

The Starburst Interview

TERRY NATION

—creator-writer of **BLAKE'S 7**, **The DALEKS** and **The SURVIVORS**

Terry Nation is best-known for his fantasy writing: as creator of the Daleks and now *Blake's 7*. But it wasn't always that way. He originally wanted to get up on a stage and be laughed at.

Born in Cardiff, Wales, he grew up during World War II. His father was away in the army and his mother was an air-raid warden, so there were times when he would sit alone in the air-raid shelter as German planes bombed Cardiff. He says he believes in the only child syndrome: "Being an only child (as he was), you have to invent your own persona and your own stories." As for other influences, he says: "I grew up with a marvellous radio service that had a thing called *Children's Hour*. I read early. And I also grew up in the front row of the local Odeon."

He started his working life at eighteen, as a commercial traveller for the family furniture factory. But, aged 25, he gave up this career and moved to London with hopes of becoming a stage comedian. These hopes were dashed. As he says, "to play your best joke and receive back absolute silence is pretty devastating". Eventually, a talent broker told him: "Son, the jokes are funny—it's you that's not." If there is a turning-point in Terry Nation's life, then that was it.

Fortunately, he met comedian Spike Milligan who saw Nation was starving, gave him £10 and commissioned him to write a *Goon Show* script. At the time Milligan ran a talent agency which included Ray Galton, Alan Simpson, Eric Sykes and Johnny Speight. It was a small world and Nation's successful comedy script led to writing work for such comedians as Peter Sellers, Ted Ray, Harry Worth, Frankie Howerd and Tony Hancock. His radio work included *All My Eye*, *Idiot Weekly*, *The Jimmy Logan Show*, *Val*

Parnell's Startime and the Elsie and Doris Waters' *Floggits* series. In all, he wrote more than 200 radio comedy shows. But, by that time, he had decided his comedy writing "wasn't really very good".

So he turned down the chance to write four tv episodes of *The Army Game* (ironically starring the first *Dr. Who*, William Hartnell). Instead, he



took time out to write an entire comedy play for tv's *Uncle Selwyn*. This led to three scripts for the ITV sf series *Out of This World* (1962). He adapted Philip K. Dick's *Impostor*, Clifford Simak's *Immigrant* and wrote an original screenplay *Botany Bay*.

He then returned to comedy, writing for a Tony Hancock stage show in Nottingham: "I leapt at it because he was the greatest comic in

the world". At which point, "the BBC came up with this idea for this crazy doctor who travelled through time and space. They called my agent, my agent called me, Hancock said *Don't write for flippin' kids* and I told my agent to turn it down." Luckily, Hancock and Nation had a "dispute", parted company and Nation agreed to work on *Dr. Who*. But then Eric Sykes offered him a comedy writing assignment in Sweden, so he wrote the seven episodes of the first Dalek story (*The Dead Planet*) in seven days and left to join Sykes.

Dr. Who first appeared on screen in 1963. Within three weeks, it was drawing the largest audience for its time-slot in BBC history. After a four-part introductory story, *The Dead Planet* introduced the Daleks. In 1965, Dalek merchandising (toys etc) reportedly earned Nation £50,000. The *Dr. Who* and the Daleks feature film (1965) reportedly brought him in £300,000. And *Daleks—Invasion Earth 2150 AD* followed in 1966. By 1977, the Daleks were still one of the top four tv toys and their creator was reportedly earning £40,000 a year from scripts. The Daleks were only a small part of his output.

He wrote a dozen scripts (more than anyone else) for the original Saint tv series. That success led to a job as Script Editor and writer on *The Baron* series. He also wrote for *The Champions*, was Script Editor on *The Avengers* (the series co-starring Linda Thorson), was Script Editor and Associate Producer on *The Persuaders*, created *Survivors* and created *Blake's 7*.

Starburst met Terry Nation at London's Reform Club in Pall Mall (the base for Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*) and they talked about the world which Nation has created.

Interview conducted by John Fleming

What did you think when you heard about Dr. Who for the first time?

I didn't have any confidence in the series. I read the brochure at the briefing and said, "There's no way this show can ever succeed." And I don't think it could have done if it had followed the route that they had planned for it.

What was that?

That it actually went into historical situations and was reasonably educational. That was the direction the BBC wanted to take and Sidney Newman (BBC tv's Head of Drama) was bitterly opposed to any bug-eyed monsters. We could go into the future, but it had to have a relatively scientific base and it was going to be 'good solid stuff'. He violently objected to the Daleks when he

saw them on the script. It was only the determination of the producer Verity Lambert that got them on. Or maybe it was the fact that the BBC had to go on. They'd had them built and they'd spent so much

"The Daleks represent government, officialdom, that unhearing, unthinking, blanked out face of authority that will destroy you."

money they had to go on. Nobody had faith in them, including myself.

How did you originally visualise the Daleks?

I knew that I didn't want them to be men dressed up. That was my first personal

brief. I had seen the Georgian State Dancers—the girls who move with long skirts and appear not to move—they just glide. That was the kind of image I wanted to get. I knew what the voice would sound like, because it had to be mechanical and broken down into syllables all the time. I made a few mistakes.

Such as?

The hands. They became enormously cumbersome. I made a few mistakes about being able to go up stairs and things of that sort. I made the cardinal mistake of killing them off at the end of the first series, which had to be rectified. But what actually happened with the BBC was that episode one of *The Dead Planet* came up. It was quite a good eerie beginning and, at the end

of it—the last frame of the picture—we saw a bit of a Dalek. We didn't see a whole Dalek. And the phones started to ring. People saying, "Christ, what *is* that thing?"

A week later the Dalek appeared. And a week after that the mail started to arrive. And then it mushroomed. As a writer, you are a very anonymous figure. Nobody notices your name on the screen. And, for the first time in my life, I started to get mail. It wasn't just a couple of letters: it was thousands of letters. They were coming by

"I went to the United States in 1965 and said I wanted to make a series called *The Daleks*."

the sackload. So I twigged I had something going for me here: something was happening. And of course the BBC twigged it as well and they knew they had to change the direction that **Dr Who** was intended to go in. So a lot of the stuff they had prepared was put aside and they went much more into the sf area. And I think that actually established the ultimate pattern of where it was going.

The series has never really caught on in America. Why do you think that is?

It's played now in syndication.

But the networks were never really interested, were they?

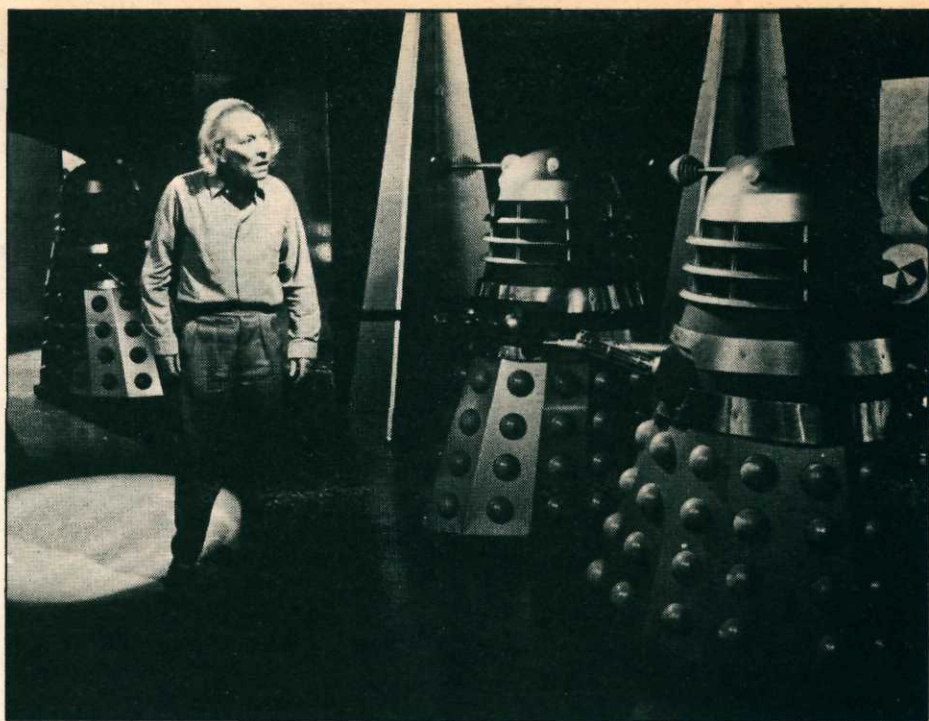
No, well how could they be with the quality of the production? There was always a certain sort of Englishness about it. It was very much a domestic product, I think. I went to the United States (in 1965) and said I wanted to make a series called **The Daleks**. I went there to hustle and got very close to doing it.

What sort of series would it have been?

There would have been no **Dr Who** because I had no copyright on the Doctor character. But I could take the Daleks away and do it. I might have to pay the BBC something for their interest in the design, but they're my characters. Indeed, the BBC was going to go with me on this series at one point. But they weren't—at the time—a very good business

"My favourite character in *Dr Who* was Davros: The man in the wheelchair who was actually perpetuating his image in his machines."

organisation. And the whole thing sort of crumbled to dust. And then I'd moved on to something else: I think I'd gone on to **The Saint**. And from there I went on to **The Baron** and on to **The Avengers** and straight on to **The Persuaders**. And each one of these is a big block of your life. There was never time. Hence, when the BBC wanted the Daleks again, I wasn't available to write them. So other people wrote those episodes but they never understood the nature of the



*The first Dalek story of the entire **Doctor Who** series. The original Doctor (William Hartnell) comes face-to-face with his metal adversaries.*

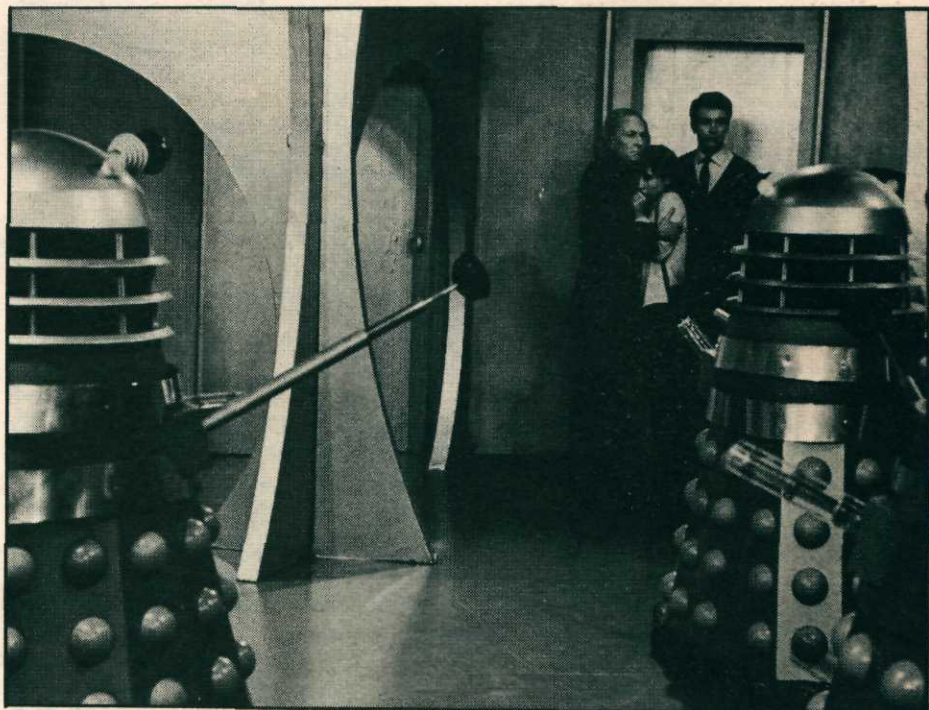
Daleks as well as I did.

So what is the nature of the Daleks? You must have based them on a real person or a number of real people, did you?

I can't isolate one character. But I suppose you could say the Nazis. The one recurring dream I have—once or twice a year it comes to me—is that I'm driving a car very quickly and the windscreen is a bit murky. The sun comes onto it and it becomes totally opaque. I'm still hurtling forward at incredible speed and there's nothing I can see or do and I can't stop the car. That's my recurring night-

mare and it's very simply solved by psychologists who say you're heading for your future. You don't know what your future is. However much you plead with somebody to save you from this situation, everybody you turn to turns out to be of 'Them'. And there's nobody left—You are the lone guy.

The Daleks are all of 'Them' and they represent for so many people so many different things, but they all see them as government, as officialdom, as that unhearing, unthinking, blanked-out face of



*The Doctor, Ian and Barbara, are cornered by the Daleks in the story, **The Survivors** (1963).*

authority that will destroy you because it wants to destroy you. I believe in that now: I've directed them more in that way over the years.

Presumably by writing about the future, by creating your own future, you're making what lies at the end of the road, at the other side of the windscreen, less frightening because it's less unknown and because you're controlling it.

Yes. I mean, Dr Who always comes out of it alive, however bad the problem. The good guys, if they don't win exclusively, at least

"In this country, if I write a novel, I am instantly dismissed as being a television writer."

come out winning that particular round of the war. Dr Who doesn't win the war, but he wins a battle.

You once said all your writing was about survival.

Yes, well it's a theme that's actually gone through my work enormously. I see minefields all around me: I'm not that confident. I've been going back and forth from London to Geneva (working on a new project) and it may be like Walter Mitty but I'm in that aeroplane and I'm waiting for the moment when they say, "Can anybody fly this aero-

plane?" And I can't but I know that finally I'm going to be the one who has to do it. There is menace all around you. It's a fairly dark world out there. It doesn't infringe very much on my personal life, but when I listen to any news broadcast I think, "God! I might be living in Beirut. I could be one of those people in Beirut being shelled every day of my life." As a wartime child, I grew up when bombs were dropping and men actually were trying to kill me—not personally, but they wouldn't mind if they killed me.

Your Genesis of the Daleks story for Dr Who has come astonishingly surrealistic scenes in it. Dr Who falling down a cliff, the girl with her foot trapped in the railway line, genetic experiments, gas battles.

My favourite character in a Dr Who series in year was Davros: the man in the wheelchair who was actually perpetuating his image in his machines. He was a creator. "You are made in your creator's image." That's what I wanted to do. I think it was a smashing set of episodes. I loved them. David Maloney directed it (he also directed some *Blake's 7* episodes) and he found production values they hadn't had there for ages. It seems to me if you have to say, "What's the best Dr Who series that ever happened?" from my point of view that would be it.

And it had that astonishing battlefield.

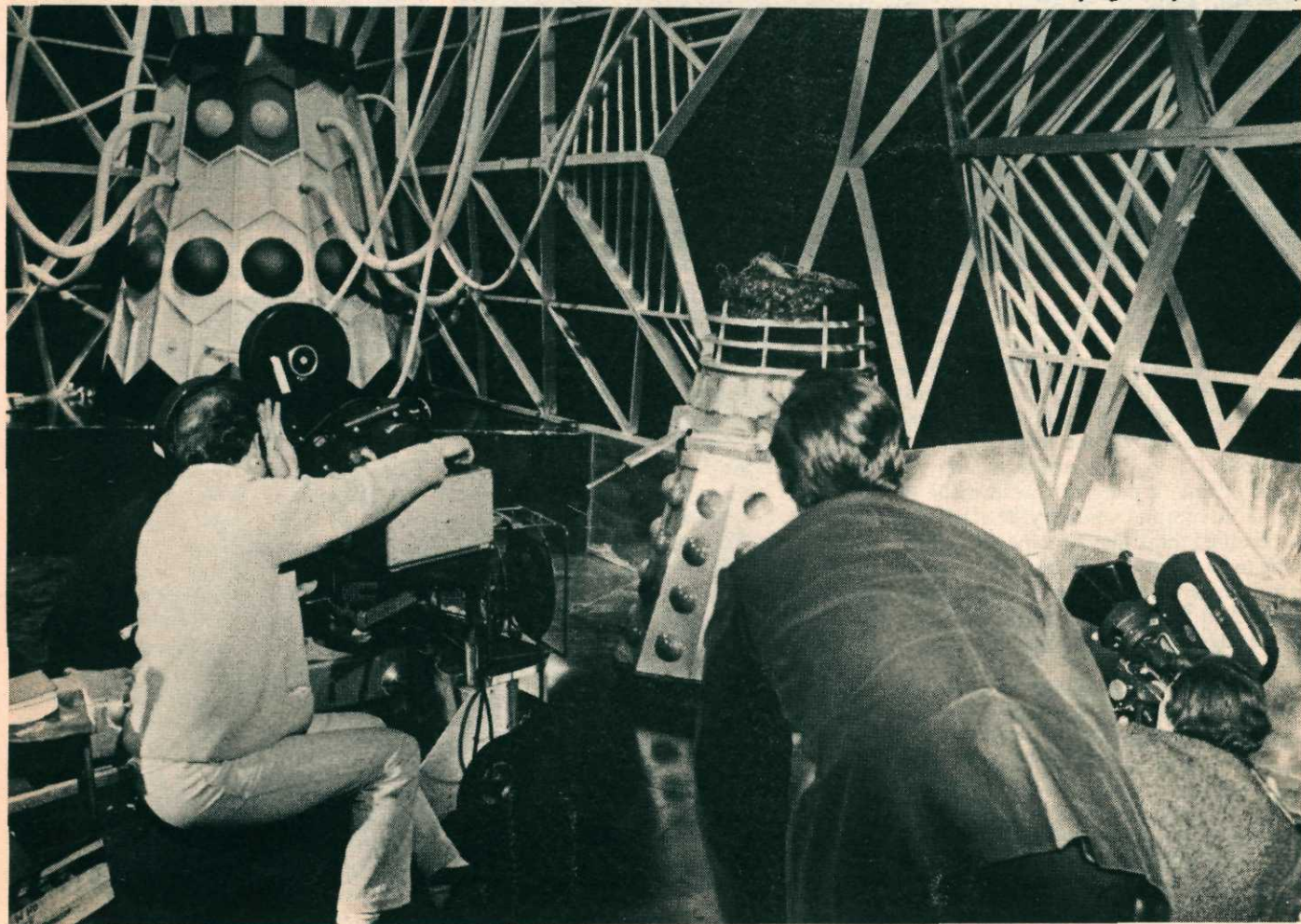
It was a bizarre World War I battlefield because, lying alongside the most incredible space-age gun is an iron hatchet. I think it was really something I saw as a kid: a movie called *Things to Come* (1935) where everybody had reverted almost to primitivism, but they were also building this great spaceship. The technology had run out; they were going back to more and more basic things. But somewhere in there was a *corps elite* of people working who still had their priorities. I truly believe it is set up that, if it happens

"The Daleks are Mark I. In *Blake's 7* The Federation is the Daleks Mark II, if you like."

someone presses the button or releases the virus or whatever, there are areas of elitism that will be protected until the very last moment because the future of mankind is in the hands of these elements. And (in *Genesis of the Daleks*) Davros' force was called The Elite.

*That brings us to your TV series *Survivors*. It was more serious than, say, *Dr Who*.*

Oh, very much more. I was very committed to that series and still am very concerned about our increasing reliance on technology. In *Survivors* I was trying to say "Here am I,



A rare, behind-the-scenes shot of the Doctor Who special effects team at work. A scene from The Evil of the Daleks (1967).



*Terry Nation poses for a photograph with a metallic friend. The robot will be appearing in the second series of **Blake's 7**, to be screened in the new year.*

a man of the generation that landed men on the moon, and I don't know how to make an iron axe-head". That's what concerned me. There's nothing in my house that is the exclusive product of one man. I mean, a matchstick is a huge piece of technology. A length of line, a piece of thread made of nylon is an enormous industry. That bothers me because I think that, at some point, I am going to be thrown on my own resources by either world cataclysm or personal cataclysm. And I don't know anything. That's the message that **Survivors** was supposed to offer.

*You wrote the novelisation of **Survivors** yourself—something you didn't do for **Blake's 7**. Why was that?*

Because I cared enough. I found it very tough too. But I wanted to do it my way. In this country, if I write a novel, I am instantly dismissed as being a television writer who has ventured into the rarefied world of the book writer. I sell a lot of copies, but I really shouldn't be there. It was noticed very badly in this country—I mean very, very few notices took me seriously or

the book seriously. Nobody liked it as a literary piece. Then it appeared in America, where I am next-to-unknown as a television writer, and it was reviewed. A lot of terrible reviews, but some very good ones. People took it seriously and were concerned. And so 'The Novel' is somewhere in my future. *The film director Sam Peckinpah was quoted as saying if he gets 60% of what he wants on screen, he's a very lucky man.*

I would have said he's been very lucky if he's got 60% of what he's always wanted to achieve. When BBC2 opened, they did a big drama series and I did an adaptation of *A Kiss Before Dying*, a novel by Ira Levin, who wrote *Rosemary's Baby*. I did a good adaptation of it and it was really quite well produced for an American subject in Britain, which we don't do terribly well. And I actually sat back and forgot I'd written it and watched it and enjoyed it. Very seldom am I able to dissociate myself until years later. When I watch first time, I think: "That's not what I meant . . . He doesn't look like that" and so on. It is always frustration. But then you'd go potty

if you really let that get to you. So you live with it.

Do you 'own' the Daleks?

Yes.

A percentage?

A large percentage of them, yes. The BBC and I have a deal. Nobody can use the Daleks without my consent in any situation. And if they use the Daleks, then I benefit financially from their use anywhere in the world. There's a lovely one—there's nothing I can do about it—a new ad (for Rediffusion TV rentals) that's running at the moment with a remote control colour set and the headline is *I Will Obey*. I think I've sort of put things into the English language now. I can't copyright that phrase, but it's associated with Daleks. And *Exterminate*—I didn't really invent that (laughs). The Germans did. I think my big moment of great happiness was when somebody told me *Dalek* was in the new—full—Oxford Dictionary—You know, the twelve volumes of obscure words. *Dalek* apparently is in there: that pleased me no end.

You're always reported as not knowing where you got the word from. Do you?

No, but I'll tell you a story that I found fascinating. Someone in the *Daily Mail* dragged it up years ago. Their line was

"In the *Survivors* series I was trying to say: Here I am, a man of the generation that landed a man on the moon, and I don't know how to make an iron axe-head."

WHAT DO PRESIDENT TITO AND TERRY NATION HAVE IN COMMON?

And the answer is nothing, of course. However, Terry Nation doesn't know the meaning of the word *Dalek* and President Tito does. Because in Serbo-Croat the word *Dalek* means "far and distant things". Isn't that incredible? I found that very, very strange and bizarre. I don't meet too many Serbo-Croats in my regular, daily life.

***Blake's 7** was widely criticised for having cheap production values.*

What can I say?

They looked pretty cheap.

They were. Yes, they were by any standards. I mean, you have to know the current state of the BBC. They were the best we could produce and we have never done less than our best. But, finally, if you want to buy a motor car and you can afford a second-hand 1948 Ford Anglia, that's what you go after. So yes, OK, to the buff we are not in *Star Trek's* class, but we attempted more than *Star Trek* ever did.

But with no decent budget.

Well, it would have been nice but that wasn't possible—it wasn't achievable—so you go with what you've got.

Avon seemed to me to be a far more attractive and dominant character than Blake himself.

Aaah. He (Paul Darrow) took hold of the part and made it his own. It could have been a very dull role, but this particular actor took hold of it and gave it much better dimensions than I'd ever put on paper. He is an enormously popular character. He is incredibly popular—and rightly so. He's a good actor. I think he's terrific. I enjoy watching him all the time. This is how stars emerge, I suppose: it's the actor's doing.

Was Blake's 7 easier to write than Dr Who?
Presumably because it's longer it's easier to pace.

Yes. Tempo is vital. Years ago a radio producer told me that all of drama is shaped like a 'W'. You start at a peak, but

"Hammer movies are very interesting: when they do their heavy horror sequences, somewhere in there is always the light relief."

you can't ride on that peak all the time because it's just very boring. Hammer movies are interesting: when they do their very heavy horror sequences, somewhere in there is always the light relief.

You also tend to have two or three sub-plots going on in your series. Not just in Blake but also in Dr Who.

Always. Always. I maintain it's the only way to write those things and they don't do it enough. Always my aim in episode one was split them. Get them all going off in different directions so the moment whatever Dr Who was doing was getting dull, or he was getting to the edge of a precipice, or his fingers were slipping, then cut to the other one. Cut to the other one so you've got this

intercut situation. I think what's happened with the *Dr Who* series now is that they haven't done that enough. I think they tell one story. They mainline it, following Tom Baker, and there isn't enough diversion of secondary and tertiary stories. I did that (using sub-plots) in *Blake* all the time.

The central idea of Blake's 7 is wildly subversive, isn't it?

Well, the Daleks are Mark I. The Federation is the Daleks Mark II, if you like.

But the audience is asked to identify with rebels who are going round blowing up official installations—people who might be called terrorists.

In a way, yes, you're absolutely right. But I disapprove entirely of that kind of political action. That's why, in the first episode, I made The Federation so beastly and monstrous.

In the Blake episode Bounty, starring the Irish actor T. P. McKenna, you had a community which was going to be torn apart by two internal factions fighting each other. The Federation's plan was to send in a supposed 'peace-keeping' force which was, in fact, an occupying army. That sounds like you were thinking of a particular, real, situation. Were you?

Syria. It's a political device that happens all the time. That's what was happening at the time with Syria. (The Syrians sent a peace-keeping force into Lebanon.)

You were sneaking in a serious idea.

Yes. But I guarantee that 99.9% of people in the world who see that show won't see any political significance at all. Though, God knows, I've got to get all those people to relate to some truth, some honour or some dignity somewhere. It is not just people tearing around in spaceships, although that may appear to be what it is.

My Blake is the true figure of good. Do

you know the story of the Last Crusade?—I think it's the Third Crusade. All these guys set off and they were really going to wipe out these heathens and they got as far as Venice, I think, and ran out of money, ran out of boats and a million other things. And the Venetians said *Okay, fellahs, listen. There's a Christian community over there. You've got the men and the arms. Go and wipe out that town and we'll give you the boats.*

So they wiped out the Christian community so that they could get the boats to wipe out the heathen community. It's that kind of deviousness that I see in The Federation. They have no regard for Man; they have regard only for the mechanics of Man—for that machine. It all works neatly and efficiently. It doesn't matter what the cost in manpower; it's the final solution. Get rid of the Jews and the world is going to be lovely; get rid of the gypsies and the world is going to be lovely. That metamorphosis doesn't ever work. Finally somebody has to be on the line that says *I, at least, am honourable and I believe in my honour.* The awful thing for me would be to find out that that honour is the true evil—which would be devastating and destroy my life.

Do you find that people don't treat you

"To the buff we are not in *Star Trek's* class, but we attempted more than *Star Trek* ever did."

seriously as a writer because you write 'fantasy'?

Oh, I'm never taken as a serious writer.

That must be frustrating, isn't it? Not getting credit for hard work.

Well, perhaps. But if you're a popular entertainer, then that's the kind of badge you carry, I suppose. I don't mind that too much. I mean, I have yet to prove that I've got something very valid and good to offer. I've yet to do that. I think I *will*, because I'm learning my craft and I'm beginning to get it right now. I think it will come. I've always believed I'm a late developer, so I think it's just taking me longer. My intention always is to entertain because, if I fail to do that, I think I've failed to reach an audience. But within the context of primarily entertaining, I like to say some things that I believe are valid and good and honourable, if you like. I don't want to use the medium simply for adventure: I'd like to educate—Oh! I take that word back!—But, all right, having said it and retracted it, you know what I mean.

To intellectually interest?

(Laughs) I wish I'd said that. But, having said it, I would never actually let that be said aloud, in a way. I hope it's subversive in that sense. What they must see is a good entertainment. If it has an additional value, then terrific. That's really what I would like to achieve.



The Survivors traces the progress of handful of people who live through a global holocaust. In episode two, "Genesis," Greg (Ian McCulloch), and Anne (Myra Frances) discover the dead body of Vic (Terry Scully).

So, let's look at the future now. Have you changed anything in the second series of **Blake's 7**?

Yes, one of the characters is going to die. And, earlier, you mentioned your new project **Bedouin**.

It's a marvellous adventure story to be shot in the desert. I think twelfth century. The Crusaders. It's just possible that the Crusaders could be around in the period of my picture. It might be tenth century, I'm not sure.

This is a feature for the cinema, isn't it?

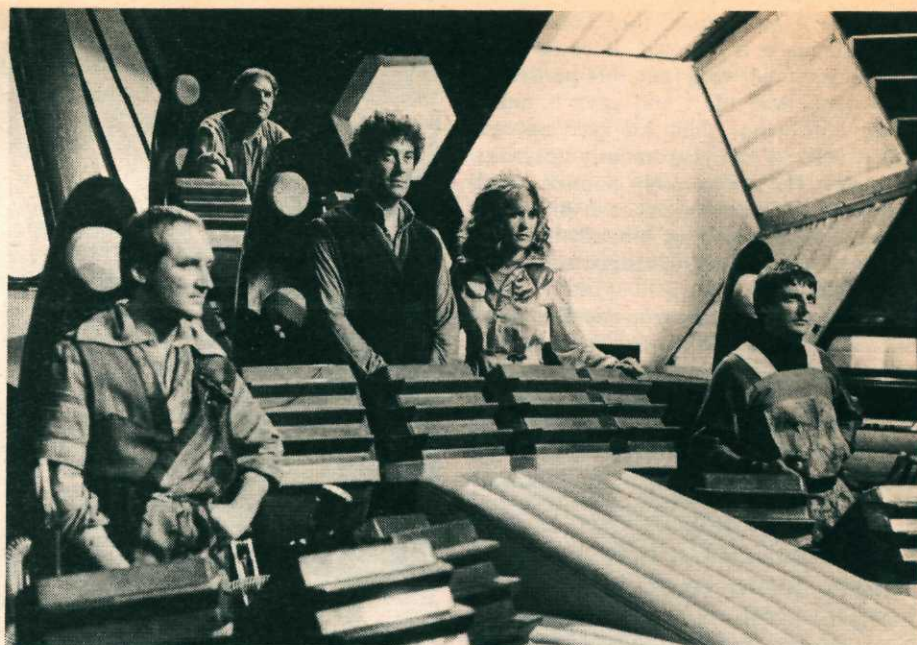
Yes, with the projection that it could ultimately turn into a major American network hour-long special. The director is not assigned and the producers are a company who are based in Geneva. The man I'm

"In the second series of *Blake's 7* one of the characters is going to die."

working with is a super guy called Hal Vaughan; we've had very exciting discussions. I love getting into these kind of projects. This is the marvellous time when you're talking about it: everything is exciting—what can you achieve?

*Can you tell me anything about **Bedouin**?*

It honestly is a bit early days yet. It's a real adventure story and there is one aspect of it that will have some . . . You see, as soon as you say "Arabia" and "fantasy", you're into the Hollywood version of it, which is not what we have. It's something quite different. I'm merely saying that some of the strengths of the heavies in it come out of things that are long-forgotten and past. If you want to take the simplest level of hypnotism, they have that. But they also have much more potent powers from the



The crew in the *Liberator* in control. Left to right: Vila (Michael Keating), Gan (David Jackson), Blake (Gareth Thomas), Jenna (Sally Knyvette) and Avon (Paul Darrow).

ancients to unite their particular force.

Powers from the ancients?

Possibly even—it has been said aloud in our discussions—Who taught the Egyptians to build the pyramids? . . . It's in our thinking. But, at this point, I'm not letting it really influence things until I know more the nature of the creature I'm dealing with. Is there a Wisdom? The Von Daniken kind of thinking. I disapprove of him entirely; but is there a Wisdom somewhere that there could have been from another source?

Why is money being put up for an Arabian story when there's no apparent market for Arabian stories?

Well, is there not? That's the point.

Everyone still wants to finance sharks and

creatures from outer space, don't they?

I started **Blake** at a time when I thought science fiction was going to be right and the fact that we opened the same night as **Star Wars** in this country seemed to prove that thinking right. Now there's this project **Bedouin**. It's a new look, it's a new background, a new dimension and I think it could be quite an interesting one.

Why do you think the time is right?

Well, perhaps it is simply the fact of new locations and backgrounds. Maybe it's that. I've been watching **How the West Was Won** (on TV). It's a good series. Again, it's telling the stories of about seven people, so you're intercutting the stories all the time. And we're back to real old-fashioned cowboys - and - Indians. It's story - telling again. That's the cycle that I believe is constantly coming up. Story - telling.

"I disapprove of the Von Daniken style of thinking entirely."

Whether we tell it against sand or against space, I want good stories.

*And after **Bedouin** what will you be doing?*

Well, I frequently wonder what I'm going to be when I grow up. I'm not sure. I know it will be writing. I think it will be writing. I mean, I'm really newly-excited about **Bedouin**. I'm high on it. It's my current drug. But I wouldn't like to think that for the next five years that is going to be . . . I've been too long with products. When I create a product of my own or I'm deeply involved with a product at its beginning, it takes three to five years out of my life and I should be doing more things. I've got more things I want to do. I mustn't stay with things for as long in future. I must move on and move on and find out where I need to go.



Roj Blake (Gareth Thomas) poses with some friends who appeared in the fifth episode of the first series of *Blake's 7*, "The Web".