

Sands *of time*

A bus-smash in Dubai, an alien fly and Michelle Ryan in a catsuit – it's all go in the Doctor's 200th story!

Doctor Who
Saturday 6.45pm **BBC1, BBC HD**

IT'S SAFE TO say that of all the unfortunate things that could happen to a film crew in the desert, getting caught in a sandstorm – rendering a whole day's footage practically unusable – would be one of the worst. It's 12 February 2009, and the BBC crew filming this year's *Doctor Who* Easter special, *Planet of the Dead*, is experiencing the worst sandstorm to hit Dubai since last September. But that's the least of their recent problems...

It all began with a red London bus. "That bus was the starting point for the story," says Russell T Davies, *Who* supremo and, with Gareth Roberts, co-writer of this episode. "A bunch of everyday commuters stranded on an alien world. I wanted big pictures, vivid images, something that would burn into kids' minds. In 60 years'

time, they'll still remember 'the one with the bus' – and a red double-decker seems so British, which is always one of *Doctor Who*'s strengths."

"It's a barmy adventure," says David Tennant, sheltering from the sandstorm under a violently flapping gazebo. "It's quite 'out there'. A London bus in the middle of the desert kind of sets the tone. It's not a plot that any other show could do. It's very specifically a *Doctor Who* story. I can't think of any other show that could combine all these elements and still make sense!"

The production team's first hurdle was to get the bus into the desert. "We'd always looked at going abroad," explains producer Tracie Simpson. "A beach in Wales, especially in February, would have just looked like, well, a beach in Wales."

"But Dubai looks beautiful. There was talk of airlifting the bus in, but it's too heavy, so we decided to ship it instead. It takes five weeks to get a bus from Cardiff to Dubai, so it set off in >

"I can't think of any other show that could combine all these elements and still make sense"

DAVID TENNANT



ALL ABOARD THE No 200 BUS
The Tritovore (Paul Kasey) joins the Doctor
(David Tennant) and Lady Christina (Michelle Ryan)

plenty of time, and it arrived safely, no problems. And then, a week before we started filming the episode, a crane dropped a cargo container on it, crushing our bus!"

The temptation must have been to sink your head into your hands and weep. "Oh, on several occasions," admits Simpson. "For hours. But I'm cushioned by a brilliant team. We set up a crisis meeting. Russell was fantastic. In the end, it couldn't have been more advantageous, because he tweaked the script to explain away the damage – and it looks fantastic. A smashed-up bus looks much more impressive."

BACK IN THE desert, Tennant's hair has turned blond from the sand, which is choking, clogging and sticking to everything. ("I spy with my little eye," he jokes, "something beginning with S!") The crew has only three days of filming in Dubai; this is the first. Thousands of miles away in Cardiff, Davies is frantically rewriting the script, cutting scenes, relocating others, lest the bad weather continues.

The director, James Strong, looks like he doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. "This is ridiculous," he says. "At this rate, we'll be here for another week!"

"Now I know what the Egyptians had to put up with when they built the Pyramids," says make-up designer Steve Smith.

"At least they were on schedule," deadpans Simpson.

Standing amid the chaos, as sand soars around her, is ex-EastEnders and sometime *Bionic Woman* Michelle Ryan, ice cool and drop-dead sleek in a black catsuit. For this episode only, she plays the Doctor's companion, international woman of mystery – and part-time jewel thief – Lady Christina de Souza. And she's loving it!

"I was probably the only one who thought the sandstorm was great," she laughs, half-guiltily. "Like

WELL, IT'S NOT CROMER

The Margham Desert, an hour's drive from Dubai City, is a perfect filming location for David Tennant and Michelle Ryan – despite sandstorms



GRITTY PERFORMANCE

"I thought the sandstorm was great," says Michelle Ryan, stoical after years filming on the Albert Square backlot

Christina, I love extremes. This girl is me! On *EastEnders* [Ryan played Zoe Slater, 2000–05], we just had to keep going when things went wrong, so I'm used to it. On *Doctor Who*, when they saw our hair blowing in our faces and sand in our eyes and teeth, no-one seriously considered stopping. It's really one of the best productions I've worked on. Even when there were rewrites, no-one made a fuss. And David is so brilliant as a leading man – he keeps things light and free."

"She's very easy-going," says Tennant of Ryan, "Considering all the things she's achieved and places she's been – she's been to Hollywood and back – she's untouched by pretension or actor's lunacy, which others in her position might be. She's a delight to have around, and

seems to be having fun. She loves all the throwing-yourself-around stuff, which I get to do hardly any of in this episode, for a change. It's all given to somebody else, so thank goodness it's somebody who's enjoying it." And he must have noticed, she looks great in a catsuit! "She looks sensational, yeah. There aren't many people who could fill a catsuit as well – and she does it with great ease and elegance. She's terrific."

"I don't find myself particularly sexy," says Ryan, when *RT* asks her about the catsuit. "It's not something

WHAT? WHAT! WHAT!?

As a camera crane closes in on David Tennant, the extent of the damage to the double-decker becomes apparent

"Like Christina, I love extremes. This girl is me!"

MICHELLE RYAN

I've ever tried to be, but I guess being curvy, you put on certain clothes and they cling and it's inevitable. When I put on the catsuit, the costume girls were like, 'Wow!' Even Russell said, 'Well, the boys are gonna have fun!' It's part of who Christina is, but she doesn't pose or pout. And you know what? By the end of the shoot, I guess there were moments when I thought, 'Yeah, I do feel sexy.' That normally never happens. Not for me. I've never really felt sexy before. As I'm getting older [she's 24], maybe I'm becoming more comfortable with it. >

DUBAI DECKER

The bus is No 200 to mark what is debatably the Doctor's 200th story. "It depends how you count them, doesn't it?" says David Tennant. "It's nice to be around for these landmarks. Maybe we should have called the story *The Mighty 200*. You'll see why when you watch it"





WATCH THE SKIES The Swarm is coming!

◁ I don't know if 'embrace' is the right word." Does she get to keep the catsuit? "Actually, I have asked if I can have the leather boots," she grins. "And I really like the sunglasses, because I helped choose those, so who knows?"

THE NEXT DAY, David Tennant is in reflective mood. "Yesterday was grim," he says. "But that doesn't make me think ill of the series. In fact, it makes me realise how important it is to me, because I get quite frantic that we might not get it done – the worry that we've come all this way and structured the whole story around this wonderful desert location. Mercifully, the weather is holding up."

Indeed, the sun is shining, the breeze is slight, the emergency rewrites remain unused and – miracle of miracles – "It looks like we've caught up," exclaims Tennant. "But we really can't have another day like yesterday or we'll be back where we started. The thought that this won't work out, and what that would mean for the story and for the show – well, it's hard not to worry. Maybe if it were something that I cared less about, I'd be thinking, 'Just get me back to the hotel and get this sand out of my hair!'"

The Christmas episode, where Tennant was last on our screens, was actually filmed back in July, so *Planet of the Dead* heralds Tennant's return to *Doctor Who* after an eight-month break, in which he played

Hamlet with the RSC, to great acclaim. It's the first of his final four outings as the Doctor, before Matt Smith takes over the role in 2010.

"Next week, we have the read-through for the next episode back in Cardiff," says Tennant, "which will go out... well, some time towards the end of the year. That story really is the beginning of the end, but *Planet of the Dead* could kind of exist anywhere in the Doctor's lifespan. There's a little hint at the end of what's to come – an omen – but this is an uninhibited romp.

"When we start on the next script, you can sense the bell tolling for the Tenth Doctor. Something happens in that one that fundamentally alters who the Doctor is and where he is, which is the sort of thing you can only do when you know that you're coming to the end. That's very

exciting, and quite sad. This Easter episode is, I suppose, the last hurrah for my Doctor.

"The end is nigh. You can sense the Grim Reaper knocking on the door. But," he concludes cryptically, "how many times?"

Benjamin Cook

There's more on the Dubai filming in *Doctor Who Confidential* (Saturday BBC3) and in the latest *Doctor Who Magazine*, out now priced £3.99. New images in our preview gallery at radiotimes.com/planet

"This episode is the last hurrah for my Doctor"

DAVID TENNANT

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Insect asides

There's a new monster in town, but it's not the first insectoid life-form the Doctor has encountered



Giant Ants (*Planet of Giants* 1964)

The very first Tardis crew were miniaturised in an English garden – fortunately, the giant ants, worm and fly they discovered had succumbed to insecticide.

Zarbi et al (*The Web Planet* 1965)

The Zarbi were simple-minded pantomime ants who shared planet Vortis with the butterfly/bee Menoptra. "We overstretched our resources," confessed then-story editor Dennis Spooner. (Check out RT's complete guide to First Doctor William Hartnell at radiotimes.com/first-doctor)



Mutts (*The Mutants* 1972)

Third Doctor Jon Pertwee encountered these pincer, exoskeleton-covered creatures. They're mobile pupae, basically.

Giant Maggots (*The Green Death* 1973)

Almost certainly the only *Doctor Who* monster to be made from inflated condoms. One of the maggots hatched out into a (short-lived) giant fly.



Wirrn (*The Ark in Space* 1975)

Described by Fourth Doctor Tom Baker as "gigantic sort of grasshoppers", they lay eggs in a living host. A Wirrn larva is green and made of bubblewrap.

Tractators (*Frontios* 1984)

Oversized woodlice with powers over gravity. "It was an impossible task to foist upon the limited budget," admitted writer Christopher H Bidmead.



Malmöoth (*Utopia* 2007)

Friendly insectoid people. The last surviving Malmöoth, Chantho, assisted Derek Jacobi's Professor Yana (the Master in disguise).

Vespiforms (*The Unicorn and the Wasp*, 2008)

Shape-shifting creatures, whose natural form is a giant wasp. Just like real wasps, they're vulnerable to water. Donna (Catherine Tate) drowned one in a lake. She had more trouble shaking a manipulative Time Beetle off her back in *Turn Left* (2008).



Tritovores (*Planet of the Dead* 2009)

"Tritovores are a new alien race," explains David Tennant. "Paul Kasey – who's played many monsters in the past – plays the head Tritovore and came over to Dubai with us, in the desert, in a rubber head. I don't envy him. The amount of body fluids he must have lost!" "Actually, it looked a lot hotter than it was," says Kasey. "It went in my favour wearing an animatronic head on top of my own, because my head was shaded from the sun. On breaks between set-ups, the eyes pop off, to let in more air – and my costume is a flight suit, which is very thin, so I didn't have much on underneath."

☞ No spiders? We don't want to upset the Tritovore!

