PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY FOR *RADIO TIMES* BY RICHARD ANSETT

The nightmare man

Steven Moffat scares people for a living. The fan-turned-mastermind talks misogyny, Missy and the past, present and future of *Who*

THE RT INTERVIEW BY **PATRICK MULKERN**

THERE'S A TELLING PHOTO of Steven as a boy in 1973 absorbed in a *Doctor Who* paperback. Can he paint a picture of the young Master Moffat back home in Paisley? "This is going to be so stereotypical *Doctor Who* fan. Quiet. Bullied at school. Very bookish. I liked anything magical. I loved the Narnia books and entirely missed the Christian allegory."

Today he's a crazily busy man, a top dog in British TV drama, running both *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*, global hits and cash cows for the BBC. He's just bagged a lifetime achievement trophy at the British Screenwriters' Awards, to add to the Emmy and five Baftas on his groaning mantelpiece. It's six years since Russell T Davies handed him the Tardis key and he says, "I'm gobsmacked by how much *Doctor Who* I've written – an insane amount."

The well of ideas isn't about to run dry any time soon, but the current series saw a shaky start with a dip in the ratings. An un-child-friendly time slot and being up against *The X Factor* and the Rugby World Cup on ITV didn't help, but Moffat concedes, "That wasn't our best-run launch. This isn't a new Doctor year, an anniversary or new companion year. It's dangerous when you don't have that special extra bit to launch a show with. And our ratings went up with episode five."

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Meet Moffat for the first time and he might seem saturnine, taciturn, a tad unapproachable. I've known him long enough to discern that, however high his profile, he's shy at heart. "Not at heart," he laughs. "At every level a shy person. But hey, I'm 54. I've got the hang of it." He doesn't let it interfere with the job. "I'm relaxed about getting up on stage and talking to a crowd and might even make them laugh. This, my son tells me, is typical of introverts. But stick me in a room with a bunch of people I don't know and I go, 'Oh God!' and try to hide behind Sue." His wife, Sue Vertue, is a fellow exec on *Sherlock*. They live in south-west London with their sons Joshua, 16, and Louis, 13.

His father, Bill, was a primary-school headmaster in Renfrewshire. For a while, Steven emulated his dad. With a degree in English and philosophy from Glasgow University, he began work as an English teacher at a high school in Greenock. "I feel fraudulent. I didn't complete three full school years. My father was passionate about teaching, and if you are, it's one of the most fascinating jobs in the world. But I was frustrated. I wasn't especially bad at teaching; I was good with the kids and reasonably popular. But it's not what I wanted to do – not that I ever imagined I'd get to do what I wanted to do."

HE'S NEVER LOST his passion for storytelling or scary *Doctor Who*. "It was the only programme in the history of children's TV that was unsuitable for children. That's why we loved it." Another fixation is Sherlock Holmes: "Arthur Conan Doyle's storytelling is amazing. It's pure, brisk and to the point. People don't talk about that enough. He's been obscured by his own creation." Ask him to list screenwriters he admires and he rattles off William Goldman, Quentin Tarantino, Aaron Sorkin and Neil Simon. "I wouldn't be grand enough to call them influences though."

Naming no names but "some things you see on TV are so bad, you think you shouldn't write for a week in case you're contaminated. In case it's got into your head. The sheer rubbishness of the dialogue and story construction. You have to detox. But you read a script by Russell [T Davies] and suddenly everything makes sense in an immaculate, clean way. I read [Davies's Channel 4 drama] *Cucumber* years ago for the simple reason I was stuck on *Doctor Who*, having a miserable time rewriting someone's script. And all I was doing covertly was saying, 'Russell, could you send me some good writing so I can remember what it's like?'

"The single most intractable trouble that bites us in the arse on *Doctor Who* is getting 12 scripts together that are good and makeable, with the right amount of CGI and prosthetics. That's the No 1. That's why this is a well-paid job." Regular *Who* writers Toby Whithouse, Chris Chibnall ▷

PEEP SHOW Steven Moffat in his London garden with his own Weeping Angel. The monster made its debut in the 2007 episode *Blink*, voted the best story in the past decade in an *RT* poll

COURTESY OF STEVEN MOFFAT

◁ and Mark Gatiss submit "incredibly polished first drafts. It's like having a day off."

Are colleagues free to tell the top dog when his own scripts aren't working? "Yeah, and they do all the time. You want to know if your joke's not funny before you stand in front of your audience. If I haven't had enough notes, I'll send a script to Mark or Russell for feedback. Ben Stephenson [departing BBC drama chief] sent me his notes for the 50th anniversary special and helpfully numbered them 1 to 50. Within the bubble of *Doctor Who* or *Sherlock* everyone's polite and honest. There's not much in the way of sycophancy. I'm not regarded as a figure of awesome power and significance. I'm the man who forgets to eat and has to be fed when he arrives at the office, the man who forgets his reading glasses."

TIME TO UNWIND
Steven Moffat in his study with a 2005-style Dalek

MOFFAT PREFERS TO write at home and has houses in London and Cardiff, where *Doctor Who* is based. "But the reality is I can be writing in a room at the studios – where I don't even have an office – or on the train." It's hard to shut out distractions: "If you've got two kids and a whole life going on, two TV series in production, there isn't anywhere to hide. If you hide, the problems stack up. It's like an air traffic controller taking a couple of days off."

He admits sometimes he's stuck for inspiration. "No magic will occur, so you have to force it out. When I was writing comedy, I used to say, 'Stare out the window until you make yourself laugh.' With *Doctor Who*, it's stare out the window until you surprise yourself and think, 'Oh that would be creepy.'" How does he get inside the mind of a superior intellect like Sherlock or the Doctor? "I take it seriously as a problem because you have to simulate genius while not being one. I try to work out what the Doctor is really up to and never tell you what it is."

Between them, Moffat and Peter Capaldi have let the Time Lord mellow this year. "I was watching Peter on the World Tour [2014] with his shades on, waving to the crowds and being such a rocker. That's what he once was, rocking round Glasgow in his younger days when the whole world wanted him. I wanted to see that in his Doctor. My big note this year was, 'You're the raddled old rocker.' If you want to play your electric guitar on top of a tank, you damn well do it."

UP TO 11... NO, 12!
Peter Capaldi relives his musical youth as the Doctor

Michelle Gomez has been a big hit as Missy, the female Master; and they go way back, to when her husband Jack Davenport starred in *Coupling* (Moffat's BBC2 sitcom). "She recalls – and I do not – when we were all out in Montreux in 2001 and *Coupling* won the Silver Rose. We all partied, so drunk we could hardly speak, and I said, 'I swear I'm gonna make *Doctor Who* one day.' I like the fact that this conversation took place between the future showrunner and future Master."

Moffat's *Who* always favours strong, enigmatic women (including Alex Kingston's River Song and Maisie Williams as Ashildr). "I'm married to a very powerful woman," he offers, opaquely. So why do *The Guardian* and online forums accuse him of misogyny? "It's a complicated issue. I never quite know how to respond. The general point being made by these people is correct. We need better female role models on screen. Maybe this is my dimwittery but I do not understand why *Doctor Who* of all shows is singled out as misogynist. I'm sure I'm to the left of a lot of my detractors."

Clara (Jenna Coleman) is leaving this series after three years spanning Matt Smith and Capaldi, and Moffat is keen to show the impact it has on the Time Lord. "*Doctor Who* does that form of bereavement rather well. We have an emotionally engaged hero and those women he knows are not like James Bond girls. They don't just disappear between movies. When the Doctor ends a friendship, it tears him apart."

HE'S ONLY JUST starting to consider her successor and has in mind "specific ideas but not a specific actress. A new companion gives us the chance to relaunch the show. And we've got a really cool new idea about how to do that."

He's signing up for another year and is knee-deep in plans for series ten but won't be drawn on when it will go into production, let alone air. After six years running *Who*, he's vague about his own regeneration and insists he won't leave

'I'd never leave *Doctor Who* in the lurch. It means too much'

until the right person emerges to pass the baton to. "That's an issue I'm actively engaged in. Everything is difficult in *Doctor Who*, including leaving. I'd never leave it in the lurch because it means too much to me. Let's not pretend it's not a big problem. But there will be a solution."

For now, he's happy in his dream job. If he could time-travel, what would he tell his bookish 11-year-old self? "I think he'd be alarmed at me turning up from the future. Since it all worked out well, I'd probably forbear from saying anything."