DALEKS HAVE KNEES TOO

Twenty-five years after the first Doctor Who series, the Daleks are back, still hell-bent on universal domination.

Richard Askwith gets the inside story

A steely grim Dalek, above, and its human voices, right

fans in at least 65 countries. But there is something undeniably British about them: like Blue Peter and Woman’s Hour, the Daleks (and Doctor Who) have gradually become part of the nation’s collective image of itself. We may not actually want them to win, but we do regard them with a certain affection. And close investigation reveals that, in spite of their intimidating exteriors, most Daleks really do have hearts of gold.

John Scott-Martin, for example, has been a Dalek ‘operator’ for 25 years. In costume, he trundles around with flashing lights and thrashing plunger as fiercely as anyone. In the flesh, he is perfectly human: a gentle, white-haired man with a wiry body, a soft voice and mischievous eyes.

‘When I was first asked to do it,’ he explains, ‘it just seemed like an unusual way of earning a bit of money. But it turned out to be quite enjoyable. It isn’t the biggest challenge an actor can face, but it does require skill.’

Operating a Dalek ought to be easy but isn’t. They are cumbersome, heavy, wooden creatures, with little room inside. On television, they look like metallic miracles of high technology; in real life, especially from the inside, they look like home-made props from a school play. They have lots of painted wood and cleverly concealed rough edges, and you expect them to be full of protruding nails as well. To work them, you sit or squat inside the structure on a small wooden bench, with a cluster of control sticks and buttons a few inches in front of your face – for flashing the lights, for moving the plunger and exterminator, and for rotating the ‘head’. Two stagehands remove the top while you climb in and, if you are lucky, replace it without stunning you. You move by shuffling your feet as quickly as possible, rolling the small castors forwards, backwards or sideways as desired, with sheets of foam rubber, strapped to the inside, protecting you (up to a point) from bruised shins. It helps to be quite small and quite expert: otherwise you tend to misjudge the width of the base, crash into immovable objects at high speed and bang your head against the sides, top and controls. I escaped with minor bruising.

The other drawback, according to John Scott-Martin, is that ‘It can be bloody hard work. It’s all right in the studio, where the floor’s smooth and flat, but when you’re filming on location it’s a nightmare. Cobbled streets, sloping roads – it’s knackering.’

Hugh Spight, the newest and youngest operator, agrees. ‘When I started,’ he explains, ‘I was definitely junior Dalek. But because I’m younger and stronger than the others I’ve gradually become more important. You have to be pretty fit to get through a day’s shooting.’

Most people are under the impression that our planet is threatened by hundreds of thousands of Daleks. In
fact, there are only four— or only four operators, anyway. ‘We have done scenes where there appears to be a whole army of Daleks,’ says John Scott-Martin, ‘but that’s just done by the old trick of four of us rushing around in circles, going past the camera again and again.’ The new adventure includes a new breed of mutant Daleks: big, white-and-gold glossy things called Emperor Daleks. The Emperor Daleks are at war with the normal Daleks. But both types have the same operators inside.

John Nathan-Turner, Doctor Who’s producer, is reluctant to disclose too many of the Daleks’ secrets. ‘I’d much rather you didn’t take any photographs of people getting in and out of them,’ he says. ‘I know that everyone knows that they have people inside them, but actually showing a picture of how it’s done would puncture the mystique.’

He is probably right. We may like and admire Daleks, but we do ultimately need to be frightened by them, and the more you learn about how they work, the less frightening they become. Roy Skelton, Royce Mills and Brian Miller are a case in point. While filming is taking place, they sit in a small studio above the set. They are charming, gentle people, whose conversation consists mainly of casual chat about their scripts.

‘I don’t seem to have anything at all in the next scene,’ says Brian.

‘Yes you have,’ says Roy. ‘Look, there’s this bit at the top.’

‘Oh yes,’ says Brian, reading. ‘That’s nice: “We obey.” That’s a good line.’

On the table in front of them, a small television screen shows the action unfolding below. Suddenly the doors at the side of the screen slide open, the camera swings round, and a regiment of Daleks rushes in. The three men in the recording studio are transformed. Their bodies tense, their movements become jerky and mechanical, their faces are distorted with malice. And their voices combine in a hoarse, electrifying shout, inches from the microphone in front of them: ‘STAY-WHERE-YOU-ARE!!!

These are the Dalek voices. When the programme is finally broadcast, their utterances will have been electronically distorted to make them sound even less human. But it is pretty convincing as it is. Again, it may not sound like a particularly demanding job, sitting by a microphone all day doing nothing apart from barking out the occasional ‘Exterminate’ and ‘We obey’. But someone has to do it, and these men do it well. Roy Skelton, the senior voice, has been doing it well for 25 years. He has done many more glamorous things, too, but he is still proud of his Dalek skills. ‘It isn’t quite as simple as it looks,’ he says. ‘You have to get the timing absolutely right, just as you do if you’re a normal actor. And you have to co-ordinate with the operators as well, because Daleks always flash their lights when they speak.’

John Scott-Martin agrees. ‘It really isn’t very different from normal acting. You have to respond to the director and do everything on cue. The only difference is you flash instead of talk.’

There is a constant danger of being typecast, of course. ‘Programme notes almost invariably describe you as a Dalek, whatever else you’ve done,’ says John. ‘But that’s just something you have to live with. There are certainly many worse ways of earning a living, including some of the other Doctor Who monsters. Monoids were the worst: giant ant things that weighed a ton. I suppose there have been times when I’ve wished that I’d never got involved, but I must admit that on the whole it’s great fun.’

‘It is tempting to think of Doctor Who as a bit of a dead end,’ says John Nathan-Turner, who has been producing it for nine years, ‘but in practice it’s a wonderful thing to work on, because the idea is always developing.’

None the less, some things never change. John Scott-Martin still remembers a cartoon he saw years ago in which a Dalek was shown at the foot of a flight of stairs, looking bemused. ‘Oh well,’ it was saying, ‘that puts paid to my plans to conquer the universe.’ ‘What I love about Daleks,’ says John, ‘is that although they are obviously very frightening and virtually indestructible, everyone knows that you can completely immobilise a Dalek simply by putting a small obstruction—even a pencil—in front of its wheels.’

The new Doctor Who series begins on October 5.