A new wrinkle for ‘Dr. Who’ writer

Steven Moffat says writing for new cast members, even St. Nick, is part of the gig.

ROBERT LLOYD
TELEVISION CRITIC

Head writer Steven Moffat has been determining the course of “Doctor Who” since 2009, when show-runner Russell Davies handed over the keys to the TARDIS and Matt Smith took over from David Tennant as the dark and madcap traveler in time and space.

He has written five Christmas episodes for the Doctor, four for Smith and the latest, “Last Christmas,” for Peter Capaldi, the current inhabitant of the role. Earlier stories have made reference to Dickens (“A Christmas Carol,” 2009) and C.S. Lewis (“The Doctor, the Widow and the Wardrobe,” 2011); the new one includes Santa Claus and is set at the North Pole.

Last known companion Clara (Jenna Coleman) is again aboard. Nick Frost (“Shaun of the Dead,” “Hot Fuzz”) plays Santa. As traditional, there is snow.

I spoke with Moffat, transatlantically, about “Doctor Who” at Christmas and other times.

Do you approach writing the Christmas specials with any special excitement?

Steven Moffat: I always approach “Doctor Who” with excitement. Otherwise, I wouldn’t still be doing it. I suppose there are extra challenges; what are we going to do to make it Christmas-y—all that stuff.

But in the end, the audience just wants to sit down and actually watch “Doctor Who.” They don’t want you just to turn it into a Christ-


TELEVISION REVIEW

Santa in Who-ville

The big guy crashes the Doctor’s holiday special. Hilarity ensues.

BY MARY MCNAMARA
TELEVISION CRITIC

Two time ‘n’ space-defying stars of the season face off in this year’s “Doctor Who” holiday special, “Last Christmas,” which airs on Thursday on BBC America.

The courtship of reality and illusion is showcased in this latest battle to save the universe, as are issues of courage, death and the one-night present-delivery system. But it’s the wavy dance between two holiday icons that steals the show.

The Doctor (currently played by Peter Capaldi) has fought plenty of fake Santas, but he’s never come up against the man himself. Neither have we, for that matter, or at least not Santa as envisioned by Steven Moffat and played with action-hero hilarity by Nick Frost.

This Santa may have all the trappings of traditional myth—the elves, the reindeer, etc.—but his knowledge extends well beyond naughty and nice, and he’s clearly been keeping an eye on the Doctor.

For very good reason too. Aside from Santa, no other character in literature has as intense and changeable a relationship with Christmas as the Doctor.

In the years since it was rebooted by Russell T. Davies in 2005, the BBC series has always included a Christmas special. In keeping with general tradition, the episode is narratively lush, gorgeously cinematic and garlanded by A-list guest stars of such cultural diversity as thespian Michael Gambon (“A Christmas Carol”) and pop singer Kylie Minogue (“Voyage of the Damned”).

More important, the episode can reveal big changes for the next season, which have included the introduction of new companions and the identity of the Doctor’s latest regeneration.

In other words, the Doctor, a character burdened by the sins of time and space on a self-appointed...
Doctor heads to the North Pole

"Who," from [DL] mass spectator. And you have to keep in mind that some people are being forced to watch it that don't normally watch it, it's a big family event.

And you know what's like about it, it's stuck on Christmas Day -- you can hardly keep your eyes open, you've been stuffing your face, you've been drinking champagne since 6 o'clock in the morning. It's the most highly anticipated day of the year, so maybe it's not the time for the most intricately plotted piece of "Doctor Who," you're ever done. It's time to make it quite accessible and appropriate to the day. And it's just to have a bit of fun, and it's got to be a bit sentimental. But then "Doctor Who" always has three things.

Both David Tennant's first full episode as the 10th and Matt Smith's last as the 11th fall on Christmas. These are just things that come up in the cyclical of the show. For logistical reasons, it was the right time for Matt to leave and the right time for David to leave. I'm not that in favor of killing of villains here on Christmas Day.

How did you decide to use Santa Claus?
It just came up as a fun idea. In British, Doctor Who and Santa Claus are the two big heroes at Christmastime, so for them to share an advent, just the visual of Father Christmas entering the TARDIS is kind of cool.

So you're writing the same character? Yes, well, no. It's different version of his character in the American version, but you don't want to think that Matt Smith's Doctor just didn't want you want to think that he's returning as anybody else. And you know, you've been too far to. You can see the same as you were when you were a teenager or a little bit of a woman. You're not the same after you've gotten married. He's not the same at all. I've seen you, and you've got to be a bit of a woman. Sometimes it's happened twice. Sometimes it's happened once, and sometimes it's been a trap. Who cares? You're eaten. Everything is equally fiction. It's kind of nonsense to say otherwise.

Does it matter whether the timelines are logically correct, or just that they're spatially right? All the rules of that kind of things on "Doctor Who" are dramatic rules, so you say, points rather than scientific or mathematical, because that's the kind of show it is. You sort of set up the world with every episode, and you stick to the rules of that episode, sometimes you break them elsewhere. But that's not how people watch "Doctor Who." In classic "Doctor Who," the British prime minister on television -- Peter Capaldi, the American president on television -- you never ever referred to it again. I think that period that would be mentioned quite a lot. It would cause a moment of suspense between the nations.

Robert Dayo lattimes.com

THE LINEUP for the "Doctor Who" Christmas special includes, from from left, Jenna Coleman, Peter Capaldi and Nick Frost.

Santa and Doc's big adventure

Matt Smith, from [DL] mass spectator. And you have to keep in mind that some people are being forced to watch it that don't normally watch it, it's a big family event.

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Where BBC America Where: 9 p.m. Thursday Rating: TV PG (may be unsuitable for young children)