

# Davies on Tennant

Russell T Davies – the man who reignited our love affair with ‘Doctor Who’ during his stint as chief writer – tells **Rachel Halliburton** about ‘The Tennant Effect’. And how it all started with a VHS video tape in a padded envelope...

**R**ussell T Davies shouldn't be in Los Angeles. No, let's rephrase that. Russell T Davies – the phenomenon – definitely should be in Los Angeles: the writer who turned ‘Doctor Who’ into a multi-million-pound brand; the man who triumphantly woke Cardiff's TV scene from its not-so-enchanted sleep; the figure who regularly teeters at the top of media power lists. Yet for a writer who has carved out a reputation as a patron saint of the normal, California's city of Botoxed angels is an odd location. This is the man, after all, who created a Christ who worked in Blockbuster; a man who values

the lessons he learned from 'Coronation Street' over those he learned as an undergraduate at Oxford; the man who must know on which side his bread is buttered by now, but would still, you suspect, plump for Mother's Pride over ciabatta.

Yet fame, like the Tardis, has a habit of depositing people in the most unexpected places. As the nation girds its loins for the Christmas and New Year's Day 'Doctor Who' specials (has a national day of mourning been scheduled to follow David Tennant's last appearance? Still time, Gordon Brown – it's a vote-winner, you know it), Davies is celebrating six months on the Californian coast. 'I'm not loving it – I'm enjoying it, I find it quite strange, but I like the strangeness of it,' he confides, his voice bubbling jovially down the phone line across the Atlantic. 'I can't drive, so I go everywhere on the buses. And, oh my God, you do see life happening there. I've almost been in fights. I got accused of being racist by this black man. He started having a go at me. I was just sitting on my own saying nothing. He just went off at a white man. It's brilliant seeing all of that.'

The Swansea-born Davies may not drive, but he is definitely one of the most driven individuals in the media. This is belied by the carefree conversational tone and the giggle that places him somewhere between a naughty high-church bishop and a maiden aunt on her fourth sherry. The granite-hard determination, however, is clearly there in the detail. Famously he lives apart from his 'very patient boyfriend' of 11 years so he can focus on his writing, 'I like being on my own. I was like that before I had a lot of money and I'm like that now I've got a lot of money. Your life doesn't change much.' Asked at one point about how often as a 'Doctor Who' producer he's had to fight to preserve elements he'd imagined in the script, he replies, 'Every shot you say, "Could the sun be brighter or the monsters wetter?" The meeting will last eight hours and we'll go over every single shot in detail. Literally on every shot we're going, "Could we make that a bit more blue? Could we obscure the eyes a bit more?" It's like painting. It's like painting by committee, which is weird. It works.'

Control freak? Workaholic? These labels could both be applied to Davies, yet this is also about love, a love for creating and telling stories which started when he was a boy, all too appropriately, with 'Doctor Who'. 'I used to walk home from school having "Doctor Who" adventures in my head. Spaceships exploding. Now that "Doctor Who" is over I realise how much of my young thoughts I put into it.' No surprise then that he describes his first encounter with Tennant the way some might describe a romantic *coup de foudre*. The story rewinds Davies's life to 2004, when he was casting for the young lead in his 'Casanova' for the BBC. 'My whole life changed. We were auditioning everyone – we literally auditioned every classically handsome man and every leading man in the country, and it just wasn't quite clicking. Then I was in Manchester and this tape arrived – a casting tape. I remember I was getting up to make a cup of tea and his tape came on, and I literally stopped and stood in the doorway. It was just so absolutely right. We had big investors in "Casanova" who were demanding stars. My heart went in my boots

because I thought: That's the perfect Casanova and they're not going to let us cast him. Not enough people knew who he was. Imagine that now. Five years later and he's the biggest name in Britain!'

Daniel Craig, and indeed Daniel Radcliffe, might take issue with this, but it's easy to understand Davies's triumphal note. What precisely was it that marked Tennant out? 'Surprisingly few lead actors – it's a man thing – have a sense of humour. A lot of my work, even if it's very serious, is funny – it's got a speed to it and a rhythm. In a way I think this is what the good actors get. They know that the dialogue's actually irrelevant. It's all chat. All the real stuff is actually going on in your head. It's true of life. David just absolutely got that. I'd written a man who was just full of chat. Who wasn't a charmer. He was just having a babble. He got the babble instantly. It's just the intelligence of the man.'

Scroll through Davies's CV, and there's a



Super 'nova' Tennant in Davies's 'Casanova'

## 'This tape arrived – a casting tape. It was just so absolutely right. My whole life changed'

handful of clearly favoured actors – Penelope Wilton ('Bob & Rose', 'Doctor Who'), Lesley Sharp ('Bob & Rose', 'The Second Coming'), Christopher Eccleston ('Doctor Who', 'The Second Coming') and obviously Tennant. He concedes that with all of them, 'You feel something click, actually. Then you literally cling on to them. They all probably think I'm a stalker!' He's disparaging of loony/earnest attempts to read portentous subtexts into 'Doctor Who' – biblical parallels and gay agendas have both been dismissively zapped in the past – but he is open to investigating why the man who proved such a perfect Casanova might also be equipped to play Doctor Who. 'Both men come with huge reputations, one as being a great lover, one as being a genius – they're both iconic figures. You've got to learn not to be scared of the myth and access it [with normal dialogue], while allowing all that size and all that grandiosity to still be there under the surface.'

Now the Tennant phenomenon – with all its attendant action dolls, calendars, T-shirts ('David Tennant, proof that God loves us,' exclaims one design) and screaming female fans from eight to 88 – is nearly over. What's going to happen in those final episodes? 'Oh Lordy God,' says Davies, 'you'll laugh, you'll cry. And there'll be June Whitfield and Bernard Cribbins – a brilliant man – that's what I love about it. It's the return of the Master, which always ups the stakes, because they're both Time Lords and it's more personal between them. It's got the whole of Britain in it. It goes from the homeless on Christmas Eve buying burgers from charity vans to Donna's middle-class family sitting there with the turkey, and then you go all the way to the obscenely rich – we've got a character called Joshua Nasesmith – who is surrounded by a mansion and servants. There's deaths and monsters as well, of course, and all of these stories are headed in the same direction. I love the scenes of the homeless. To think that's going to go out on Christmas Day. Let's not get carried away, it's not a piece of social history, but there's a little bit of me that's really proud of showing that to people sitting round the turkey.'

Although he can't, or won't, say what he's working on in LA, he says he's relieved now to be producing drama that doesn't rely on the distractions of aliens. 'It will be good for me not to have that, to be writing about two people in kitchens, which I know very well.' Though he also notoriously believes – as fans of 'Bob & Rose' and 'The Second Coming' well know – in writing drama that stirs up debate. Does he believe the BBC is brave enough in the work it commissions?

'It's very rare that the drama commissioners are at fault. It's the writers and producers. At home in their offices saying, "This won't work." And they stop good ideas getting to the desks of people who will commission them. Talk about the privileged position I'm in. I can get into the offices of people making those decisions and I swear to God all they want is good ideas. It's not just the BBC's problem. Every commissioning desk in the land is sitting there saying, "Where's the good stuff?"' So what would Davies like to see? 'A lot of artists, directors and actors are essentially left wing, and it means the right wing is never correctly represented. I couldn't write it, but it would be interesting to see some well-written right-wing drama. There's a very received opinion on what's wrong and what's right. It's very hard to watch television and see, for example, a racist character written as honest and true. I would love to watch a drama in which you are absolutely fundamentally challenged like that.'

It's almost time to ring off, so the million-dollar question has to be asked. What does he think of Matt Smith? 'Oh, bless him,' he giggles. 'I think younger was the only way to go. You could immediately see why they cast him. He's enough of his own man not to copy David or even Tom Baker. I was in Cardiff and hadn't met him properly. I was in my flat and there was a fire alarm at 5.30am. Everyone in the flats ended up standing outside in our pyjamas. And there was the new Doctor Who! It was a brilliant way to meet.' Part one of 'Doctor Who: The End of Time' is on Christmas Day, 6pm, BBC1. Part two is on New Year's Day, 6.40pm, BBC1.