

NOVEMBER 17, 2013

Sunday

The Washington Post

Style

Inside Comics and KidsPost pullout

Music

Sky Ferreira and her long-awaited "Night Time, My Time." **Page 3**



Movies

Chris Hemsworth refuses to be typecast **Page 2**

Books

David Letterman's take on "Billionaires" **Page 4**

Fashion

Alexa Chung: An "It Girl" aims for "okay" **Page 17**

MOVIES | TV | PUZZLES | MUSIC | ADVICE | WEDDINGS



In November '63, just when Earth needed a time-travel fantasy, he made his first house call.

BY HANK STUEVER

In television's vast universe, there is perhaps no acquired taste that is more difficult to acquire than the taste for "Doctor Who," BBC's long-running sci-fi series about an alien dandy who navigates the time-space continuum in a phone-booth-style British police box. It's been on (and off, and then on again) for five decades, but despite its increased popularity, "Doctor Who" remains steadfastly niche.

And before fans come at me with their sonic screwdrivers bared, let's assume that "acquired taste" is meant as the highest compliment in this full-blown nerd era. The show's remoteness — and the way it has skirted the edge of mainstream success for so long — remains its strongest asset.

From its earliest episodes, "Doctor Who" has rewarded a certain stripe of viewer who can pay close attention while cerebrally forgiving the show for its low-budget, slapdash, resolutely episodic qualities. It's melodrama for Mensa. One of the main reasons "Doctor Who" thrived, in fact, was because its fans came to love it as much for its shabbiness as its exuberance and manic intelligence. The bells and whistles of the CGI era have caught up to "Doctor Who" and made it infinitely cooler to watch since 2005, yet it's still appreciably outre.

And so, to a growing list of 50th anniversaries, we must add the Nov. 23, 1963, premiere

TV REVIEW CONTINUED ON 10



'Doctor Who' at 50: Where does the

TV REVIEW FROM 1

of "Doctor Who," a television show that, if nothing else, tells us a lot about the nature of TV (and the sentimental devotion of fans) on both sides of the pond.

Even if you've never seen the show or long since concluded that it's not your cup of tea, BBC America has several specials and retrospectives scheduled this week, offering ample opportunities for the casually curious to share in the anniversary mirth. It all leads up to a much-anticipated special episode of the current "Doctor Who" saga that will be globally simulcast on Saturday, Nov. 23.

Among these offerings, I'm most inclined to steer you to "An Adventure in Space and Time," an enjoyable dramatic movie about how the show was first made. This is perhaps your best chance to not only get the basic gist of the *who* but at least some hint of the *why* — and you can do so without having to watch an actual episode of "Doctor Who."

"An Adventure in Space and Time" is set in the BBC's "Mad Men" era, when a hyperbolic and creative network executive, Sydney Newman (Brian Cox), gropes around for a quick fix to an empty half-hour on his programming grid.

On the fly, it seems, Newman cooks up a concept for a kiddie science-fiction series about a "doctor" from another planet who has the power to travel across time and visit the past, present and future. But in the same excitable breath, Newman ada-

manly forbids the show from having robots or bug-eyed monsters. He wants it to be smart but silly, educational but goofy.

Newman promotes his ambitious assistant Verity Lambert ("Call the Midwife's" Jessica Raine) to helm the series; it's her first crack at running a show.

But Lambert and her ethnically Indian director, Waris Hussein (Sacha Dhawan), run up against the Beeb's prevailingly chauvinistic and mildly racist culture. Their production budget is deplorably low and their deadlines impossibly tight; their soundstage is cramped and outdated; the scripts are dreadfully wordy; the art department sloppily throws together a mod look for the extra-dimensional interior of the Doctor's police box, which writers christen the TARDIS ("Time and Relative Dimension in Space").

For a while, "An Adventure in Space and Time" somewhat mirrors "The Hour" (also seen on BBC America), in that it captures the chaos and experimental vibe that dominated early TV production. By 1963, metrics were in place to measure a show's success with viewers; "Doctor Who," we learn, was initially just a grab at key adolescent demographics.

Though the circumstances of "Doctor Who's" shaky beginnings are well documented and firmly part of fanboy/fangirl lore, the film (with a screenplay by current "Doctor Who" writer Mark Gatiss) nevertheless overplays and glosses over the

against-all-odds magic that made the show a surprise success. Because it's a film both by and for the devoted, "An Adventure in Space and Time" tends to too easily revel in its own creation myth, veering quickly into a tidy, Hallmark-like ending.

The Doctor himself provides a sobering (though not exactly teetotaling) presence, as Lambert and Hussein coax an aging stage and TV actor named William Hartnell (David Bradley) to star in their weird little show. "He's C.S. Lewis meets H.G. Wells meets Father Christmas — that's the Doctor," Lambert tells the actor.

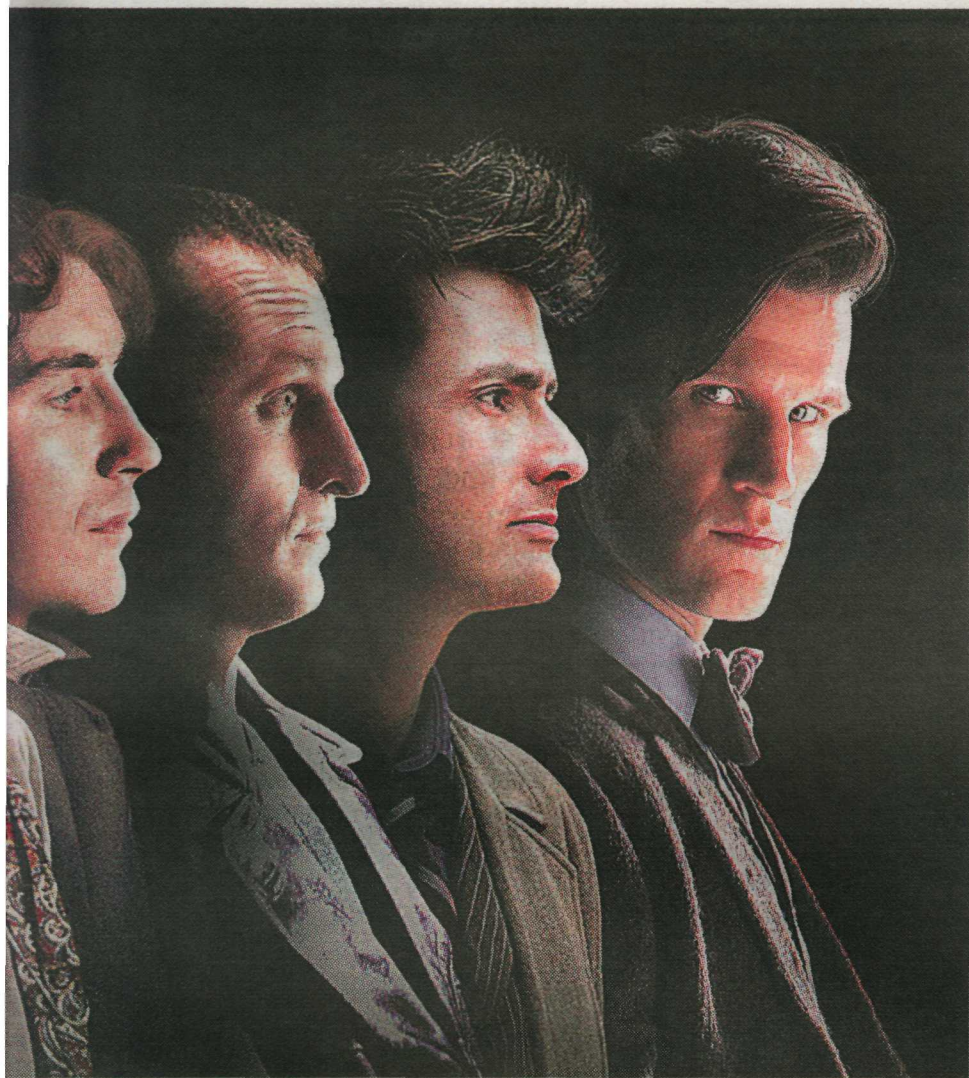
Bradley (you may know him as Red Wedding host Lord Walder Frey on HBO's "Game of Thrones") plays Hartnell as a lovably sour and embittered grump who signs on mainly for the paycheck. A rough cut of the pilot episode flops in the front office; Newman orders Lambert and her crew to rewrite it and reshoot it. Rushed to the airwaves, "Doctor Who" premiered disastrously — steamrolled by news from the United States of John F. Kennedy's assassination the day before.

Doubling down, Lambert defies Newman's "no robots" edict with an episode that introduces the Daleks — killer creatures who exist in robotic shells that look like salt shakers on wheels, shouting "Exterminate! Exterminate!" in shrill electronic bursts.

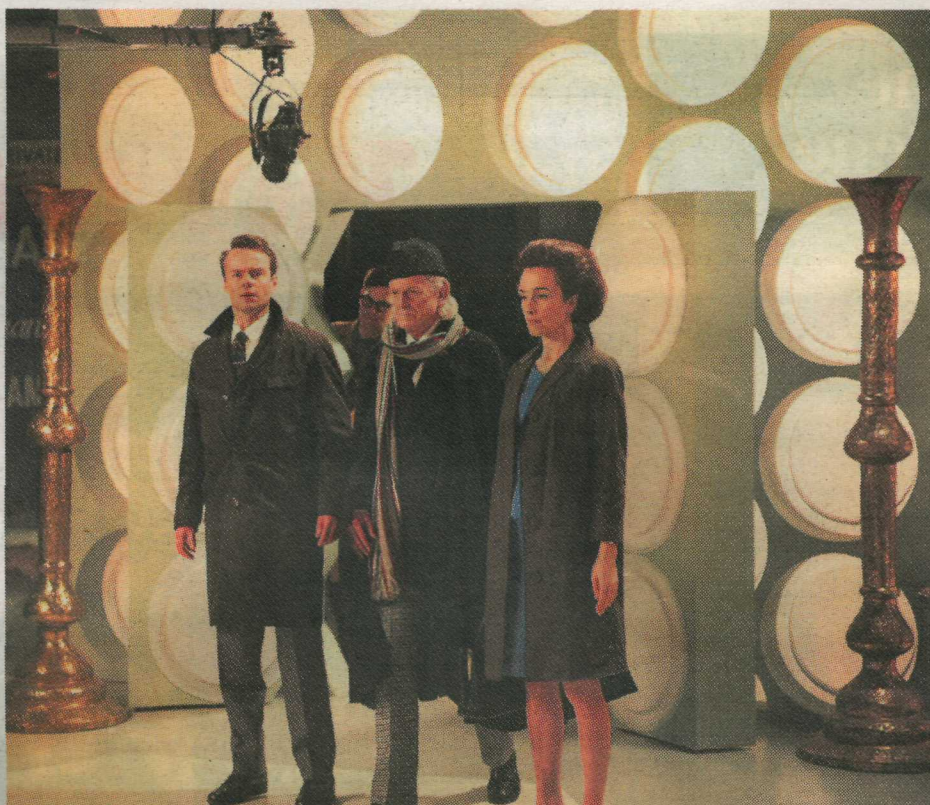
Big hit. In no time at all British schoolchildren are chasing one another in Dalek outfits and shouting "Ex-ter-min-

MEET THE NEW WHO:
Peter Capaldi takes over as the 12th Doctor Who in Nov. 23's 50th-anniversary episode, which is being simulcast globally.





MATT BURLEM/BBC AMERICA



HAL SHINNIE/BBC WORLDWIDE

THE YEARS HAVE BEEN KIND:
William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton, Jon Pertwee, Tom Baker, Peter Davison, Colin Baker, Sylvester McCoy, Paul McGann, Christopher Eccleston, David Tennant and Matt Smith have played Doctor Who.

"AN ADVENTURE IN SPACE AND TIME":
Jamey Glover, David Bradley and Jemma Powell as original "Doctor Who" cast members William Russell, William Hartnell and Jacqueline Hill.

time go?

ate!" The BBC orders a full season and then another; Hartnell brightens and accepts that this part — not Shakespeare — will probably be his permanent legacy. His health fails and he forgets his lines and before we know it, the makers of "Doctor Who" come up with one of the show's smartest innovations: The Doctor, being an immortal Time Lord, can regenerate his body when faced with death (or contract renewal). Thus, by 1966, another actor took over the part — as would 10 more Doctors, and counting.

It's all very dear and respectful, but by the end of "An Adventure in Space and Time," we still don't know why children — and a steadily growing horde of adults — ate up this bowl of oatmeal and pronounced it a gourmet banquet.

It would be a hard task for a movie like this to achieve cultural analysis without lapsing into a tedious a voice-over essay — and anyhow, there are piles and piles of theses on the Internet about what makes "Doctor Who" tick. It would take another 50 years to read everything ever written about the show and watch old episodes.

Dipping into the archives, I found myself most drawn to a video compilation of every iteration of Ron Grainer and Delia Derbyshire's collaboration on the catchy theme music for the show, which harnessed the high-tech ideals and low-tech execution that became the show's stock in trade. The years go by and the synthesiz-

ers get more ridiculous and Moog-ish — up until the modern era, which turns the theme into something more serious, more appropriate, more stylized.

There you have the "Doctor Who" problem for those of us who could take it or leave it: The concept and feeling of the show (the music, the strangeness) seem so inviting at first, both as a story and as a worldview; but then, a couple of episodes in, "Doctor Who" still feels dauntingly remote and lacking in soul.

It comes all the way back around to the scene in "An Adventure in Space and Time" of Verity Lambert trying to explain to William Hartnell what kind of guy the Doctor is. It feels like all 50 years of the show have conspired to make sure we never know. Even his real name is never to be revealed.

The answer, obviously, is that he's not a guy at all. He's an alien — given to moodiness, wacky fits and bizarre non sequiturs. Each of the men who succeeded Hartnell brought his own interpretation to the Doctor's quirks — as did the writers — but only recently, with David Tennant (who played the 10th Doctor from 2005 to 2010) and his successor Matt Smith (who will now hand the role over to Peter Capaldi), has the Doctor flowered as a more humanlike entity. I side with fans who spent the summer hoping, before Capaldi was chosen, that the Doctor would finally morph into a woman.

The show assiduously treats the Doctor as empathetic but essentially asexual and

averse to romance; fans argue about this a lot, especially since both Tennant and Smith exuded high doses of charisma.

The Doctor certainly grew fond of the 50-year parade of comely women (and handsome men) who've traveled with him as seasons came and went. It can feel, after so much time spent with the Doctor, that one is also wasting *too* much time with the Doctor. He morphs and morphs but never really changes. Which means that even now, slicked-up and improved as it is, "Doctor Who" can still feel like a show designed to hold a place on the schedule.

Fans certainly don't see it that way. For them, the show has never been anything short of a marvel. It's also an old friend to American sci-fans of a certain age who remember (as I do) when our local PBS affiliates started importing "Doctor Who" reruns in the late 1970s and early '80s (during the Tom Baker years) along with reruns of "Monty Python's Flying Circus." With that unlikely pairing, a nerdy adolescent in, say, Oklahoma could have an almost orgasmic exposure to a certain British sensibility; it was like discovering another planet, a place where you might belong.

In that same spirit, "Doctor Who" is still an occasionally terrific (and reliably comforting) show, no matter what season you're watching or on what continent. I envy the people who give the Doctor their unconditional love, even if he is incapable of returning it.

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AN ADVENTURE IN SPACE AND TIME
(two hours) airs Friday, Nov. 22, at 9 p.m. on BBC America.

DOCTOR WHO: THE DAY OF THE DOCTOR
(two hours) global simulcast of the 50th-anniversary special episode begins at 2:50 p.m. Eastern on Saturday, Nov. 23, on BBC America. (Encore at 7 p.m.)

DOCTOR WHO: TALES FROM THE TARDIS
(one hour) features actors and producers reflecting on the series' success, Monday, Nov. 18, at 9 p.m. on BBC America.

THE SCIENCE OF DOCTOR WHO
(one hour) airs Monday, Nov. 18, at 10 p.m. on BBC America.

DOCTOR WHO
marathons of past seasons will feature each of the 11 incarnations of the Doctor; airing Monday, Nov. 18, through Saturday, Nov. 23. Visit www.bbcamerica.com/doctorwho for complete schedules.

DOCTOR WHO EXPLAINED
(one hour) airs Friday, Nov. 22, at 8 p.m. on BBC America.