Chris Clough - Who’s Anniversary Director

A Starburst feature by Stephen Payne, David Richardson and Lee Matthews

CHRIS Clough has not had the easiest of times while directing Doctor Who. He joined the production team in 1986, a year which would be remembered for the show losing both its script editor and principal actor.

Clough arrived at the beginning of the troubles, when Robert Holmes, who was contracted to write the final two episodes of the Trial of A Time Lord, sadly died after completing only the penultimate treatment. Script editor Eric Saward stepped in and completed episode fourteen, but then resigned from the programme in a torrent of bad publicity, and took the script with him.

Starburst spoke to Chris Clough during the editing of the second episode of Silver Nemesis, and asked him how far work had progressed on the production of Saward’s script before it was withdrawn. “We had no new casting to do on Eric’s script - he had retained all of the same characters. We had chosen the location because we had a scene that required the Doctor and Melanie to be going around in circles and not coming back to the same place. In search of something circular, we were looking at power station cooling towers. We eventually chose...”
Gladiator Pottery in Stroke on Trent for its circular lids, but then Eric withdrew his script. Pipp and Jane Baker were brought in and asked to shoot some footage for that location, but because of copyright reasons they were not allowed to read Eric’s script. I think we got the final cuts three days before we went to shoot it. "It was quite tricky because I had never done a Doctor Who before, and the scheduling meant that we had to shoot those final two episodes which wrapped up the season before the Vanwood story."

The Trial of A Time Lord was to be Colin Baker’s story as the Doctor, the BBC declining to pick up his contract for another year. "I’d got on very well with Colin, he is a very nice man. He was different to Sylvester in character in that he had legal training, and so tended to look at things from a logical point of view. Sylvester has a more theatrical background and tries to look at it more from a visual perspective."

Holiday Camp
Romp and Cool
Kane

Chris Coghe’s first story with Sylvester McCoy was Delta and the Bannermen, the holiday camp romp which was rejected during a short-lived heatwave in June 1987. One of the most interesting scenes in that story was the baptism of the Chimeron baby, which had been "remarkably easy" to record. To obtain this effect, the prop was made to resemble a baby wrapped in camerawraps and there were effects guys underneath the bed with lots of wires and pulleys that made it move. It can take a very long time to get those sort of model shots right, and unfortunately with Doctor Who’s schedule you don’t really have the time. The secret is to entice the audience and leave them wanting more.

The part of the young Welsh girl Ray was contested by three actresses: Lyn Gardner, Sophie Aldred and Sara Griffiths. Sophie was eventually chosen to play Azmael in Dragonfire, and the part of Ray went to Lyn Gardner. "Lyn was going to play Ray, because she was Welsh, but the only problem was that she couldn’t ride a scooter. She was chosen because she looked like a Welsh girl, but during them she had an accident and a couple of days later she was rushed to hospital, which meant she was incapacitated for the filming. Sara Griffiths was then brought in to play Ray, but Lyn also got the job because she was contracted and it wasn’t her fault. When we came to do Dragonfire, we thought it would be nice to bring Lyn back and so we gave her the loveliest sunny voice."

Aside from those two Doctor Who scenes, Delta was recorded entirely on location, including the scenes set on the flight deck of the Bannermen spaceship, which would normally be recorded in the Television Centre studio. We asked Chris who directed this, and he made this exception. "It was all down to the cost of contracting actors, which meant it was cheaper. Within the holiday camp there was a larger cast, so we put the spaceship set there, and did the interior of the bus the same way. The spaceship flight deck was in fact the same set that we used for Glatz’s ship, the Nosferatu, but redesigned."

All but one of the TARDIS scenes were eventually lost in the editing process. "We had too much material for too short a shot with an episode one, and so the TARDIS scenes were the logical bits to go. I think that was alright, because a lot of those exposition scenes are quite dull. We have come across the same situation with Silver Nemesis this year, part one was seven minutes too long, and so we cut the peripheral stuff and kept with the packet scenes. It strips the story down and you end up with a better result."

Clough has worked on the last six episodes of each season for the last three years, with a cost-saving schedule which means that the entire production team works back-to-back on two separate stories. "You get a slightly longer preparation time, but the problem is you go away for six weeks, and then come back a week later you are in rehearsals for the next actual story. This means that everything has to be ready before we start recording the first story—all the designs, all of the casting. This year we have been particularly hair-raising."

So, after returning from the shooting of Delta, it was almost straight into the studio to record Dragonfire. One of the most popular elements of that story was the casting of Edward Peal as the sub-zero villain Kane. "Kane was a very difficult character to cast, but I chose Edward because I thought the physical height would be good, I liked the overall acting style. The only way to make those sort of lines work was to play them straight. I had seen him in Juliet Bravo, and also many years ago in Hull in a play called What the Butler Saw. Whenever I get a script, I go through it and write a list of ideas which I discuss with John Nathan-Turner. We then see who is available—no everyone is free, and not everyone is willing to do it."

Anniversary and Happiness

Clough returned to direct another two stories for the 25th anniversary season, again with the back-to-back recording schedule. This meant three weeks on location with Silver Nemesis, followed by four days in the studio with The Happiness Patrol. We asked him how he came to choose the locations for the former story. "For the building site scenes, we were going to use Action Power Station which is closed down, but they wanted too much money. So with power stations in mind, my production manager Gary Downe went to the Gas Board, and came across Greenwich Gasworks, which we fell in love with. The only problem was that we didn’t have enough time to shoot there. We had three days in all, and the final evening was very rushed. We called it ‘Black Friday’ because we had to do the entire denouement of the story. Those gasworks have now been demolished, but they have been used in every item from pop videos to Spielberg’s Empire of the Sun.

We chose Asenfeld because it is very similar in construction to Windsor Castle; the last story as the Doctor’s crypt on the scene estate. The secret of doing any location work is to find one central point and base all your other locations from that. If we had actually shot in Windsor it would have been a nightmare with all the tourism."

In our next issue Chris Clough discusses shooting this year’s stories, and their monsters.