The new Who

Introducing Paul McGann as the eighth Time Lord
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Above: K9, Doctor Who's computerized canine companion

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The what, when & how of the new Doctor Who

The hero of the world’s longest running science-fiction television series is back. Stephen Dabkowski reports from London on the resurrection of the good Doctor for the 1990s, a project that involved Rupert Murdoch’s Fox TV network, Steven Spielberg and the success of The X-Files.

He’s back, although, for a while there, it looked like the good Doctor had fought his final battle. The hero of the world’s longest running science-fiction television series, Dr Who had defeated Daleks, Cybermen and the Ice Warriors but he was fast becoming a relic of a bygone age, a victim of times when whiz-bang, big-budget effects were in and dinky monsters dressed up in furry suits were way, way out.

But the Time Lord has been rescued by an unlikely savior, Rupert Murdoch and his US Fox Television network. And the behind-the-scenes story of how the media mogul saved the sci-fi hero and plans to relaunch him into the 1990s is almost worthy of an episode in itself.

For Australian viewers, the culmination of the long process came with the announcement by the ABC that it will screen the new $6 million, one-off telemovie, possibly as early as July. Co-produced by the BBC and US television house Universal Productions, the telemovie represents three years of work by dedicated “Whovians” who believed that their time-travelling hero could inspire a new generation of sci-fi buffs.

When the BBC ceased production of the Doctor Who television series in 1989, the show’s producers feared that perhaps the Time Lord had outlived his usefulness. The BBC just couldn’t invest the sort of money in a long-running series to compete with the special effects to which the average sci-fi buff had grown accustomed on film and other television. The BBC’s prop department couldn’t pretend to make monsters look particularly threatening when, for example, they were attempting to create the dreaded Cyberman using old wetsuits painted silver with an old car headlight stuck on a helmet.

Still there were those who believed that Doctor Who could be modernised and Philip Segal is the man who finally managed to resurrect him. An expatriate Brit, now a mover and shaker in the American television industry, Segal was convinced that Doctor Who could travel successfully to the US market where it had established a cult following, rather than a mainstream audience, through screenings on PBS cable television.

In 1993, Segal was working with Steven Spielberg’s production company Amblin Entertainment. It appeared that Spielberg himself was interested in resurrecting Doctor Who, and just as it seemed that the biggest name in Hollywood was to be the Doctor’s savior, Amblin disbanded and Spielberg moved on to create DreamWorks SKG leaving his old projects behind.

Segal was not deterred. He continued to hawk the idea around, finally gathering interest from Universal Productions, the television arm of the giant movie company. Script writers were employed to start working on the project.

“Philip Segal has been the champion of the cause. He always thought it would do well in the US and that Doctor Who would return,” says Juliet Grimm, the head of co-production and business development at BBC Television Worldwide. Grimm has the
almost certainly financially-rewarding task of selling the movie to as many of the 80 countries that show old re-runs of the TV series to around 110 million people each year. As a result of the close association between the ABC and the BBC, the sale to Australia was one of the first deals secured in the world.

While Segal was pushing the idea upfront during 1994 and into 1995, the BBC was gently prodding it from behind. The British television network might have been receiving hundreds of letters a month from impatient "Whovians", but they also weren't going to make another program unless it made sense. Doctor Who, after all, wasn't going to be cheap to produce; the days of using fake fur to make scary monsters and wobbling cameras to suggest warp-speed time travel were long gone.

What the BBC needed was a co-producer to finance the sort of blockbuster movie it needed to relaunch the Doctor as a high-tech super hero. Even when Universal agreed in principle to back the project, American money would not be forthcoming until US television distribution was secured, so in the mid-1990s Doctor Who found himself caught in a time warp for a few years: the BBC needed a new product to pitch at the lucrative US television market, but, before that, they needed US money to produce the new product - catch-22.

Then last September, Segal, by now executive producer of the project, together with the BBC's executive producer for the program, Jo Wright, had a breakthrough. Fox Television, Murdoch's flagship in the American television industry and that country's fourth network, gave it the green light. They would show a pilot movie in prime time, and, if it rated well enough, buy a new series of 50-minute television programs.

It is not known whether Murdoch himself was consulted. Since the series started on Australian television in 1963, as a young man it is possible that he could have seen quite a few episodes himself of the original Doctor, William Hartnell, prancing around the set like "an atypical grandfather" as the BBC describes him. What is certain is that Doctor Who was saved by a clique of British expats now prominent in American television. Apart from Segal, the head of development drama at Fox is Trevor Walton, a Doctor Who fan for much of the 33 years it has been on television.

Fox agreed to run the program in its key month (May), when pilot shows are tested on the American audience to decide which series get the go-ahead for the coming ratings year. "Suddenly, Doctor Who went from years on the backburner to everything being in a rush," recalls the BBC's Juliet Grim. "Fox wanted the two-hour movie finished by May, and this was last September. First we had to secure the availability of Paul McGann, our newest Doctor, then get moving with filming.

"The go ahead for Doctor Who by Fox Television owes much to the success of The X-Files. Science fiction is big news again on television, so a new version of Doctor Who was seen as capturing a new market. Because Doctor Who was a known commodity and because we already had some scripts written, the minute Fox said
yes, we got started. Jo Wright starting reworking the script to suit an American audience and McGann was locked in to play the part," says Grimm.

While Grimm admits that McGann wasn't the first actor considered for the part of television's eighth Doctor, the producers felt he had the same natural empathy for the part as the actor considered to be the best-ever Doctor: Tom Baker.

Australian viewers will recognise McGann from the film Withnail And I and the television series The Monocled Mutineer and The Hanging Gale. "Paul's a good actor, and he's absolutely brilliant in the part. He's not a huge name in Britain, but he's a good name, a good actor and everyone agreed he'd be good for the role and the response to pre-screenings has been fantastic," Grimm said.

McGann says he was attracted to the role because of the nature of Who: "The character's unique. There's a touch of vampire about him. He comes backwards and forwards throughout the centuries. He's supped with Da Vinci and Caesar and Marie Antoinette."

The other actors the BBC gave at least passing consideration to included the increasingly bankable Alan Rickman (Truly, Madly, Deeply, Die Hard, Sense And Sensibility) and Eric Idle (of Monty Python fame). However, once McGann committed to the project, the BBC considered no one else. With a Brit in the traditional role of Doctor, it was now time for the producers to placate their US investors, so the rest of the cast is American.

The key role of the Doctor's companion in the movie, the somewhat sexist legacy of the TV series which required an incredibly beautiful sidekick to supply an element of sexual tension, went to Daphne Ashbrook who is better known in the US than Australia for movies including Lasser and Poisoned By Love. Ashbrook brings a '90s feel to her role, playing a strong-willed, intelligent cardiologist character called Dr Grace Holloway.

According to executive producer Segal, the interaction between the Doctor and his companion attempts to replicate the chemistry between Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner in the hit film Romancing The Stone.

By all accounts, executives at Fox were more interested in who would play the villain - the Doctor's ultimate enemy - The Master, a fellow Time Lord turned bad, who in past television series has tried to master time for his own ends to control the universe. Eric Roberts (Star 80, Runaway Train), brother of Julia, got the nod.

Without giving too much away, the storyline of the new movie sees Doctor Who's trademark Tardis crashlanding on New Year's Eve 1999 in San Francisco, while transferring the remains of The Master to a site of eternal imprisonment. Emerging after the crash, the Doctor becomes caught in a gun battle. To
The first episode of Doctor Who, *An Unearthly Child*, was broadcast in England on 23 November 1963, the day after the Kennedy assassination. It became the longest-running science fiction show in television history, enjoying a virtually unbroken sequence until 1989 when production was halted after 713 episodes—more than Star Trek in all its generations!

As a result of both deliberate and accidental purges of BBC archives, many Doctor Who episodes were destroyed. BBC researchers and Who fans have tracked down and restored copies of some episodes, but around 100 still remain lost.

A Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey, the Doctor roams the galaxy in his sentient space-time machine, the TARDIS (Time And Relative Dimensions In Space). The Doctor is approximately 550 years old and can “regenerate” his body after mortal injury, conveniently changing his appearance. This device has allowed many actors to play the Doctor over the years:

- Jon Pertwee, 1970-74 (died of a heart attack last month while holidaying in the US).
- Tom Baker, 1974-81.

- Peter Davidson, 1982-85.
- Colin Baker, 1985-86.
- Sylvester McCoy, 1986-88 (and who will appear at the start of the new TV movie).
- Paul McGann 1996 – Three other actors have also played the Doctor:
  - Peter Cushing, who starred in 1966-68 feature films.
  - Richard Hurndall, who resembled Hartnell, recreated the first Doctor’s role after Hartnell’s death.
  - Trevor Martin, who played the Doctor in a 1974 stage play.

The show’s title may be Doctor Who, but the main character remains nameless and is affectionately known as ‘The Doctor’. Legions of hapless passengers have marvelled that the TARDIS is “bigger on the inside than the outside”. It contains multiple control rooms, living quarters, a sickbay, cloisters, and a huge indoor swimming pool!

Jammed camouflage circuits doom it to mimic a London Metropolitan Police Box. Real police boxes were originally made from concrete and served as emergency telephones and temporary lock-ups for felons.

More than 30 men, women, children, robots, and aliens have swelled the ranks of the Doctor’s travelling companions. In order of appearance they are: Susan Foreman, Ian, Barbara, Vicki, Steven, Katarina, Sara, Dodo, Polly, Ben, Jamie McCrimmon, Victoria Waterfield, Zoe, Liz Shaw, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, Sergeant Benton, Captain Yates, Jo Grant, Sarah Jane Smith, Harry Sullivan, Leela, K9, Romana, Romorana, Romana II, Adric, Nyssa, Tegan, Turlough, Peri, Kamelion, Melanie, and Ace.

The evil Master (who plays Moriarty to the Doctor’s Holmes) is also capable of regeneration. The first actor to play The Master, the prodigiously named Roger Caesar Marius Bernard de Delgado Torres Castillo Roberto, began in 1971, but was tragically killed in a car accident in 1973. Anthony Ainley wore the dark garb of The Master from 1981-89. Other favourite recurring villains were: The Rani (a Time Lady), Cybermen, Silurians, Ice Warriors, Sea Devils, Yeti, Ogrons, Omega, The Black Guardian, Sontarans, and the infamous Daleks and their creator Davros. The word “Dalek” is one of several science fiction terms to be found in the Oxford Dictionary.

Who's Who

By Robert Jan and Paula Ruzek

maintain the movie’s continuity from the television series, the character who emerges from the TARDIS is the Doctor from the last series, Sylvester McCoy. He is quickly caught up in the cross-fire and dies.

A cardiologist soon on the scene, Dr. Holloway, thinks she has failed to save him. But what she doesn’t realise is that Doctor Who has two hearts and can regenerate. Enter Paul McGann. Meanwhile, The Master has escaped from the TARDIS and inhabited the body of a paramedic, and a fight for control of the world starts.

Fans of the TV series will notice differences in the movie. It is faster paced, and reviewers in Britain have noted that, for a pacifist, Doctor Who gets his hands a bit dirtier in the action stakes. In fact, the level of violence increased to the extent that the co-producers filmed two versions of the opening gun battle, one which is more explicit for the American audience and a slightly tamer version for Britain. The BBC claims the ABC can choose which version it wants to screen.

“Although Doctor Who has always appealed to adults, it has also been seen as a children’s television series as well. And at the moment there is a high level of sensitivity to excessive violence on British television,” Grimm explains without actually spelling out the impact that the Dunblane massacre in Scotland has had on television programmers in the UK.

“It has all the integrity of the original Doctor Who series, and the traditional supporters will not be disappointed. However, the new movie has all the advantages which modern technology offers and the high-tech effects which viewers demand. We are looking for a new audience, as well as the old audience staying with the Doctor. There is a new generation who don’t know about Doctor Who, but who love high-tech action packed films.”

Included in the changes for the movie is a complete new set for the TARDIS, although producers couldn’t do away with the blue flashing bubble which moves up and down in the middle of the control panel. It seems some trademarks are not to be tampered with, and, even as Doctor Who is poised to launch into a new millennium, some things remain the same. •