



‘Writing Christmas specials has a zest to it – you know millions more will be watching’

RUSSELL T DAVIES

‘David Tennant turned up at our Christmas party dressed as an elf’

STEVEN MOFFAT

TWOTIME LORDS A-LEAPING

INTERVIEW BY HUW FULLERTON



LANDING SOON

Ncuti Gatwa will shortly be seeing in his second Christmas as the Time Lord in this year's special *Doctor Who* episode, *Joy to the World*

Russell T Davies
and **Steven Moffat**
discuss the magic of *Doctor Who*
at Christmas, time travel, turkeys
and being replaced by AI

PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY FOR RADIO TIMES BY
MASSIMILIANO GIORGESCHI

CHRISTMAS IS A TIME for storytellers. Once, that might have meant sharing festive tales by a roaring fire – but as time went on, the flickering flames have been replaced by the light of the television, illuminating our living rooms as the nights grow dark and cold outside.

And two men who know more than most about on-screen Christmas storytelling are *Doctor Who* writers Russell T Davies and Steven Moffat. Between them, they've sent their time-travelling hero on 15 festive adventures that have taken him from present-day council estates to Victorian London, via the Singing Towers of Darillium and a flying *Titanic*.

In this year's special, *Joy to the World* – written by Moffat at the request of current series boss Davies – the Time Lord (Ncuti Gatwa) checks into a hotel for Christmas, but in typical *Who* style it's no ordinary minibreak. Instead, he finds himself in a "time hotel" that allows him to visit every December the 25th in history. And in one of the rooms there's a mysterious suitcase, held by a woman (played by *Bridgerton's* Nicola Coughlan) who might just be the key to saving the world...

But what are Davies and Moffat's secrets to telling a great yuletide yarn? And what do they get up to at Christmas themselves? In *RT*'s exclusive fireside chat, they reveal all. Are you sitting comfortably? Then they'll begin...

PRESENT COMPANY

STEVEN MOFFAT When I found out there was going to be a Christmas special in 2005, I remember thinking, "That's a brilliant idea. *Doctor Who* should be on Christmas Day. It just should be."

RUSSELL T DAVIES Yes, it instantly fitted. But they worked that out very early on – the first time they did it was in 1965 [with William Hartnell's episode *The Feast of Steven*]. Writing Christmas specials has a zest to it. It's fun. You know millions more people are going to be watching it. There's an extra glint in your eye. ▷

◀ **SM** It's an odd one, the Christmas special. Either you take the attitude that it has to be an episode that reminds you of what *Doctor Who* is for the general audience; or sometimes the Doctor happens to be regenerating. And then you kill a children's favourite on Christmas Day – which I've done twice. So it's either a totally mainstream one, or one that re-engineers the entire continuity of the show to account for a recast!

RTD I wish I'd written all of your Christmas episodes – and for anyone who thanked me on the street, I did. I've lost count of how many times I've got "I love your Weeping Angels..." "I know... aren't I brilliant?" I love all your specials, but I think [2010 episode] *A Christmas Carol* is a majestic piece of work for that moment of Michael Gambon realising that he is seeing his future self. Never mind *Doctor Who*, never mind fantasy, never mind the original *Christmas Carol*. That's an absolutely astonishing piece of drama, full stop.

SM I think my favourite was your first one, *The Christmas Invasion* [in 2005]. It was the moment at which you realise, "No, it's back for good." The regeneration has worked, and it was not a guarantee back then at all.

RTD Remember when David Tennant was unknown? What a world.

WE WISH WHO A MERRY CHRISTMAS

SM I've never done what you have this year – give up the Christmas special! I'd have given up other episodes, but I said, "No, that's what I do for fun!"

RTD I mean, it sounds terrible to say I have too much work to do the Christmas special...

SM That's exactly what happened, though, Russell. My career is summed up as Russell's understudy. Loitering in the wings...

RTD I think you'll find I sent the most fawning email in the history of the world. "I know you're busy, Steven, but please, please, please..."

SM I was thrilled to get it again. Eventually, I got to the idea of a hotel chain in the future that discovers the secret to time-travel, and says, "We've got a lot of unsold rooms throughout history. We need to flog them."

RTD For a long time, the title was *Christmas Everywhere All at Once*. I'd been saying since we started working together, "Why haven't you



DOCTOR YULE

Top left: David Tennant and Billie Piper in *The Christmas Invasion* (2005). Left: Michael Gambon, Matt Smith and Katherine Jenkins in *A Christmas Carol* (2010)

NEW PARTNER

The Doctor (Ncuti Gatwa) is joined by Joy (Nicola Coughlan) in this year's special

done that time-travel farce?"

SM And I still haven't.

RTD Well, no... But with hotel bedroom doors opening and closing, there's a vestige of it left. Faithful reader, do not expect a farce. But there's an element of it.

SM A bit. You could go back to that Time Hotel and do an actual farce. But I just thought that for Christmas Day you need something a bit more emotional. And he's just lost a companion [with Ruby (Millie Gibson) having departed last series], which is always a bother. We've got to actually go through that,

Remember when David Tennant was unknown?

RUSSELL T DAVIES

otherwise it just looks like, "Oh, well, you're gone. You'll do." Which is roughly what he does, but we try and disguise that.

TALKING TURKEY

SM I was halfway through writing when you told me Ruby wasn't in it and I was like, "Are you serious?"

RTD Did I not tell you straightaway? Oh my gosh! Wow. I remember, we had very long conversations about: "Why doesn't he go to UNIT [the Unified Intelligence Taskforce] for help?"

SM "Why doesn't he phone up David Tennant?"

RTD "Oh, well why doesn't he go back to the Tardis?" That's always the question. By 1964, [scriptwriter] Terry Nation had

girders fall in front of the Tardis to stop them getting in.

SM Remember, I sent a long email to you all about why the Doctor doesn't use the Tardis in this episode? The broad theory is – this will never get in *Radio Times* – if the Doctor goes back to the Tardis, the only world he can travel to is the one that is the result of his departure. In other words, like in [1975 story] *Pyramids of Mars*, he says, "If we leave now, that's the future."

RTD And he kind of refers to that in dialogue this time, doesn't he?

SM Yes, he says, "I will re-engage with a causal nexus." Which I think will explain everything on Christmas Day.

RTD Over your turkey. Digest that.

HAVE A HOLLY JULY CHRISTMAS

SM I hate Christmas specials where they go to Ibiza. It has to be Christmassy. I always like to include a Christmas tree, and you should always have snow. But you're usually writing it in the summer. The very first one I wrote, I was trapped in a hotel with Karen Gillan [*Doctor Who*'s Amy Pond], thanks to a volcanic eruption grounding planes. I turned the air conditioning up, closed all the curtains, and put on Christmas carols.

RTD I remember going to the HMV in Cardiff to get the Ronnie Spector Christmas album in July. They got it out of the stock room for me. It does put you in a Christmassy mood. It makes it snow in your head. I've done so many, I've got little Christmas playlists on my computer now. Carols and pop songs. They're ready for when I do write another special.

SM How do you start writing?

RTD For any episode you just think and think and think and not write. And then you sit down and panic. The first page you think is brilliant. ▷

At page 35, you're like, "I'm giving up." A lot of writing is just making it work because it doesn't.

SM You're absolutely right. I think, up until the opening titles, I can fly like the wind.

RTD When someone else is running *Doctor Who*, let's just write those opening scenes. We'll be a band. We'll call ourselves the Cold Opens.

SM Also, towards the last third, you start to think, "What is it actually about?" I don't mean in a big, mystical sense. But this episode is about... what? I sometimes run aground, and think it's because I haven't set it up properly.

RTD But also the opposite – as I get older, I find that if I put something in, it's there for a reason. If you give someone a sister, 50 pages later you find out that's why he's got a sister.

SM Stephen King says something: you don't make up a plot, you unearth it a layer at a time.

RTD It's always amusing to me when people write critiques of episodes, and I think, "How lovely it is that you've thought about that for two minutes. I've thought about it for three years solidly. Believe me, all your versions don't work."

SM "Why doesn't he land on a planet where nothing bad is happening?" Guess! It's the same reason that James Bond doesn't occasionally walk into M's office, and M says, "No, nothing in. Take the afternoon off!"

RTD Because we're faultless, of course.

THE GIFT OF THE AI

SM Artificial Intelligence is fascinating, though... I think we as screenwriters are safe?

RTD Or are we being daft? If AI is at this stage now, in ten years, maybe we will be replaced?

SM My son explained it to me. He said, "Yes, it can do all these things. It might even get quite good at them. But it takes an immense amount of power to run AI." Whereas you can run a human being on sunlight and a vegetable patch. Human beings are amazingly cheap, we're knocking out human beings every day. And unlike anything else in history, the more we use it, the less good it is. Because the more content that is out there produced by AI, the more it absorbs its own content, and eats its own tail.

RTD Television has been run on those principles for a very long time. You've just described most networks!

I WISH IT COULD BE CHRISTMAS EVERY DAY

SM I absolutely adore Christmas – it can't start early enough for me. We do a big party the day before Christmas Eve where all our friends come round. I remember once – I don't know why this happened – but David Tennant turned



THAT FIGURES

Russell T Davies and Steven Moffat adorn their tree with Doctors

'I'm not writing for the series next year. I was sacked'

STEVEN MOFFAT

up at our Christmas party entirely dressed as an elf. No one else was in fancy dress! He's just wandering around like an elf.

RTD I wonder if he just does that anyway! We swap Christmases between my sisters. I don't ever cook. We have a big, proper family Christmas dinner. We normally miss the *Doctor Who* special, to be honest. I'll watch it at midnight.

SM I never miss it. I adore Christmas specials. You know, there's nothing funnier than Eric and Ernie and André Previn. "Not necessarily in the right order." But the one that we actually watch every year is *It's a Wonderful Life*.

RTD And what a dark film.

SM It's horrible. The big, heartwarming message at the end is: you're going to carry on being poor. You are never going to leave this town. But your life is not so bad. It's actually a tough film, but it's a great film.

TOM BAKER EXCLUSIVE!

It's 50 years since Tom Baker became the fourth Doctor and, for many fans, he will forever be the ultimate Time Lord. *Radio Times* is celebrating with a new digital bookazine plundering our archive for exclusive interviews and photos from his time in *Doctor Who* and beyond. Available to download on 20 December via radiotimes.com



The *Doctor Who* special, *Joy to the World*, will air on BBC1 on Christmas Day. Don't miss our interview with Nicola Coughlan in the Christmas issue

RTD I can't resist it. And every version of *A Christmas Carol*. The Patrick Stewart one, *Scrooged* with Bill Murray. It just works.

SM As a structure for a story, it's impeccable. I've used it more than once – you know, Past, Present and Future.

RTD It's time-travel and alternate universes and ghosts, all in one. Stuff that we think is revolutionary and new now – and there was Dickens churning that out. It's astonishing.

AND A HAPPY WHO YEAR?

SM I'm not writing for the series next year. I was sacked.

RTD Inappropriate behaviour.

SM It was humiliating.

RTD And public. Epaulettes were ripped off.

SM I was marched outside of Bad Wolf Studios. My sword snapped over the knee. I was sent penniless and naked into the world.

RTD Until we need another Christmas special. Then we'll come begging. But seriously, what can I tell you about next year... it's just too soon. There's a lot of amazing guest stars we haven't announced yet. Some great monsters, great settings every week. Mainly, you'll have [new companion] Belinda, played by Varada Sethu, who's gorgeous. You'll see a lot of that in a trailer on Christmas Day – but we'll keep a lot secret, too. And there's the new spin-off, *The War between the Land and the Sea* with Russell Tovey, who I've worked with three times now – he's absolutely exceptional. I'm very, very excited!