As K-9, John Leeson did the barking on adventures through time and space with "Doctor Who."

By JEAN AIREY & LAURIE HALDEMAN

The slang phrase, "It's a dog's life" usually means someone is leading a life more unfortunate than the lowest bow-wow. However, don't tell that to John Leeson. He led a "dog's life" for nearly four years—and loved every minute of it! Best known to American audiences as the voice of K-9, the computer mutt on the British TV series Doctor Who, Leeson is candid about his canine claim to immortality.

"Getting the part of K-9 was entirely accidental. A director I worked with years before in repertory days had been working in a police series. I met him at a local pub, and he said, 'I'm doing a Doctor Who.' The next thing I knew, my agent phoned up and asked me to go along to Graham Williams [then-producer of Doctor Who]. I did. Graham showed me pictures of K-9—I think he had just been built—and said, 'What do you feel about it? Do you think you could do it? It's only one story.' I said, 'Yes! I would love to do anything.' I put some voices on tape and sent them along, then I heard no more about it." Assuming he had been rejected, Leeson was astonished when, two weeks later, the BBC rang him and said, "We're still waiting! We want your acceptance. Are you, please, going to do it?" The response was yes.

With that answer, Leeson's career started barking up a different tree. Although he was doing quite well in the theater, acting all over England in both modern and classic plays, Leeson was quite willing to give something else a try. "I don't think many actors would have actually applied to play K-9, but I'm an easy, free-wheeling sort of guy and I thought it would be worth taking on. I haven't regretted it for one moment, because it actually did turn into a really worthwhile character!"

Having decided at age five that an actor's life was the one for him ("I remember it well—in kindergarten, I was cast as the village idiot. I loved playing the village idiot! I thought that if I could go on playing village idiots and getting laughs for the rest of my life, that would be wonderful!"), Leeson finally managed to get accepted into the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art by giving "the worst audition of my life."

When he left RADA, he went into repertory—but not the usual, run-of-the-mill repertory. He joined a Shakespearean com-
pany dedicated to bringing culture in the form of Macbeth and As You Like It to the “natives”—those who happened to live in Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona. “The people who were funding this production set up a trust called ‘Shakespeare on the Desert’ but we kept getting letters addressed to us in care of ‘Shakespeare on the Rocks’! I don’t know how close that was to reality, but it was a marvelous experience to come out and play to audiences who hadn’t really heard Shakespeare before. In fact, I remember the Beatles had just hit the Eastern Seaboard when we were hitting the West. There’s a line in Macbeth, ‘The shard-born beetles that drowsey hums as ‘round nights waxing peel,’ or I think that’s how it goes, and we could not understand why every night that line came out and the house simply fell apart! Oh, that was a great experience.”

**Dog Days**

Leeson eventually drifted into British television. “I got into television and, because of my rather lightweight style, I tend to do TV comedy more than anything else. I enjoy it very much and enjoy the discipline very much, particularly farce.” His mobile face changes and his eyes light up. “Now, there’s a discipline I love because it is so, so difficult. The difference between farce and comedy is that basically comedy is a funny situation and the actor or character knows it’s an amusing situation. But in farce, the character doesn’t. It’s for real. Holding one’s line of thought in farce is a great art.”

Holding one’s line of thought while scampering around on all three—with a script in the “spare” hand—as Leeson did while rehearsing K-9’s lines wasn’t easy either. He was just a little surprised when he began acting with Tom Baker that everything worked out so well. Leeson grins cheekily now. “You know the saying, ‘Never work with animals or children’—the dog might well have upstaged the Doctor. We had to get the dynamics of working it absolutely right.” Luckily, the dynamics turned out to be exactly right and the “one-shot” appearance quickly turned into the role of a companion, albeit a metal one.

“I was sort of ‘loaned’ for further adventures from Professor Marius [the original “creator” of the mobile computer]. The BBC decided after the first episode was shown that they were going to make a go of it. They had spent a fair deal of money making K-9 and getting the thing to work, so I think they wanted to capitalize on that as well.”

And capitalize on him they did. K-9 traveled with the Doctor for the next several years, with four other companions and even through a regeneration of his own. Leeson established a solid rapport with his co-workers and, although he wasn’t able to keep in contact with all of them, did meet them some years later at an American convention. “It’s an extraordinary thing, this business of ours. I mean, you will work with people very closely, very intimately and you’ll be bosom buddies for as long as the job lasts. Then, boom! That’s it, the end, finished. Never see them again!” He pauses. “When you do see them again, you take it up exactly where you left off, exactly the same point. It’s one of the very few professions where this sort of relationship occurs—an intense, very strong working bond which is instantly switched on again. You’re there again after a lengthy period of time, 10 years, 20 years, and you’re finishing the joke.

“Through Leela (Louise Jameson) and the other companions, K-9 (Leeson) remained Tom Baker’s best friend.

Heard but not seen, Leeson enjoys his anonymity at American SF cons as the fan from Philadelphia. He has even managed to lose a K-9 soundalike contest.
Economics and departmental changes at the BBC did more to ruin *K-9* and *Company*’s Christmas than the witches that Leeson and Elisabeth Sladen faced in this series pilot.

by a mere sentence! *That* made rehearsals pretty difficult at times because the actors would have to fight to find their characters. K-9 would be written in such a way as to be more ‘humanized’! More of the dog and less of the computer. I wanted to keep the computer. *K-9* was a computer! He just happened to be in the shape of a dog with a will of his own and a strong identity."

Was *K-9* used in the later years as a *deus ex machina*? "It didn’t happen that way," Leeson responds. "That if you like, is the most extraordinary thing about *Doctor Who*. There are ‘moral issues’ involved with the Doctor, if he’s up against a problem, instead of getting *K-9* to blast the problem to smithereens (that lovely word Tom always used!), he would actually make a decision as to what to do at that point and try and prevent any danger from occurring to anybody, which is rather nice. *And* use an inventive way ‘round the problem instead of hitting it head-on."

**Dog Nights**

Feeling that "the material was beginning to soften a little bit," Leeson left the series for a year and set about regenerating his career. A call from the new producer, John Nathan-Turner, caught him by surprise. "He said, ‘Would you come working back as *K-9*? I really had to think hard about it because having begun to nose back into the mainstream of ‘face acting,’ as I call it, I was a bit loath to go back into obscurity again. But, as I heard *K-9* was going to be rounded off, I thought it would be worthwhile finishing him off.’"

Leeson’s own thought on just how the plucky little computer must have been written out of the show may surprise fans. ‘Marry him off!’ was his first gleeful reaction. When that suggestion was turned down out of hand, he had another idea: "*K-9* should have gone out on a heroic mission and been blown to smithereens within full sight of the Doctor! Tears would be shed—but that would be THE END. That would be clean and final and heroic and good and wonderful," he continues in one breath—and then adds with dramatic pauses. “But then, as everyone knows, it... didn’t... happen... that... way.”

*K-9*’s departure wasn’t an unqualified success. “The fans were really broken up. Now, we have two schools of thought about using *K-9* in *Doctor Who*. There were some who thought the *K-9* element was too childish or too humorous or too ‘larky’ for the serious purpose of the heroic dramas. The others who liked that element, they liked Bob Holmes’ stories which were very, very witty and sharp. But *K-9* had supporters. When he was dropped, there was a great outcry and a lot of press. A lot!”

If *K-9*’s departure caused a stir, so did his (continued on page 42)
and Ron Perlman. We just do it. We don’t question it and don’t think about it too much. There’s that level of trust, which I tip my hat to.

“In terms of the consumption of the characters’ relationship,” he adds, “we’re always getting that question. There’s a tremendous amount of heat between these two, but whether they take the final step or not, it’s there and that’s probably what the women who’ve taken the show and run with it have felt. It’s almost not necessary to see it acted out because it’s there in full bloom. Playing that heat within the parameters of what we have to do is an interesting exercise.”

A very real concern, naturally, is what seems fresh and innovative now, may turn into a cliche as the series continues. That hasn’t escaped the actor’s attention.

“I’m fearful of that, sure,” he admits. “I’ve been very concerned about the show’s promise, and it’s not as if it’s falling on deaf ears. Ron Koslow is supervising every single script and every word that goes into every script, and he also knows that this can easily become The Incredible Hulk if we’re not careful, by using the formula of her getting into trouble, his saving her during the last ten minutes, and the two of them walking off into the sunset. That’s the last thing in the world we want to put into any episode. We’re trying to figure out how not to do that, how to make each one almost like a feature film, and I think we’ve been pretty successful. There are times when we’ve gotten a little bit formula, but I think it’s all because it’s justified; it follows what has come before in a very organic way.

“In the beginning, we were finding our way, and I’ll admit there was a bit of formula, but even in the most formula of our scripts, there have always been elements of incredible beauty and abstractness that most other shows don’t ever come to address. Our worst is something that I still think is better than most of what you see on TV and it’s the kind of show I’ve always dreamed of. I really got lucky to find one that is a TV series which happens to feel like a movie every week.”

While he is confident that the audience for Beauty & the Beast will grow, Perlman hopes that word of the show will reach the general “unwashed” public.

“If I had the opportunity, I would like to tell people that by tuning into Beauty & the Beast, they’re going to see things they’ve never seen before, except maybe in motion pictures and on PBS,” Ron Perlman stresses. “Along with that, it’s going to be accessible enough, exciting enough and emotional enough that it will drag you in. If this show doesn’t drag you in, then you’re either cynical, or you don’t get it. I just recommend that you give us a try, because once you do, its uniqueness is going to overwhelm you. Any show that can end with Shakespeare’s Twenty-Ninth Sonnet, as one episode did, can’t be all bad.”

Locklear

(personal to ask. He was always nice and kind of a jokerester.”

Unfortunately for posterity, she doesn’t remember any of the jokes. And as for working with Shatner?

“Just like working with any other actor, except that he was a little more demanding because it was his show, more or less.”

For her part, Heather Locklear looks back on her days playing rookie officer Stacy Sheridan on T.J. Hooker with mixed feelings.

“Actually, it was really fun at first, wearing a cop’s uniform,” she says. “When you’re walking around town and people don’t know you’re filming a movie, they think you’re a real cop. I was so small, it was funny. Being able to ride in police cars was really fun. Then, when it started to get really hot, the novelty wore off. And working in downtown Los Angeles in the alleys—

“But when I think back now,” Locklear adds, “it was real fun. At times, you complain of sitting around for seven hours and having one line. Still, it was nice then to go to work every single day. Whereas on Dynasty, two days a week is a heavy schedule.”

 Asked about the self-created confusion over whether The Return of Swamp Thing is her first film or not, Heather Locklear hedges. Finally, the awful truth comes out. She has a secret past.

“The first one was Firestarter, and I was in it for maybe one minute,” she confesses. “I played Drew Barrymore’s mother. Some people don’t even know I was in it, and they liked the movie!” She turns to her husband for moral support. “Tommy, did you even know I was in that when you first met me?” Lee looks blank. “I don’t think he did,” Locklear goes on, “and he had seen it.”

 Eventually, the conversation gets around to the most sensitive aspect of her role in The Return of Swamp Thing—the sex scene, known to cast and crew alike as the “Tuber Scene.”

“It was an endive,” she gently corrects, “that they placed on the side of Dick’s hip. I want to make love to him. And he says, ‘Take a bite of this.’ I tear off the leaf. I really don’t want to take a bite, but OK, I tear off the leaf, eat it, and then I kinda go, ‘Uuuuuhhh.’ And there appears a real man.”

Heather Locklear’s voice trails off. She smiles. The smile implies quite a bit, if you want to know what really happens after that, you have to go see The Return of Swamp Thing.

And if you want to know if Heather Locklear will be back as Abby Arcane, she’s being coy about that, too.

“You know,” she says, her voice filling with impish good humor, “if she’s the only one in on a secret joke, you can never predict the future.” Then, perhaps remembering that this is for print, she adds seriously: “It depends on the script.”

Leeson

return. A TV pilot, K-9 and Company, was filmed a little over a year later. Elisabeth Sladen (as companion Sarah Jane Smith) and Leeson re-created their Doctor Who characters. The show earned good ratings, but as Leeson remembers, the series never got off the ground due to finances and a change of the head of the BBC’s Drama Department. “Just at the very time they were deciding to continue with K-9 and Company, the chappie who was the incumbent said, ‘Yes, it’s fine. We would like to have some more.’ Then, the other fellow came in and said, ‘What’s this? I haven’t seen it—Oh no, we haven’t time for it.’ It just didn’t fly.”

Although he isn’t contemplating any more Doctor Who, Leeson takes great pleasure in visiting American fans. At the first few conventions he attended, he took advantage of his “facelessness,” assumed an East Coast accent and spent the early part of the convention wandering around, replete with camera, buttons, T-shirt and cap, playing a fan from Philadelphia. As such, he even entered two “K-9 soundalike contests”—one of which he won, and one he lost. He smiles with delight and comments, “It’s quite extraordinary, the sort of feedback American fans give. Sitting with the fans—apart from being hyped up because I’m playing a trick on them—the excitement being generated and the love, the wanting to identify, is just stunning. It’s something that you don’t find in the UK. It’s up front! This is so refreshing in many ways ‘cause we’re a reserved lot back over the water.

“With our own fans, I think Doctor Who is regarded as a part and parcel of the framework of British television. It’s no longer an exciting, vibrant thing. It’s successful and it gets the rating, but it doesn’t have the same sort of dynamic behind it as you have over here where it’s new and is in quite sharp contrast to your own, home-generated science fiction in terms of films like Star Wars and particularly Star Trek, which I love. I must say I’m a great Star Trek fan, but the thing about the American version of science fiction is it’s very much glossier and geared to visual action. Doctor Who is done for love and for the story’s sake, rather than for the sake of being flashy and showing how clever we are in space. There’s a harder edge to Doctor Who than there is to American science fiction. The marvelous thing about Doctor Who is the license it actually gives. You are licensed to be anywhere at any time! That’s the marvelous, free-wheeling thing about it—an unbeatable formula.”

And would he refuse the opportunity to return to playing in an “unbeatable formula?” Even as a real villain? He hesitates.

“Well, if it was very far removed from K-9, a real character,” John Leeson smiles, “I think maybe, maybe.” He laughs, “I shall wait to be asked!! Make me an offer!!”