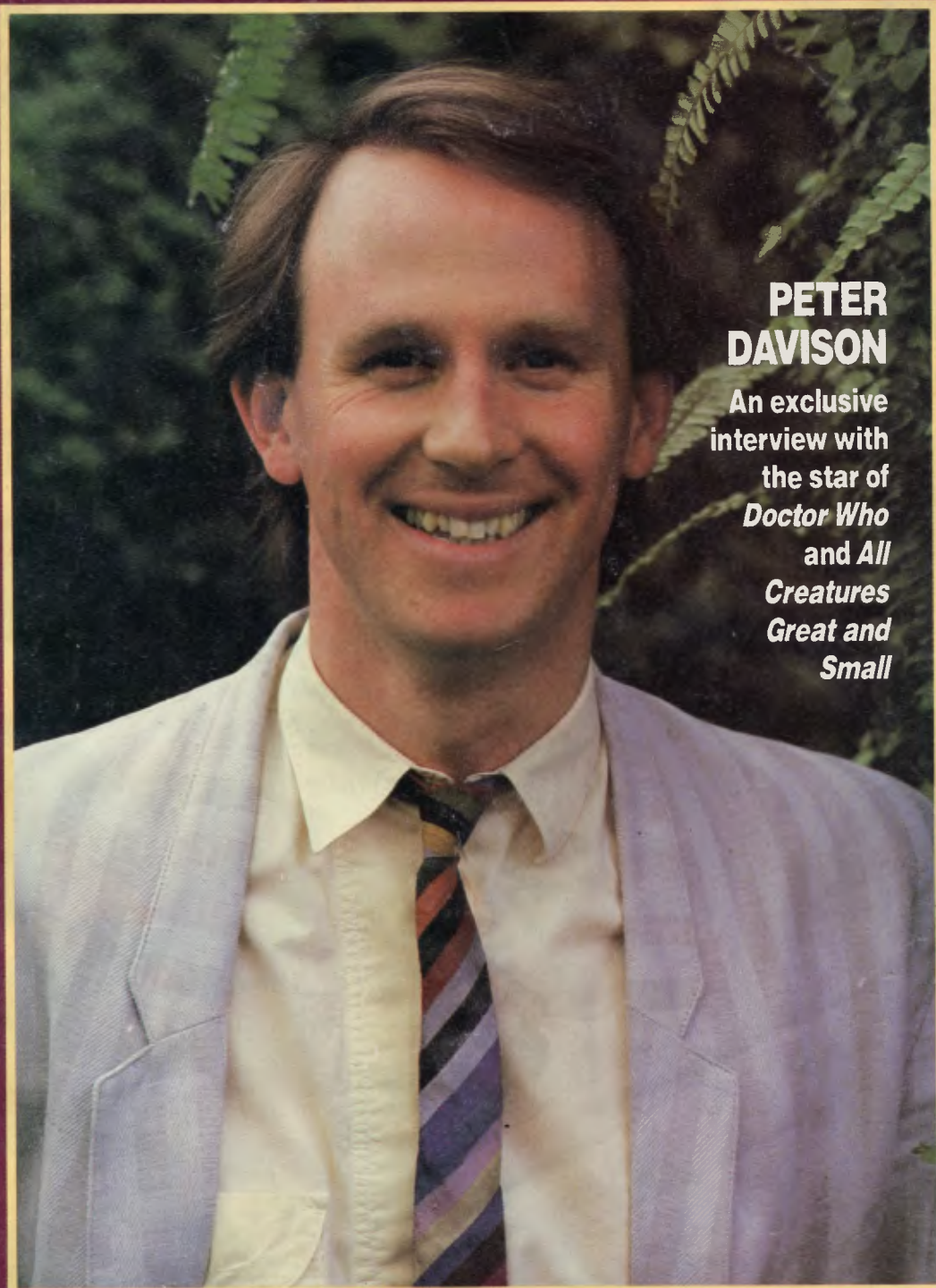


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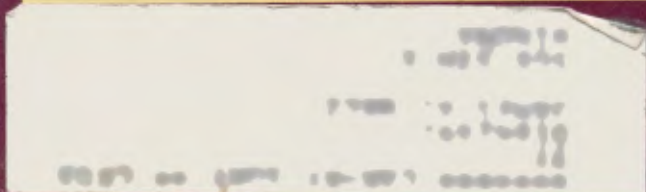


**MEET JOHN
McLAUGHLIN**



PETER DAVISON

An exclusive
interview with
the star of
Doctor Who
and *All
Creatures
Great and
Small*



It's hard to imagine any Channel 2 viewers more devoted than those who greeted British television star Peter Davison at the Twin Cities' first-ever *Doctor Who* convention this spring. A sellout crowd of 2,000 waited two hours for his appearance at the St. Paul Prom Center, and convention organizers said another 2,000 fans were unable to get tickets. In Davison's honor, many of those lucky enough to get inside wore orange-trimmed cutaway coats and celery boutonnières. They gave him deafening standing ovations when he arrived and when he left.

Then again, it's just possible that Davison's most faithful fans in the Twin Cities are viewers of *All Creatures Great and Small* on Channel 2. "The *Doctor Who* conventions are a bit deceiving" as a measure of fan interest, the 35-year-old Davison said in an interview at the KTCA studio before the convention. "Ninety-nine percent of the time when I'm recognized in this country, it's for my role as Tristan in *All Creatures*."

That statement may shock *Doctor Who* fans, but it makes sense. *All Creatures Great and Small* still holds a record it established in 1978 as the most-watched dramatic series in England. In this country it has been in a kind of semipermanent repeat status following its first showing during the 1979-80 PBS season. For the past six years, despite being moved out of prime time to 5 p.m. Sundays, it has quietly attracted nearly as many Channel 2 viewers as *Doctor Who* attracts on Friday and Saturday nights.

Davison was surprisingly relaxed for someone who had just flown in from two West Coast *Doctor Who* conventions, with a third one scheduled at the Prom Center in a few hours and a fourth in Boston the next day. He even seemed relieved to talk about something besides *Doctor Who* and to fill in details of his acting career that are not well known to American audiences.

Davison grew up in a nontheatrical family in a London suburb and became interested in drama while acting in school plays. After three years at London's Central School of Speech and Drama, he embarked on the traditional English route to a stage career by working in repertory theater, first in Edinburgh and then Nottingham. "I played typical novice roles—second gentleman in Shakespeare, first villager in Ibsen—that sort of thing," Davison said. "Then, quite out of the blue, I decided to try out for a part in a television science-fiction drama called *The Tomorrow People*."

Although it was only a small role in a

PETER DAVISON

Trained for the stage, the star of *All Creatures Great and Small* and *Doctor Who* found his niche in television instead. Lucky us.

by Diane Kepner



three-part series, getting it shifted Davison's career plans. "I found I was very comfortable in the environment of a television studio. I liked knowing what was going on technically and felt I had very good control over what I was doing. Back then, theater was—and still is, to some extent—a much more mannered medium than television. I felt more at home with the greater naturalness of television acting."

After *The Tomorrow People*, Davison decided not to return to repertory theater and found a job at

the Board of Inland Revenue (England's IRS) so he could remain in London to pursue a television career. It was almost a year before his first big break came: the role of the earnest young farmer Tom Holland in the 14-episode "Love for Lydia" (shown on *Masterpiece Theatre* in 1979). "It was marvelous doing that series," Davison said. "We were all young and fairly new to it. It was a big serious-to-do that took more than a year to complete, and we just had a great time."

Even before "Love for Lydia" appeared on English television, Davison auditioned for another role, the one that established his star in the BBC firmament: that of Tristan, the charming, exasperating, womanizing, younger brother of Siegfried Farnon, James Herriot's veterinary partner in *All Creatures Great and Small*.

How did a 5'10" blond actor come to be chosen for the part of Tristan? Davison admitted he didn't exactly match the description of the small, dark-haired Tristan sketched by the real James Herriot in his autobiographical books that became the basis for the series. Nor, physically, did actor Robert Hardy (round and fair-haired) fit Herriot's description of tall, lean Siegfried. But, Davison said, "Hardy has a marvelously explosive and mad quality to his acting that matched the personality of the real Siegfried perfectly." Once Hardy had been cast as Siegfried, some limits were set on who could play Tristan. "As it was explained to me after I got the role of Tristan, even if brothers look very different in real life, that won't work for actors playing brothers on television. There has to be some physical resemblance, or the audience finds it too odd."

Once they started working on the series, the actors had to learn to work with a variety of four-footed costars. "Animals don't take stage direction very well," Davison said.

How about the earthier scenes with farm animals? "Yes," Davison said—that wonderful, boyish, Tristan grin lighting up his face—"those were real scenes with real cows. The fact of the matter is, country vets spend practically half their lives with their arms up cows. It's a primary form of diagnosis, like a doctor looking down our throats."

Of course, there was always a vet around telling the actors what to do, Davison explained. "And in fact, psyching oneself up for a scene like that is the worst

part. When it actually comes to the final event, it's fine—you just do it. When I did it, I was up on a freezing cold hillside in the middle of winter, stripped to the waist, and the only warm part of my body was my arm."

And where did all those minor characters in the series, the delightfully idiosyncratic Yorkshire farmers and townspeople, come from—were they professional actors? "Certainly anyone who had a speaking part was an actor," Davison said. "But most of them you will never see on television except in that series. They were club comedians—it's a north-of-England tradition—who travel the circuit of workingmen's clubs to perform in variety shows on Saturday nights."

By mid-1977, filming of the first series of 13 episodes had been completed. The shows aired on BBC television later that year and were an immediate hit, Davison said. "But, in fact, everyone who worked on *All Creatures* now agrees that the stories moved too fast in the beginning. We went through too much of Herriot's pre-World War II material in that first series. After it proved so successful, story lines for the two subsequent series were more fully developed in order to slow things down, because Herriot wouldn't allow BBC scriptwriters to just out-and-out invent new tales."

Despite enormous viewer interest, *All Creatures* came to a close after 41 episodes because all of the original Herriot material had been used up. Only two *All Creatures* specials, which focus on postwar reunions of the main characters, have been made since then. (The first special was shown on Channel 2 during Pledge Week last March and may be shown again in November at the close of the current series run. The second, filmed last winter, is not yet available in this country.)

"The main characters went their own ways after the war, so plots keeping them together were impossible," Davison said. However, a change may be in the wind. "Very recently," Davison continued, "Herriot agreed to allow BBC scriptwriters to invent stories—as long as he has final approval. So a new series is at least a possibility now, which it wasn't six months ago."

After completing *All Creatures*, Davison acted in two comedy series, neither of which has been shown in this country. His role as Brian in *Sink or Swim* remains one of his favorites because the series was especially well written and offered him a chance to do something completely different from Tristan: He played a "staid and rather boring" older brother. Davison was less enamored of the other sitcom, *Holding the Fort*.

Six years ago, Davison received a phone call from John Nathan-Turner, producer of *Doctor Who*, the long-running BBC science-fiction series that

had become an English institution. Davison said he was flabbergasted at being asked to play the main character in a series he had watched devotedly while growing up. His selection was the lead story on the news in England one November night in 1980—together with a story about another actor, Ronald Reagan, who had just been elected President.

Davison, the fifth person to play the Doctor, chose to model his character after the second Doctor, Patrick Troughton, his boyhood favorite. "I wanted to make the Doctor into more of a reckless innocent than he had been during the reign of Tom Baker [the fourth Doctor]. The show had become very funny under Baker, but it had lost some of the genuine adventure and cliffhanger excitement of its early years. I wanted to inject the idea that the Doctor just might fail sometimes, that he might not magically make it through to the end."

That led to one of the most controversial *Doctor Who* programs, one that called for one of the Doctor's companions to be killed. "Over the years," Davison said, "as companions were scheduled to leave the show, their departures were handled in various ways. They might choose to stay behind on another planet or get married, but it had never been scripted to have one die."

Davison's and Nathan-Turner's decision to have Adric perish in a crash caused a furor among viewers. "Admittedly, it was shocking," Davison said, "but it also paid dividends in terms of the series. It meant that events like that were possible. The Doctor was seen to be mortified by this dreadful thing that had happened and to be struck by his responsibility for it."

After three years, Davison quit the show. "It was great fun doing *Doctor Who*—it's like all your childhood fantasies coming true," Davison said. "But there's something lacking in professional satisfaction. Once you've established your character, there is basically nothing more you can do with the part. You just save the world every two weeks."

Davison returned to the stage. He acted in two plays in England—"American plays, actually; I've been working on my American accent"—with his American wife, actress Sandra Dickinson. In addition, he played the male lead in a serious turn-of-the-century dramatic series, *Ana of the Five Towns*, which aired this year on cable television. And he has just completed a new BBC comedy series called *A Very Peculiar Practice* in which he plays an idealistic young doctor, who—unlike Tristan—can't handle women very well.

Not bad for someone who was told in drama school that his future lay in character parts and that he shouldn't expect to find regular work until he was 40. □

Minneapolis free-lance writer Diane Kepner wrote about PBS book tie-ins in the June issue of *SCENE*.