mop-haired Baker began acting at 14, when a monk asked if he wanted to be a hero for God. That sounded like a good part, so Baker decided to join the monastery and become a saint. That proved difficult. After almost six years, he left to become an actor.

"I think I was acting very hard when I was a monk; it was just that I got fed up with the same old lines. Also, we didn't have very big audiences—I mean, apart from God. One couldn't hear the applause."

Baker was waylaid on his way to drama school by the army in the 1950s. "That was a good part. I was getting so tired of poverty, but especially I was getting very jaded with chastity."

At the end of his hitch, he swung a grant to drama school. He was there about 20 months until: "They asked me to leave. They said I couldn't earn my living.

"In those days, I was excessively thin. I'm very tall, and, when I was very young, I was only about 11 stone [154 pounds], so I was very striking in an uneasy-looking way, which hindered me from playing traditional parts.

"SO I HAD to struggle on under this cloud that they thought I wouldn't be able to earn a living. I don't know how anyone can say that to anyone in a frantic profession like acting. You just can't tell." He recalls that of 42 people in his class that year, only he and one other man are actors.

Working in repertory companies, he was spotted by a director of the National Theatre and asked to join. There, Laurence Olivier noticed him and eventually recommended him to Sam Spiegel for the role of Rasputin in the film "Nicholas and Alexandra."

That was followed by Paolo Pasolini's "Canterbury Tales" and another stint in the theater. Between times, there were jobs as a freelance gardener or a housekeeper, a few



Tom Baker as Rasputin in "Nicholas and Alexandra": "I want to get to big audiences—big, big audiences, scores of millions."

horror films best forgotten and "The Golden Voyage of Sinbad." The last was in release when someone from BBC saw it and decided Baker might do as the new Doctor.

Would he ever be willing to return to the series, someone asks, and will he appear in "The Five Doctors" episode, due to air on the show's 20th anniversary in November? The answer to both questions is no, though some tape of him will be used.

"WHEN THEY were filming 'The Five Doctors' last year, I was still too close to it. Even though I'd made the decision to leave and left it, it wasn't very easy. Besides, I've always felt very proprietary about the program. I didn't want to come back to what I felt was my program and have to share the character with all those other people."

Questions arise as to the formulation of the fourth Doctor's character and his lack of a love life. Baker says he decided early on there were certain things he wouldn't do, so as to make the Doctor look more alien and separate him from human men. One was that the Doctor never get emotionally involved with another character. As a result, Dr. Who tends to be "very clumsy with the girls."

"I did it for the fun," he says of the series. "That was a good enough

reason. That doesn't mean I didn't have to work. I had to work hard to do the alchemy of turning the ordinary scripts into something acceptable and, I hope, witty and surprising at times."

He is unimpressed by actors who complain about being accosted by well-wishing fans. "It strikes me as being absolutely crazy. After all, what is a successful actor? The only people who can judge an actor are not directors or anyone else; only fans can judge an actor."

AND THE quality he values most in people?

"I think most important is the capacity to love. I mean, that's the only thing that really matters, isn't it?" Yet he says of his own profession: "You can't be an actor and actually love someone else!" He laughs but obviously means it.

"If you choose to be something as frantic as an actor, you pay a severe price. And the price is you often cut yourself off."

He is far from cut off in the poolside garden where a stream of fans waits to greet him. He moves through the queue with the ease of someone at a family reunion, as if these scarved and costumed characters were favorite cousins and beloved aunts and uncles. He calls them his "lovely, kind people."

What, he's asked, would he like the next five years to be like?

"I'd like to be inundated with offers of work," he says and grins. "Work fuels my entire existence, really. When I'm working, I think I'm quite possibly slightly more interesting than when I'm not working."

THE FIRST thing Baker did upon leaving "Doctor Who" was return to the stage, playing "The Trials of Oscar Wilde" at the Chichester Festival. This was followed by the role of Judge Brack in "Hedda Gabler," and the part of Long John Silver in "Treasure Island."

He played Sherlock Holmes in a BBC television production of "The Hound of the Baskervilles," which should be available soon to PBS. Next came the title role in a thriller, "Dr. Ziegler's Casebook." Just before visiting the United States, he completed a six-month tour of the United Kingdom with the Royal Shakespeare Company in a contemporary play entitled "Educating Rita."

Leaving the series was his own decision, he says. "When I started to drag my feet a bit about going to work in the morning, I decided it was time to move on and give somebody else a chance."

With that sentiment, Tom Baker's "lovely, kind people" heartily disagree. To them, he will always be the very best Doctor ever.