I have an appointment with the Doctor. It has been a year since Peter Capaldi was revealed as the Twelfth Time Lord and he has promised to give us his Doctor’s uniform just for us. In anticipation, I arrive an hour early. He arrives exactly on time, as time lords should, and just walks in. No Tardis, no Themys. Not even any ice. He is wearing a T-shirt and jeans, and his skin is pale it’s almost translucent. He’s hugging his ribs like it’s been fighting Doctors since January (which, technically, he has). “Are you injured?” I ask, because it would do either of us or the BBC’s multi-million-pound franchise any good if he needed to regenerate before his own began. “No. I’m just happy to be here,” he says. We have dragged him from his home in Carshalton, to a studio in a Kilmain Green in the capital’s northwest, but it transpires this is where he first lived when he arrived as a restaurant Glowman actor. He’s hugging his ribs posturising.

The first thing to note is that Capaldi is nothing like Malcolm Tucker, the sly doctor who first made him a household name owing the Whirlpool with a deep blue in the BBC comedy The Thick of It. He is a willow-the-wisp, gentle and soft-spoken, small for his 5’7″, almost entirely non-aggressive, and if he’s pleased to be hugging our box this morning, he’s absolutely beside himself with his new role as a time lord. “When I was Doctor-who, before it was announced, I used to go to Fulham Park [in 8 Impressionist in the West End], and just hang around,” he volun- tum. “It would mean that people wouldn’t know they were standing next to the real Doctor. Who. That’s all I got to do.”

But for Capaldi it’s bigger because he is an aficionado. Ask him a simple question – are Daleks more than Cybermen – and what feels like a whole morning can slip by. Because, you see, it depends whether you’re talking about the Mandarin Cybermen, which came from the planet Mondas circa 1964, or those that arrived from a parallel universe in 2006. “There is a conflict among fans,” Capaldi says gently, “but I’m trying to get the Mondasian back.” Which doesn’t answer my question, but I move on.

His earliest memories are of Daleks emerging from the waste in The Dalek Invaders of Earth (1964), and it’s a bad idea to rattle them with tales of role playing and wobbly sets. “Everybody does it off now,” he says, “but those programs weren’t made to be viewed over and over again. When you just consumed them in that way, at the time, they were magical.”

Of course, back then, Daleks couldn’t go up much, so there was no need for Capaldi, at age five, to hide behind the sofa in his third-floor tenement flat. He didn’t put on the ice-skating shoes or the mask of the Doctor. Who in front of the mirror. He used the studio to sit on the windowsill. He did just what allowed inside the Magic Circle, then I knew I wanted to be part of this world.” His mother helped, sending him a Doctor Who annual every year. When I ask how long into adult life this continued, he starts laughing – so much that he8 starts straggling for air. Eventually, he regains control. “By the time the show came back, in 2005, I couldn’t have thought I was too old. But I suspect it will start again now.”

Since the program’s return on Saturday after a 14-year hiatus, the Doctors have been rejuvenating into ever-younger lunch hunger candy.
Christopher Eccleston (41), David Tennant (44), then Matt Smith (26). With it, the plot lines, much to the chagrin of die-hard Whovians, have become more Takeaway. There has been flaring and smooshing. There has been a will-they work-they dynamic between the Doctor and his sidekick, Clara. We were one nibble short of a hotdog. Following the age trajectory, the next Doctor would have been 23. Or he could have been a she. Or Idris Elba – a favourite, although he may have been the wannabe black actor who turned down the role last time. Instead, the BBC went for a TV geniestic. Capaldi, 58, is joint oldest time lord with William Hartnell.

In the translucent flesh, he looks a good 30 years younger than Hartnell, thanks largely to the fact that he gave up alcohol years ago (and Hartnell liked a drink). But he’s still old enough that the BBC has a choreographer on speed dial. More awkwardly, he’s old enough to be Clara’s father. This regeneration lark can have disturbing Freudian implications. So will the relationship with Clara, played by 28-year-old Jenna Coleman, continue to be romantic? “There’s no flaring, that’s for sure,” he says. “It’s not this Doctor’s concerned with. It’s quite a fun relationship, but no. We did call and say, ‘I want no Papa-Nicole moments’.

What will there be, then? Is the 12th Doctor an old codger like Hartnell? Will he be a more modern 50-somethings, a time lord who can work an iPad? Executive producer Steven Moffat has said he’ll be older, trickier, fiercer. Mark Gatiss, the best writer on the show, says the new doctor “has a madness in his eyes”.

“All that’s true,” says Capaldi, “but he’s also joyful. One thing the show does well is balance the epic and the domestic. You can go from the edge of the universe to a pedestrian precipice. This Doctor loves watching stars being born in Andromeda; he’s also thrilled to see litter blowing across the supermarket car park at dawn.”

So who has he based his mad-eyed, fierce, joyful litter-watcher on? “There was a large selection of people,” he says. “I won’t name names, because it’s more fun for people to spot them. I have a book, though. I started to collect images and quotes from people I thought were Doctor Who-ish.” The book is kept under lock and key. After the first five scripts of the new series were inadvertently leaked, he’s not taking any chances. Capaldi didn’t arrive at the start of shooting in January with a fully formed Doctor. “Sometimes I’d look in the mirror and think, ‘that’s just me. That’s not him. But some days he’d look back and

I’d try to catch it. It’s not an intellectual process, it’s just an instinctive relationship.” His character has evolved through the first few episodes.

The uniform has evolved too. Out with Smith’s tweed, in with a long black jacket, scarlet lining, black trousers, Doc Martins and a waistcoat that was very nearly a cardigan. Setting on the final outfit took weeks. “I tried on everything anybody suggested,” he says. “We did go to a costume house and have huge, exhausting sessions of getting dressed up. It’s fine for about 15 minutes, but by the time we’ve done 3/4 hours it’s like, ‘Get me out of this.’

He went for a sort of magician look, “Magician’s look” he says, more defensively. “I think it’s quite a hard look. I always wanted him to be in black. Not sweet. Matt’s a really young cool guy – he can wear anything, but I wanted to strip it back and be very stark.”

Many Doctor Who scholars think the plots could do with stripping back too the last few series have become increasingly OTT. Can we expect fewer fireworks and more drama? “We still blow a lot of shit up,” he says. “That’s very important, but it’s going to be a bit different from what we’ve seen over recent years. A bit more gravity. Some situations are more sombre and I think there are more rooted dramatic scenes. Over the past two or three years, which I’ve loved, there has often been a breathless vigour; we still have that attack, but we have another level of drama, another tone. And the scenes are longer.”

Capaldi was in Prague shooting the BBC historical drama The White Rose when his agent called to say he’d got the part. He spent the afternoon wandering around the city, humming the Doctor Who theme tune. “I just didn’t think it was something that would happen to me,” he had to keep his big secret from everyone but his wife and his 21-year-old daughter for the next 10 weeks. But he didn’t say yes to the part immediately. “I didn’t want to be Doctor Who in a Doctor Who I didn’t like. I had to be convinced the show was going in a direction I was interested in. I had to think carefully about the level of visibility. My life was blessed, but as soon as this happened I had paparazzi outside my house.”

“Not that he was ever going to say no. I thought, ’You’ve loved this since you were a kid, how can you not be Doctor Who?’

It would be wrong to say Capaldi was destined

to play the part. His life has been too mercurial to allow anything approaching destiny, as a quick time travel back through his CV demonstrates. He mole the show in 2011 as the obsessive-compulsive BBC executive Randall Brown in The Hour. He won awards as the profanity-spouting Malcolm Tucker in 2006. But before that he spent a year out of work, defaulting mortgage on the immediate horizon. His wife, Elaine Collins, a producer, kept the wolves from the unemployed actor’s door. What went wrong that year? “I don’t know,” he says. “In the same way I didn’t know why I started to work again the next year. That was one of the key learning points in my life. I hadn’t done anything different. I didn’t start writing letters or putting myself on the world. I didn’t start attending parties. I didn’t pull myself together. This work just started coming in and I thought, ‘I have no control over this.’

The rest is history. Or the future, depending

on the direction in which we’re travelling. Whichever it is, we have reached the point when Capaldi swaps T-shirt and jeans for the full Doctor. On goes the waistcoat, the DMs, the magician’s jacket. On too goes the signet ring, specially constructed to hide his wedding band, which he doesn’t ever like to take off.

As he changes, a strange thing happens. His whole body language transforms. By the time he’s got all the clobber on, he’s grown beyond his 175cm. His eyes are firing lasers around the studio and he’s no longer the very relaxed, very happy Glaswegian will-o’-the-wisp. He’s a full-on Gallifreyan maître de. But in a good way.

We will soon see if his Doctor, the one conjured from a book of thoughts and half a lifetime of enthusiasm, is a success. Today, I’ve had a sneak preview. I’ve seen the madness behind the eyes, and the joy too. I’ll be surprised if he doesn’t become the most compelling Doctor to date.

Capaldi and Jenna Coleman will appear live on stage at the State Theatre, Sydney, on August 12.