It was the right place to be for Whovians

By Bruce Turner
The Leader

You could tell by the line of people outside the Tampa Theater that the Doctor needed to be in Tampa when you asked.

The final appearance of the long-running British science fiction television series "Doctor Who," which has inspired the show of the same name following in the steps that originated "Blade Runner" in the 1970s.

About 1,500 Whovians gathered March 2 at the Tampa Theater to watch the final episode of the show and meet with John Nathan Turner, the current producer of "Doctor Who," and Peter Davison, one of the actors who have played the Doctor over the past 20 years.

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Peter Davison as the Doctor.
The success of 'Doctor Who'

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of the show, which was first broadcast the day after President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

"It has no confines," says Nathan-Turner. "The time and space element is what's so superb about it. It's unlike 'Dallas,' which concerns a family who live on a ranch and deal in oil and has only so many permutations of the conflicts between the individuals concerned. If you do a series about a hospital, there are only so many permutations of illnesses and love interests with doctors."

"We don't suffer from that. 'Doctor Who' has never become repetitive despite its 22 year run, other than the fact that usually the Doctor wins."

With the time and space elements, "We can do historical stories, pseudo-historical stories, sci-fi-historical, totally futuristic, totally fantastic—there's limitless combinations. If you stuck to the history vein, you could still run for a hundred years and not be stale because there's so much of history that's available to use as a backdrop to your story."

Nathan-Turner has been producer of 'Doctor Who' for the longest period of time but credits the show's past eight producers with contributing to its survival. "Each has taken the show in a completely different direction," he says. "Combine that with six different actors who have played the part and you can see it's a process of constant development and change. It has moved with the times."

Very popular in England

In England, "Doctor Who," which is seen only three months out of the year, has attracted an average audience of between 6 million and 9 million people this season, he says. While not a Top Ten show in Britain, its following was demonstrated when an independent network moved the American import "The A-Team" against "Doctor Who," which is broadcast on the BBC. "The A-Team," which had been one of the most watched shows in England, lost enough viewers to drop it out of the Top Ten and was eventually moved to a different time slot.

Yet, despite being a tradition on British television, the decision has been made to cancel the next season of "Doctor Who," which would have begun filming in May. The budgeted money for "Doctor Who" is being used instead to develop new drama series for the BBC, says Nathan-Turner.

"Of course, it's sad to lose a whole season; no one in their right mind would say it wasn't." But he insists the future of the show is "absolutely secure."

"Doctor Who" is scheduled to begin shooting again in early 1986 and will return to British television in the fall of that year after an 18-month hiatus. The controversy over canceling the next season generated such interest that a record producer released an album in support of the show called "Who Cares?"

Popular in U.S., too

Meanwhile, the show continues to find fans in the United States through episodes that are syndicated primarily to public television stations such as WEDU.

Peter Davison, who was the fifth actor to play the Doctor, is known to many American viewers for his role as Tristan Farnon on the British-produced "All Creatures Great and Small," which is also seen on PBS stations.

Although he is no longer playing the Doctor (he left the series in 1984), Davison, 33, is comfortable talking about the show, particularly in America, where episodes from his three seasons are the most recent ones available. The situation is different from when he first appeared at a Doctor Who convention in Tulsa, Okla., in 1980.

Then, Davison had just accepted the part, following in the footsteps of Tom Baker, who played the role for seven years and is still the actor most identified with the series.

"That was a bit odd, to be promoting 'Doctor Who' before anyone had actually seen me and wouldn't see me for about two years," he recalls. "Tom had just left and they showed his last story and everybody fell about crying. When I was introduced, I thought they might stone me to death. But everyone was very nice."

Having been off the show for a year, Davison says he still watches it. "It's much better now because I don't know what's going to happen in the end."

Davison is the youngest actor to have played the Doctor and was seen in a costume derived from outfits worn in the game cricket. He decided to leave the show after three years to avoid what happened to Baker, he says.

"I think Tom got stale, got sick of the series and felt he had it up to here, and I didn't want to feel that,"

Part of the physical nature of a Time Lord, such as the Doctor, is that he can "regenerate" to a new body, which is convenient when a new actor is needed to step into the role.

Davison thinks one reason the show has been such a continuing success is that "Doctor Who" wasn't originally intended to run beyond six or so episodes. No one sat down to decide what a successful formula might be for a long-term science fiction series. It just worked.

A dual appeal

And "Doctor Who" has always attracted an audience of both adults and children.

"It does have that dual appeal," says Davison. "Douglas Adams (a former 'Doctor Who' script editor and author of 'Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy') once said to me the secret of 'Doctor Who' is making it simple enough for the adults to understand and difficult enough to hold the children's attention. Because it really is the younger people, generally, who have the patience to sit down and actually figure out what the hell is going on. The fans understand it, but in Britain the general viewer can watch it as a tradition without understanding what's going on."

Davison anticipates his daughter watching "Doctor Who" much as he did when he was a teen-ager.

"I expect her to love the Doctor Who who is Doctor Who when she grows up and never think of me as Doctor Who at all, unless I sit down with videotapes and brainwash her at a very early age."