ABOUT TIME!

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 COLLINS @ClarkCollins PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXEI HAY
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-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."
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.”

The announcement of the new Doctor took the form of a video that premiered after the Wimbledon men’s tennis finals last July and followed a hooded figure through a wood, who was finally revealed to be Whittaker. News that the Thirteenth Doctor would be female proved a huge story, one that set social media alight. Perhaps the most notable reaction came in the 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!”

Strevens says he and Chibnall “saw the announcement of the new Doctor as having the potential to do quite a short space of time,” she says. “So it sent this vast amount of information in as she and her three costars filmed an upcoming episode.”

Not everyone welcomed the idea of a female Doctor. “There was a lot of reaction; the network pointed out that the character ‘is an alien from the planet Gallifrey and it has been established in the show that Time Lords can switch gender,’” says Strevens. “Whittaker’s casting was the network pointed out that the character ‘is an alien from the planet Gallifrey and it has been established in the show that Time Lords can switch gender.’”

“Whittaker auditioned because she was interested in the role and felt it was a good fit for her,” says Strevens. “She was very excited about the opportunity and was willing to take the risk.”

Whittaker says she was “very nervous” about the audition, but “once I started, I felt much more confident.”

“I wanted to feel that everybody who tunes in, around the world, has a character they can relate to,” says Chibnall. “Across all ages and cultures, the Doctor can be anything in the mind of the young viewer.”

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. “She has a similar energy to Matt Smith’s Doctor,” says costar Gill. “Very high-energy.”

Whittaker 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. “She has a similar energy to Matt Smith’s Doctor,” says costar Gill. “Very high-energy.”

Whittaker auditioned because she was interested in the role and felt it was a good fit for her,” says Strevens. “She was very excited about the opportunity and was willing to take the risk.”

Whittaker says she was “very nervous” about the audition, but “once I started, I felt much more confident.”

“I wanted to feel that everybody who tunes in, around the world, has a character they can relate to,” says Chibnall. “Across all ages and cultures, the Doctor can be anything in the mind of the young viewer.”

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. “She has a similar energy to Matt Smith’s Doctor,” says costar Gill. “Very high-energy.”

Whittaker says she was “very nervous” about the audition, but “once I started, I felt much more confident.”

“I wanted to feel that everybody who tunes in, around the world, has a character they can relate to,” says Chibnall. “Across all ages and cultures, the Doctor can be anything in the mind of the young viewer.”

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. “She has a similar energy to Matt Smith’s Doctor,” says costar Gill. “Very high-energy.”

Whittaker says she was “very nervous” about the audition, but “once I started, I felt much more confident.”

“I wanted to feel that everybody who tunes in, around the world, has a character they can relate to,” says Chibnall. “Across all ages and cultures, the Doctor can be anything in the mind of the young viewer.”

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. “She has a similar energy to Matt Smith’s Doctor,” says costar Gill. “Very high-energy.”

Whittaker says she was “very nervous” about the audition, but “once I started, I felt much more confident.”

“I wanted to feel that everybody who tunes in, around the world, has a character they can relate to," says Chibnall. "Across all ages and cultures, the Doctor can be anything in the mind of the young viewer."