The Doctor Is In (He’s Aged)

By DAVE ITZKOFF

The passage of time is perhaps not so acute to the centuries-old alien at the heart of the BBC’s “Doctor Who,” the shape-shifting hero known simply as the Doctor, who has had more than 50 years of adventures across dimensions known and otherwise.

But time and its measurement have become especially crucial to Peter Capaldi, who will make his proper, full-length debut as the latest actor to play the Doctor when the new season of “Doctor Who” has its premiere Saturday on BBC America.

Peter Capaldi makes his full-length debut as the star of “Doctor Who” with Saturday’s season premiere on BBC America.

It has been just over a year since the BBC announced that Mr. Capaldi would succeed Matt Smith, who was a 26-year-old relative novice when he was chosen to play the Doctor, and, after three seasons of putting his frantic, whirling-dervish stamp on the character, disclosed his departure in June 2013.

Since then, Mr. Capaldi, 56, has spent several months filming “Doctor Who” in Cardiff, Wales, trying to bring to the role his own personal take, which he says is more sardonic and elusive.

Still, as a lifelong “Doctor Who” fan, he could not quite contain his giddiness, all this time later, that he had actually landed the part.

“I just didn’t think that they would be going in this direction,” Mr. Capaldi said in a gentle, stately voice with only traces of a Scottish accent, on a visit to New York last week. Asked what he meant, he answered with a laugh: “Well, I guess, older. And more like me.”

Mr. Capaldi’s penetrating eyes and expres-
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Mr. Capaldi is playing the 12th canonical version of the Doctor, though the show cheekily acknowledges its counting system has run off track a bit.

Born and raised in Glasgow, Mr. Capaldi grew up admiring character actors like Peter Cush- ing and John Hurt, and was a fol- lower of "Doctor Who" more or less from the start.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, he watched the series transfer its lead role from older statesmen like William Hartnell to expres- sive wits like Tom Baker, and, in its 21st-century revival, heart- throbs like Mr. Smith and David Tennant. (Mr. Capaldi also ap- peared in a 2008 "Doctor Who" episode playing a Roman in an- cient Pompeii.)

As a steadily employed actor, Mr. Capaldi said, he'd fallen into a routine of "increasingly bland tele- parts, turning up in episodic tele- vision as the slightly untrustwor- thy doctor or shrink, or the M.P. with a gay secret."

"That was fine," he said, "but quite dull.

That changed in 2005 when Mr. Capaldi met Iainnucci, creator of "The Thick of It," on a day when Mr. Capaldi had come from another demeaning BBC audition and was in a particularly good mood. "I was like, "O.K., show me what you've got,"" Mr. Capaldi re- called. "It was lucky I had just the right attitude at that moment."

Mr. Iannucci, the creator and show runner of HBO's "Veep," said he recalled Mr. Capaldi as initially "very amiable and softly spoken."

"When the switch came," Mr. Iannucci said, "from this personable charmer to this rather ruth- less and cold, frighteningly still person, I thought, "My God, that's quite a trick you can pull off there."

Mr. Moffat said that the casting of Mr. Smith and Mr. Tennant on "Doctor Who" had not been a de- liberate search for youthful demo- graphic. "When people are try- ing to be cynical about modern 'Doctor Who,' they say, "Oh, they always cast these young fellows,"" he said. "We didn't. It was always a young bloke who turns out to be right for it."

Mr. Moffat said he and his col- leagues quickly thought of Mr. Capaldi, for reasons he could not entirely quantify.

"He just felt incredibly right," Mr. Moffat said. "He would just take the part in such an unexpected, different direction and over- turn everybody's preconceptions."

At an audition at which the "Doctor Who" producers say Mr. Capaldi was the only candidate, he said he performed a test scene in which he had to ask another character to describe his new in- carnation. "The Doctor doesn't have a mirror, so he has no idea he's got- ten older," Mr. Capaldi said. "So he keeps asking her about his face. 'Does it look good?'

The answer he received was, "Well, it's O.K." Mr. Capaldi was quickly offered the role and introduced in a live special last summer. But just as rapidly, some die-hard "Doctor Who" fans and casual viewers alike pushed back against the de- cision, disappointed that a role with seemingly so few boundaries had once again been given to a white male actor.

"I do think it's well overdue to have a female Doctor Who," Helen Mirren told the British morn- ing show "Daybreak," before the announcement. "I think a gay, black female Doctor Who would be best of all."

Asked about an audience's de- sire for more diversity in the role, Mr. Moffat said: "I just cast on instinct, really. There's nothing against that, and we have au- ditioned every shape and size and type of human being for this part the last time around."

He added that Mr. Capaldi "looks like a Doctor Who," and could have played the character at previous ages. "He'd have been a great 20-something Doctor and a great 36-something Doctor," he said.

Yet Mr. Capaldi's age does not go unnoticed in his premiere.

"I took Matt to lunch and he came in on crutches," he recalled, "and I said, 'What happened to you?' And he said, 'This show.' I thought: 'My God, you're 30 years younger than me and you're on crutches. What's going to happen to me?'"

With his first season nearly under- his belt, Mr. Capaldi did not have to look into the future to be- lieve that he would fare just fine. "I survived without any inju- ries," he said. "It keeps you fit. It's great to wake up in the morn- ing and think, 'I'm Doctor Who.'"