

AT THE FORMER headquarters of Arkwright Hardware Company on an industrial estate on the fringe of Vancouver, the only vaguely alien presence is the bullet-shaped silver chuckwagon in the car-park. Lost in a cloud of steam and barbecue smoke, it could pass for a crash-landed UFO from across the Canadian city where another crew is filming *The X Files*.

A visit to the set of *Doctor Who* conjures up images of papier-mâché monstrosities, nightmares in latex. But there is not a single Silurian, Cyberman or dear old Dalek in sight. Instead, the hangar-like building is dominated by a spectacular \$1-million soundstage — a mad-scientist mixture of Jules Verne's *Nautilus* and the British Library reading room. Next to it stands a Gothic homage to Bram Stoker's Carfax Abbey being prepared by effects-men for a climactic shootout. In a distant corner only the rather forlorn-looking pair of blue Sixties London Police boxes offer any obvious clues as to the events unfolding here.

*Doctor Who* has come to Hollywood, or at least the city which is an hour or so's flight away and which acts as its overspill and home to the phenomenon that is *The X Files*. The two most intriguing mysteries in

like set is the latest incarnation of the most famous time machine since H.G. Wells: the dimension-hopping Tardis. The Dracula set will be the scene of a struggle between the new Doctor Who, played by Paul McGann, and his Mephistophelean nemesis, the Master, played by Eric Roberts.

As metaphors go, the showdown between McGann — star of such diversities as *Withnail and I* and *The Monocled Mutineer* — and Roberts — biceps-for-hire in action-thrillers like *Runaway Train* — works well enough in describing the events of the seven years it has taken to bring Doctor Who back to life. The saga has been nothing if not a test of British eccentricity in the face of Hollywood muscle.

HOLLYWOOD HAS HAD designs on *Doctor Who* for a long time. Since George Lucas's *Star Wars* invented the modern science-fiction franchise 20 years ago, the competition to emulate its synergistic success — from films to funfair rides, snack-boxes to CD ROMs — has been the biggest game in town. Without Luke Skywalker, Paramount would never have dreamt of overhauling a dead and buried Sixties television series called *Star Trek*.

Since then, Spock, Kirk and company have boldly gone on to create a business worth \$1 billion, with spin-offs like *The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* now effortlessly easing the Trek industry into the 21st century. *The X Files*, currently this country's biggest sci-fi phenomenon, leads the pack snapping at the heels of the Starship Enterprise. Soon it will be joined by TV series drawn from hit films *Stargate* and *Species*, and, probably in 1998, the re-appearance of *Star Wars*. After years of planning, Lucas has put a new phase of three films into production.

Throughout this explosion, Americans have cast an envious eye across the Atlantic to the genre's genuine sleeping giant. Much imitated, but never bettered, Doctor Who was a unique character. And he came with a ready-made global audience. From Australia to Zimbabwe, more than 110 million in 60 countries watched the series at its peak. When the 26th and final season of the programme, starring Sylvester McCoy as the meddling master of the universe, came to an end in 1989, the vultures swarmed, with Steven Spielberg's former company Amblin Entertainment leading the way.

# DOCTOR WHO MEETS PLANET HOLLYWOOD

Britain's favourite sci-fi hero is returning to our screens, courtesy of a £3-million American make-over — and it's about time. Garry Jenkins reports



The Doctor, Paul McGann, with Daphne Ashbrook as his companion, Grace Holloway

Vancouver right now are whether the oldest science-fiction series of them all can compete in a world in which agents Mulder and Scully reign supreme, and whether the BBC has sold the soul of *Doctor Who*.

The £3-million, two-hour movie is being filmed in a co-production between the BBC's commercial arm and the American company Universal Television. If successful, it will lead to a new series. The Nemo-

Despite the lack of plans to revive what was perceived as a spent force, the BBC resisted the lure of the mega-dollar deals. If they ever doubted the Timelord's place within the nation's affections, the £1 million a year the BBC's commercial companies continued to rake in from *Doctor Who* ephemera — from Doctor versus Master chess sets to Dalek salt-and-pepper sets — served as a reminder. Sales of the *Doctor Who Magazine* have never faltered, despite having had nothing new to write about in seven years.

It was three years ago, when BBC1 controller Alan Yentob was visiting Universal Studios in Los Angeles, that the intransigence began to weaken. Yentob met Philip Segal, one of Spielberg's lieutenants at Amblin and the best qualified *Doctor Who* producer this side of Alpha Centauri.

It is difficult to place Segal's accent. It clearly got lost somewhere between his Southend birthplace and his Los Angeles workspace. Since the moment he sat on his grandfather's knee on a November night in 1963, however, there has been no hiding his



evangelical passion for *Doctor Who*. Segal will, if you really wish, tell you all you might care to know about that episode, *Unearthly Child*, and the subsequent 694 adventures of the errant time-traveller from the planet Gallifrey. He may well know the Gallifreyan for franchise.

"He is a very special character. Kids don't have enough heroes and he is a hero in every sense of the word. He is not this square-jawed handsome guy; he is every person's hero," he enthuses. "As a boy, I was not in a clique. I did not have a lot of

friends. He was a guy who was saying, 'It's OK to be different, it's OK to be you.'"

Like many fans and senior figures at the BBC, Segal watched the show lose its direction in its final years, becoming a hammy pantomime parody of itself. "The show got written down over the years; it got very camp and very silly, which was tragic," he says. Segal also saw the sci-fi television revolution going ahead without *Doctor Who* in the vanguard. "It was frustrating to know that there were so many products out there that have been lifted from this great

show, and that this show has never really had a chance to breathe," he says.

Segal, a former literary agent who produced two of Spielberg's television sci-fi series, *SeaQuest DSV* and *Earth 2*, had been the most persistent thorn in the BBC's side after the cancellation of the series. "I hammered and hammered and drove everybody crazy. I would make calls religiously every day," he says. When Yentob arrived at Universal to tour the set of *SeaQuest DSV*, a Segal-inspired homage to *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, the pro-

ducer took his chance. "I dropped everything, ran over there and accosted him."

Yentob tempered admiration for Segal's enthusiasm with distrust for what Hollywood might do to one of British television's treasures. "He agreed to let me have a go," Segal said. "But he insisted on two things. One was that the Doctor was British. The second was that I didn't embarrass him."

Since then, Segal has been walking a creative tightrope. His first attempt to fly the Tardis came to an end when Spielberg announced he was setting up ►

◀ his Dreamworks studio. Spielberg gave Segal his blessing to pursue *Doctor Who*, but the upheaval spelt the end for the first planned production. "To be honest, nobody ever thought it would happen," says Jo Wright, the executive producer at the BBC who has overseen the project.

Salvation appeared in the shape of Trevor Walton, the former husband of Ruby Wax and head of Fox Television's film division in Los Angeles, who agreed to make a pilot for a potential new series of *Doctor Who* adventures. Over the next six months, Fox, Universal, Segal's company Lakeshore and the BBC flexed their respective muscles. "Four companies had to actually approve the script, then I had to make sure that I kept my promise to Alan in terms of the integrity of the show and its Britishness, and then Alan had final approval over the Doctor, and then, of course, that didn't make the American network very happy because they were entitled to their own point of view," explains Segal. "So I ended up being this sort of Swiss diplomat."

PREDICTABLY, CASTING caused the greatest transatlantic rift. Successive BBC controllers had resisted America's overtures amid Hollywood rumours of Dudley Moore, John Cleese and Eric Idle roaming the universe. For Segal, the nadir came with whispers that *Baywatch*'s uber-babe Pamela Anderson was being lined up to star with Eric Idle's Doctor. "It was Mickey Mouse, absurd stuff, and it made me angry because it meant no one was taking it seriously," he said.

Paul McGann resisted the offer at first. "You just can't imagine yourself saying those things, doing those things, wearing that costume. I kept saying, 'There's no way,'" he confesses. Yentob, Wright and the BBC were enthusiastic about the gravitas he would give the part, but America was less impressed. Sting was the preferred choice of many at Fox and Universal. Ultimately, McGann was accepted in return for a piece of Hollywood casting elsewhere. "Paul is not a big name in America. But they were happy as long as the Master was a television movie star," Wright says.

Eric Roberts, brother of Julia and a bankable name in America, was given the role, while Daphne Ashbrook, a familiar face from *Falcon Crest*, was cast as the Doctor's "companion", Dr Grace Holloway.

American television's imprint is unmistakable. While the script was written by a Briton, Matthew Jacobs, and a home-grown director, Geoffrey Sax, was hired to make the film, the visual atmosphere has been revolutionised by Hollywood high-technology. The exterior remains the same, but the inside of the Tardis has been given a complete overhaul by designer Richard Hudolin. The story is far more action-orientated than anything the BBC Doctors attempted. And there is a sprinkling of sex to go with all the SF.

In the past the Doctor's procession of attractive "companions" from the Amazonian Louise Jameson to the Miss Moneypennyish Elizabeth Sladen — were required to provide little more than scream-

queen close-ups and an incentive for fathers to join their children in front of their TV sets. Throughout his 26-year reign, the Doctor remained devoutly asexual. Ashbrook's place in television history will be guaranteed when she shares Doctor Who's first screen kiss. (If the production needs proof of the sensibilities of hard-core "Whovians" in Britain, news of Doctor Who's nuptials provided it. Andrew Neil, amongst others, was outraged at the prospect.) "It is very romantic," says the actress, who hadn't heard of the programme, let alone her predecessors' submissive streak. "Grace is a Nineties woman all the way. She is very strong; she will do her own thing."

McGann's portrayal of Who himself will be more sinister than latter-day Doctors like Peter Davison, McCoy and Colin Baker. "I have been looking for something more edgy. It's like the vampire. You can't hang round for 300 years and not feel kind of bitter. There are darker elements to it," McGann says. But he defends the new Nineties gloss. "We have got mad chases on police bikes — why not? We have had gunfights at the OK Corral in *Doctor Who* before. Who says we can't have *Streets of San Francisco*?"

Whenever there was a danger of the Hollywood values over-encroaching, Segal used humour to deal with it. "We have got a little core of Brits who are mindful of it. We can invest it with whatever level of irony or send-up it deserves. But don't worry: the flavour of it is being looked after," he says.

Judging by the filming and the rushes I saw in Vancouver, the new *Doctor Who* is a distinct departure from the wobbly cardboard world of the first Doctor, William Hartnell, and his successors Patrick Troughton, Jon Pertwee and the rest. More noir than knockabout, thriller than caper, it is an effort to transport the series in time and imbue it with the values of a new television era. Segal admits he is "terrified". But he hopes he has pulled off the juggling act: "I think there is an International Who. Ultimately, the Doctor is an alien. He's not from England. He's from another planet. We just created an international thing."

*'Ultimately, the Doctor is an alien. He's not from England. He's from another planet. We just created an international thing'*

Philip Segal, producer

At stake are multi-millions. "This part of the BBC was set up in the early Sixties to cope with the demand for Dalek products," says Richard Hollis, licensing executive at BBC Worldwide. In the seven years since it's been off the air, it has always been in our top ten best-earning programmes. The potential is huge. It could easily become our highest-earning property again if it works out.

Early indications in America, where the pilot was aired this week, are positive. McGann is contracted for five years. A series of hour-long episodes may be approved later in the year.

The fans are ready to embrace the programme once more. They see McGann as a natural successor to Tom Baker, the most engagingly eccentric and popular both in



Eric Roberts, chosen for the role of Master because of his American appeal

ratings and fan following — of all the Doctors. And they have overcome their fears of an Americanisation of their hero. "There were lots of rumours about how the core values had been subverted. There was talk of David Hasselhoff as streetwise American. People were very hesitant at first," says Gary Gillatt, editor of *Doctor Who Magazine*.

"The fans are willing to compromise things they hold dear simply to have it back. It doesn't matter so much that the Tardis is a certain shade of blue or that he holds his sonic screwdriver the right way," he says.

"But it can only become a success again by getting this family audience back. It had lost its core family audience by becoming too abstract. To do that it has got to be different yet informed by the success of things like *The X Files*."

There are, however, those who worry whether the Doctor's time has passed. "For many years *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* were the only two real science-fiction shows on television," said Paul Youngbleuth, a London-based television consultant at Tape, which advises both British and American networks on future trends. "*Star Trek* picked itself up, dusted itself down and turned itself into the most valuable franchise television has ever known. In the meantime, *Doctor Who* just faded away."

"It would have been a lot more valuable if they had done this a few years ago. Now the market is heavily saturated. It's a welcome, if belated, attempt to regenerate the *Doctor Who* franchise, but I think the likelihood of long-term success is very

small. Frankly, I think they've missed the boat."

Wright disagrees. "I personally think there is room for sci-fi based on damn good stories and good characters," she says. "If you are churning out copies, people will say, 'I've seen this before.' *Doctor Who* is not a copy of anything else. In a way, it needed someone from outside the BBC to look at it anew. We have taken a holiday from it and come back with renewed enthusiasm."

The new *Doctor Who* will be screened on Monday. If the film does spawn a new series, the stars are the limit. Segal began planning new adventures in his head years ago. "I would love to see him have an encounter with the Daleks on Skaro. I would love to see him have an encounter with the Cybermen, perhaps, as they attempt to conquer Earth. I would like to see him help other races on other planets, or go back to talk to Napoleon. There were some wonderful stories that were not told," says Segal. "It would be wonderful to think of *Doctor Who* movies."

For giants like Fox and Universal, the territory is familiar. Pilot to series to movies to global cultural icon — the progression is natural. Rest assured, *Doctor Who*: The Theme Park Ride is an embryo in a fertile Los Angeles mind. For the BBC, gingerly transforming itself from benign public servant to global television player, it could open up a whole new world.

The 33-year-old Timelord may be the man to lead the Corporation into the 21st century. Who better? ●

Doctor Who is on BBC 1 on Monday at 8.30pm