

The New *Doctor Who* Is In!

How Ncuti Gatwa went from TV queer idol to making history on the iconic Brit sci-fi show

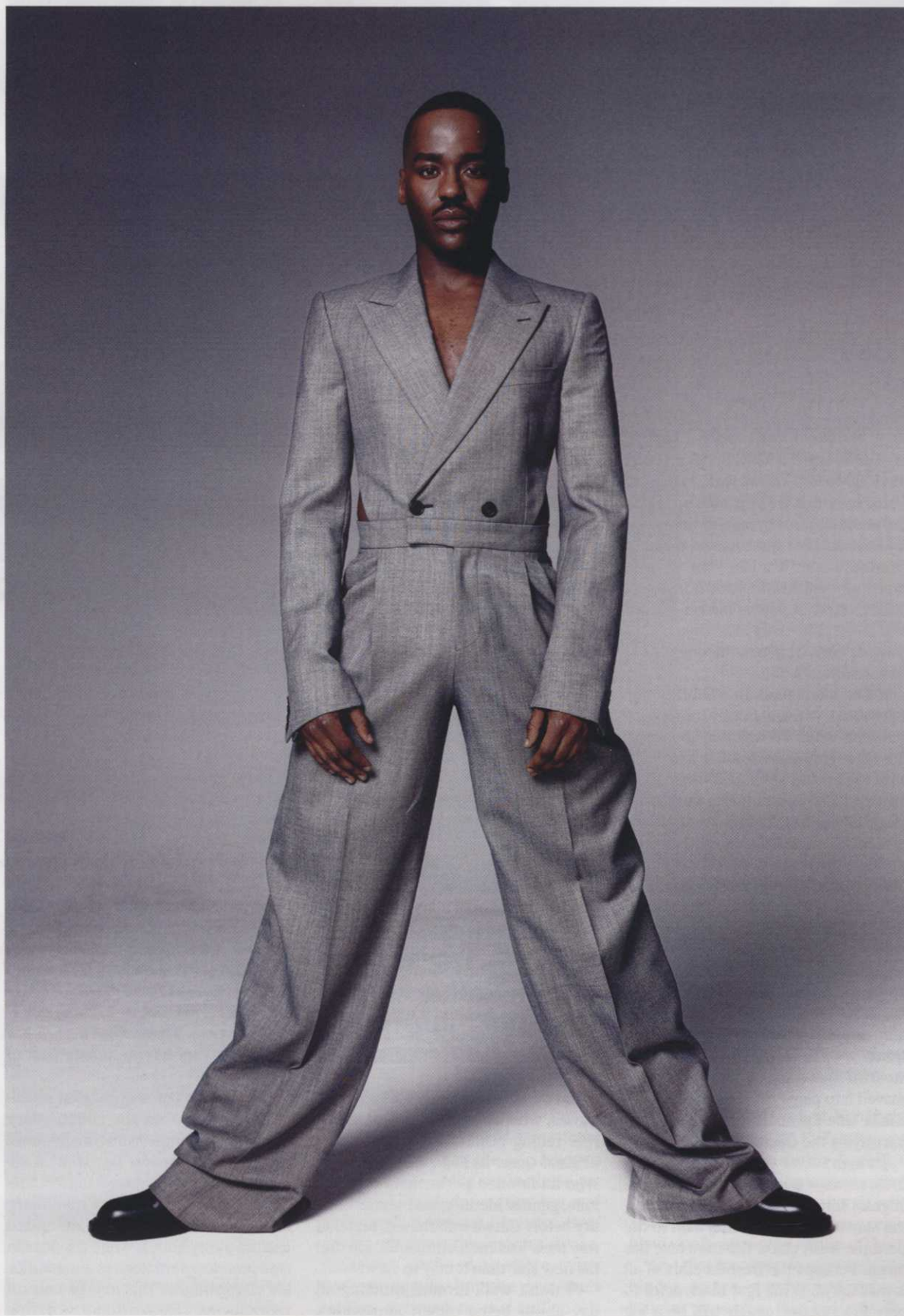
By ALAN SEPINWALL

THE FIRST THING you notice about Ncuti Gatwa is his smile. Whether as a young, anxious queer teen in Netflix's *Sex Education*, one of the many Kens in *Barbie*, the latest actor to play the lead character in *Doctor Who* — or even on a slightly pixelated Zoom screen — when Gatwa flashes those pearly whites, it is impossible to look at anything else. His expression radiates joy so pure and uncut it's as much a superpower as the Doctor's ability to travel through time or regenerate into new forms.

It's also exactly what *Doctor Who* producer Russell T. Davies was looking for when he began creating this 15th Doctor, long before Gatwa came in to audition. In 2005, Davies revived the British sci-fi TV institution from an extended limbo and ran the show for several seasons with Christopher Eccleston and David Tennant as the ninth and 10th Doctors, respectively. Upon taking the reins again last year, he decided that the present moment called for a different kind of Doctor.

"I was thinking about what a terrible world it is now, and how many stresses of mental health there are in young people," says Davies. "I wanted a hero who wasn't closed, who wasn't all stiff upper lip. And [who] wasn't swaggering or butch, either. The life of a young person is bigger and madder and wilder than it was when I was young. So I wanted a hero who *felt* more. Then along comes Ncuti, and bless you, you could not hide your emotions for a second in your performances."

The emotions of Gatwa's Doctor are indeed always palpable. His first appearance, in the Christmas 2023 special, begins with his Doctor crying in a tight close-up; when his new companion Ruby Sunday (Millie Gibson) sees him for the first time, he is exuberantly dancing in a club, wearing a tight tank top and kilt. The delight Gatwa projects onscreen is also a reflection of how it feels to take on a character who may be second only to James Bond in British pop-cultural identity.





The new Doctor, inside the TARDIS

"I don't know whether you can quite put it in words," Gatwa says. "They are a character that we've grown up knowing and that most people in this country have had the show passed down to from someone. It's like your favorite piece of furniture in your house. It's something that you've always known and loved to be there, and then you're going to pass it on to someone else. It feels really cool."

It's a huge leap in visibility for Gatwa, 31, whose family moved to Scotland when he was two to escape the Rwandan genocide. He struggled with racism and loneliness while growing up in a foreign land. He was on the verge of quitting acting due to a lack of money when he landed his breakthrough job on *Sex Education*, in which his character Eric Effiong's journey toward embracing his sexuality and finding a place within both his religious family and his church instantly made him an icon for queer teens. (He had 500 Instagram followers right before the show debuted; he has nearly 3 million now.) Naturally baby-faced, he sports a thick leading-man mustache most of the time to look older. He shaved it to play Eric, then had to wear a false one for his first two months of portraying the Doctor.

Though *Doctor Who* debuted back in 1963, Disney+ is presenting Gatwa's inaugural series of adventures (premiering May 10) as Season One, akin to the periodic fresh starts the franchise has taken. Perhaps the freshest start of all is that Gatwa is the first Black actor to play the Doctor, which will be a big

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change for legacy viewers — though not necessarily for children in the series' target demographic.

"If you're a six-year-old boy sitting there in Brixton, it's like, 'That's the Doctor,'" argues Davies. "If they go online, they're finding the spiciest chicken wing on YouTube. They're not bothered by this."

Still, Davies understands the necessity of hiring an actor of color to play this iconic role. "It's about time," he says. "Sometimes, big old terrestrial and streaming shows can be slow machines to catch up with the world."

"That's what the show does," agrees Gatwa. "It evolves and it regenerates. I feel like it's about time, and I am here. For all you damners out there, I'm not going anywhere."

Gatwa is also openly queer. So is Davies, who has spent much of his career telling LGBTQ+ stories, like the original *Queer as Folk*. He says *Doctor Who* auditioned performers of every race, gender identity, and sexual identity before Gatwa was chosen, and that this feels less momentous to him and his new star than it may to viewers.

"I don't walk around thinking all day about being queer, and what's



Gatwa, shining on *Sex Education*

my queer energy today," says Davies. "You're talking to people who live a queer life. So this is completely normal. And where I'm slightly amazed is that anyone finds this different. Come on straight people, come and find out!"

"I am reluctant to apply any human label to the Doctor," says Gatwa, "because they're an alien. They've been with all sorts. That is label-less and limitless, and I think it represents our ability to be anything. That character can be anyone and played by anyone. And I feel very, very honored that I get to be the first of a couple of things. If you're a true fan of the show, you understand that the show lends itself to inclusivity and to diversity and welcoming different people in. That's what Russell has done. I'm very happy to be a part of that vision."

Doctor Who has always been socially progressive, but the commentary this time around seems even more pointed than Davies' last stint. A recent special gave beloved *Doctor Who* character Donna Noble a nonbinary child, whom she fiercely defended against transphobes, while the Season One premiere functions as a metaphor for governments that try to control reproductive rights without worrying

about what happens to children after they're born.

"If you're not writing that [in 2024], what on Earth are you doing?" argues Davies. "I think our rights are in danger. So there's no choice in this. There's things to be done, there's things to be said. And if the most exciting and entertaining action-adventure show on television can also do that, I think that's wonderful." (Gatwa responds to this speech with an exaggerated snap, cracking up both men.)

Into this fragile moment steps Gatwa, who was 12 when the Davies revival began. "It just felt so cool that this was a show that we had on British TV and it was fantastical, and that we had this mad adventure once a week," he recalls. Tennant was the Doctor he grew up on, and he credits Tennant's Hamlet for the Royal Shakespeare Company as the reason he studied drama at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland:

"That DVD formed my perception of what a true actor is," he says. While sharing scenes with Tennant in one of the specials, he says, "I felt like I was in *Inception*. It was just like a dream in a dream. For me to have generated from my Doctor, who also is the man that inspired me? Then he introduced me to the TARDIS for the first time, and it was like, the uni-

verse is doing some great magic here."

Tennant and Jodie Whittaker (the first female Doctor, a milestone that came with its own baggage) both warned him that however big a deal Gatwa thought being the Doctor was, it's much, much bigger.

"[Tennant] prepared me for the intensity of the show," he says, "which I had been downplaying: 'Yes, I understand that it's a huge show, but I don't think it's going to be that big news, really.' And then it bloody well was. I thought, 'Oh, my gosh.'"

Sex Education launched his career, but playing an iconic character with a massive fan base comes with a lot of responsibility. Asked about one point of similarity between the Doctor and Eric, he hesitates, makes sure to note during a lengthy answer that Eric was a child while the Doctor is thousands of years old, then emphatically jokes, "Eric is gone. Just to let everyone know, Eric is gone. He's dead! He's not here anymore. It's all about the Doctor now!"

Davies, older and more PR-savvy, warns him, "The headline for this will now be, 'Eric Is Dead!'" An unfazed Gatwa flashes one more dazzling smile and replies, "'And the Doctor lives.' Let that be the headline."