

'Dr. Who' series draws fanatic followers

by Diane Mermigas

Herald TV/radio critic

Ask yourself. What could be appealing about a whimsical 750-year-old chap in a multi-colored scarf who works out of an English police box that is really a time machine that takes him throughout the universe?

Enough to turn several million American adults into fanatic followers of the British sci-fi hero "Dr. Who," a pacifist renegade Time Lord who sets out in his Tardis to save the universe from destruction by Daleks, Cybermen robots, man-eating Krynoid vegetables, his arch foe The Master and other sordid creatures at 11 p.m. Sunday on Channel 11.

"Dr. Who" has been an outer-space cult hero in Great Britain for nearly two decades and now airs in 39 countries to an estimated weekly television audience of 98 million viewers.

The high-camp series, which has aired sporadically on American public television since the mid-1970s, only now is catching on with Yankee sci-fi enthusiasts who have been searching for a new fixation since "Star Trek" was canceled by NBC in 1969.

LIKE THE futuristic adventures of the starship U.S.S. Enterprise, "Dr. Who" is cerebral space opera that puts more stock in acting and storyline than in the flashy special effects that have become a staple of America's now wave cinematic science fiction. The props and settings of "Dr. Who" are often downright rinky-dink.

Much of the appeal of "Dr. Who" lies in the personality of British actor Tom Baker, who for the past seven years has given his moral hero a wayward sophistication and pleasing sense of not taking himself or his extraterrestrial jauntings too seriously.

Baker's "Dr. Who," who sports a floppy Edwardian coat and fedora pushed down over his mop-like curls, unfailingly triumphs over evil. The doctor successfully has conquered even the Doomsday Machine, a powerful weapon owned by Alien Priests capable of blasting apart entire planets.

He travels through time, battling a broad spectrum of "bad guys." One week, the Daleks, led by their ruthless emperor, are calculating to remove Earth's core and replace it with a drive mechanism in order to pilot the planet through the universe.

THE NEXT WEEK, leaders of Operation Golden Age are plucking dinosaurs from Earth's past and transporting them to present-day London to get rid of the city's undesirable elements.

No task is too formidable for Dr. Who's sharp wits or sonic screwdriver even if it is wrestling with the temperamental breakdown of his Tardis spacecraft, which frequently jams the time track or jams its "last return switch."

Because "Dr. Who" is more a celebration of the human spirit and swashbuckling enterprise than Hollywood hardware, many of the show's most ardent fans are college-educat-



Herald photo

LONGTIME FANS of "Dr. Who," Cheryl and George Breo have installed a cardboard likeness of their hero to greet patrons of their New Fantasy Shop in Chicago, which specializes in merchandise based on the British sci-fi cult hero. "Dr. Who" vanquishes

sinister forces as he travels through the universe in his Tardis at 11 p.m. Sunday on Channel 11.

ed professionals in their 20s and 30s.

These diehards secretly delight in the scientific mumbo jumbo exchanged by the good doctor, his trusted K9 (a computerized dog with an IQ of more than 300) and a revolving door of unimpassioned female companions ranging from helpless screamers to fiercely independent Time Ladies.

Sarah Jane Smith was a journalist from Earth who saw the doctor through his fourth incarnation. Leela was a glamorous fighting Amazon

whose uncivilized manner caused her to pulverize killer monsters and giant rats first and ask questions later. Romanadvoratrelundar is a shrewd Time Lady who has been Baker's most recent companion.

"DR. WHO" aficionados can rattle off endless trivia about each new alien race and villain the doctor and friends tangle with during their 90-minute escapades.

"Who-ites" are a small but faithful lot. Chicago's underground cult of "Dr. Who" watchers has grown most-

ly by word of mouth during the past two years to an audience of about 250,000 regular viewers, which surpasses WTTW-TV's usual prime time average for even such popular serials as "Brideshead Revisited." Yet only 58 public television stations broadcast the series at odd hours and in odd forms.

The North American branch of the international Dr. Who Appreciation Society, formed two years ago by a Van Nuys, Calif., grandmother, has a mere 1,500 members.

"That's not bad considering we started out with less than 300," said Barbara Elder, who mails a monthly Dr. Who newsletter to "Who-ites" in exchange for \$10 in annual dues. Fans can send their inquiries to NADWAS, 6642 Andasol Ave., Van Nuys, Calif. 91406.

"The people interested in 'Dr. Who' appreciate mature TV science fiction. We're so tired of junk like 'Battlestar Galactica,' which is beamed at too low a level for adults. 'Dr. Who' assumes that the people

watching have read some science fiction like Isaac Asimov and are genuinely interested in the subject. The show doesn't insult your intelligence," Elder said.

ASIDE FROM the fan club and an annual Dr. Who convention, which will take place in Chicago July 16 to 18, there is no grand nationwide "Who-ite" network. Fans are left to their own devices.

Consequently, bank executives.

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'Dr. Who': British sci-fi minus usual razzmatazz

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lawyers, newspaper photographers and other respectable grownups with intergalactic inclinations shuffle into Chicago area specialty shops with brown bag guilt all over their faces, hot on the trail of "Dr. Who" paraphernalia.

Patrons of The New Fantasy Shop, 5651 W. Belmont Ave., Chicago, are surprised to find other sane adults rummaging through the 60-plus different titles of "Dr. Who" paperbacks, comic books, official T-shirts, mugs, baseball caps and the like displaying the official "Dr. Who" insignia.

"The reaction is always the same," owner George Breo said. "They say, 'I thought I was the only one who watched 'Dr. Who.' There are a lot of people who fear others will think they are crazy if they show any genuine interest in wearing a T-shirt around the house or getting knitting instructions for making their own trademark 'Dr. Who' scarf."

Gary Colabuono, owner of Moondog Comics at 139 W. Prospect Ave., Mount Prospect, and 1402 W. Schaumburg Road, Schaumburg, also prides himself on providing "safe haven" for closet "Who-ites."

"WHEN THEY come into a store like ours, they immediately know they are among friends. It's when they leave here that they look both ways and then run to their cars to stash away the stuff before anyone else sees them," Colabuono said. "But nothing stops them from coming in. Last week, despite the awful snowstorm, we sold 250 buttons."

The British Broadcasting Corp., which produces the "Dr. Who" series and owns the merchandising rights to all "Dr. Who" accouterments, reports a marked increase in international sales and selection of items during the past year.

New "Dr. Who" products that will be distributed in the United States by summer include the Tardis Tent, a talking stuffed K9, a talking Dalek and ceramic tiles. The British have added "Dr. Who" unisex candy underpants, Dalek bubble bath and chocolate Easter eggs to their collection. They have turned the series' catchy theme song into a disco hit.

American fans already can buy \$10 ceramic mugs, \$3 die-cast metal pins, \$15 tote bags, a \$25 "Dr. Who" board game, an \$11 sound effects album, \$15 multi-colored T-shirts, a \$5 Tardis tin bark, \$8 baseball caps, \$1.50 buttons, \$3 posters, \$1.50 greeting cards and paperbacks for \$2.75 to \$3.75, all bearing the official "Dr. Who" insignia.

"Believe me. When someone comes in here and buys \$167 worth of 'Dr. Who' things, we're not talking kids' stuff. These are adults who aren't afraid to spend a little money," said Breo, who averages a brisk \$4,000 in weekly sales of "Dr. Who" items.

ONE CUSTOMER who couldn't get his fill of "Dr. Who" material decided to carve wooden Tardis doors for his bedroom. Others have manufactured their own K9 coffee tables and "Dr. Who" chairs.

"The real craze started about five months ago. When the 'Logopolis' episode aired in December and the current Dr. Who played by Baker began to transform into the new Dr. Who. When viewers realized it was Tom Baker's last appearance on the show before being replaced by Peter Davidson, they rushed in here the next day and cleaned the place out. They bought anything that had his likeness on it," Breo said.

Baker is a 48-year-old Liverpool-born actor and onetime monk who recently left the series to portray Sherlock Holmes in a BBC-TV production and act on London stages. Sir Laurence Olivier launched Baker's career 15 years ago by asking him to join his National Theatre of England.

Baker was the fourth actor to play the prestigious role. He was preceded in the episodic adventure series by William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton and the white-haired Jon Pertwee.

Despite the evolutionary nature of the character during the past two decades, recent American converts have become most familiar with, and fond of, Baker's portrait of Dr. Who as a lovable, slightly off-beat member of the elite Time Lord race of intergalactic scholars.



THE DR. WHO known to Chicagoans is played by Tom Baker. One of his companions during his time travels is played by Lalla Ward, who also had a featured role in PBS' "Duchess of Duke Street." At left, Peter Davidson stars in the newest series of "Dr. Who" adventures, which have yet to be aired here.

HIS ABRUPT exit from the series prompted a deluge of emotional fan mail to Channel 11 from faithful who feared that Baker was ill, was swallowed by The Creature from the Pit or trapped in a time warp.

"This show is the only one on any television station worth watching," one distraught "Dr. Who" fan wrote Channel 11 after Baker's Dec. 27 farewell episode. "Without Tom Baker as Dr. Who, there may be no show worth watching. Is there anything that can be done to get him back?"

Because of syndication complications, American viewers will have to settle for reruns featuring Baker for the next two years before a new series of "Dr. Who" episodes starring Peter Davidson can be imported.

Lionheart Television International, which also syndicates other British series like John Cleese's "Fawlty Towers" and "Dave Allen at Large," apparently plans to shift its future sales of "Dr. Who" from financially beleaguered public television stations to independent commercial TV stations that can afford to pay a higher price.

WTTW will exercise its broadcast rights for three more reruns of the current 40-episode series of "Dr. Who" starring Baker, which should last through January 1983, before deciding what to do next.

LOCAL "WHO-ITES" already weary of a second rebroadcast of the series are petitioning Channel 11 to obtain the rerun rights to earlier "Dr. Who" episodes starring Baker or Pertwee.

Fans are expected to storm Panopticon '82, the official Dr. Who National Convention, July 16 to 18 at the Americana Congress Hotel in Chicago where they will be able to view sample episodes of the new "Dr. Who" series starring Peter Davidson. A \$12 registration fee can be sent to Panopticon '82, c/o Chicago Comicon, 1219A W. Devon Ave., Chicago 60660.

Davidson, best known for his portrayal of the bungling veterinarian of "All Creatures Great and Small," surprisingly has surpassed even Baker's ratings records since the new "Dr. Who" series premiered in Britain earlier this year.

"I suddenly have acquired the ability to strike children numb," the good-na-

tured Davidson said during a recent trans-Atlantic telephone call. "The popularity of this show and character is a powerful force. I watched 'Dr. Who' from the time I was 12 years old, so I'm having extraordinary fun playing it."

Davidson best describes his concept of Dr. Who as "a universal friend."

"I haven't worried so much about making him different, just slightly more vulnerable. He's not as concerned with winning. But the humor, I think, is most important to keep," Davidson said.

THE NEW DOCTOR, who runs about in a red- and white-striped Victorian cricket outfit, will be joined by the alien female Nyssa, an Australian air hostess named Tegan and the alien boy named Adric. The character of K9 will not return.

"The popularity of the program obviously exceeds even that of the title character or the person who plays him," said "Dr. Who" executive producer John Nathan Turner.

"I wanted a more youthful doctor but still someone who could be heroic and yet fallible all at once. I think that's the key to the character's appeal, that and the fact that you have this wonderful police box that allows him to travel through time. Now who wouldn't want to try that?"



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