Anthony Ainley

The man who plays the Master, the Doctor’s Arch-Nemesis, talks about evil, acting and acting evil in "Doctor Who."

BY PATRICK DANIEL O’NEILL

Very early in my professional career, people began to tell me that I’m Machiavellian,” says Anthony Ainley. He smiles, and indeed, even through the twinkle in his eye, there’s a hint of menace in that smile. “Once I was in a perfectly straight play, and my line was ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ And the actress I said it to replied, ‘My god, you’re sinister!’ And I wasn’t even trying to be. So, it soon dawned on me that I had a forte for the sinister.”

For the last three years, Ainley has turned that talent to playing one of the most sinister characters in science-fiction drama—the Master, renegade Time Lord and ruthless foe of that other famed exile from Gallifrey, the Doctor. In taking up the part, Ainley was stepping into a role made famous by another actor 10 years earlier. Roger Delgado was the original Master, during the period that Jon Pertwee played the Doctor, but, tragically, he died in a car accident in 1973. It would be three years before the Master again appeared on Doctor Who, in “The Deadly Assassin.” In that tale, the renegade was portrayed as a dying, decaying figure who had used up his Time Lord cycle-of-regenerations. The role was filled by actor Peter Pratt, wearing heavy makeup. The Master escaped at the story’s end, only to turn up once more in “Keeper of Traken,” still dying. But at its climax, he stole the body of the Keeper, Tremas, to regenerate, transforming himself into a youthful, bearded Ainley. Delgado’s portrayal is still remembered by Who fans around the world, yet Ainley says he is unconcerned about comparisons.

“I try to play it my way,” he says. “I think it’s better to play it from within myself rather than to copy Roger. I’m often asked if I copied him, based my portrayal on the way he did it, and the answer is no. We tried to get it to look like him, with makeup and the like, but it’s better not to copy anyone, because you become one-dimensional then, unless you’re a genius. It’s better to let it all come from within oneself. Then, it becomes, with luck, three-dimensional and real, more spontaneous and true.

“John Nathan-Turner [Doctor Who’s producer] suggested to me, ‘Would you like to come and see the stories that Delgado did?’ I said, ‘Yes, I would,’ and I would have, but I never got around to it. By then, I had started playing the part, and John never mentioned it again, so I assume he was happy with the way I was doing it.” Ainley leans forward to make a point. “The actor’s job is to bring the play to life,” he continues, “and that is what I try to do. I’m told sometimes that I’m more ruthless than Roger was; I’m also told that I’m less humorous. It’s a matter of opinion.

“I love it when people say I’m better, but I don’t think about that way. I know there are some who say that there will never be another Master—Roger Delgado is it. Well, I’ll just have to live with that attitude. It’s one of the things an actor takes, the good with the bad.”

A Talent for Acting

Ainley comes from a family with an acting tradition. His father, Henry Ainley, was a stage actor, and his half-brother, Richard, was in Hollywood during the 1930s. Richard joined the U.S. Army to fight in World War II, and was seriously injured, paralyzed on the left side. He turned to teaching drama, and that led to one of the theatrical world’s happy coincidences. “Oddly enough, Richard was drama teacher to Tom Baker. Small world, isn’t it?” remarks Ainley. “Tom stayed with Richard and his wife for a long time, when he wasn’t getting much work. That’s where I first met him, in the days when he was ‘Tom Who?’ ”

That family training and talent has created in Ainley an actor with a strong awareness of his strengths and limitations. “All an actor does really,” he explains, “is interpret the written word, give it spontaneity and truth and immediacy and credibilit— that’s what I try to do. I learn my lines, say them, go home and have a bath! One really does work within the strict confines of the script; one is the servant to one’s author. I don’t think I’m a very good actor at making suggestions. I tend to do what I’m told and spend my time trying to get the job, the craft, right.

Anthony Ainley as The Master.
"I don't like to try and impose myself on a script. I tend to trust my writers when actors start to rewrite scripts in rehearsals, you're in trouble. However, I am quite hot on grammar and words! I like using short words rather than long ones where possible, and I like simplicity in art. If I find a word in dialogue which seems unnecessarily rare and not immediately understandable by the masses, I tend to suggest a more simple word. Sometimes, Doctor Who is so technical that you must throw simplicity out the window. Still, there are moments when an intellectual word is used, which I think is wrong—although one should never underestimate the audience's intelligence."

Ainley arrived during the last months of Tom Baker's tenure as the Doctor (STARLOG #77), and he has been with Peter Davison since his first tentative beginnings in the role. As an actor, Ainley had a special insight into the differences between the two men.

"Thinking back, watching Tom in rehearsal for 'Keeper of Traken,'" Ainley remembers, "one was probably seeing an actor at the height of his confidence in his career. He was seven years into the show, and handled it all, absolutely at home. You seldom see an actor like that, unless he has been in a successful play for several months. But there was Tom at his peak.

"Then, some months later, I started with Peter, and you couldn't expect him to be anywhere near so confident. He wasn't anywhere near as experienced an actor, and he was well aware that he stood in the shadows of the four previous Doctors, especially Tom."

Did that affect his portrayal of the Master? Not at all, according to Ainley. "My attitude doesn't change toward the Doctor. Once again, I just rely on what the scene is, what the action is, what the words are. But the personality, in those two cases, is absolutely opposite. Peter got into the swing of it, and wasn't quite so diffident. I was very pleased to see Peter grow."

He had the chance to see Davison in more than Doctor Who. During the 1982 Christmas season, Ainley and Davison and his wife, actress Sandra (Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy) Dickinson, starred in a new stage version of Cinderella, written and directed by Nathan-Turner. The production was done in a traditional British form of children's theater called panto. Part comedy, part musical, part vaudeville, the performance utilized both parodies and straight versions of songs from a variety of American musical comedies, as well as new material, and it was not without its topical references to Doctor Who. Davison played the traditional panto character "Buttons," with Dickinson as the Fairy Godmother, and Ainley, in true villainous form, as the wicked Stepfather. "Working with Peter in Cinderella was just marvelous, and I saw him there in a completely different light, singing and dancing. We did it all in just 10 days, while we were simultaneously taping a Doctor Who episode, 'King's Demons.' It was quite a miracle that we got it on."

Additionally, Ainley takes the occasional TV guest shot when he isn't playing the Master, although he never worries about unemployment. "I'm rather a lazy actor," he admits, "I like having time off. During the Summer, I'm frequently an amateur cricketer, rather than an actor. That, on top of my house and garden, which always involves work, gives one many things to do. I'm not desperately unhappy when I'm out of work. I'm in a slightly more fortunate position than many people: I don't have a mortgage, I don't have children to educate. There's not a great deal of pressure on me, and when the phone stops ringing, I don't panic."

A Talent for Evil

But even in something as different as Cinderella, Ainley was still the villain. Doesn't he ever tire of being the bad guy? "No, I never worry about that," he replies. "Once I twigged that I had that Machiavellian thing without even trying, it only made life easier. I don't know if it's instinctive for me to play things like that, but if I see the part is evil, there can be a danger of going over the top. I try not to do that and make it melodramatic."

"I'm blessed with the gift for evil. Many of my friends hate it—for god's sake, they say, 'why don't you do something decent for a living?' But I quite like it. I'm not boasting, but if one has a talent for a certain thing— even acting evil—one might as well cash in on it."

And he does get the opportunity to be the good guy, or at least seem to be. In nearly every Who appearance, Ainley must play both the renegade Time Lord, and a sort of alter-ego—a disguise played by the Master to fool the Doctor and his companions. Many times, that alter-ego must appear convincingly good. 'There's a lot of goodness in me,' Ainley confesses, 'but I seldom show it. I was able to as Tremas in 'Keeper of Traken.' Once again, it all depends on the writing. I was happy to play that part as a nice old gentleman, because I knew it would create the needed contrast. I get a great kick out of contrasts, and I think life gets even sweeter if you can go from goodness to evil. Apart from the financial aspect, I would rather play the Master than the Doctor."

There are other reasons why Ainley prefers the relative anonymity of the Master—public reaction. Peter Davison, like Baker before him, has had a very hard time leading a private life, since he is constantly recognized in England. "Poor old Peter," sighs Ainley, "when he would walk from his car to the Cinderella stage door, or walk his dog, he had to wear a disguise! He would wander around with a hat pulled down not just over the eyes, but over his face! I would rather go in disguise when I'm acting."

"Of course, I would quite like the sort of income that Robert Redford has, and I would rather like to look like Robert Redford, but I would hate being unable to go anywhere without being leapt at and asked questions, and have things thrust in my face to be signed. When you're young, you want that to happen, because it indicates that you're successful. But once you are not without a meal, with a few bob in the bank, the last thing you really want is to go down the street and be stared at."

Aiding in Ainley's anonymity is the makeup involved in his role. Indeed, the Master's hair, eyebrows and beard are not the actor's. Additionally, there is the makeup he dons for his alter-egos. And he doesn't find it a problem at all. "No, I rather like it," he explains. "It's a gift for an actor to have all that aid. It's very stretching to try to vocally change things as well, or to make it physically different. I've always admired the great protean actors—there's a word I wouldn't write into a play—the actors who always seem to change, like Peter Sellers or Laurence Olivier. I never dreamt that I could do it, and it's an incredible lesson to all of us—it certainly was to me—in what you don't know about yourself."

Work on a new makeup job begins weeks before taping, often even before any rehearsals. "Before you go into makeup, you, the producer and the makeup people get together and discuss the disguise. Then, they do a test. We always try to make it different from any other face we've done before."

"I would rather play the Master than the Doctor."

Sometimes, fans who have seen Ainley out of makeup say that they can now recognize the Master's disguises much sooner. Those reports disappoint Ainley, who takes great pride in his multiple roles. "It would be better if they didn't spot any resemblance; if we could absolutely stun them every time. But, very often, the makeup people go bananas when I ask for extremes. I had an enormous job convincing the makeup lady to give me a false nose in 'King's Demons,' because the nose is very important in profile. She didn't want to do it; she thought it went beyond the bounds of subtlety."

"However, there are aspects of my visage—my eyes, my brow, my voice, too—which are difficult to conceal. So, it's terribly important that we try to get a completely different face, whether it's very subtle or very heavy, using plastic rubber [latex]. I'm a great believer in the surprise element in drama. I don't want to be so subtle that the smart viewers will spot it. Still, I have these eyes which have a sort of expression—John Nathan-Turner always notices it, and he's very anxious to disguise it—something about the way I look at people, that's very difficult to conceal."

"This is the great thing about the human personality—how it comes through in acting. People either hook onto it and like it or they don't," Anthony Ainley concludes. "Fortunately, even though I'm always the evil one, they seem to like me."

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