Feature by Gary Russell

For those of you with either long memories, or a large collection of Starburst, you may remember issue 27’s John Fleming interview with the then new producer of Doctor Who, John Nathan-Turner expressing his ideas for how he wanted the programme to look in the 80s. Since then he has three seasons under his belt and the fourth is about to be unleashed onto an audience who, after The Five Doctors will be expecting nothing short of brilliance from the man who said “We are concentrating on new writers who come with fresh ideas and a fresh outlook towards the programme.” back in 1980.

If nothing else, Nathan-Turner will probably be remembered as the only producer to have cast three actors in the role of the Doctor: first Peter Davison, then Colin Baker and, stuck in the middle, Richard Hurndall taking the late William Hartnell’s place as the First Doctor. The 21st season could well be a make-or-break season, both with long-term fans and the general viewing public, for whilst Nathan-Turner’s approach was very refreshing and exciting in 1980, by 1983 it had worn off considerably. There is a limit to how far viewers will accept a story that treads along slowly featuring few, if any, climaxes, until the very end of the fourth episode—no such story a season is okay, seven is a bit of a strain. Added to this the dubious popularity of Peter Davison as the Doctor means fans at the BBC’s Longleat Convention last April will remember, I’m sure, the audience’s reaction to the question, “Who is your favourite Doctor?” when only about three hands went up in favour of poor Peter, and it isn’t difficult to explain why viewers will be looking for something innovative and different in the new season.

So what have we got? Well, for starters, out of the seven stories scheduled, only two bear names new amongst Doctor Who writers. One is experienced BBC Classics writer Anthony Stevens, who is penning the final story of the season, The Twin Dilemma, which will introduce Colin Baker as the Doctor.

On a slightly better note, three new directors debut. Graeme Harper, Michael Morris and Matthew Robinson, who has directed the potential Doctor Who Magazine Season Survey winner, Resurrection of the Daleks, which as you may have guessed, features Terry Nation’s creations zooming about in spaceships, raiding prisons and even cropping up in contemporary London, where incidentally the Doctor’s antipodean assistant, Tegan, will appear at the end of the story. This mini-masterpiece has been written by Doctor Who script editor Eric Saward, who also scripted the hugely popular Earthshock a couple of years back. As with Earthshock, Resurrection of the Daleks appears to have a large cast, so we can play “Guess which character will survive this episode,” although with a role-call featuring Kula Laska, Rodney Bewes and Max Bygraves, you can be sure those who die will probably die well!

Another story with a fairly big cast, and a returning monster (or monsters) is the season opener, written by Johnny Byrne and directed by Permain Roberts. This one is called Warriors of the Deep and features the Sea Devils and their land-based cousins, the Silurians, trying to take over an underwater sea base of the not too distant future, whilst the human population are trying to deal with enemy agents and a huge sea creature called the Myrka. Very much the “typical” Doctor Who story, with scientific/military bases, a race of monsters, traitors, unseen opponents and the Doctor being mistaken for the enemy.
Warriors or The Deep is a very fast-moving script, the Doctor never seems to have three seconds to spare before something arrives and starts killing people. Amongst the cast of this story is Tom Adams as the base's commander, Ingrid Pitt as the base's doctor and Ian McCulloch as the base's resident psycho.

Between these two "old monsters" stories are two tales featuring new monsters – firstly The Awakening, a two-parter written by the other newcomer, Eric Pingle. This strange story moves the charm of English country life and all its traditions with the evil force of a vistor from space lying dormant in an old church, just waiting for the chance to feed off... what? Add to this a chap from the past and Tegan's grandfather and you might be left wondering how it all fits together. Whatever the outcome, I'm sure the guest cast featuring Glyn Houston, Denis Lill, Polly James and Jack Galloway will carry it through with flying colours.

Next up is a story from ex-script editor Christopher H Bidmead. As a producer, John Nathan-Turner seems to have gone through many script editors as he does Doctors. Still, it's nice to see Bidmead back again, although if you are expecting stories similar to his scientific ones of the past, then I think you'll be surprised by what is best described as another "typical" Who script: this one featuring an Earth colony of the future, stranded on a less than pleasant planet, with jovial, educated scientific types helping the Doctor and loud-mouthed, ignorant military types trying to kill him for no other reason than the fact that the TARDIS has blundered into an awkward position. Frontios is a tremendously good script, full of the sort of wit from Bidmead that makes you wish he'd written every Davison story for the last two seasons. Watch out in particular for the lovely little scene where the Doctor informs a reluctant Tegan that she is, to all intents and purposes, an android and then proceeds to put a screwdriver in her ear: Jeff Rawle, Peter Gillmore, Lesley Dunlop and William Lucas star in this one.

After the Dalek story comes Planet of Fire written by sometime director/sometime writer Peter Grimwade, and featuring Anthony Ainley once again as the Doctor's best enemy The Master. This is also Turrogh's last story and fans of Kamelion will be pleased to know that he's still making an appearance. Planet of Fire looks to be a curious mix of The Incredible Shrinking Man and any old film set in pyramids you care to mention. Filming took place in sunny Lanzarote towards the end of last year and involved Mark (Turrogh) Strickson and Nicola (new companion Peri) Bryant splashing about in the water. Peri Brown and her Step-father are holidaying in the Mediterranean when they meet up with the Doctor. After her step-father tries to drown, Peri is rescued by Turrogh who carries her aboard the Tardis and discovers amongst her artifacts a strange object not of this world. The TARDIS crew then zoom off to a distant planet where Peter Wyngarde leads a seemingly primitive tribe in their worship of a God whose return they all devoutly. Barbara Shelley (Blake's 7) fans may remember her as being the only positive point in the story. (Star)The also guests. Of the final two stories, the Davison bow-out is written by old favourite Robert Holmes and is called The Caves of Androzani and guest stars Robert Glenister of Sive and Jawn fame and Christopher Gable, once principle dancer with the Royal Ballet and more recently was seen in "Women in Love", the Ken Russell film. As said earlier, the final story of the season introduces Colin Baker as the Doctor and is called The Twin Dilemma and looks set to round off the season with quite a bang.

Bearing in mind that two companions leave, one joins, the Doctor regenerates, the Daleks, the Master, the Sillurans and the Sea Devils all return, the twenty-first season should be quite a cracker. Let's hope that it is.

And maybe this season we'll actually find out if the Master is really the Doctor's father -- (Sorry, folks, we're out of space!)