After 25 years of tracking our changing lives and morals, Doctor Who is stuck in a time-warp—a reflection of the uncertain Eighties, and of a BBC with no direction home.

By MARK BALL.

Lost in Space

The present celebratory season of Doctor Who, marking an innings of a quarter of a century, was greeted in the Observer by the acid observation that, in returning to the locations of the very first story, the present production team was risking the misjudgment that the original serial was far better written, acted and designed, more imaginative and more technically convincing. Repeats of early episodes to mark the anniversary would be as welcome as Banquo’s Ghost at the feast.

Only five years ago, John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado could write, in their stimulating Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text, a detailed and poker-faced analysis of the series. Today, it is an embarrassment of riches—littered with references to the parable of Doctor Who is of importance—not least because, for 25 years, it has symbolised the popular face of public broadcasting.

Created in 1963, annus mirabilis of Sixties Britain, the show has always been an emblem of British consensus, of opposites reconciled or held in healthy tension. A children’s series watched by adults, an educational venture that broke ratings records, a reply by Auntie to ITV’s populist, there has remained a nexus of contrasts. At once frightening and cosy, innovative and traditional, its plots and preoccupations freely cross-fertilise drama and comedy, history and science, costume epic and Saturday-morning thrills. The Time Lord himself—part Merlin, part Jester, part reasoning scientist and part anarchic nomad—has evolved from near-villain into unalloyed hero, embodying everything from stern omniscience to child-like helplessness.

The series has spent two and a half decades recording Britain’s troubled reactions to an ominous future, adjusting its identity to the changing times. In the early Hartnell years, our heroes were the classless professionals, the schoolteachers, faced by the challenge of an alien child. Behind the threat of youth lurked the Doctor, the child’s sternly archaic grandfather—Edwardian in manner, forbiddingly authoritative, but also a thoroughly irresponsible madman, a scientist barely in control of his science. Geriatric past and anarchic future seemed equally dangerous, and Britain held its breath.

Then, gradually, Hartnell’s Edwardian eccentric revealed himself as a hero of unpredictable humanism, travelling the galaxies in a police-box full of historical bric-à-brac, surrounded by mementoes of more reassuring times, battling dehumanising science and the alien. By the height of the playful Sixties, in the person of Patrick Troughton, the Doctor had become an almost comic figure, a clown with a secret authority—as Britain perhaps liked to see herself. Apparently helpless, he was actually empowered by experience and intelligence, assisting the technocrats against hordes of invading monsters, bred by scientific arrogance or alien malignancy.

In the Seventies, the series shrank in length and restricted its format to the Quatermass mode; heroic scientist helps the stubborn military against the alien threat. The show became much more consciously nostalgic, revisiting former glories, and Jon Pertwee’s Doctor proved an overtly heroic and sympathetic figure—benign and Holmesian with a touch of the dandish aristocrat, outsider still to the centres of power, but clearly a moral exemplar.

With the advent of Tom Baker, the Doctor became once again a cosmic nomad, the post-Sixties student figure of rebellious clown and irrationalist, a supporter of revolutionary groups against corrupt aristocracies in Gothic societies, and an environmentalist championing the tribal and the local against ‘professional’ embodiments of dehumanising science.

Parody, and elements of self-parody, began to creep in during the Baker years of the mid-to-late Seventies, but always a speculative intellectual playfulness glittered through the increasingly pantomimic structure. What killed the series’ ability to evolve was the decision in 1976 to respond to public protest about ‘unnecessary violence’. The Gothic strain was too much for Mrs Whitehouse and those who had always argued that the programme was excessively disturbing for children. Matters came to a head over ‘The Deadly Assassin’, after which the BBC insisted that the amount of physical action be curtailed.

The irony is that The Deadly Assassin won the highest ever ratings for a Doctor Who story, and was clearly the high-water mark of the programme’s appeal to an adult audience. Reduced to employing often desperate humour in place of suspense, the serial was never to be allowed to grow up. It was forcibly retarded. All its present

Doctors of future pasts: William Hartnell in 1963 (top) and Tom Baker in 1977
difficulties flow from this decision.

Under Douglas Adams, the series clawed back some ground as a lively offshoot of The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, but its authority and self-esteem were lost. Subsequently deprived of institutional status by exile from its Saturday-night slot, Doctor Who floundered on—as it has for the last eight years. Peter Davison's charming and clever impersonation was sabotaged by his own lack of alien strangeness or natural authority, as well as by chatter and inconsistency in production. Colin Baker's sixth Doctor was encouraged to be over the top, as hysterical self-parody failed to deflect the BBC's hostility to a show only surviving because of American sales.

Sylvester McCoy, the new and promising Doctor, faces the uphill grind of a series hopelessly locked in repetition, unable any longer to break out of its past. Less re-born than still-born, it decorated with noisy special effects. Indeed, the more anachronistic the famous police-box becomes, the more the show's fading virtues are dragged out as pastiche and dressed up in 'style'.

Doctor Who began to sicken as the solid family audience for BBC1's Saturday schedules started to break apart in the middle Seventies—indeed, as the Sixties' consensus and dynamics it once vividly embodied began to dissolve before Thatcherite exigencies. Instead of holding firm to its own achievements, and allowing Doctor Who to develop and mature, the BBC chose to box the series in. It now has a hermetically sealed immaturity, bright and cheerful and not without its charms, but a shadow of the compelling and unpredictable confection that it once was.

Michael Grade, of course, threatened to axe the whole show. He would have been wiser to have grasped that the series's problems are close to the BBC's own. Can its former virtues be maintained, and adapted, evolve into a new and often hostile future? Or must it be condemned to dilute its standards, to weakly tread water, to collapse into frenetic displays of 'style' to disguise a loss of creative potency?