IS THAT THE TIME LORD?

By Matt Rudd

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 put on 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 theme tune. Not even any dry ice. He is wearing a T-shirt and jeans, and his skin is so pale it's almost translucent. He's hugging his ribs like he's been fighting Daleks since January (which, technically, he has). "Are you injured?" I ask, because it won't do either of us or the BBC's multi-million-pound franchise any good if he needs to regenerate before he's even begun. "No, I'm just happy to be here," he says. We have dragged him from his home in Crouch End, northeast London, to a studio in Kensal Green in the capital's northwest, but it transpires this is where he first lived when he arrived as a penniless Glaswegian actor. He's hugging his ribs nostalgically.

The first thing to note is that Capaldi is nothing like Malcolm Tucker, the spin doctor who first made him a household name turning the Whitehall air deep blue in the BBC comedy *The Thick of It*. He is a will-o'-the-wisp, gentle and soft-spoken, small for his 175cm, almost entirely non-sweary. And if he's pleased to be hanging out here this morning, he's absolutely beside himself with his new life as a time lord. "When I was Doctor-elect, before it was announced, I used to go to Forbidden Planet [a sci-fi superstore in the West End], and just hang around," he volunteers. "It would amuse me that people wouldn't know they were standing next to the next Doctor Who. That's all past now. I can't do it anymore."

Being the Doctor is a challenge for any actor, but for Capaldi it's bigger because he is an aficionado. Ask him a simple question – are Daleks better than Cybermen? – and what feels like a whole morning can slip by. Because, you see, it depends whether you're talking about the Mondasian Cybermen, which came from the planet Mondas, circa 1966, or those that arrived from a parallel universe in 2006. "There is a conflict among fans," Capaldi says gravely, "but I'm trying to get the Mondasians back." Which doesn't answer my question, but I move on.

His earliest memories are of Daleks emerging from the water in *The Dalek Invasion of Earth* (1964), and it's a bad idea to sully them with talk of toilet plungers and wobbly sets. "Everybody slags it off now," he says, "but these 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 stairs, so there was no need for Capaldi, at age five, to hide behind the sofa in his third-floor tenement (his Italian father ran the ice-cream parlour on the ground floor). Instead, he built sets from shoe boxes, collected autographs – he ticked off three of the first four Doctors (William Hartnell was ill, so he got his wife's autograph instead). He wrote fan mail to the producers: they sent back old scripts. "It was like being allowed inside the Magic Circle, the point 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 he starts struggling for air. Eventually, he regains control: "By the time the show came back [in 2005], she must have thought I was too old. But I suspect it will start again now."

Since the program's recommissioning after a 16-year hiatus, the Doctors have been regenerating into ever-younger lunchbox candy:

Christopher Eccleston (41), David Tennant (34), then Matt Smith (28). With it, the plot lines, much to the chagrin of die-hard Whovians, have become more *Twilight*. There has been flirting and smooching. There has been a will-they, won't-they dynamic between the Doctor and his sidekick, Clara. We were one nibble short of a hickey. 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 unnamed black actor who turned down the role last time. Instead, the BBC went for a TV geriatric. Capaldi, 56, 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 chiropractor 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'll be no flirting, that's for sure," he says. "It's not what this Doctor's concerned with. It's quite a fun relationship, but no, I 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-something, 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 precinct. 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 Martens and a waistcoat that was very nearly a cardigan. Settling on the final outfit took weeks. "I tried on everything anybody suggested," he says. "We'd 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 3½ hours it's like, 'Get me out of this'." He went for a sort of magician look. "Magician look?" he says, more defensively. "I think it's quite a hard look. I always wanted him to be in black. Not tweed. 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."

Flirt-free: Capaldi on set with Jenna Coleman, 28, who plays Clara

Capaldi was in Prague shooting the BBC historical drama *The Musketeers* 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 stole 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 2005. But before that he spent a year out of work, a 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 out in 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 time 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 mufob. 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