

Time, gentlemen, please - meet the new Doctor



Mark Lawson

At 4.26pm, shortly after Roger Federer became the only man to have won eight Wimbledon singles titles, the BBC interrupted its tennis coverage to announce an even more audacious first: the casting of Jodie Whittaker as the first woman to play the central character in Doctor Who.

Whittaker, 35, becomes the 13th performer to portray the intergalactic troubleshooter. She had long figured in speculation and betting because of a belief that Chris Chibnall - the new head writer and executive producer on the hit BBC1 show - might prefer a performer with whom he had worked. Whittaker filled the pivotal role of Beth Latimer, mother of a murdered child, in all three series of Chibnall's hit ITV crime drama Broadchurch.

When Peter Capaldi announced in January that he was retiring as the Doctor, a consensus rapidly built that it was time to break the glass galaxy. Those calling for the character's latest regeneration to involve a change of sex as well as actor included Billie Piper, who played an assistant to the ninth and 10th doctors, Christopher Eccleston and David Tennant.

Piper suggested a 13th bloke at the helm of the Tardis would be a "snub", a view supported by the Labour MP Harriet Harman, and other high-profile women. Although Chibnall insisted that punditry would have no impact on his decision, he and the BBC seem to have concluded that the logic towards equality had become irresistible.

Yet this significant piece of TV news was broken rather curiously. Four years ago, the casting of Capaldi was revealed in a pre-scheduled standalone special programme. The latest unveiling was more casual and unanchored, following the match between Federer and Marin Čilić at Wimbledon which, given the potential length of a men's five-setter, meant any time from 4pm to 7pm.

Tennant was in the royal box for the final, giving his latest successor a hint of the sort of social privileges playing the part can bring.

In the event, Čilić struggled with a foot injury, twice requiring medical attention on court. "Not much the doctor can do for him," commiserated Sue Barker, in what may have been an attempt to make the BBC's strange juxtaposition of sport and fantasy television seem neater.

Once Federer had shown his trophy to the crowds, Barker declared that viewers would now find out the identity of the latest two-hearted time-traveller from the planet of Gallifrey.

On film, a figure, face obscured by a hooded cloak, walked through wood-

The BBC released the first pictures of the new Doctor, Jodie Whittaker, yesterday

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Broadchurch star Whittaker is 13th Doctor

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land towards the blue police box in which the Doctor travels. A feminine-looking hand holding the Tardis key then flicked back the hood to reveal Whittaker.

This brief teaser film coincided with the dropping of a press release, in which Chibnall said: "After months of lists, conversations, auditions, recalls, and a lot of secret-keeping, we're excited to welcome Jodie Whittaker. I always knew I wanted the 13th Doctor to be a woman and we're thrilled to have secured our number one choice. Her audition for the Doctor simply blew us all away."

Whittaker said: "I'm beyond excited to begin this epic journey - with Chris and with every Whovian on this planet."

The series, which was first shown in 1963, has often explored alternative universes, and many will suspect that - in any parallel world in which the BBC had announced a man to follow Capaldi - the show would be in serious trouble, its ratings having recently fallen to around half of the 10 million or so who tuned in when Russell T Davies relaunched and repopularised the franchise in 2005.

But the choice of Whittaker creates a fresh buzz around the series, the feminisation of the character offering exciting new possibilities. In opting for a previous collaborator, Chibnall has also followed the example of Davies, whose two doctors, Eccleston and Tennant, were both former colleagues.

The revelation was good news for the Mail on Sunday, which had floated Whittaker's casting on yesterday's front page, but tricky for BBC2's Newsnight, which had seemed to heavily suggest in a recent item that the new Doctor would in fact be Phoebe Waller-Bridge, the Bafta-winning star of the sitcom Fleabag.



Fans' view 'Completely new territory for the show'

Jodie Whittaker, the first female Doctor, rose to fame in the ITV crime drama Broadchurch and had been touted as one of the contenders for the role.

Chris Chibnall, Doctor Who's new head writer and executive producer, said: "Jodie is an in-demand, funny, inspiring, super-smart force of nature and will bring loads of wit, strength and warmth to the role."

Emily Cook, from Doctor Who magazine, said: "Having a female Doctor is

really exciting and significant. I cannot wait to see what she does with the role and where she takes the show. She will bring a freshness. She is younger than Peter Capaldi and, being a woman, she will have a different approach to the role. It's completely new territory for the show."

Erica Lear, social secretary at the Doctor Who Appreciation Society, said: "I did not expect it but I think it's brilliant. My only wish was that we have

a good actor and that is what we have."

Sebastian J Brook, site editor at Doctor Who Online, said: "After 50-plus years, it's certainly going to take some getting used to, but I support the show and Jodie is a fantastic actress, so she gets my full support, too." Sarah Marsh

William Hartnell, the first Doctor, top left, then Patrick Troughton, Jon Pertwee, Tom Baker (with Louise Jameson), Peter Davison, Colin Baker (with Nicola Bryant), Sylvester McCoy (with Bonnie Langford), Paul McGann, Christopher Eccleston (with Billie Piper), David Tennant, Matt Smith (with Karen Gillan), Peter Capaldi (with Jenna Coleman) and, below, Jodie Whittaker

The problem with attempts to predict successors to the role is that gamblers and fans tend to work on the basis that every member of Equity who is available would accept.

In reality, the producers are picking from a much slimmer list of performers who would consider the role career-advancing and are available to spend most of the year filming in Cardiff.

Several of those suggested in the press and lucratively backed at book-makers were, in reality, never within reach: Waller-Bridge has movie and TV commitments and has generally written her own material. Olivia Colman, also regularly named because of her own Broadchurch connections with Chibnall, is about to open in a play at the National Theatre in London.

It may still be, though, that Colman and Waller-Bridge will turn up in cameo roles in Doctor Who as villains or other supporting personnel. Chibnall has also hinted at possible big changes in the shape and tone of the show.

His first crucial decision, however, promises well. Whittaker's work - she's due to be seen soon in a BBC1 medical thriller, Trust Me, that will now attract extra attention - has shown an ability to play tragedy, comedy,

warmth and mystery, all of which will be useful in this role. It remains to

be seen whether Britain still has a female prime minister when Whittaker makes her debut on Christmas Day, but the first woman in this other key UK position has the potential to be popular in a way May can only dream of.

