

# TOM BAKER—WHO? 'WHO,' THAT'S WHO

By NANCY MILLS

Now that Batman, Wonder Woman and the Incredible Hulk have retired and Superman has moved on to bigger projects, larger-than-life television heroes have been pretty scarce in Los Angeles. However, that has changed now that Doctor Who has arrived from England on KCET Channel 28.

The Doctor has been saving the Universe for BBC viewers for 20 years. But only recently have many Americans discovered him on their local stations; the program is now syndicated in about 100 U.S. markets. (Locally, Channel 52 aired it briefly several years ago.) However, most Los Angeles residents have never heard of the Time Lord who travels through space and time in a "tardis," a contraption that looks suspiciously like a phone booth.

□ The Loch Ness monster is menacing London. Doctor Who arrives and saves the day.

□ An evil leader has plans to destroy Renaissance Italy—until Doctor Who arrives on the scene.

□ Doctor Who finds himself on the planet Pluto millions of years in the future and assists the inhabitants who are being exploited by their leaders.

Doctor Who is no standard-issue comic-book character. Granted, he has a pretty girl for an assistant, but there's nothing between them. "Doctor Who doesn't shoot anybody, drink, beat his wife or even go out with girls," explains Doctor Who actor Tom Baker, "but somehow he has a heroic appeal."

Although Baker is but one of five actors to have played the part over the decades, his performance seems to be the one to have captured the public's imagination. It's a combination of his witty acting approach and his slightly demented appearance—he's 6 feet, 3 inches tall, with an impressive mop of reddish-brown curls.

After a six-year run he retired as Doctor Who in 1980—but, since his episodes are still airing, he has become a cult figure in many parts of America. Promoting his image are two American fan clubs,



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NADWAS (North American Doctor Who Appreciation Society) and the Doctor Who Fan Club, which have several dozen chapters.

In Los Angeles, however, the response to the series and to Baker himself has been, "Who?" But that may change now that KCET has licensed 41 full-length "Doctor Who" adventures—Baker's total output as the Doctor. They will air weekly through most of 1984.

While in Los Angeles a few weeks ago to help KCET in its midwinter fund-raising efforts, Baker knocked on a few doors looking for acting jobs. "I don't see why I

shouldn't work in America," he says, "but certain Americans don't see why I should."

This was his fourth trip here in a year, and a slight improvement over the earlier visits—he actually was called back to read for the producer and director of a "Hart to Hart" episode. They were looking for someone to guest-star as a British commercials director. "It was the part of a very silly, vain man," Baker explains. "I could waltz through it."

But he's not going to get the chance. "They told me I was too old," he reports. "I'm acceptable as a 776-year-old Time Lord in 54 countries, but at 49 I'm too old to play a director of commercials."

"I've had massive proof that I can please an American audience. In Chicago in July, 50,000 people paid \$60 a ticket to come and be near and celebrate at a 'Doctor Who' convention. Another 2,000 couldn't get in." Then there's the group of women from Palo Alto who call themselves "The Friends of Tom Baker" and follow him around whenever he's in the U.S.

Baker, of course, has more than "Doctor Who" credits to his name. Before he signed with BBC in 1974, he was a member of Britain's National Theater. And for the past two years he has worked steadily in British theater. He plays the villain in the upcoming CBS-TV movie "Robin Hood," with George Segal. He got the part because it was filmed in England.

Although he's a dedicated actor now, Baker (on one time planned to be a monk. He spent six years in a monastery but left at 22 to join the army. "I was a terribly withdrawn, pained, skinny man," he recalls, "and the army was a release for me. I loathed the Queen's Regulations; it was the forced contact with people of different backgrounds that did it. When I discovered I could make people laugh, it gave me a new strength."

In fact, it was Baker's sense of humor that caused his theatrical career to flourish. According to him, "Sir Laurence Olivier let me into the National Theater for no reason at all, except I made him laugh. I was playing a dog in a theater revue in Northern England, and I came down to London on an overnight train for an interview to join the National's Repertory Company.

"Olivier was late. He called up to ask how long I could wait. I told him, 'I only can wait two months, my lord.' For some reason he found that funny. Finally he arrived, and we talked. Since he'd laughed when I called him 'my lord,' I took to addressing him as 'my noble lord' and then 'my dear lord.' He laughed a lot, and by the end of the interview he said, 'I think you must stay here.'

"So the National Theater picked me up as a dog, and four weeks later I had a leading role in 'Don Quixote.' I played Rosinante, one of the most famous horses in history. The play was a catastrophe, but the horse was a hit.

"Then I played the Prince of Morocco to Olivier's Shylock in the National's 'The Merchant of Venice.' My star waned when Olivier left the National, but then he suggested me to Sam Spiegel for 'Nicholas and

Alexandra' (1970)—they needed a Rasputin. I have grateful thoughts for Oliver. He is a very kind man. He was very encouraging at a time when I needed encouragement.

"After 'Nicholas and Alexandra,' I worked for Pasolini in 'The Canterbury Tales.' That was 'interesting.' Then I did various odd horror movies. I played the Pope in 'Luther' with Stacy Keach. I remember being mooted for the monster in Christopher Isherwood's 'Frankenstein: The True Story,' but then they gave it to someone beautiful (Michael Sarrazin). As a consolation prize they paid me to do one scene as the sea captain. Raymond Burr wasn't very impressed with me; he had my scenes trimmed in 'The Curse of King Tut's Tomb' (1980)."

Throughout, Baker has retained his sense of humor. "I can't conceive of any situation that's not fraught with irony or some humor," he says. And that's how he approaches his roles. "I got gales of laughter when I was playing Macbeth. Then at the end they booed me. That was one of my *not* triumphs, hut the show did capacity business!"

With "Doctor Who," however, Baker's irreverent approach was right on target. "Sometimes I don't think we were outrageous enough," he feels now. "I was infamous at the BBC for my bad taste.

One of my stories, I remember, had a very dreary introduction. I wanted to start out with a clip from 'Top Hat' with Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire dancing.

"Then the camera would cut to my assistant and me, tied up. Gradually the camera would back up and show all these monsters trying to tap dance. They wanted me to teach them how to tap dance. Finally they agreed to untie us so we could show them how, and we tap-danced away and escaped. Unfortunately, the BBC wouldn't do the scene.

"But they did let me threaten a man's life with a jellybaby (an English candy). The script said I was to threaten to kill somebody with a knife. Doctor Who doesn't believe in violence, so I refused to use the knife. Instead, I suggested using a jellybaby: 'These monsters won't know the difference between a Sten gun and a jellybaby,' I reasoned.

"The producer wasn't there, and I knew he wasn't in his office. He was 'in transit.' The director was very young and kind, and he let me do it."

Now, if Hollywood would be just as kind. "Last year when I was jumping around in plays and being Sherlock Holmes in the BBC's 'Hound of the Baskervilles,' I thought maybe I should try America. That was capricious, but then I *am* capricious." □