Who is He This Time?

The seventh Time Lord clocks in with some observations of his first year on the job.

By PATRICK DANIEL O'NEILL

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laying the Doctor is very hard work,” Sylvester McCoy confesses. The Scottish actor, seventh in the line of Time Lords in the BBC-TV series Doctor Who, has recently completed taping his first season in the role.

“Usually, the theater is where the hard work is in acting, and television is less so,” McCoy continues. “But this job is rough. You’re acting for 12 hours, and toward the end of the day, about 9:30 at night, you can hardly stand up, you’re so tired. There are scenes in my episodes where the Doctor’s leaning on things, and the audience can see it: ‘There—that’s 9:30, he’s exhausted.’”

McCoy came to the part during a continuing period of chaos for television’s longest-running science-fiction program. In 1985, the series went on a BBC-enforced 18-month hiatus. At the conclusion of the 23rd season in 1987, the sixth Doctor, Colin Baker (STARLOG #132), was told his services were no longer needed. Baker became the first actor to be dismissed from the role. Naturally, then, McCoy is a bit wary, both of professional and public reaction to his Doctor.

“The public generally has had a very positive reaction,” he notes. “There has been almost nothing but praise. As a matter of fact, I’ve received only two letters that said anything critical, which is rather nice. The professional fan types seem to feel somewhat differently about it. But then, I suppose they would. It’s the same every time a new Doctor comes in, there’s a certain amount of apprehension.

“Of course, because of the recent events, there’s an uncertainty that will hang over the program from now on,” McCoy relates. “There have been major changes within the BBC as well. The people who took the show off the air are gone, and we don’t know whether the new people who have taken over want to keep it.

“The circumstances of Colin’s departure meant that I took the job knowing that that could possibly happen to me. Before, no other Doctor knew that fact when he took it.
on. It was nearly guaranteed that you had the job for as long as you wanted to stay. So, that has meant knowing that one's future is in the hands of the BBC."

Despite those concerns, McCoy admits he has enjoyed the role right from the beginning. "The actual physical transition was quite fun really, dressing up as Colin Baker," he recalls, "although, when I put the curly wig on, I looked like Harpo Marx. Lying on the floor of the TARDIS, no one could see the height difference—all Doctors are the same size lying down." (Normally, the departing and incoming Doctors are both involved in a regeneration scene, but Baker's abrupt departure precluded such a sequence this time.)

Like the six actors who have played the Doctor before him, McCoy is slowly getting used to instant public recognition in Great Britain. "Sometimes, if I'm walking down the street, or on my bike, cycling around London, I'll hear someone shout, 'Oy, Doctor, where's your TARDIS?' I was known before in Britain, one of those faces people recognize. In one way, people are responding to me as they always have, just in a bigger way. I can still go on the Underworld [subway, a.k.a. "tube"] and the buses, but people look at me strangely, as if thinking 'That guy looks just like the Doctor. Ah, no, he wouldn't be on the tube.'"

**Who Goes There?**

Every actor brings something new to the Doctor, but this one hopes to bring something old as well. "I think my characterization of the Doctor is forming slowly. I would like it to be a combination of all the other Doctors, plus," McCoy explains. "I'm finding areas where you can bring in a little bit of William Hartnell, a bit of Patrick Troughton. Actually, I'm looking forward to another season. As an actor, it's quite nice to spend only five months of the year doing Doctor Who, because you have the chance to do other things. In a way, though, I would have liked to have done more because the character's development didn't feel finished. It was as complete as it could be for the amount of screen time involved, but it takes a while to get it together."

Storywise, McCoy knows little about the upcoming season, during which the show will celebrate its 25th anniversary. Does he find that daunting? "I don't think being the Doctor during the 25th anniversary puts any special responsibilities on me. I mean, the responsibility is there from the start, just in terms of playing the role. I'm very lucky to be around at this time," he laughs. "There should be quite a few parties."

On the other hand, McCoy knows exactly what villains he wants to battle. "I'm looking forward to working with the classic opponents, including the Master. As far as the monsters are concerned, when I went to interview for the part, they asked me my favorites, and I said the Daleks and the Cybermen. I like the Ice Warriors, too."

The Doctor always faces some interesting problems during the series' taping, and McCoy had his share of dangerous moments, including a run-in with a motorcycle. "Driving a motorbike with Bonnie Langford [who co-stars as the Doctor's traveling companion, Mel] in the sidecar and [guest star] Richard Davis on the back was pretty exciting," McCoy says, remembering a scene from "Delta and the Bannermen." "The director came up to me and asked, 'Can you ride a motorbike?' And I said, 'Yes' [shaking his head no all the while]. So, they gave me this very powerful motorbike to ride. I'm driving along on it, and suddenly a bush ran out into the road and we ran into it. It was very interesting watching Richard's face as he flew past me, looking rather worried at the time. What

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entertainment, and by such guest stars as Stubby Kaye, the American Broadway performer best known as Nicely-Nicely in Guys and Dolls (who co-stars in Who Framed Roger Rabbit?). Kaye had a major role in the “Delta and the Bannerman” saga. McCoy, who has been a fan of the show since his college days, says he has felt some of the heat.

“A few of the more prominent British fans have been critical, generally of [producer] John Nathan-Turner, and their criticism of him has rubbed off on me,” McCoy comments. “Unintentionally, apparently. They’ve written me letters saying, ‘We’re not knocking you.’ The problem is they went very public about the criticisms, speaking to the general press—and the press didn’t see it as knocking just one producer but the current show in general, so I came off tarnished by it all.”

Although he has yet to meet one of these critical fans in person, McCoy feels they are probably wrong about the current state of Doctor Who. “It’s all very confusing, the conflicts within the fan groups. Generally, the feeling I get is that they approve of what I’m doing, but they don’t approve of what John’s doing. I disagree, but that’s the way it is.

“I’ve been watching the old Doctor Whos off and on since I got the job—they’ve lent me tapes—and people keep harping back to the ‘good old days.’ I’ve been watching them with my sons, who are 10 and 12, and they enjoy the more recent ones more than the older ones.

“In many ways, I think the fans look at the older stories through a golden mist. There are some where the stories and writing are very good, but the rest falls apart today.”

Returning to the subject of “responsibility,” McCoy agrees that the actor who plays the universe’s most well-known Time Lord must meet the fans. “I think the actor playing the Doctor does have a responsibility to face his public in settings like conventions and respond to them. And I’ve found it quite enjoyable so far. I believe it helps the program.

“’It’s really nice to find out what the audience thinks. Generally in television, an actor doesn’t really know what the audience thinks. On stage, if it’s a comedy, the audience laughs, or if it’s a tragedy, they cry. There’s an immediate response. The frustration of television is that, usually, you never know if you’ve gotten across. Just the fact that people turn out to see you means something.”

But sometimes, those meetings with fans can be disconcerting. “Of course, they turn out to see ‘the Doctor,’ too,” McCoy points out, recalling one incident in particular.

“Some of them seem to have difficulty separating Sylvester McCoy from the Doctor. There was one man in Minneapolis-St. Paul who asked me, ‘Excuse me, Doctor, but when you were in your third persona, what were you thinking when you . . .’ And I had no idea, I’ve never even seen that episode! But he believed!”

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McCoy hopes that his Doctor and Mel (Langford) will face such classic baddies as the Master, the Daleks and the Cybermen.

was amazing was that both he and Bonnie were ready to get back on it with me.”

Perhaps the physical nature of McCoy’s previous theatrical duties—including portraying a human bomb (STARLOG #120)—helped to prepare him for such explosive action. “The physical nature of the part didn’t particularly faze me,” he agrees. “I’ve done lots of physical things, falling about and the like. I’ve played Buster Keaton and Stan Laurel, very physical roles. I’m a physical actor, and I’ve tried to make the Doctor even more so. Thus far, they’ve let me do all my own stunts. I didn’t think they would be very dangerous, although the other people on the motorbike probably did. I did one stunt where I was hanging by my umbrella from a 30-foot cliff. That was quite dangerous, I suppose, but I enjoyed it. Sadly, it doesn’t make any sense in the story: ‘Why am I hanging from a cliff?’ ‘It’s a cliff-hanger!’”

Who Done It?

Perhaps because of the series’ now precarious perch on the BBC schedule, British fans have become quite vocal about what they deem to be the show’s faults. Among the problems seen by some viewers is a turn toward comedy evidenced by McCoy’s own background in vaudeville-type