Trekkies move over for 'Doctor Who' fans

By Steve Turner
The Ledger

Don't bother inviting Vickie and Allen Wuertz out this Saturday evening. The Lakeland husband and wife will be where they are nearly every Saturday: in front of their television set watching "Doctor Who," the British science fiction series that is developing a cult following in the United States to rival that of "Star Trek" in the 1970s.

The Wuertzes are just two Polk County "Whovians," as fans of the show are called. Whovians know all about the good Doctor, the renegade Time Lord who travels around the universe in his TARDIS (for Time And Relative Dimensions In Space), a spaceship that looks like a London police call box.

They can tell you about the Doctor's companions who accompany him on his journeys through time and space; they can tell you what bad guys Sontarans, Zygons, Cybermen, Daleks and the Master are.

About the only thing they can't tell you is why everybody else isn't watching "Doctor Who."

But more and more people are tuning in the series, which has been around since 1963 on England's BBC network and is seen by an estimated 100 million viewers in 64 countries.

In the United States, the show is broadcast in 112 television markets, including the Tampa Bay area where Doctor Who's adventures are broadcast on WEDU, Channel 3, each Saturday at 7 p.m. and weeknights at 11 p.m. "Doctor Who" has proven to be a popular draw on many public television stations around the country and a source of new subscribers.

Like "Star Trek," the success of the show has spawned a host of commercial spin-offs. There are "Doctor Who" conventions, where fans can meet performers from the series and trade in "Doctor Who" memorabilia; there are "Doctor Who" T-shirts, magazines, caps and posters. The BBC has licensed more than 400 different products connected with the show.

Since the show began more than 20 years ago, five different actors have played the Doctor, each in his own style (s)ix times this year). Changes in actors are explained by a Time Lord being able to regenerate himself up to 12 times.

And despite the title of the show, the character is never called Doctor Who.

Tom Baker, with his mop of curly hair, Harpo Marx-like grin, floppy hat and long, knitted scarf, played the Doctor the longest, from 1974 to 1981. Baker's Doctor thought nothing of pulling a yo-yo out of his pocket or offering an alien a "jelly baby" while stopping a galaxy-threatening invasion. Baker, who played Rasputin in the film "Nicholas and Alexandria," was the villain in "The Golden Voyage of Sinbad," remains the most popular actor in the role of the Doctor, and his episodes are the ones currently being broadcast locally.

But actors such as Baker are just one reason the show is so popular. Although it was originally geared toward children and has sophisticated special effects that are light years away from the high technology of "Star Wars," the show's scripts feature tongue-in-cheek dialogue that appeals to plenty of adults as well. As fanciful as the adventures are, they touch on a lot of 20th century concerns.

The result is a show that has remained fresh over the years and which counts as its fans people of all ages and backgrounds.

People such as Vickie and Allen Wuertz. She teaches speech and drama at Auburndale High School; he's a mathematics instructor at Florida Southern College in Lakeland. They've been watching "Doctor Who" about two years now.

"We don't miss an episode," says Mrs. Wuertz. "We even videotape them."

For her, the show's strong point is its writing, particularly that for the Doctor.

"He'll turn around and say something to somebody, and it's the kind of thing you always wish you could say! And he understates everything. In a normal series you'd hear everybody yelling and screaming."

Her husband likes the Doctor's style of not taking things too seriously on the surface, but underneath he does take it all seriously. I envy that."

There are probably lots of "closet Whovians" around, he says, and with a chuckle, adds, "It's terrible. We're adults. We shouldn't be doing things like this."

"I've never been in a fan club ever, I've never had a desire to," Wuertz says. "I used to think Trekkies were stupid."

But the Wuertzes are both members of the Doctor Who Fan Club of America and have their "Doctor Who" T-shirts to prove it.

Another local "Doctor Who" fan is Jeff Clifford, manager of the Spec's Music store on South Florida Avenue in Lakeland.

"All my life I've been a fan of fantasy and science fiction," he says. "The combination of the two (in 'Doctor Who') is just great."

"And I really like the cheezy special effects. I think it lends a certain charm to it and I don't think it would be the same if they had 'Star Wars' special effects."

Clifford, a longtime fan of English folk and rock music, enjoys "the Englishness" of the "Doctor Who" series, too.

"There's nothing quite like it."

He has collected a variety of "Doctor Who" memorabilia, including paperback novelizations of the shows, records, posters and books.

He's also been making copies of it on his videocassette recorder since New Year's Eve, when Channel 3 showed the "Fifth Doctors" 20th anniversary episode.

"I want my (2-year-old) son to watch them when he gets older."

It may be the third time he's seen many of the shows but, Clifford says, "I'll never get tired of them."

"My wife says she is a 'Doctor Who widow' on Saturday nights and from 11 to 11:30 on weeknights."

It's sometimes easier when both halves of a marriage are fans. That's the case for David and Kim Smith, another Lakeland couple.

"I don't think I've missed an episode in a year," says Smith, manager of the Rose Auto Parts store on Memorial Boulevard.

He first found the program while channel flipping one night "when there was absolutely nothing on."

"I got interested and watched it that night, then the next week and the next week."

It's hard for him to pin down exactly why he likes the show so much. "It's a well-written program. To me, it's just fascinating."

His wife likes the "personal relationships" in the show, particularly the way See Kids on page 7C
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the Doctor acts toward his traveling companions, most of whom have been young women.

“He treats women as women,” says Mrs. Smith. “They’re intelligent women who help him along. They’re not just there for the jiggie factor.”

Of course, “Doctor Who” attracts its share of younger fans too, including two Lakeland teen-agers, Rodney and Kevin Flatt.

Kevin, who’s 13 and a science fiction fan, says that “Doctor Who” is the only show he likes on TV other than “Airwolf.” Not even “Star Trek,” which is still being shown regularly in syndication, keeps his interest any more. “It’s gotten old,” he says.

It was at his urging that his older brother started watching “Doctor Who.”

“When I got interested in it, I just couldn’t leave it alone,” says Rodney, 16, who’s worked out his own plots for a “Doctor Who” spin-off.

Their parents, Margie and Harvey Flatt, watch the show occasionally.

“I’m familiar enough to know what everything Doctor Who has been doing, all his metamorphoses,” says Mrs. Flatt, who doesn’t mind her sons’ interest in it.

“It’s wholesome,” she says. “It’s not anything that you object to them watching.”

At public TV station WEDU, which has been showing “Doctor Who” since November 1981, the success of the program was something of a surprise at first.

“It’s not a silly program, and neither is it a kids’ program, which is the reason I bought it in the first place,” says Jim Stasko, the station’s program director. “It does appeal to kids, but it’s an intelligent show.”

In the most recent Nielsen ratings for the Bay area, the Saturday night “Doctor Who” programs were being seen by about 32,000 viewers.

“That’s not fantastic for commercial TV, but for public TV it’s pretty good,” says Stasko.

WEDU gets calls “all the time” about “Doctor Who,” according to Kay Schweitzer, who answers the phones. There have been so many inquiries that she started watching the show and has become a fan herself.

“It’s good clean entertainment, to begin with,” she says about the show’s appeal. “There’s no sex in it. The violence, it’s so fantastic, people dissolve and disappear; it’s not graphic.”

Currently, WEDU is in the process of showing the complete Tom Baker library of “Doctor Who” episodes, which should continue through November. After that, the station is going to broadcast the shows of the fifth Doctor, played by Peter Davison, who is leaving the series this year after three seasons.

Program director Jim Stasko isn’t sure what will happen then. The station might purchase the third Doctor’s episodes (played by Jon Pertwee, who was in Tampa last July for a “Doctor Who” convention), or the shows with the new Doctor (played by Colin Baker, who’s no relation to Tom) might possibly be available by then.