

DR. WHO

You've **Seen The Series**, **Read The Books...** Now Here's **The Movie!**

As Dr. Who gets a new health check, JOHN MOSBY looks at the troubled history of the show, and examines the road to recovery.

Dr. Who is the longest-running sci-fi show in the world, but it has a history full of controversy, cancellations, disputes and frustration. Despite being a lucrative cash-cow on its overseas sales, the show has been off TV screens for nearly seven years. Every so often a rumour would spring up. Eric Idle, Richard O'Brien, John Cleese, Sting and David Hasselhoff (God help us!) were all rumoured to be contenders for the lead role if the show returned, but the TV was a BIG 'if' every time it looked like something was going to happen, hopes were dashed.

Until now.

Finally, the show is back, first on TV in the States, then on BBC Video, then on transmission on BBC. On top of all this, of course, are the regular vintage stories being shown on UK Gold.

But it has been a long road back. Fans of the show - and as Time Lords themselves - are more than aware of the ill-feeling the powers-that-be have caused.

"I was the longest-serving incarnation so far," says Jon Pertwee, one of the most popular Doctors (Number 3). "People grow familiar with a face, and I think the audiences liked the devices and vehicles. I brought in the Whomobile and Sesame (the classic car) and also ended up riding motorbikes and jet-boats - there was a certain Bond-ish feel to the Doctor, and that owes a great deal to Terry Welsh, my stumman."

At the time Pertwee is speaking of, the show was still being seen in its established Saturday evening, prime time slot. This was to remain the case throughout the Tom Baker years, but when Peter Davison took over the role in 1982 the decision was soon taken to switch the show to a midweek, bi-weekly position.

"Well, of course I had been off the show for some time before that happened," admits Pertwee. "But there is some irony there in the fact that it was probably moved from its traditional slot by the success of *Worzel Gummidge* on ITV."

That was the show, adapted from the classic children's books, which told of the adventures faced by a dilly scarecrow, played by Pertwee. It ran very successfully for some years, before the production was transferred to New Zealand. The show also moved time-slots to Sunday morning, a decision that was made by one Michael Grade, then Programme Controller with the BBC. A popular man?

"Not with me, he isn't," Pertwee admits.

Colin Baker took over the role from Peter Davidson. While Davidson was seen as perhaps a little too young for the role, Baker was never really given the chance to develop his own take on the character. Some liked the more unpredictable, arrogant qualities that Baker

was trying to bring to the fore, but a union strike which delayed the show's second season with the actor didn't help, and Colin Baker remains the only incarnation of the Doctor never to play a regeneration scene (into Sylvester McCoy's seventh Doctor).

"Basically, my contract wasn't renewed," Baker says. "The powers-that-be (Michael Grade, now working for Channel 4 - now why is that name familiar?!) decided in his infinite wisdom that the time had come for a new Doctor. John Nathan Turner (a man long associated with overseeing the Time Lord's adventures) was given the unenviable job of ringing me up and saying: 'There's good news, and there's bad news'. They did ask me to come back to film a regeneration scene, but the answer I gave them was similar to 'No'. I would quite happily have done one more series, and then regenerated, but that wasn't to be. On the flip-side, I did get more work security in my theatre work for a year, anyway."

Sylvester McCoy's seventh Doctor spin landed firmly down the middle. Many didn't like the new incarnation, but equally as many



see it as a nod to the Troughton era. But the budget and the story-lines were seen as the biggest handicaps. McCoy was saddled with Bonnie Langford's Mel, a character whose only characteristics were being able to scream loudly and looking as if she had been dressed by a half-blind tailor with a questionable penchant for pins. It was scheduled opposite *Coronation Street*, the equivalent of placing a troubled show opposite *The X-Files* today. Ratings were guaranteed to drop, thus 'justifying' a cancellation. Even long-term fans were diagnosing a mercy killing - even the removal of Mel and a new companion, the explosive Ace, couldn't save the show.

The years ticked by with little change, until Philip Segal - a man with a long-enduring love for the series, and connections with the movers and shakers in Hollywood - finally decided that he couldn't wait for someone else to make the effort. Time for action!

Now, several months later, the TV pilot has been filmed in Vancouver (standing in for the San Francisco of New Year's Eve, 1999), sharing sets with some *X-Files* locations. Paul McGann steps into the role of the Time Lord, but not before we see Sylvester McCoy enjoy a last few minutes in a revamped - (though still classic) - TARDIS.

"In the past the problem with the show was that the scripts promised very large worlds, and with small budgets you can't deliver that much world," explains Segal. "Everybody does what they can. I've always said that it's not a function of camp and wobbly sets - it's a function of doing the show within the parameters of a budget, or not doing it at all. If I had to bring Dr. Who back within the confines of the original format, I would have done less episodes, and made each episode more expensive."

And what about all the star names attached to the Doctor?

"None of those names were contenders," Segal tells me, not beating around the bush. "There were people that we met - very talented actors, whose names will go



unmentioned - but we were looking for one specific person, and the first thing that he ran about Paul McGann were his eyes. Just look at his eyes - he's an alien! He was born to be the Doctor!"

Segal's credits include *Twin Peaks*, *thirtysomething*, *The Young Riders* and *China Beach*, and he was also approached by Steven Spielberg's new company, *Amblin*, to be involved in TV production, where he helped create (the now sunk) *SeaQuest* (which he admits he's not proud of). He also created *Earth 2*.

So how did he find working with the BBC?

"The BBC gets a bad name because what the BBC doesn't do very well is disseminate information," he says. "It's not organized, departmentally, in a way where people report to other people in other departments - it's fragmented." Having said that, if you dissect the BBC there are people who are very talented and creative - you can't blanket the Corporation by saying that it's all terrible. It provides a canvas for very talented people to paint on.

"There are gems of gold within the BBC, but the bureaucracy itself is disgusting - it's tragic the way some shows are handled."

Segal has high hopes for the new series, but it will all come down to the ratings. Either way, the big decision will be made by early June. If a series does go ahead, we can expect at least 13 - probably 20-plus hour-long, self-contained episodes, with some story arcs (as in *The X-Files* and *Highlander*).

"*The X-Files* is starting to fade a bit in the States," Segal admits. "The *Star Trek* phenomena has faded too, and there are no other new franchises."

"*Dr. Who* has every opportunity to make it. If it does, and it's as financially rewarding as *The X-Files* has been for Fox, then no-one is going to complain!"

The new *Dr. Who* feature film was released by BBC Video on May 15th, old series of *Dr. Who* show on UK Gold. The Sci-Fi Channel shows *The Doctors: 30 Years Of Time Travel* at 1pm on the 30th on cable and satellite, and Warner's Beyond Vision label has just released the movies *Dr. Who* and *The Daleks and Daleks: Invasion Earth 2160 AD* for £12.99 each.

