



TV



Jodie Whittaker
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JODIE WHITTAKER

the first female lead of **DOCTOR WHO**,
and the long-running series' new
showrunner tell EW why now is the perfect time
for a woman to pilot the TARDIS

BY CLARK COLLIS @ClarkCollis PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXEI HAY

“AW, BRILLIANT!”

As monologues go, that expression of joy, uttered by Jodie Whittaker in last year's special Christmas episode of *Doctor Who*, may not rank up there with the best of Shakespeare. Nonetheless, it was an exultation of huge cultural significance—and one that sprang directly from the preferred vocabulary of the actress herself. “My two go-to words are ‘Brilliant!’ and ‘Ace!’” says Whittaker, 36, chatting with EW at a studio in the show's home city of Cardiff, Wales, this past May. “I’ll try to get the Doctor an ‘Ace!’ in there somewhere.”

The “Doctor” in question is, of course, the titular character of *Doctor Who*. A two-hearted alien from the planet Gallifrey, this time-traveling, monster-battling hero has been played by a succession of actors in the show's 55-year history, thanks to the Doctor's ability to “regenerate” his physical form. Up until last December, the “Time Lord” was always depicted as male. But at the end of the Christmas episode, Peter Capaldi's so-called Twelfth Doctor regenerated into Whittaker's Thirteenth. It was that switch in sex that prompted the character's delighted “Aw, brilliant!” after he—or rather, *she*—saw herself reflected in a computer

screen on the bridge of the Doctor's time-and-spacecraft, the TARDIS.

The choice of Whittaker to play the lead role on *Doctor Who* represents a massive gamble on the part of new showrunner Chris Chibnall—who'd previously cast Whittaker as a grieving mother on his cop drama *Broadchurch*—and the BBC, which successfully revived the sci-fi series in 2005 following a lengthy hiatus. More than 18 million *Doctor Who* DVDs have shipped, 12 million action figures have been sold in the 13 years since its relaunch, and in 2013 a 50th-anniversary episode was screened in 94 countries. In the U.S., the show has become the flagship series for BBC America, which will premiere the new season this fall, simulcasting the first episode so it screens at the same time as in the U.K. There is a lot riding on Whittaker's ability to make audiences around the world fall in love with a female Doctor, as the actress is well aware.

“There's no rules, and it's liberating,” she says. “But it's equally terrifying.”

IF THE IDEA OF A WOMAN

at the helm of the TARDIS is groundbreaking, it is also a development many feel is overdue. The show previously made clear that the Doctor *could* be female by having Matt Smith's freshly regenerated Eleventh Doctor briefly believe he was a woman after feeling his foppishly long hair in an episode broadcast at the start of 2010. Three years later, Chibnall's showrunner predecessor Steven Moffat introduced the villainous Missy, played by Michelle Gomez, who was ultimately revealed to be the Doctor's fellow Gallifreyan and longtime adversary the Master in regenerated female form. When it was announced that

Smith was leaving the show, one of the names linked to the part was Helen Mirren. The Oscar winner subsequently told a British TV interviewer that while she wouldn't contemplate taking the role, she did think “it's well over time to have a female Doctor Who.... I think a gay, black female Doctor Who would be best of all.” In fact, Smith was replaced by Peter Capaldi, although he would ultimately be partnered with a gay, black female assistant—or “companion,” to use the traditionally preferred nomenclature—in the form of Pearl Mackie's Bill Potts.

In January 2016 the BBC announced that Moffat would leave *Doctor Who* after

the following year's Christmas special, to be replaced by Chibnall, who had previously written episodes of *Who* and was one of the main creative forces behind the spin-off *Torchwood*. Among Chibnall's priorities was finding a replacement for Capaldi, who announced in January 2017

that he too was departing. By then, the showrunner had decided that the moment had come for a female Doctor. “I just felt the time was right,” says Chibnall. “I think if the show hadn't done it, we would have been behind the world, and *Doctor Who* has got to be out front leading the world.”

Tosin Cole, Bradley Walsh, and Mandip Gill watch Jodie Whittaker light up



Gill as Yasmin, Walsh as Graham, and Cole as Ryan

DOCTOR WHO: SOPHIE MUIR/ELIANT; INSET: COCO VAN OPPENS/BBC STUDIOS 2018



At the end of 2016, Chibnall contacted Whittaker asking for a meeting. The actress assumed he wanted to talk about the upcoming publicity junket for the last season of *Broadchurch*. "It was hilarious, because I was going, 'Are you looking forward to starting your new job?'" says Whittaker. "And he said, 'It's interesting that you bring that up. Would this be a part you'd consider auditioning for?' It took me [just] a second to go, 'I'm throwing my hat in the ring.'"

Whittaker auditioned for both Chibnall and the show's executive producer Matt Strevens, reading specially written script pages designed to see if she could handle the many emotional sides of the mercurial Time Lord. The pair then asked her to tape herself spouting what Whittaker describes as "sci-fi gobbledygook," something she found surprisingly enjoyable. "I had an iPhone, wires, in a box," she says. "I pretended to defuse something, and I loved it." Strevens says he and Chibnall "saw a few actresses for the part" but couldn't stop thinking about Whittaker. "She was just so compelling," says the EP. Chibnall explains that casting Whittaker "was the easiest decision I made in my whole career."

Gill, Walsh, Whittaker, and Cole



TIMELESS STYLE

Jodie Whittaker reveals the inspiration behind the Doctor's new wardrobe

The main influence for the Thirteenth Doctor's costume was a black-and-white photo Jodie Whittaker came across on the internet and sent to *Doctor Who* costume designer Ray Holman. "It's just a Google image, and I have no idea what decade it is," says the actress. "But it's a woman in cropped trou-

sers that are slightly too big, with a T-shirt, and braces, and boots. I just love the androgyny of it, without it being masculine." It's also a costume fit for the most physically active of time travelers. "The Doctor that I have created, and been given, is full of energy," says Whittaker. "That costume had to move with me, rather than dictate the movement." She teases that the outfit also boasts yet-to-be-revealed attributes designed to delight longtime *Whovians*. "There's homages to things in there, which will be lovely little gems!" she says with a laugh.



form of a viral Twitter video shot by the author Jenny Trout, which captured her daughter watching the announcement footage and crying out in joy, "The new Doctor is a girl!" Within 24 hours of being posted, the video had been retweeted 17,000 times and received 60,000 likes. One person who liked the clip, in the traditional meaning of the word at least, was Whittaker. "I've never done Facebook, I've never done Twitter, I've never done Instagram—I'm not on anything, except I've got a phone," she says, laughing. "Because of all that, I had the joy of someone finding something wonderful and sending it to me, rather than the fear of seeing every opinion everywhere. You see the reaction of an unself-conscious child who has no agenda but to express how they feel in the moment—that's a kind of priceless moment in your life, and not one to be taken lightly."

STYLING: STEVE SCHOFFELEW/BBC WORLDWIDE CREATIVE ©2017

"I wanted to feel that everybody who tunes in, around the world, has a character they can relate to." While both Gill and Tosin are firmly in the mode of previous, youthful companions, Walsh is, at 58, old enough to remember the show's very early years. "I was a fan of *Doctor Who* in the days of black and white," he says. "I used to watch the show from behind the sofa. I really did." Walsh describes his character as "a regular bloke from London who's ended up living in the north of England and gets taken away on this journey. It's like, Jodie [is] Captain Kirk, and we're the rest of the guys on the bridge. I'm, like, Lieutenant Uhura!"

At the end of last year's Christmas special, the TARDIS caught fire and Whittaker's Doctor was expelled from her own craft and plummeted through the sky, before the words "TO BE CONTINUED" appeared on the screen. Whittaker recalls turning up to shoot the scene as a barely less stressful experience. "All I could think of was 'Oh, what if I hate it, and I've just changed my family's life and moved us to a completely different city?'" says Whittaker, who prefers not to discuss her personal life but has a young child with her husband. Fortunately, she didn't hate the job. "It was amazing!" she continues. "I'd never done anything like that. Playing an alien, and walking into your ship, and then it rejecting you, and kicking you out—that was all elements of being an actor I'd never experienced before. And it was brilliant."

WHITTAKER HAD BEEN shooting the new season of *Doctor Who* for around five months by the time of EW's visit, but she still seemed to be having a blast, laughing uproariously between takes as she and her three costars filmed an exposition-filled scene. "You have to present this vast amount of information in quite a short space of time," she says. "So it needs a lot of banter to keep you all going!" EW has been asked not to divulge the details of the sequence being shot, as part

of the production's plan to keep as much as possible about the show's new era a secret for as long as possible. "In terms of old monsters, and old foes, and old characters [returning], you'll just have to wait and see," says Strevens, when asked if the upcoming season will feature the Doctor's archenemies, the Daleks.

This veil of secrecy was breached last month when a 53-second clip from the new season featuring Whittaker was shared via the mobile platform Tapatalk. This prompted the BBC to file an application in California court for an order that would compel Tapatalk to divulge the source of the material. While Chibnall doesn't sound too upset about the incident, he is keen that people should wait for the completed show to be screened rather than give in to the temptation of checking out such material. "I love that people are excited," he says. "I would just say, 'We haven't finished it yet. Let us finish our job, and then watch it when we're ready to show it to you.'"

We can disclose that based on the shooting EW observed, Whittaker's Doctor does seem to be as excitable and ebullient as the woman who portrays her. "She has a similar energy to Matt Smith's Doctor," says costar Gill. "Very high-energy."

Whittaker herself is optimistic that at a time when the world can seem like a very dark place, her Time Lord will strike a chord with people for reasons that have nothing to do with gender. "I would say that it's hopeful and fizzing with wonder," the actress explains of her take on the part. "This Doctor goes in all sorts of directions, but essentially I think the big theme is hope."

That sounds brilliant—and ace—to us. ♦

