

Who's Better...?

Simon Stabler speaks to classic Doctor Who companion Janet Fielding

The late Nicholas Courtney held something of a record among Doctor Who actors, having appeared on screen with the first seven Doctors.

Coming a close second – some would say eclipsing him given her involvement in the casting of Sylvester McCoy and Paul McGann – is Janet Fielding. As Tegan Jovanka, companion to Tom Baker and Peter Davison's Doctors, Janet also appeared with Patrick Troughton and Jon Pertwee in the 20th anniversary special *The Five Doctors*, Colin Baker in the Jim'll Fix It sketch *A Fix With Sontarans*, and more recently with Jodie Whittaker in 2022's *The Power of the Doctor*.

Born in Brisbane, Australia, Janet travelled widely as a child, due to her father's work as a parasitologist.

"Dad did a year at Walter Reed in Washington when we were kids, so he was doing research and he was working on malaria. We came to the UK in 1966 for a month during the World Cup. Dad was recruiting staff, we didn't see much of him, he was up to Oxford and Cambridge, recruiting people for Australia. And I remember we went on day trips to things like Woburn Abbey and Stratford on Avon. It was very exciting, because we don't have anything like that in Australia."

Having only visited the theatre twice as a child – to see the ballet *The Nutcracker* in Brisbane, and the musical *The King and I* in Washington – it wasn't until studying journalism at the University of Queensland that Janet realised she wanted to act.

"I started at university doing rehearsed readings in the English department. I did one with Bille Brown and Geoffrey Rush. Geoff Rush was playing my husband and Bille Brown was playing the lover, I seem to remember. Or was it the other way round? I can't remember, it was a long time ago."

"They were a couple of years ahead of me at uni, and they were doing the first

children's Christmas show that the newly formed Queensland Theatre Company was doing, and they persuaded me to audition for the part of Rapunzel. And don't ask me how but I got the part."

Did you always have shortish hair?

"No, I had very, very long hair that you could sit on at that stage. But it was dark, it wasn't blonde like Rapunzel, I had to wear a wig anyway."

“I think Ken Campbell would have been a wonderful Doctor. He was certainly eccentric.”

In 1976, Janet joined Queensland's radical Popular Theatre Troupe.

"We used to bring out to Australia an English playwright called Albert Hunt to do shows about contemporary issues in Australia. We always felt that the best play that we had done was a thing called *The White Man's Mission*, about the history of the colonisation of Australia, and some of the group wanted to bring it to England

and they asked me to come with them."

With performances at London's Roundhouse in October 1977 and the Oval House in November 1977, along with a regional tour, *The White Man's Mission* was critically acclaimed. Among those going to see it was the actor, writer and director Ken Campbell who Janet had long wanted to meet.

"I'd read all about *Illuminatus* which opened the Cottesloe wing of the National. It was an eight-hour show and it was amazing. He came to see the show in London and offered me work. He said: 'What are you doing after this finishes?' and I said: 'I don't know, I'm going back to Australia, I'll probably start a theatre company with a friend. And he said: 'Do you fancy spending a year working with me?' And, so I did, and we did an opera called *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. Keith Allen was in it and Jonathan Hyde and various people."

Others included future Doctor Who star Sylvester McCoy, a long-time collaborator of Campbell's, who was part of the chorus.

"I think Ken would have made a wonderful Doctor Who. He was certainly

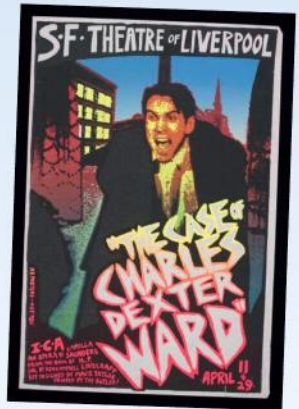
Peter Davison with his original Tardis crew – Janet Fielding (Tegan), Sarah Sutton (Nyssa) and Matthew Waterhouse (Adric) – plus George Watkins (audio companion Marc) at the rear – during a break from recording with Big Finish Productions.



eccentric, and he had that sort of passion. He was a very good actor, a good writer, and mad. Well, in a good way. But he had a fresh and interesting way of looking at the world. He wasn't quite sure what women were for, you know, in terms of interacting with them but then that wasn't by any means unusual in that generation of men. It was one of the things that made life quite tricky as an actor."



Janet, pictured with Errol O'Neill, in the Popular Theatre Troupe's 1977 production of *The Millionaire's Handicap*, which was co-written by British playwright Albert Hunt. Right: After meeting actor, writer and director Ken Campbell, Janet was offered a part in his musical production of HP Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*.



In 1980, while part of an actors' cooperative, Janet made her television debut in the Hammer House of Horror episode *Charlie Boy*. However, a more substantial role in *Doctor Who* was just around the corner.

"The word went out that John Nathan-Turner, the producer, was looking for an Australian to play an Australian. And the actors' cooperative wrote in on my behalf. They [the *Doctor Who* production team] said: 'No, we don't like the photo.' I thought: 'No, I don't like it either.' They were quite right about that one.

"But one of the actors in the cooperative wrote a letter saying: 'If you want somebody to play a bossy Australian, they don't come much bossier than this one.' John was amused by that letter, and he saw me and then he decided: 'Yeah, she's Tegan."

News of Janet's casting as air hostess Tegan Jovanka came just days before the announcement that Tom Baker would be leaving the show. Therefore, Janet's first *Doctor Who* story, 1981's *Logopolis*, was to be Tom's last regular story.

"The two things are not related. It wasn't taking one look at me and going: 'I think I'll leave now.' Tom was fed up by that point and it was obvious. He'd had enough."

There was, however, a much happier atmosphere on set once Peter Davison took over as the Doctor.

"From my point of view, I found it much more relaxing. You know, Peter was nearer to my own age. So, it made it a lot easier."

Janet feels that she didn't often have much to do on *Doctor Who*, which is why *Kinda* and its sequel *Snakedance*, two stories where Tegan has a central role, are her favourites.

"I didn't always have a lot to do but I did have quite a lot to do in those two stories

and we had a wonderful guest cast, you know, we had Richard Todd and Nerys Hughes on *Kinda*, and Simon Rouse who was very good, too. Oh, Mary Morris was on *Kinda*, she was wonderful, she had been a Rank star.

"And then on *Snakedance*, we had Colette O'Neil, John Carson, Jonathan Morris and Martin Clunes, wonderful, wonderful actors."

Another of Janet's stories, *The Arc of Infinity*, was partly filmed in Amsterdam. Could this have been her most glamorous filming location while on the show?

“If you want a bossy Australian, they don't come much bossier than this one.”

"It certainly was, by a long way, although I never did a gravel pit. There was a gravel pit in *Earthshock* but I wasn't in that gravel pit, there was a gravel pit in *Five Doctors* but not for me. I think I played that well."

Janet appeared in all but two of Peter Davison's *Doctor Who* stories, leaving at the end of 1984's *Resurrection of the Daleks*. Had she expected to stay that long? "No, I thought it would be 18 months, that's what I was expecting and then it just got extended. I don't know, they kind of liked that dynamic. I think what happened was she was easy to write for because she was a cranky Australian."

After leaving *Doctor Who*, Janet appeared in the children's series *Murphy's Mob* and an episode of *Minder*, while stage work included *Macbeth* at the *Duke's Head*, Richmond, and a Swedish production of Alan Ayckbourn's *Time and Time Again*. However, it wasn't long before

Doctor Who came calling again when she appeared, alongside Colin Baker, in a sketch for Jim'll Fix it. Although Janet didn't feel threatened by presenter Jimmy Savile ("Because, I mean, you wouldn't take me on, would you?"), she found him "creepy" and "really dead behind the eyes."

"There's always one or two characters like that and you look at them and you go: 'I don't get what other people are getting. I don't see what this massive appeal is,' and I used to think that about him. I thought he was fairly revolting you know with the medallions, the jangly jewellery, it was all really gross."

In February 1987, Janet was asked by John Nathan-Turner to act opposite Sylvester McCoy, David Fielder and Dermot Crowley in a screen test to select the new Doctor. It was to be one of her last acting roles for some years.

"I was at an interview for an acting job and the woman sitting next to me said: 'It was as though somebody turned a tap off on my 32nd birthday,' she was bemoaning the lack of female parts. 'There were zillions of us up for this one role, which went to Deborah Findlay, and I remember thinking: 'Yeah, for me it was my 34th birthday.'"

"I was looking at casting briefs and there was just nothing I could play; it was really interesting you know. I was one of the people who started [membership organisation] Women in Film and Television and I ran it for the first four years. Then I became an agent and took over a well-established agency called Marina Martin Associates, and even when I was an agent, 10 years later, I could look at casting briefs and 75% of the roles were for men."

Has it got better?

"It feels like it has. It's not equal by any means but it is better."



The cast and crew of the Doctor Who story *The Power of the Doctor* attend its world premiere at the Curzon Bloomsbury, London in October 2022. From left: Gemma Redgrave (Kate Lethbridge-Stewart), Janet Fielding (Tegan Jovanka), Sophie Aldred (Ace), director Jamie Magnus Stone, Jodie Whittaker (the Doctor), Mandip Gill (Yasmin Khan), Sacha Dhawan (the Master) and showrunner Chris Chibnall.

During her time as an agent, Janet represented the likes of Hugh Bonneville, Indira Varma, Claudie Blakley, Bill Patterson, Lynda Baron and Simon Callow. It was while visiting Callow on the set of Shakespeare in Love that she met up with Geoffrey Rush again.

"I turned up one day and it was really funny because there were loads of people I knew: Martin Clunes, the makeup designer and costume designer. I worked with them at the BBC."

As Paul McGann's agent, Janet got him an interview for his role as the Eighth Doctor. I wondered if the producers of the 1996 Doctor Who TV movie had known about her connection to the programme.

"No, not until later when I was out there for the screenings and things in L.A."

From 2009 until the beginning of this year, Janet led the Ramsgate-based Project MotorHouse, a youth arts charity that closed because of the funding crisis.

"Kent County Council are now going to stop all non-in-house youth funding, and it's a disaster, it's a disaster because all they're going to be doing is social work, there are no activities for young people, and it's especially important for kids who aren't into sports. We tend to specialise in the 11- to 14-year-old age bracket and that's very important, you know, you want somebody other than the local drug dealer to take an interest in them at that age."

Like many former Doctor Who actors,

Janet has recorded a series of full-cast Doctor Who audio stories for Big Finish Productions. Although her 1980s co-stars Peter Davison, Sarah Sutton and Mark Strickson – who played fellow companions Nyssa and Turlough – began working with Big Finish in 1999, Janet didn't reprise the role of Tegan until 2006's *The Gathering*. Why did it take her so long?

"Because I'd given up acting and I didn't know if I'd be any good at it. Anyway, [producer] Gary Russell, I met up with him in Australia and he persuaded me to do one, that was it, I was going to do one, but I had a great time, so I was back for more, and the lunches at Moat Studios were so good, that was it, I've always loved food."

In April 2022, following the television broadcast of the story *Legend of the Sea Devils*, Janet surprised viewers by appearing – alongside Sophie Aldred who played Ace from 1987-89 – in a trailer for the following story, *The Power of the Doctor*. I wondered what persuaded her to come back.

"They asked me. I got a hint of it on Twitter, funnily enough, because somebody tweeted about a year before saying that [showrunner] Chris Chibnall wanted to bring back Tegan and Ace. I thought: 'I wonder if that's true. I don't believe it.' Then lo and behold, I get a phone call in July 2021, and it was Julian Owen who books some of my conventions and he said: 'I've had this request...' long

story short, I didn't hear anything for weeks and then suddenly it was all systems go and we were racing to get on the money.

"Keeping it quiet was difficult, I kept telling people that I was doing Blu-ray extras, a lot of Blu-ray extras, because I never usually am away for a week when I'm doing that, so they were a little bit suspicious. And one of my friends, one of my closest friends at Ramsgate, said: 'Where are you going?' and I made the mistake of saying: 'Oh, Cardiff' and she said: 'You're back in the series.' She knew instantly, and she's not a Who viewer at all, she's Dutch for God's sake.

"I thought: 'Oh, I better not say Cardiff again.' I had to do a board meeting for the charity when I was down in Cardiff and the trustees said: 'Where are you?' and I went: 'I'm somewhere down the west country, I don't know exactly, I'm in a village somewhere.' I'm in the Hilton in Cardiff you know."

Although Janet is unable to say whether she will be appearing in any future Doctor Who stories on television ("Even if I were, I couldn't say"), she's open to the idea of another comeback.

"I'd be daft not to say yes." 📺

Janet's classic Doctor Who episodes are available via BritBox, while *The Power of the Doctor* is on BBC iPlayer. For more on Big Finish's range of Doctor Who audio stories, go to bigfinish.com