The Doctor amidst his many foes.
Terrance Dicks

Former "Dr. Who" Script Editor and Author of 37 "Who" Books Talks about this 17-year British SF Institution

By ALAN BRENDER

The only two shows that have ever really made science fiction accessible to a mass television audience are Star Trek and Dr. Who. And, in a way, Star Trek didn’t actually do it that well because the show was eventually canceled—whereas Dr. Who goes on and on to its [now] 17th year.

So observed Terrance Dicks, former script editor of the British SF hit Dr. Who and author of 37 novelizations of Dr. Who teleplays, during an interview with STARLOG.

Although Dr. Who has become a Saturday night institution in Britain, it is just now beginning to be shown in a substantial way on American television through syndication. Unfortunately, there are many problems with the way local stations present the show. Often it is aired early in the morning; frequently it is shown out of sequence (it has a serial format) and many times important scenes are cut from the show to allow additional time for commercials.

Despite these problems, Dr. Who is gathering increasing numbers of supporters in the United States. (One very strong American supporter is SF author Harlan Ellison, who has called Dr. Who "the greatest science-fiction series of all times.") Dicks hopes that eventually, through groundswell support from fans, the show will be aired at reasonable times, in proper sequence and intact on American TV. If this should happen, he is confident the show could gain as much popularity in this country as it has attained in the United Kingdom.

In the early 60s, when Dr. Who first aired in Britain, it was put on as a children’s show with a very modest budget. But then it caught the fancy of older people, and similar to the
Diversified Format

Part of the popularity of the show in England, according to Dicks, is its flexible format. "It's rather unique," he explains. "It's a series of serials—usually a four-part serial, sometimes a five- or six-part serial. Each one is written by a different writer, and each is self-contained—except for the Doctor and his companions, who run right through. You can do completely different types of stories. You can do a sinister Gothic in one; a light-hearted story in the next; followed by a space opera. Then maybe a story set on Earth in which an alien menace appears. We can be flexible, which I think is something which may be denied to other shows.

"And because the Doctor is traveling about in the TARDIS (Time And Relative Dimensions In Space), we can go anywhere in space and time in a totally arbitrary sort of way. We can go back into the past or forward into the unimaginable future—to the edges of the Universe or back to the Doctor's home planet of Gallifrey. There's infinite built-in variety.

"There's also the gimmick of bodily regeneration that the writers came up with which enables the Doctor to bodily change (i.e. change bodies) when he grows old and tired or when his life is menaced. This gave us the unique advantage that we could change the lead actor in the series, which, of course, nobody else could. What are you going to do if Kirk gets killed? But we could have as many Doctors as we liked. Each time there is a new Doctor, which is nearly every three, four or five years, the show takes on a new lease of life. You've got a new personality and a whole new feel to the show."

So far, four different actors have played the Doctor over the years—and Dicks has worked with all four. As he explains it: "I joined just at the end of the Patrick Troughton season. I worked as script editor all through Jon Pertwee's five years. And I wrote the first show for Tom Baker [the current Doctor]. I've worked on the show since, at intervals, not regularly. Then during the Jon Pertwee time we did a show called Three Doctors in which the Doctor met his two previous selves. So then I got a chance to work with William Hartnell, although only briefly. Because he was then quite old and ill, he could only act in a limited part of the show—a sort of guest appearance.

"It's very hard for whoever takes over," says Dick, "and it is a crucial decision. Who are you going to get? Who can possibly do it? I've been in on two of these transitions and it has been very difficult."

The first transition in which Dicks was involved took place when the second actor to play the Doctor, Patrick Troughton, decided to leave.

"Patrick had lots of fans; everybody loved him, and everybody was sad to see him go. Eventually, we cast Jon Pertwee, which was strange casting because he was known as a comedy actor and cabaret performer. He had never done a completely straight acting part in his life. But we felt he had great colorfulness and flamboyance. Jon took to it and was immensely popular as the Doctor for five years.

"Eventually, he decided he wanted to go back into the theatre and films again. So we had this insoluble problem of who we could possibly get to replace Jon Pertwee. Lots of people were considered, but eventually we came up with Tom Baker. Again, this was a strange bit of casting. Tom was known mostly for serious theatre work and for playing sinister villains. He did a very good Rasputin in Nicholas and Alexandra. But Tom has had this immense success as the Doctor, who is so much the good guy.

"I find it hair-raising in retrospect because every time we recast the Doctor it was like a new miracle. This miracle has been done three times. How many times can you come up with a miracle? But it's always worked—that's the incredible thing."

The Personality Factor

Part of the reason the miracle works, Dicks offers, is that the casting people seek personality in the actor rather than someone who looks like the previous Doctor or who has considerable acting experience in the genre.

"They look for personality," Dick explains, "because Who is a star's part. I will say that being the Doctor is much like those old Hollywood movies with Cary Grant, Clark Gable or John Wayne. They were playing different characters, but basically people were going to see Clark Gable—the essence of him. In this sort of actor, you want strength of personality and charisma, which, of course, all actors do not have.

"Patrick Troughton didn't have it off screen. He was a quiet sort of man; the kind that perhaps you wouldn't notice at a party. But you'd notice Tom Baker. It's the Doctor's show—he's got to carry it. It's not like Star Trek where you can shift the emphasis from Kirk to Spock or one of the other crew members."

Because the Doctor is so crucial in the half-hour show, other characters—especially the leading ladies—have limited roles. Only the villains—the foils for the Doctor—have significant acting parts.

"All the leading ladies," says Dicks, "were overshadowed by the Doctor. That was one of the reasons the companions tend to change. For an actress it's unrewarding being the Doctor's companion. All she does is get tied to railroad tracks, sacrificed at the altar and have monsters creep up on her with their talons and claws ready to tear her apart. And all she gets to say is: 'Help Doctor. Save me, Doctor.' and 'Aren't you wonderful, Doctor.'"

Most of the companions, according to Dicks, have stayed with the show for at least a single season. Some were around a bit longer—two or three seasons. When Patrick Troughton decided to leave the show, the writers and producers decided to ditch his companions Jamie and Zoe as well, and bring in new companions along with the new Doctor.

Branching the Gap

But when Jon Pertwee decided to forsake the Doctor's role, his companions were kept to help bridge the gap from one Doctor to the next. "One of the reasons for that," Dick explains, "is that when they changed Troughton for Pertwee, there was a lot of stuff in the script such as: 'You can't be the Doctor! You don't look like him. That's not the Doctor—good heavens, no!' We didn't want to go through that twice. So this time we had the change take place literally under the noses of his companions. Sarah Jane Smith and the Brigadier were aware that the new Doctor was the real Doctor because they had seen
him change, and they knew he looked different.”

Each of the Doctors not only looked different from all the others, they even dressed differently. “With the first Doctor,” says Dicks, “they decided to give William Hartnell a sort of Edwardian look. With Patrick they wanted to keep more of the same look but to make it more comedic, clownish and Chaplinesque. When Jon was cast he was this rather charming, dashing, flamboyant character anyway, so I think they wanted to reflect his personality in the costume with cloaks and ruffled shirts. Now Tom, although he is sort of impressive and noticeable, he isn’t sartorilly elegant in the way Jon was. So they gave him a sort of flowing, loose, tweedy Bohemian look.

“I think that when Tom was first cast, he went into the BBC wardrobe department and just rooted around until he came up with the stuff he liked together. Then it was designed and stylized. They finally came up with the coat with the bottomless pockets, the scarf and the hat.”

A tremendous variety of villains have been used in Dr. Who over the years; most of whom were introduced for one serial and then dropped. But some have gained great popularity for their evil deeds.

The most sensationally popular do-gooders have been the Daleks. During the 60s they were so popular that a Dalek craze swept Britain. Dalek robots appeared on everything from bedsheets to lunch boxes.

But unlike the Cylons in Battlestar Galactica, the Daleks were not continuously employed. “We use them irregularly,” says Dicks. “You don’t want to wear them out. When they do a Dalek show, the Daleks don’t appear again for maybe a season or two. Then you begin to get this groundswell of letters asking: ‘What about the Daleks? When are the Daleks coming back?’ Eventually, when public expectations build, we bring the Daleks back. In the early days they were so popular they tended to be overworked. And that gets monotonous.”

Few of the show’s evil creatures actually make a return appearance. The Cybermen, invented by Gerry Davis, have appeared several times. The Ice Warriors and the Autons have also reemerged. But there is no menagerie of evil creatures which is continually drawn upon to come back time and again. Even the immensely popular Daleks have appeared only in a few more than a dozen serials in the entire 17-year run of the show.

A number of human or human-like villains have also been featured in various Dr. Who episodes. Usually, very good actors play the parts. As with the old American Batman series, it is prestigious to be a baddie on Dr. Who in Britain. Many play Shakespearean roles on the London stage with the likes of Lawrence Olivier and John Gielgud, and the following week are seen trying to do in the good Doctor.

Villain #1

One of the most popular human villains was the Master, played by Roger Delgado.

According to Dicks, “he was one of our best English character actors. He looked sinister with his sallow skin, pinched, mean-looking eyes, a sinister, pointed beard and a deep, resonant voice. He was, in fact, one of the nicest, sweetest, gentlest people.

“We brought him in,” Dicks explains, “because we had a sort of Holmes and Watson relationship going with the Doctor and the Brigadier, and we thought: ‘Why don’t we have a Moriarity?’ So we invented the Master, who was a sort of evil, renegade Time Lord dedicated to doing evil rather than doing good. He was a popular character, but unfortunately, the actor, Roger, was killed while filming another movie abroad. And that sort of put an end to the Master for a while.”

Dr. Who’s special effects, Dicks admits, “are difficult to create. They are expensive. They go wrong when you shoot them. But you really have to use talent, although it sounds conceited to say it. When a monster really works is when it’s creeping out there in the darkness, and you come across the claw print and the hideously mutilated body—or the tentacle comes through the window. Yet, you haven’t seen anything at all. It’s just playing with audience expectations.

“You’re in trouble with a monster when you have to cut to a full frontal shot, and it looks like a man in a rubber suit—and everybody goes ‘Aahhh!’ There’s a bit of that in Alien. Throughout Alien you get glimpses of the monster, but when you see it, it’s not as frightening as when you weren’t seeing it.”

Dicks reveals that a lot of the expense of special effects can be eliminated if they are worked out in the script stage. “Any unreasonable writer knows,” he explains, “that he can’t say, ‘Enter the invading Martian army and their thousands marching down Whitehall.’ With our budget, he would have been lucky to get one Martian. Rather than get into a sequence you can’t afford, you work things out with the director. He tells you whether something is impossible—depending on the money and resources available to him.”

The budget for Dr. Who was and still is small for a science-fiction program—especially when compared to the amounts that were spent on Battlestar Galactica. “But more money,” says Dicks, “doesn’t necessarily mean a better show. In a sense, the restrictions can work for you. There are many good shows in England and in America that get so little money, but you get such good people working very hard. And you can produce excellent effects without spending a fortune.

“The prime example of money not working is the James Bond films. In my opinion, as the budgets got bigger, the films got worse and worse. They’ve totally abandoned story, character, intrigue and mystery. All you see in the latest Bond film is a succession of increasingly spectacular special effects, which I got bored with.”

World’s Most Complex Show

To work on a science-fiction show with a budget as small as Dr. Who’s and still maintain quality is extremely challenging. “We had a director who used to work a lot on Who,” Dicks elaborates, “and he used to say that Dr. Who was the most technically complex show in British television, and therefore the world. So whenever somebody new joined the show, I used to tell them: ‘You are about to start work on the most technologically complex show in the world. It used to scare the hell out of them right from the beginning.’

Still, the Who crew maintains a sense of humor, and occasionally, strange things happen during the filming of the show. “Once,” says Dicks, “we did a story about some creatures called the Draconians—rather like humanoid lizards. They had a crest and sort of green, mottled skin—really fearsome. For (continued on page 53)
Han Solo
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even the sharpest-eyed critics because the films were directed by vastly different men: "I wouldn’t try comparing Lucas to Kershner," Ford says. "What is interesting to me is that two such different men were able to make two films that meld perfectly. It doesn’t matter that they come from different backgrounds and are far apart in age, because both films are in service of an idea.

"There is a very strong idea and that’s what keeps you on the track. That’s the key to it all. George wasn’t on hand for much of the second film. But the idea was, and it’s Kershner’s discipline, talent and technique that service the idea. He doesn’t go and do a star turn or anything.

"It is a job he attacked with great courage. It’s an awesome responsibility, a difficult job, and a job for which you’re bound to catch a lot of flack sooner or later. But that never happened. I don’t think I ever walked away from a scene thinking that I hadn’t given it my best shot; or that the whole team hadn’t given their best.”

The opening sequences in the film were the first to be shot, in temperatures 36 degrees below zero in Finske, Norway, and Ford almost didn’t make it for his first camera call when the train he was riding became trapped by an avalanche. But he did show up, quite a bit worse for the wear.

"It was so cold that no equipment could be operated outside for more than three or four minutes. It all froze up," Ford explains. "You couldn’t tell if a sync-generator was working. I kept asking myself how I got into the whole mess. But I couldn’t have left even if I’d wanted to—there was no way out. The trains were buried in snow.”

Element of Surprise

Surprisingly, but not really so after you get to know Harrison Ford, he never bothered to read the script pages for the scenes in which he did not appear.

"I asked Irvin if I had to read this section or that. He said there was no need to. So, when I finally saw the finished movie, I learned for the first time all the things that happened to Luke. It was great.”

Ford candidly admits that he likes the element of surprise, and the finished film is constantly surprising to him, especially because so many of his reactions are to special effects that weren’t done for months or even a year after his scenes.

"What Star Wars has accomplished is really not possible,” he says. "But it has done it, anyway. Nobody rational would have believed that there is still a place for fairy tales. There is no place in our culture for this kind of stuff. But the need is there; the human need to have the human condition expressed in mythical terms.”

For Lucas to have the guts to do it so barefacedly instead of piling on a lot of mock sophistication to make it look as though he is a sophisticated guy, is a testimonial in itself.

"Look at the way the first film emerged in 1977. That audience has had three years of maturation and change. But now we have the uncanny assessment of that maturation factor, the distillation of our common experience that makes the second film work.

"The Empire Strikes Back is for the audience of Star Wars plus whoever else out there decides to jump on it, but George doesn’t go back and try to adjust the time frame and make a different kind of movie. He just goes on, secure in knowing the people are abroad. It’s incredible.”

But after seeing the film and being exposed to the select audience who saw the early screenings, Ford does get a bit edgy.

"A lot of times I heard that people were disappointed with the ending. But they contradict themselves every time. ‘I can’t wait for the third one,’ is always their next comment.”

But the big question about The Revenge of the Jedi has been answered. Harrison Ford will be in it, and he, too, is looking forward to it, though he has no inkling from Lucas about the storyline.

Most of the 38-year-old actor’s work has taken him away from Los Angeles and that is a point of anguish for him.

"I have a couple of kids there, and being on the road is very disquieting,” Ford admits. "I like to be in my own space with them. Sometimes I bring them over with me for a couple of weeks. They were in London and they visited Yugoslavia, just so I could see them.”

Do the boys regard his being Han Solo with the awe of a Star Wars fan?

"No,” Ford says. "They’ve known me as an actor for a long time, but they are inordinately pleased that I have done something that is specifically recognizable.”

Since making the trek westward from Chicago 17 years ago, Ford has had his lean years, and with the financial security that Han Solo has given him, it is conceivable that his attitudes have changed.

"The world of acting is a great place to work. There are so many challenges and opportunities. I’m in it for the work. I love figuring out how best to make a point or express an idea. That for me is the whole bag. When people let your participate in the process as George and Irvin do, it is as much enjoyment as I could want.

"For me that’s bliss—when you’re so engaged that you’re used up. I have no ambition to go behind the cameras,” he continues. "In fact, I have no ambition, period! I am finished with ambition and the obstacles that ambition causes. I am now interested in refining and polishing what I have. If I get bored with that, I’II look for something else. But I’m not at all sure it would be directing. It might be running a retail store or, better yet, carpentry."

For the moment, Harrison Ford has Han Solo together, and between them they must nurture a legend. When that is behind him, Ford will certainly not be at a loss for work and will have left a permanent record of his contributions to the world of SF film.

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that show we used the exterior of Festival Hall on the west bank of the Thames. On that embankment it is proverbial that tramps and what you call 'winos' sleep out all night. One of them was sleeping near where the actors were making up and putting on their costumes. He suddenly opened his eyes, saw this dragon-headed man standing over him, screamed and disappeared over the horizon. I think we possibly cued him of ever drinking another drop.

"Another time, we had some giant Martian monsters called the Ice Warriors stomping around Hampstead Heath. In fact, they were terribly close to the road as we were shooting early in the morning. Some lady driving her car across the heath saw this giant green monster lurching toward her out of a cloud of fog, and she drove straight into a tree. Luckily, she wasn’t going very fast. so she wasn’t hurt.”

Tongue Twisters

Jon Pertwee, according to Dicks, had problems with complicated scientific terminology. "They used to twist his tongue," he explains. "But there was one line I put into the show that he liked—‘Reverse the polarity of the neutron flow.’ So it became a running gag that whenever Who was in a desperate situation, with the computer going berserk and threatening to blow up the world or something, he would say: ‘Right, there’s only one thing to do—reverse the polarity of the neutron flow.’"

The show never had a resident science advisor, but occasionally one would be called in to authenticate specific science problems.

"We had a basic premise,” Dicks explains, "that if you’re working with known science, get it right. But often we were dealing with future science or alien science and that’s like magic. No one can really argue with you on how the matter transporter works, how the blaster works or the drive of a Martian ship.

"Fans in America," Dicks contends, "could have a greater impact on the Dr. Who show than fans in Britain. ‘In England,’ he explains, ‘if fans write to the BBC, it’s as if they wrote to the Queen and offered her advice on running the country. You get a polite note back saying: ‘Well, okay, but we think we can manage.’ But in America, I think there’s a lot of fans can do to help the show because of the fact that it’s been shown at funny times, in a strange order and sometimes with bits left out. If the stations give the show a chance by putting it on at a decent hour, in a reasonable order and don’t muck about with it— it will certainly build up a following.”

"That’s what happened with Star Trek. The fans helped keep it alive. Then they helped to bring it back. And that’s just gone on and on until now it’s actually a movie.

"I think Dr. Who can be a smash in America as it is in Britain” Dicks says, “and fans can do a lot to make that happen.”

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