Radio Who

A new medium for the good Doctor

by Andrew Sewell

This apparent inability to exploit the great potential offered by the radio medium, prompted two BBC radio bods, David Du Pont and Andrew Sewell (sound familiar) to script a re-vamped radio version of *Genesis*. With a little jiggery-pokery they proved that a successful adaption could be achieved, if only you put your mind to it.

‘Ear ‘Ear! Have you ‘eard this one?

However, despite initial enthusiasm for the project, due to the show’s continued popularity on television, the radio chiefs felt rather apprehensive in attempting to produce the show on radio as well, feeling it to be a slight case of overkill. However, the seed of plausibility had been sown and *Doctor Who* in a proper radio format was now more than a faint-hearted hope, it was fast becoming a distinct possibility. It was, however, a further two years and the unprecedented decision of Michael Grade (BBC 1 Controller) to put the television show into abeyance for eighteen months, that was to prompt a BBC radio production.

Use your Imagination

The announcement of the radio show, coinciding as it did with the postponement of its television counterpart and the fact that it provided such a comparatively cheap and convenient stop-gap until the start of a new TV series in Autumn 1986, provoked a predictable barrage of snide remarks from the national press. ‘Auntie says: Use your imagination’... said one paper... ‘The listener’s own imagination will do, for free, work normally done at great expense by divisions of the Beeb’s huge army of scene-shifters and special effects artists’... said another... ‘Do you really need actors in the supporting roles? Director-General Alastair Milne could weigh in with some funny voices’... and so on and so on. Paul Spencer, the show’s producer, professes that the development of *Who* on radio was not as a direct result of the TV show’s untimely demise — nor was it a cost-cutting exercise on the BBC’s part. ‘The press have gone mad about it. It’s certainly cheaper, there’s no getting away from that point, it’s obvious. We don’t need the sets, costumes or anything like that,
but I think it absolute nonsense to think that because it is now being done on radio it will never again grace our television screens. That is a gross exaggeration on the part of the press.

"What actually happened was that David Hatch, who is Radio 4's controller, wanted to do a young teenage programme, and so at a big meeting various ideas were thrown around the final up-shot was Stereo Pirate Radio 4. A three-hour live continuous chunk of slantly anarchistic programming, by that I mean we did not have any exact timings - 'And coming up next' - sort of thing. We were very spontaneous. Ideas for the programme's content were varied, and one of the things suggested was why didn't we do Doctor Who. Now I didn't have the idea, but had it given to me and I must admit I doubt very much whether we would have done it had it not been for the fact we were doing Pirate Radio."

**Miles more effective**

In the good old days, when the show was renowned for its scary monsters and behind the sofa atmosphere (some argue it still has) you may well ask what does a radio show have to offer in replacement. "Someone said to me when I said I was doing Doctor Who on the radio, 'Oh, what a shame, you won't be able to see or have frightening monsters'. Now I think that is absolutely wrong, what you have here is the sound of a monster to which you then attach your particular fear or phobia of what you think that monster looks like. That initial noise suggests and stimulates the senses, so it is as terrifying as your imagination can make it. Now I think that is miles more effective."

Continuity links with its television partner are well maintained throughout, with Colin Baker and Nicola Bryant re-creating their respective roles of the Doctor and Peri. The six ten-minute episodes are written by 'Whos' stalwart Eric Saward (the television show's existing Script Editor) and in true 'Who spirit there is the obligatory cliff-hanger at the end of each episode, with a more dramatic one at the end of each pair. The reason for this was that Pirate Radio 4 transmitted on three consecutive Thursdays. "I'm personally delighted with Eric's scripts. It is what you would expect from a writer of his calibre, accustomed as he is to writing for the radio and television medium."

Given the rather profound title of Slippark (it was originally called The Doomsday Project') the story is set on: 'One big high-tech spaceship floating through space in the future.'

"It's a very interesting story - it is not what you could really call science-based, and it is true to say there is much more humour in it than perhaps there was with the television series, but I haven't set out to make a parody or spoof and I certainly don't intend to send it up. There are just more little throw away lines, simply because on radio you pick up on the little quips quicker. It was a conscious decision on my part to introduce witticisms, but not gags - it is not a case of Doctor... Doctor. We haven't thrown away any of the thriller or spine-chilling aspects of the show - that's still all there."

With a show like Doctor Who, which has such an in-built popular appeal before it even goes out, it is obviously not a good idea to start changing its established and recognised image. "You have to take on board quite a lot of the precedents already set by the television series, there would be no point in doing it differently, otherwise it wouldn't be Doctor Who. It is because we originate from the television series that it is going to work.

For this reason I consciously aimed to maintain the character that Colin was identified with, for instance there would be no point in trying to dramatically change the eccentricity of the Doctor's character at this stage in the game."

"So what did Paul consider to be the main advantages of radio as a medium? "As far as radio is concerned we have done things in this that you couldn't dream of doing on television. One of the first points is the speed of recording - it's a darn sight faster. We only had two recording sessions, and in the space of those two days we had completed one whole hour of radio. Admittedly that just involved the acting side of things, there is still the editing, multi-tracking, mixing of incidental music (which incidentally was composed by Jonathan Gibbs) and the adding of Dick Mills special radiophonic bleeps etc., but it is still a jolly fast turn-round compared with television. We record the show like a sort of screenplay, recording all of one plot that appears in each episode, and then all of what's happening in another plot."

Invariably each separate plot is set in the same acoustic (in other words, the same set or location) and by recording in this manner it saves the Studio Managers having to de-rig and re-arrange all the microphones only to find they have to set them all up again for an identical sequence in another episode.

**Very Strange**

"When the programme goes out the various plots are interconnected, rather like a jigsaw puzzle. By the time the story is established you have at least three different plots on the go, with lots of strange relationships going on between everybody (not to mention a rather manically depressed maintenance drone trundling around the ship). There was one occasion when the Doctor and Peri are running along a corridor, and while being chased, the Doctor recounts a story (or was it Vogan poetry) he remembers of something that happened to somebody else on an occasion similar to this. Now there's no way you could actually do this while running along because it would look very strange to say something that an extreme practical attempt on television. We in fact had Colin and Nicola running on the spot in the studio, it looked very funny."

(R) And sounded very funny! - Ed.)

Radio is all about allowing the individual to create in his or her mind's eye a visual perception of the events they are listening to. It provokes the senses. You can have a spaceship which is five or twenty miles long or imagine a piece of service duct running off miles into the distance, but whatever your imagination creates it will look absolutely perfect, and because it is in your head you need never again be disappointed by a tacky television set (only a tacky script).

So what of the future, more productions of similar vein to Slippark? - maybe, a BBC Enterprises record release of Slippark? - perhaps, but what is certain in whatever medium Doctor Who appears, it will never be forgotten.