

What drives Britain's best comedienne? And why is she with Dr Who? **Tim Teeman** finds what really bowers Catherine Tate

Can this really be Catherine Tate? For some daft reason I was expecting the scraped-back hair and sulky sharpness of Lauren, Tate's most famous comic creation, whose "Am I bovvered?" has passed indelicately quickly into the pantheon of vintage comic catchphrases. But no. Tate is the perfect *tabula rasa* for Lauren and all her other inspired grotesques precisely because she looks and behaves nothing like them: in person she has a lustrous bob, smoky eyes, and a soft, Cadbury's-Caramel-bunny voice.

Beached in front of the TV on Christmas Day, you'll see Tate in another new guise as Donna, a flustered bride, in a seasonal *Doctor Who*. Fans might recall that she featured very briefly in the final episode of the last series. "She doesn't want to be with

Tate. "I mix things up and do different stuff or I get bored." So is this a farewell to her sketch show? "I never said that. I want to do it as long as there is an appetite for it, but I instinctively feel that three series is enough. I don't want it to drag on, where you have a very old schoolgirl trotting out, 'Am I bovvered?'"

Tate genuinely considers questions, speaks plainly, and is as funny off the screen — albeit in a much quieter way — as she is on it. And she is absolutely focused, and very protective of her creations. "I'm probably a pain in the arse to work with, but I care about the [sketch] show. I'm always ready for a fight. I don't need to be, but I am." She laughs. "It can make for rather a tense atmosphere sometimes. I want everything done five minutes ago. I'll ask, 'Why can't we have that crane shot?' with-

An intimate tête-à-Tate

the Doctor," explains Tate. "She just wants to get married." But first she must face Sarah Parish's spidery villain, the Empress of Racoon. The special, set in winter, was filmed at the height of summer: Tate in a full white wedding dress and the other actors "in scarves and bobble hats — not pleasant but such fun".

Tate wasn't a huge fan of *Doctor Who* as a girl. "I was more into *The Kids from Fame*," she says laughing. "I think Rose [Billie Piper's character, now departed] is the reason so many girls are into it now." Tate's daughter Erin, 4, is a fan — "she loves the Cybermen" — and visited her mother during filming.

Is *Doctor Who* a deliberate attempt to widen Tate's repertoire? There were reports that she was leaving the BBC, that the third season of her sketch show was the last. "There is a tendency to bracket people," says

out realising the ceiling is only 12ft high. I hope I know my limitations, but generally, I do think I am right all the time." She smiles and laughs.

Tate didn't think the sketch show, which began in 2004, would become a hit, or that the catchphrases would enter the lexicon. "It's nuts. When you see 'bovvered' going into the *Oxford English Dictionary*, or used in headlines, or hear it around you — you go 'Oh, it's not just me and my immediate circle of friends'. It's really, really weird, and really, really amazing. I'm also a bit detached from it. It's not like I walk on the street thinking, 'I'm the person who says "Am I bovvered?"'. When I finish a show I don't think about it. I lie in bed watching DVDs of *Sex and the City*."

To this odd mix, stir in a history of shyness. "I think performing for me was a way of a shy child deflecting attention away from herself," says



Veil of woe: Catherine Tate stars with David Tennant in *The Runaway Bride*, a special Christmas episode of *Doctor Who*

Tate. "If I could dress up and pretend to be something else..." She gestures as if to grab a thought floating out of her reach. "I like making people laugh, when I started realising I could be funny at school it was a huge relief. I thought people wouldn't try to find out who I was. It was like saying, 'Don't look at me, but look at me while I'm not being me.'"

Tate would perform her comic creations for her mother. "I think I needed to be successful in something because it's only ever a relief if things go right for me," she says precisely.

"If you go back to all the ten-year-olds you knew and you had to pick the one who would be well-known for entertaining, it wouldn't have

one boss, with whom she is still friendly, asking if she did (Microsof) Windows. Tate thought he meant would she mind washing the windows. "I thought it was a bit much and said they were too high."

Once, when Tate auditioned for a Royal Court play, "A friend got the part instead and I remember thinking 'This is not going to happen'. I was very worried, restless and discontented. When I was 26 my mother said, 'You could have been working in a bank for five years now'." An astrology believer, Tate recalls reading something from her birth chart: "Strive to be successful because you'll be a very bitter failure." "That stuck with me," she says.

Stand-up saved, and made her. "As soon as I started doing it ten years ago I felt more in control. Rather than waiting for the phone to ring I went out every night and did my

I hope I know my limitations, but generally, I do think I am right all the time"

been me. I was the red-faced ginger child who stammered when she spoke because she was so embarrassed when people spoke to her."

Youth theatre, "a building block for personality," got her used to people looking at her. "Being able to make people laugh immediately made me feel confident and other people think I was confident." She was "a bit of a handful" as a teenager. "I was always on the right side of the lights, but I was cheeky. At 13 I was difficult at home, belligerent. I had a solid year of that teenage phase of 'Where are you going?', 'Out. Who are you going with?', 'No one. Then, suddenly, I thought, 'It'll be nice now'."

Tate left school at 18 before taking her A levels. She went to drama college, worked abroad for a year, then for the National Theatre, the RSC, did some telly. But nothing took off. She was a temp and recalls

stuff. It's a time-serving apprenticeship. You can't learn without doing it." In 2000 she was nominated for a Perrier Award as part of *Lee Mack's New Bits*, then she won a breakthrough role in Dawn French's BBC sitcom *Wild West*.

Now 38, Tate claims that she is glad she wasn't successful in her twenties. "I wouldn't have been ready for it," she says. "I didn't have the confidence. I was 34 when the [sketch] show came out. I knew who I was. I'd had a child. If it had happened earlier I might be jaded now, whereas I really think it's incredible." Did she ever get depressed? "No," she says. "But I'm not by nature a very cheery person — I'm most definitely 'the glass is half empty'. I had post-natal depression. She also suffered a form of depression in the run-up to the birth, which her GP called "smiling sickness". This surprised Tate. ▶▶

►► "because I thought I wanted a baby. I think I'm quite controlling, but in pregnancy you've no control because there's something inside which you can't stop growing." In time she felt better. "Working was how I dealt with it."

Is she scared of her depression coming back? "If I had another baby." It was rumoured she was planning to have another child next year. She smiles. "If it happens it happens. There's no firm plan."

Tate draws on her life for her characters: the new mum ("I wouldn't go anywhere if it meant waking my child up") and Georgie Georgie the charity fundraiser, inspired by a woman "wearing a Tibetan hat who knocked at my door and clearly thought I was not giving as much as she thought I should". Tate loves to "lose" herself in these characters. Lauren isn't based on anyone specific, but those sulky schoolgirls "who walk among us". Foul-mouthed gran's only echo in reality is "the way my godmother sits — legs spread right out".

But now gran and Lauren are no more, what next? "I've read I'm going to ITV for five million," she says



Hot and bothered: Catherine Tate as sulky Lauren, her star creation

waters. She is writing a drama for the BBC's *Decades* season, which will feature one drama set in each of the past 40 years. She is also starring in an ITV drama, *The Bad Mothers' Handbook*. She would like to do more films (after starring in this year's *Scenes of a Sexual Nature*), a play, "and, pray to God, the Christmas No 1".

Tate is famous and wealthy, but she prefers to live as normally as possible with her partner Twig Clark and Erin in West London, while mischievously mulling over the possibility of causing a "fuss" on the Tube by breaking into a volley of "Am I bothered's". Those tough years in her twenties have left their mark: "I've spent longer in temp work than working in TV," she says. Her new life is "wildly exciting, but you have to temper it because you have to function". This clear-sightedness — about where she has come from and where she is now — is the key to Catherine Tate, and the reason why fame and success must taste particularly sweet. ■
Doctor Who, *BBC One*, *Christmas Day*, 7pm

A COMEDY WHO'S WHO

Douglas Adams (the author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) co-wrote *City of Death* (1979), and friend **John Cleese** played an art gallery visitor.

Alexei Sayle played a DJ who entertains the dead on planet Necros, in *Revelation of the Daleks* (1985) — inspired by Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*.

Faith Brown took on the role of Flast, the Cryon leader, in *Attack of the Cybermen* (1985), though the part was written for Prince Andrew's former girlfriend, Koo Stark.

Ken Dodd put down his tickling stick to play the Tollmaster in *Delta and the Bannermen* (1987).

Gareth Hale and **Norman Pace** played shopkeepers Len and Harvey in 1989's *Survival*.

Cast as the result of a fan letter, **Peter Kay** turned nasty as the alien Abzorbaloff in this year's *Love & Monsters*.

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