

John Nathan-Turner
 producing
DOCTOR WHO

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 we 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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Left: Turlough (Mark Strickson), the fifth Doctor (Peter Davison) and Tegan (Janet Fielding) encounter old foes as Nathan-Turner sponsors the "Resurrection of the Daleks." Right: Davison and Strickson first meet at an English boy's school in "Mawdryn Undead."



[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 ungrounded. 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, Lis 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



John Nathan-Turner and the fifth Doctor, Peter Davison, outside the TARDIS.

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the team working on a story is brilliant at stretching one pound into five. So, we get a designer who works on a jigsaw principle: here's a set; turn everything around halfway and it becomes another set; turn it a little more and it becomes still *another* set. The same thing applies to the costume designer."

A producer's responsibilities also include casting the regulars, a task which can be no mean feat on *Doctor Who*, where companions come and go on a two-to-three year cycle, and even the leading man has changed five times. Perhaps Nathan-Turner's biggest task was replacing Tom Baker (STARLOG #77). Baker had played the Doctor for seven years, longer than any other actor. The producer's choice was Peter Davison, with whom he had previously worked on *All Creatures Great and Small*. The idea, from the moment Baker announced he was leaving, was to find a complete contrast.

"Before there was even a *short* list, a set of names to think about, there was a list of characteristics: kind of vulnerable, fallible, younger, youthful, heroic. That was the kind of brief I wanted," the producer explains. "Peter seemed to admirably fill the bill. In addition, the role of the Doctor has always been reliant on a huge amount of the individual actor's personality shining through the part. Because Tom Baker is more of an eccentric than Peter is, there's an obvious difference. Tom is a wild and crazy guy, while Peter is very much more upright and gentle—a gentleman.

"Tom's Doctor, like Tom, was an eccentric, a comic character, whereas Peter's character is more heroic, less reliant on science-fiction hardware. We got rid of the sonic screwdriver and K-9. Peter's Doctor is much more of an elder brother figure, as opposed to Tom's father figure. Hopefully, we've tried to make the difference between what I would call the slapstick comedy of Tom's Doctor and the *wit* of Peter's."

Changing Companions

Even as the Doctor changes, those around him in the TARDIS do as well. Nathan-Turner has introduced several new companions throughout his four years with the series, and he has some definite ideas about what a companion *should* be. "They used to say that the two requirements of a companion were: (one) to be able to run down a corridor, and (two) to be able to say, 'What do we do next, Doctor?' with conviction," the producer says. "Fortunately, we have all matured since those days.

"Inevitably, one has to bear in mind from the start that the companions have to be sufficiently younger than the Doctor, no matter what his age, for the audience's younger members to associate with. Therefore, you have someone in their late teens or early 20s, playing down two or three years—as we have now with a 21-year-old air hostess and a 19-year-old public school boy."

And in developing a new companion, Nathan-Turner explains, the trick is always to pursue something different. "For instance

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. "Which has led 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 a 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." ★