

NCUTI GATWA'S TIMELINES are a little scrambled. When we meet, he's yet to make his first official appearance in *Doctor Who*. But his life as the 15th incarnation of the Doctor

feels confusingly – or, perhaps, appropriately, given the nature of the show – like both a thing of the recent past and the yet-to-come future. “I’ve been waiting for so long!” he says. “I got cast so long ago and then started filming so long after that, that it feels like this thing that’s never going to come.” He laughs. “I don’t think I’m fully taking in what I’m on the precipice of.”

If he means the enormity of what lies ahead, then he’s not wrong. From the moment in May 2022 when Gatwa was announced as the long-term successor to Jodie Whittaker’s 13th Doctor (receiving the Tardis keys only after the surprise, three-episode tenure of David Tennant’s 14th Doctor), his debut became one of the most rabidly anticipated British TV moments of the decade.

This, after all, will be the first time in *Doctor Who*’s 60-year history that the series’ main character has been played by a black man and an openly queer person; it’s the dawn of Russell T Davies’s splashy return as showrunner of the revived series; and it’s the first batch of episodes to follow the significant budget boost initiated by the BBC’s global distribution partnership with Disney.

ON A PERSONAL note – as a lapsed, once-obsessive fan of the show since the days of Christopher Eccleston and flatulent Slitheen – I feel that Gatwa’s casting is the perfect, zeitgeist-seizing move; the youthful, risky counterpoint to the nostalgic fan-service of Tennant’s unexpected return. So there’s a fair bit of pressure and expectation. Did he feel the weight of it?

“I was questioning every line,” he admits, with a gleaming smile, sharply dressed and nestled at one end of a leather sofa in a tastefully appointed London hotel. The 31-year-old’s voice is a sonorous Scots burr, marked by a childhood in Edinburgh and Dunfermline, and often accented by expressive hand movements.

“It was the weight of the role – the legacy. And I don’t know if I should say this because I don’t want to let doubt in. But I thought, ‘I can’t fail at this. I cannot blow it.’ And so everyone was trying to calm me down, saying, ‘Ncuti, you’re doing fine,’ while I was all, ‘No, no! We have to reshoot the whole day!’”

But if there was justified nervousness attending the early scenes that Gatwa shot in Cardiff last December, then it was counterbalanced by a simple fact: he always felt he had an innate understanding of who the Doctor was. “It’s all in me – it’s good casting,” he says, hooting with

Doctor Who Christmas Day 5.55pm **BBC1**

My time has come

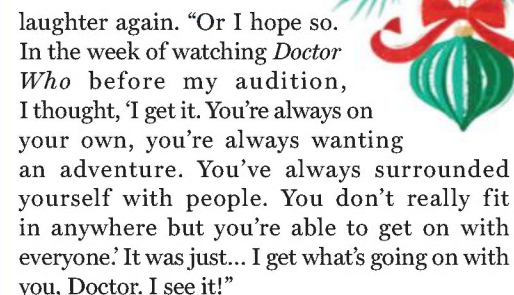
At last! Meet the new Doctor – **Ncuti Gatwa** on self-doubt, perfect casting, swearing and standing on the precipice of the Whoniverse

THE RT INTERVIEW BY
JIMI FAMUREWA





LORDING IT
Ncuti Gatwa in
one of the 15th
Doctor's striking
new outfits



laughter again. "Or I hope so. In the week of watching *Doctor Who* before my audition, I thought, 'I get it. You're always on your own, you're always wanting an adventure. You've always surrounded yourself with people. You don't really fit in anywhere but you're able to get on with everyone.' It was just... I get what's going on with you, Doctor. I see it!"

He's not wrong – while Gatwa's casting has been hailed as bold and radical, there's an overlap in his personal story, and a tangible Doctor-ishness about his character, that almost makes him the obvious choice. Born in Rwanda before his family moved as refugees to Scotland, his outward effervescence and warp-speed mind – qualities that first brought him to attention as Eric in the Netflix hit *Sex Education* – belie a lifetime of the sort of watchful outsiderdom that a rootless Time Lord might sympathise with.

"When I got the [scripts] through for the audition, the words just started flying out of me," he says. "It almost felt like it was written for *me*. The way the character's mind works and the way it chops and changes. The way he's got seven billion thoughts in his head at one time and is always constantly thinking to the future. I just thought, 'That's how I am.'"

GATWA GAVE HIS audition with the live-wire freedom of a man who thought he had no chance of getting it. And then, he barely gave it a thought – until he was standing outside a Tottenham barber shop with his phone to his ear, learning he'd won one of the most coveted roles on the planet. Was there any hesitation about taking on such an all-consuming, life-altering project?

"Oh, absolutely," he says. "I told my agent I needed a week. There was some apprehension. But it was also a no-brainer. As an actor, the role was just too juicy to turn down. It was too full of everything. The humour, the fun, the emotion, the darkness of it. It was just like a juicy, juicy steak to cut into."

It seems fair to assume part of this reticence may have also related to a viewing public that hasn't always been welcoming of representative casting (see past negative backlash to Freema Agyeman's role as companion Martha Jones, or Jo Martin's turn as the Fugitive Doctor in 2020). But, in this, Gatwa was mostly heartened by the conversation following his unveiling.

"I was a little bit braced for impact and then was very pleasantly surprised because it was the antithesis [of what I was expecting]," he says. "But then, also, what's scary is that we all live in [social media] bubbles."

"I remember scrolling on Twitter and being like, 'Oh my gosh. I'm so loved.' And then I clicked on one tweet that wasn't as positive. ▸

‘When I swore in my Doctor costume, I got called into Russell’s office’



HEIGHT OF FAME

The Doctor (Ncuti Gatwa) and Ruby (Millie Gibson) dice with danger on Christmas Day. Far left: Gatwa with Asa Butterfield in *Sex Education* and, left, with Ryan Gosling in *Barbie*

◁ And then that opened up an entire world of the opposite feeling. ‘Oh no. There they are.’ Seeing the anagrams of my name [made into a racial slur] was just lovely.” He gives me a rueful bit of side-eye. “But it was interesting. As I say, I live in a very leftist, liberal bubble. And in fact, there’s a really great episode coming up next year where we lean into that.”

SO WILL THE Doctor’s race be something that they directly address? “Yes, definitely,” he says. “It would be stupid if we didn’t. The Doctor has always walked into unknown situations and taken charge with authority. Historically, there’s only really one demographic of people that are able to do that – and it’s certainly not a woman, and it’s certainly not someone black. Thank God, things are changing.”

This change is all in keeping with Davies and the production team’s desire to, as Gatwa puts it – with pointed air quotes – “push the show forward”. However, it was an aspect of the new

episodes that it took him a while to get fully on board with. “Going into initial production meetings I was keen to, I guess, keep up the traditionalism of the show,” he says. “I didn’t want to be seen as too wild a choice. So it’s been a process of the show encouraging me to embrace myself.”

And, presumably, the same goes for the BBC embracing the fact that, off camera, this incarnation of the Doctor will (as Gatwa did in June) pose nude for a photo shoot in British *Vogue*. Did he get word of any producers spluttering out their tea upon seeing those photos? “I did think, ‘Oh yeah, I’ve got my kit off so I’m probably going to get a couple of phone calls about this,’” he laughs. “But, no, they’ve been very encouraging.”

“The only time I’ve ever gotten in trouble for

anything was when I swore [while wearing] a *Doctor Who* costume. I got called into Russell’s office. Woo! And he let me know that that’s not acceptable. He said, ‘Do what you want when you’re out of costume, but when you’re in costume, do not let us catch you swearing.’ I was like, fair enough. And I guess that was a lesson. For the last four years I’ve been co-leading an X-rated show, and so I’m on a constant journey of learning what it is to be a PG role model and the lead of a family show.”

THIS IS A mark of the evolution that Gatwa has had during his year making *Doctor Who*, without any member of the public having more than a glimpse of his take on the role. His first series won’t air until next year, but he’s already a couple of months into filming for a second run due in 2025. “It feels so much fun now,” he says. “I’ve relaxed and [the Doctor] seems to have sunk down a little bit deeper, from my chest into my gut.” Though he still says he’ll be “far away from a TV” when his first episode airs on Christmas Day.

And what’s next? Is he in *Doctor Who* for the long haul? Or does the lure of Hollywood – and more roles like his brief but memorable turn in *Barbie* – tempt him? “No idea, no plan,” he says, quickly. “I just know that I’m loving it and my love for it is growing.”

If he does want counsel on how long to stay in the role then he could always consult the “Whoniverse” – a group chat of former Doctors recently started by David Tennant. “They all gave me amazing individual pieces of advice,” he says. “I spoke to David, I spoke to Matt [Smith], I spoke to Peter [Capaldi]. I think I felt a particular affinity to Jodie [Whittaker] just because of the shared struggle, as in the Doctor’s never been seen like this before, and what that means for yaysayers, naysayers. How do you navigate that? She was so generous. With her story and her experience of it all.”

“They’re all very present parents,” he says, with a smile. And proud ones, too, I imagine. Because, though he may have had to bide his time for his on-screen bow, to spend time with him is to be in the presence of someone who is every inch the Doctor.

For both him and the audience at home, this feels like a Christmas present very much worth the wait.



WHOLARIOUS

Former Doctor Peter Capaldi and Gatwa hit it off at the Scottish Baftas in 2022