Who's the daddy as 10m find time to see the Doctor

By Adam Sherwin
Media Reporter

THE £10 million gamble that the BBC took on reviving *Doctor Who* appears to have paid off: more than ten million of us tuned in to see the Time Lord rematerialise.

BBC One beat off ITV in one of the fiercest Saturday night ratings battles for years. While *Doctor Who* got a peak viewership of 10.5 million, *Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* on ITV1 — featuring David Beckham — pulled in only 8.5 million. *Doctor Who* was seen by 44 per cent of those watching television at 7pm.

Doctor Who was dropped by the BBC in 1989, when viewing figures fell to four million. But Christopher Eccleston, the ninth incarnation of the Doctor, opened with the same number of viewers hooked by Tom Baker during the series' high-watermark in the 1970s.

A further one million are believed to have recorded the programme or watched it with others at *Doctor Who* parties. As soon as the opening episode was over, thousands of fans gave their verdict in internet chatrooms. The Outpost Gallifrey site recorded 1,200 simultaneous hits.

Eccleston's performance was in general approved of, but some complained about the absence of the traditional cliffhanger ending.

A typical message on the BBC's *Doctor Who* board was posted by Harry "The Doctor" Hayfield, Ffos-y-ffin, Wales, who wrote: "Lots of proper drama intermingled with just the right amount of science, history and comedy. Now, where can I get one of those gobbling wheelie bins?"

A ratings failure was unthinkable for the BBC, which spent more than £1 million promoting the programme through television trailers and advertising hoardings. After struggling against ITV1's *Pop Idol* for several years, BBC One has deployed two blockbusters on Saturdays. *Strictly Dance Fever* is a spin-off from last year's *Strictly Come Dancing*, which has been bought by the Disney-owned ABC network for the United States. It was the surprise hit of 2004, attracting 11 million viewers for the final. *Strictly Dance Fever*, presented by Graham Norton, also began on Saturday night.

ITV1 joined the fray with a *Stars In Their Eyes* live final and *Celebrity Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*, but could not break BBC One's ratings lead.

The ten million-strong audience almost doubled BBC One's average Saturday-night figure this year and gives Peter Fincham, its new Controller, a boost.

Doctor Who was pulled from the schedules in 1985 by Michael Grade, who is now chairman of the BBC. It was revived by its international sales; the new series begins in Canada and New Zealand next month. A TV-movie version of *Dr Who*, starring Paul McGann, drew 9.1 million in 1996. Saturday's audience also dwarfed figures for the last series of the show in 1989, when Sylvester McCoy, the seventh Doctor, won an average 4.2 million viewers.

ITV said that it was untroubled by the defeat, claiming that comparisons between an entertainment show and a big-budget drama were unfair. A spokesman said: "The average audience of 7.2 million for Ant and Dec was up on the show last Easter Saturday, which got 7.1 million viewers. We have no complaints."

Saturday, with an England-Northern Ireland World-Cup-qualifying football match in the early evening, was a scheduler's dream. But the return of the Daleks promises to retain viewer interest in *Doctor Who*.

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PAST AND PRESENT

- 2005 season (Christopher Eccleston) ..... **10.5m viewers**
- 1996 (Paul McGann film) **9.1m**
- 1989 (Sylvester McCoy) **4.2m**
- 1974-81 (Tom Baker) ..... **10m average**
- 1963-66 (William Hartnell) ..... **4m** *rising to 10 million with Daleks*
- Peak audience ..... **16m** *1979 during ITV technicians' strike*
- First episode was aired on BBC, November 23, 1963
- More than 600 episodes, 150 stories and three films
- More than 110 million watch series in 65 countries

Traditional recipe with added spice

By Michael Gove

THE moment that summed up the new *Doctor Who* came three quarters of the way through Saturday's episode.

It was the point at which the alien-controlled plastic dummies bent on world domination revealed their true malevolence. Their hands flopped down at the wrist, in a gesture at once mechanical and camp, like android Larry Graysons, to reveal the firepower they'd kept hidden up their sleeves.

And there you have the new series in a nutshell.

There are elements that are formulae and aspects that are fairly ludicrous, as well as a strong sense of self-conscious, knowing irony. But the overall effect is still powerful and well-targeted.

The formulaic aspect of the production is there in the plotting, which sticks faithfully to the traditional *Doctar Who* template of hidden alien menace, malicious hidden intelligence and shrieking extras caught up in potentially devastating disaster.

The faintly ludicrous elements were mainly a consequence of the actors' interaction with the special effects. The characters' tussles with murderous wheelie bins and lethal shop dummy limbs were not television's most chilling moments.

But if the alien menace was crudely drawn, the same could not be said of the dialogue. The writer, Russell T. Davies, succeeded in working some quite sophisticated humour into a script that could still be followed easily by young children. The jokes about *Heat* magazine (that relationship will never last — he's gay and she's an alien) and about the exclusively male nature of adult *Doctor Wha* fans, living out their fantasies on the web, were just two of several smart lines. And the casting of Billie Piper (ingenue seduced by maverick older man) as the Doctor's companion was itself a prime example of knowing humour at the expense of Chris Evans.

The most powerful aspect of the production overall, however, is Christopher Eccleston's performance as the doctor. While Tom Baker and Jon Pertwee were doctors for the age of glam rock, Eccleston is perfect as the doctor of the age of Pete Doherty — solitary, enigmatic, secretive, but always, effortlessly, the centre of attention. Eccleston is a compellingly watchable actor and while he remains at the heart of the new *Doctor Who*, it deserves to be successful.

Is Dr Who the way forward for the BBC?
Send your e-mails to
debate@thetimes.co.uk