

**I**F THE DOCTOR of the title can reinvent himself as a completely new person, why can't "Doctor Who" reinvent itself in a new genre?

And so the low-budget BBC fantasy series so beloved by Britons for its 26-year run — and by the American cult that grew around its public television airings over the past two decades — turns into a thoroughly modern science-fiction adventure movie on Fox this week (Tuesday at 8 on WNYW / 5).

The 1963-89 British show relied on economy in both production values and storytelling tempo, but this new \$5-million film is thoroughly American, and thus bountiful. Its action spreads out across 1999 San Francisco, and there's loads of it — gang shootouts, a motorcycle-ambulance freeway chase, and enough special effects in two hours to match those of the entire 723 produced episodes, far surpassing them in state-of-the-art grandeur. Even the trademark "Doctor Who" music has expanded from a haunting synthesizer whine to a majestic orchestral theme.

And, of course, The Doctor's companions this time — our regenerating alien Time Lord always boasts a couple of quippy pals on his romps through time and space — are a gorgeous and capable female cardiologist (Daphne Ashbrook of "Our Family Honor") and a slang-drenched Chinatown teen (Yee Jee Tso of "Sliders").

The new Doctor, too, is a thoroughly modern enticement: a long-haired, blue-eyed, witty, yet somehow dangerous, leading man played by 38-year-old British journeyman Paul McGann ("Alien³," "Paper Mask," "Withnail & I"). He becomes the eighth incarnation of The Doctor (he's never called Doctor Who) when McGann takes over after the film's first reel from the last series star, Sylvester McCoy.

"Whoever The Doctor is very important to the people of England," says BBC executive producer Jo Wright, "because they've gone through seven before this one. Obviously, we wanted The Doctor to be British," despite whatever casting concerns their American and Canadian co-production partners might express.

"It would have been a travesty, in my opinion, to have anybody other than an Englishman," adds the film's executive producer, Philip Segal, a British transplant to L.A., where he has developed properties for ABC and Amblin Entertainment. "That's one of the icons of the show that I think was critical to having an accessibility to the fans of the show."

And they are legion, these Whovians, who've followed The Doctor's far-flung travels from his home planet of Gallifrey for three decades now with the same passion and pique Americans witness in "Star Trek" devotees. Said to be some hundred million strong globally, they've stuck with the series' attitude evolutions, through the early black-and-white videotaped ad-



The new Doctor is a thoroughly modern long-haired blue-eyed witty yet somehow dangerous leading man played by 38-year-old British journeyman Paul McGann.

# Who's on Fox

BY DIANE WERTS  
STAFF WRITER

ventures of 73-year-old actor William Hartnell, through the distinctively different horseplay of younger comic successor Patrick Troughton, through the dandy wit of Jon Pertwee, and Tom Baker's high-spirited frolics in his trademark striped scarf and mop of curls.

Baker's jocular reign (1974-82) was the longest and the one that first grabbed American audiences, who then followed The Doctor's transformation into the boyishly brave Peter Davison, the colorfully assertive Colin Baker and finally the clown-like McCoy. What had begun as a conceit to keep the serial-type series going despite the failing

health of originator Hartnell — The Doctor was quickly endowed with the ability to regenerate himself 12 times — turned into an ingenious element of "Doctor Who's" success.

Yet the series' very flexibility worked against it by the end of its British run, says producer Segal, who chatted at the mid-season TV critics' press tour. "It became very silly and very camp. And that was very sad, because they started writing down to the character. And so, I'm sort of glad he jumped into the box and disappeared for a while."

"The box" would be the British police-call booth in which

The Doctor travels through time and space — a sort of large, blue phone booth, called the TARDIS, that lands him in the strangest places. It's back on Tuesday night, true to the BBC original, as are what Segal calls other "touchstones to the past": the return of The Doctor's "best enemy," The Master; a scarf that recalls Tom Baker's, and other obvious props from previous episodes. But there are new elements that may surprise and even shock longtime fans: The celibate Doctor kisses a woman!

"Apparently, I'm the first," star McGann says a bit nervously by phone from Bristol, where

he's squeezing in the taping of a British radio play before Who fever seizes control of his life. "We're in a strange position, really. It's a pilot," he says of Tuesday's movie, "putatively the idea being that we've got to woo an audience into forming a crush on this show — yet there are one hundred million-plus diehards who've been following the show for thirty years. We had a trick, really, to perform — to explain it and introduce it to a new audience, and at the same time, not talk down to get one hundred million noses out of joint."

Turns out Fox and the BBC would love nothing more than

to take "Doctor Who" back to series — although probably as an hourlong filmed adventure (the originals were videotaped half-hours), on a much more theatrical scale (rather than the charmingly cheesy TV-studio originals). And, thanks to the lucrative commercial prospects Stateside, The Doctor would likely keep romping 'round North America.

"It's the best thing that could have happened," maintains McGann, who off-camera spouts a Liverpool accent rivaling The Beatles'. "It's a shot in the arm to relocate to North America. There isn't any reason why it should be made in Britain, not really." Actually, it's not made in the United States, either: The "Doctor Who" movie was shot in Vancouver, where the series would return to production if Fox picks it up for fall.

"We're looking at that and seeing if there is a real appetite for that character in America."

says Fox long-form programming chief Trevor Walton, also a British expatriate who, like Segal, grew up on the series. "From thirty years ago, I can almost remember some of the specific episodes. So when something is really branded like that in your mind — when Phil came to me with this, I said, 'Oh, yes, let's try and make it happen.' I thought that probably Fox was the right place, because we did have this very young audience, and one that was already so enthusiastic for science fiction," as evidenced by Fox' success with "The X-Files" and its "Alien Nation," "Invaders" and "Generation X" TV movies. "And I knew," adds Walton, "that this was a character that stood the test of time."

McGann knows that, too, and it weighs more heavily on him. "It's kind of weird, thirty years down the line, they give you the jacket and the shoes and say, 'Okay, take over the spaceship.' That's kind of weird, somethin' you've grown up with. I've never done anything that required me to step into seven fellas' shoes. It took a couple of weeks, I must admit, to relax and be myself." Especially since McGann's favorite of the seven previous Doctors is the original: the aged William Hartnell, "a stern, Victorian grandfather type with a shock of white hair," he remembers, "a cantankerous old bugger who never seemed to smile."

What McGann saw in him, however, is something he'd like to bring to the character — "a darker side, in actor-speak. I found that compelling as a kid, and I've been thinking about that recently, the kind of elegance of that first incarnation. If I'm to be allowed to carry on, I wouldn't mind to reintroduce the more sort of world-weary, short-tempered, little-less-easy side of the character. He's a bit like a vampire, you know. He's a character who's been around for centuries. So [I'm thinking

he's] not melancholy, but just wearisome — having seen too much."

Tuesday's movie already leans that way, coming off less like the brightly lit BBC studio series than like most post-"Blade Runner" science-fiction — dark, stylish, portentous. Even the stark and shiny TARDIS interior has become a much more elaborate but dim and brooding Edwardian-style library. McGann notes that both the movie's time setting and our own are "at the milen-

villainous Master, supposedly dead but actually having hitched a ride in the TARDIS to Earth, where he seeks the use of The Doctor's body to continue his lifespan. And female lead Daphne Ashbrook "is a heart surgeon," Segal notes, in contrast to previous companions who often served mostly to scream and become endangered so The Doctor could save them, Flash Gordon-style. "We wanted a woman who represented strength and fun. We didn't want there to be the sort of damsel-in-distress thing."

Segal views Tuesday's movie as "a wonderful opportunity to see what works and what doesn't. We didn't want to do anything that tied us down."

Although McGann has a contract that ties him to a series, if it comes, everything else seems up for grabs — and in

Segal's hands. The BBC's Wright calls him "the keeper of the keys" when it comes to the Who franchise, and McGann says "he's the world's biggest 'Doctor Who' fan, his knowledge is just encyclopedic. It's his energy that got the thing going over the last five years or so."

And it's his head that's on the line if Whovians take umbrage at what he's done to their dear Doctor. In Britain, especially, where "Doctor Who" is what McGann calls "a sort of national institution," fans have been following the revival plans in minute detail, from casting in December to filming this winter to distribution strategy. (The film will premiere on television in North America, but on home video in Britain before airing there later this month.)

"People just get so excited here," McGann says from Britain. "It's ten o'clock news bulletins and the lead columns of newspapers squeezing us in among royalty. I actually must tell you a story," which begins with a third assistant director's one-line summation of a day's filming when McGann was to be hit on the head by Ashbrook's character — "Grace bonks the doctor" — and mushrooms into a British tabloid scandal. "Of course here that's the term for the noble art of lovemaking, and forty-eight hours later on the front page of newspapers, there were headlines like 'Doctor Who Sex Scandal' — 'What are they doing to our Doctor? How dare they?'"

All of which means nothing to the many Americans who've never heard of Who. And so McGann and Segal find themselves, like The Doctor, straddling two worlds and trying to be true to both.

"We want the older audience to come back to the show," says Segal. "But this is for a new generation. And so we have to look forward. We can't be looking back." □



## The cult British sci-fi series lives again as an American TV movie.

nium. If you think back to when the program started [in 1963], it's a completely different world. Just the way people's expectations have changed, the level of people's morale and confidence and everything else."

"I believe the tack that we're taking is that we are tonally a very honest show," says producer Segal. "Paul's given us a Who who's a little more dangerous."

Costar Eric Roberts (Fox' "Saved by the Light," the film "It's My Party") deftly combines menace and wit as the



Tom Baker, left, reigned as The Doctor from 1974 to 1982.

William Hartnell, right, the original Doctor Who



## Two Hearts In a Cool Body

**S**O, WHO IS Who? Here's a primer on the "Doctor Who" mythology that has kept fans enthralled for 33 years. You don't really need it to enjoy Tuesday's movie, because writer Matthew Jacobs ("Young Indiana Jones") and director Geoffrey Sax ("Lovejoy") inflict The Doctor with amnesia that requires him to piece together his past. But this will give you a head start.

- The Doctor is a nearly 953-year-old renegade Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey. His race travels through time and space to gather information on the universe but never interferes — except for the moralistic Doctor.

- He has two hearts and a body temperature of 60 degrees. In cases of lethal injury, he can regenerate a total of 12 times into a new body. (This is his eighth regeneration.)

- He travels through time and space in his TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimensions in Space), a spaceship that appears in the form of a sort of oversized phone booth; it's modeled after the old British police call box that once served as a neighborhood communications station and criminal lock-up. His ship's hull became stuck in this mode when his cloaking capabilities failed, but the ship's interior is limitlessly spacious, thanks to dimensional physics.

- "Doctor Who" is the longest-running science-fiction series in history.

- Since premiering on the BBC on Nov. 23, 1963, following coverage of the assassination of American President John F. Kennedy, "Doctor Who" has been seen in more than 80 countries, from Australia to Zimbabwe. Public television stations introduced it to the United States, and its most recent run was on cable's Sci-Fi Channel (1992-94). Many tapes of the series' stories (each an arc of several episodes) are available from CBS / Fox Home Video.

- Fans call themselves Whovians, join groups like London's Doctor Who Appreciation Society and gather in periodic conventions. Internet activity is intense. Some sites to try: the busy newsgroup [rec.arts.drwho](mailto:rec.arts.drwho) and the Web's fact-packed "Into the Vortex" link [http://orca.ucd.ie/Doctor\\_Who](http://orca.ucd.ie/Doctor_Who). — Werts