The man behind the Time Lord's most recent adventures discusses "The Five Doctors," the heroics of Tom Baker and Peter Davison, and the importance of hair color.

By Patrick Daniel O'Neill

Producing a television series with a devoted international following, a series which is not only the world's longest continually broadcast science-fiction program but also one of the longest running of any type, is undoubtedly a rough assignment. Now, add to that task the responsibility of helming production of the series' 20th anniversary special, and of recasting the lead role not once, but twice, and you may have an idea of the problems which have faced John Nathan-Turner, producer of Doctor Who since 1979.

Nathan-Turner first worked on the series in 1968 as a production assistant, while Patrick Troughton portrayed the Doctor. He briefly returned to the program during Jon Pertwee's tenure. Later, he served as production unit manager for three of the Tom Baker years before taking on the producer's mantle for Baker's final season in the role. Therefore, even before beginning "The Five Doctors," which celebrates Who's two decades on the air, Nathan-Turner had worked with every Doctor, except the late William Hartnell. And for the anniversary special, he even selected Hartnell's replacement, character actor Richard Hurndall.

The producer does admit some apprehension when he began "The Five Doctors." "We did suspect that there might be some uncomfortable presences," he says. "There were with four people—three of whom have played the role previously or currently—and we were afraid that there might be a vying for attention or a fear of treading on each other's toes. [The fourth Doctor, Tom Baker, was unable to participate in the special's taping due to other commitments. His contribution is derived from the previously filmed—but unbroadcast—story, "Shada."]"

"And bringing back some of the companions—we thought, we have all these egos coming in: the Brigadier, Nick Courtney, who has worked with every Doctor; Lis Sladen [STARLOG #77]; Frazer Hines

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[Jamie] who's back briefly; and Caroline John [Liz Shaw]. Plus the current lot, who may feel insecure because the old ones are returning.

"We thought, 'Maybe we've made a monster for ourselves and it will be terribly unpleasant to live through.' But, in fact," Nathan-Turner chuckles, "there was a huge amount of fooling around and joking. I must say our initial fears were totally unfounded. I always write to my actors at the end of any show and thank them, and I was very surprised at the vast number of those involved in 'The Five Doctors' who wrote back and said, 'Thank you for thanking me, but it was a treat. It was pure joy.'"

Nathan-Turner returned to the series’ very beginnings to find the special’s “guest companions” — going all the way back to Carole Ann Ford, who played Susan, the Doctor’s granddaughter, a role she hadn’t filled since 1964. Her experiences may give a new insight into the atmosphere on the set. “Carole, Liz Sladen [Sara Jane Smith], and Janet Fielding [Tegan] all became great mates,” Nathan-Turner explains. “They all got on famously. Carole obviously went through a transition of thinking, ‘Gosh, it’s all so different.’ In the end, however, she said that although the effects have developed and matured, it’s really just the same making Doctor Who now, as it was then.”

Changing Whos?

Obviously, “The Five Doctors” is a special case; the daily work of producing the twice-weekly Doctor Who series is something different. BBC producers are famed for accomplishing wonders on small budgets, much smaller than normal American TV show price tags. Nevertheless, hasn’t Nathan-Turner ever wanted to beg for more money when a script demanded it?

“No,” he states. “There’s no point in asking for more money, once the budget for the year’s programs has been settled. It’s not at all practical to say, ‘I have the most marvelous script. I want more money for it.’”

The answer to budget problems, according to Nathan-Turner, is to assemble a production team who can do the job within the allotted funds. “My job is to make sure that
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Sheraton Beach Inn & Convention Center
Virginia Beach, VA
April 13-15
Atlanticon
PO Box 9590
Hampton, VA 23660

STAR TREK CON
CYO Center
Warwick, RI
Warwick-East Greenwich CYO
900 Warwick Avenue
Warwick, RI 02889
April 15

MUNCICON IV (SF)
Marshall University
Huntington, WV
April 20-21
Marshall University Science Fiction Society
Memorial Student Center
Huntington, WV 25701 (SASE)

 STELLAR VOYAGE 84 (Trek/SF)
Bond Court Hotel
Cleveland, OH
April 20-22
Stellar Voyage
PO Box 98266
Erieview Station
Cleveland, OH 44199

LEPRECON 10 (SF)
Phoenix Hyatt Regency
Phoenix, AZ
April 20-22
Leprecon 10
PO Box 16815
Phoenix, AZ 85011

SEACON '84 (SF)
Metropole Hotel
Brighton, England
April 20-23
SEACON '84
PO Box 321
Sarehole Rd. Hall Green
Birmingham, England B28 4AL

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Baton Rouge, LA
Baton Rouge Science Fiction League
PO Box 14538
Baton Rouge, LA 70898
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PO Box 12422
Omaha, NE 68112 (SASE)
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with Perpugilliam [Nicola Bryant], the new girl companion, I was thinking of an opposite to Tegan. Having already created the bossy, strident, feminist Australian air hostess, I wanted her opposite number, someone younger than Tegan, less bossy, less forceful, more charming—and American."

Additionally, Nathan-Turner elaborates, the companions should not share too many physical characteristics with the Time Lord.

"When it comes to the whole thing of hair becoming a kind of joke on Doctor Who."

"When I started as producer," he remembers, "I had Tom Baker, who had kind of salt-and-pepper hair, Matthew Waterhouse as Adric, who was dark, and I brought in Sarah Sutton as Nyssa, who had medium brown hair. That was OK. Then, I cast Janet Fielding, who also had dark hair, as Tegan. To avoid a whole cast of brunettes, I asked Janet to dye her hair red, so she would look different from the others. Then, Tom left and Peter came on board. Now, he has a naturally mousey-colored hair, up against dark Adric, medium Nyssa and redhead Tegan, so I had streaks put into his hair to make it more blond. Then, Adric and Nyssa departed, and I brought in Mark Strickson as Turlough. Mark's hair is naturally carrot-colored and very close to Peter's dyed hair, so I darkened it to auburn. So, at the moment, we have three regulars—all with dyed hair!"

As Doctor Who entered production for its 21st season, Peter Davison announced his intention to leave the series (STARLOG #76). Suddenly, Nathan-Turner was once again faced with the search for a new Doctor. He found him in the person of Colin Baker (no relation to Tom), who has previously played guest roles in both Doctor Who and Blake's 7. The Producer says he settled on the second Baker after seeing him at at wedding for one of the Who production team, where Nathan-Turner explains, "Colin kept 15 hard-bitten TV industry people entertained for hours. If he could do that, I knew he was my next Doctor."

John Nathan-Turner, the only producer to work with all four surviving Doctors, the only one to cast the Doctor twice, sums up with this tribute to all the Doctors: "I think what's interesting about the six actors who have played the Doctor—I never met William Hartnell, but speaking of the others and Richard Hurndall—is if you brought them all into a room, the only thing they have in common, as individuals, apart from being actors, is that they're all charming in their own way.

"There's never been a kind of nasty piece of work playing the Doctor. Do you know what I mean? There's never been someone about whom you couldn't find something to recommend."

"They're all very different: Patrick, for instance, is a very shy, but a very amusing man, and quite warm when you get to know him, whereas Jon is very outgoing, Tom's an eccentric, Peter's just a gentleman, and Colin's thoroughly entertaining. All of the Doctors are very, very different, but similar in that way. They're all a charm."