

Dr Who's SUCCESS

By Julian Critchley

"Isn't it terrible" was the reaction of a small boy of seven who watched the return of *Doctor Who*, B.B.C. 1 on Saturday. With others he had sat spellbound as the Doctor, with his acolytes Jamie and Victoria, searched the empty tomb of the Cybermen for any sign of its former inhabitants.

Doctor Who has a time machine that allows him to voyage back and forth across the universe intervening, on instructions from Time Grove, in the events of both the past and future. I was told that Jamie, a Scots youth who has taken the kilt into outer space, was rescued by the Doctor from the Highlands after the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie, while Victoria was the daughter of a 19th-century scientist who had come to a bad end. She was, not surprisingly, anxious about the length of her skirt.

Doctor Who is the most successful of children's programmes because it has matched its science fiction setting with good story telling, and the most ingenious array of props and electronic sound effects. The children can identify, too, with Doctor Who's child companions. But most important of all Doctor Who's infallibility is a device that allows even a nervous child to believe that in spite of the most alarming experiences all will be well in the end. It is reality, or what passes for it, that children find truly terrifying.

Later the B.B.C. showed *Tony Bennett meets Robert Farnon*, in which singer and bandleader interrupted each other's performances to exchange compliments of a fulsome, vulgar and unwarranted sort. Bennett, like a prize fighter, sang from a crouching position, hand microphone held firmly in front of his mouth. Perhaps it is because he has sung his songs so often that he is unable to resist the temptation to embroider them in such an irritating way.

He sang a composition of Farnon's which was forgettable, while every so often the orchestra was allowed to indulge in a piece of gymnastics, the saxophone players standing up in batteries, that in this sort of programme passes for serious music.

On Sunday Zero Mostel, who made his name in *Rhinoceros* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, was introduced in B.B.C. 2's *Zero Hour*. A clown with a face that has something both of Alistair Sim and Charles Laughton, he sang, danced and took part in sketches, some of which were better suited to the theatre than to television. I felt that, good though he is, last night at least he was too big for the medium.